

Technique of Stream of Consciousness in Faulkner's

The Sound and the Fury

K. Mathuramani

S. Ganesan

William Faulkner is an American novelist of repute. He is as distinguished a novelist as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and Henry James. He has a large number of readers across the world. He spent much of his life in and around his beloved hometown of Oxford, Mississippi, where he worked in various odd jobs and wrote in his spare time in the years leading up to his literary fame. As a prolific writer, in 1924 he published his first book, a collection of poetry titled *The Marble Faun*. His fourth novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, published in 1929 gained him a growing audience and reputation. In this novel, as in those, which followed, Faulkner's penchant for technical experimentation enabled him to explore the psychological complexity of his characters and their interactions more thoroughly than a straightforward narrative style would have allowed. This technical virtuosity is especially evident in *As I Lay Dying*, published in 1930.

His friendship with Anderson inspired him to write and in a short time he finished his first novel, *Soldier's Pay*. After a series of successes in the early 1930s Faulkner's reputation began to recede slowly, forcing him to take up work as a script writer-in Hollywood to supplement his income. In 1940s Faulkner wrote seven more novels, including his famous *Absalom and Absalom!* and *Light in August*. After the publication of *The Portable Faulkner* in 1946, which featured a large and varied selection of his writing, his fortunes were quickly revived. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1954, and a pair of Pulitzer Prizes followed in

the ensuing decade. Faulkner continued to give shape to his literary quest till his death, in Byhalia, Mississippi on July 6, 1962 at the age of 64.

The Stream Of Consciousness

Narration of the events of a story through the ‘Stream –of – Consciousness’ technique is the development and result of literary research in the twentieth century.

‘Stream of consciousness’ is a technique whereby the author writes as though he is inside the mind of character. This technique reflects the twentieth century’s research and interest in the psychology of “free association” As a technique, stream of consciousness was first used in English by James Joyce and Virginia Wolf, But Faulkner’s use of this technique in *The Sound and the Fury* is outstanding.

The first section in the novel namely ‘Benjy section’ serves two purposes . It reveals Benjy’s psyche or inner life. It also provides an objective record of certain dramatic events in the Compson family, more objective than Quentin and Jason’s sections. Faulkner in fact makes him speak the way a thirty –three – year old idiot would, Faulkner gets into his mind, as it were and evolves a severely constrained style that harmonizes with Benjy’s limited abilities. Benjy can experience only sensations. He is incapable of abstraction and generalization. His body is affected by some physical sensation and this activates his memory of a similar experience in the past.

The best way to describe Benjy’s reaction then would be to offer a stream-of-consciousness rendering of a present action. Certain things make an impression on his mind but

he cannot correlate or connect things, except through a basic sensuous impression. For example, when he hears the golfer's call for their 'caddie' the name reminds him of his sister Caddy, whom he loves more than any other person.

Luster leads Benjy through a fence and scolds him for getting snagged on a rail. Benjy's getting snagged on the rail reminds him of a similar episode in the past. His mind then jumps back to 1902 when Caddy was taking him on an errand and he had to stoop low to keep from getting snagged. Caddy's asking him on that occasion to keep his hands in his pockets in order to keep them warm comes flashing in the mind of Benjy. When Luster carries Benjy through the fence in 1928, Benjy's mind automatically returns to an earlier scene, in which he was involved in the same type of activity. Time has no meaning for Benjy and the past and the present blend into one response for him. Many of the scenes of the past that Benjy remembers are connected with his sister Caddy in one-way or another.

Benjy reacts to sensual impressions, such as the cold of the gate or the rattling of leaves. The thought of cold hands reminds Benjy of an earlier episode. Uncle Maury once visited the Compson family for the Christmas holidays. He saw that Benjy was a worry to Mrs. Compson. He asked her to let Versh take Benjy out doors. Versh dressed Benjy and told him to keep his hands in his pockets. Benjy immediately went to the gate to wait for Caddy. Benjy now remembers Caddy's smelling like tress, "She smelled like tress" (*The Sound and the Fury* 31) This memory causes him to start moaning and Luster gives him a Jimson weed to keep him quiet very often Benjy's mourning is the result of some memory of Caddy. His memory causes him to start mourning. Luster cannot understand why Benjy mourns so much. When Luster takes Benjy to a house – Benjy is reminded of an earlier event that occurred in that particular place. For example, the scenes that Benjy remembers about his name being changed from Maury to Benjy occur in the last part of the Benjy section, when Luster carries him into the same house Versh said, "Your name is Benjamin now you know how come your name Benjamin now." (*The Sound and the Fury* 52)

As Benjy plays in the water he remembers the time when he was three years old. Benjy, Caddy, Quentin and Jason were all playing from the same branch. Caddy fell and got her drawers ‘muddy’. She took off the dress so as to let her underclothes dry. Quentin then scolded and slapped her and Caddy fell into water again. When Benjy saw that Caddy was all wet and muddy, he began to cry and Caddy rushed to comfort him. There is a symbolic purpose also for this particular scene. Caddy’s falling down and getting up prepares the readers for her promiscuity later in the novel.

On one such occasion some girls came by then and Benjy wanted to say something to them about Caddy just to unburden his mind of the thought of Caddy. But the girls were frightened and ran away. Benjy chased the girls trying to speak to them. Jason and Mrs. Compson mistook the feelings of Benjy. Benjy is reminded of these events now and starts moaning. Luster gets angry, when Benjy does not stop crying. Dilsey comes out of the house at this time, scolds Luster and takes Benjy to the kitchen.

Benjy’s mind suddenly jumps to the picture of Jason’s cutting up of his dolls.

“He cut up all the dolls, Man Beny and I made’ Caddy said, ‘He did it Just for meanness” (The Sound and the Fury 49)

Suddenly, he is reminded of the old occurrence of Jason’s burning the two free passes, without giving them to Luster. When Luster starts getting Benjy ready for bed, Benjy remembers the night of Dam Uddy’s death and Dilsey’s taking him to a room, which is not their usual sleeping room.

In “Quentin Section” of the novel, the entire section is told from within Quentin’s mind, on the day when he commits suicide. As with Benjy, Quentin is at Harvard. He is roaming around Boston and Harvard. But his mind is more complex than Benjy’s. Where as “ Benjy section” only records sensuous impressions that have symbolic significance, Quentin’s section plunges into the depths of the causes and effects of certain actions. Throughout the section, Quentin’s chief concern is about Caddy’s sins and her loss of virginity.

The section opens with Quentin noticing the shadow of the past and his remembering the watch his father gave him and the advice Mr. Compson offered about the need to forget time. Mr. Compson is of the conviction that there are no values worth anything in life and that time cures all things. This is the philosophy that Quentin strives to deny, but he is unable to do so. Quentin’s concern with time and with her father’s cynical view of life is the prime motive of this section.

Shreve comes in and asks Quentin about his classes. Quentin tells Shreve that he will come later. The word ‘later’ brings to his mind the views of his father on time. The thought of his father reminds him of his father’s saying that, “Virginity was only important to men, not women” (The Sound and the Fury 60)

When he (the father) hears of the illegal pregnancy of Caddy, he is not upset at all. He tries to make Quentin understand that it was the man who invented virginity and that women don’t care about it.

This statement hurts Quentin, because he is still pure. Mr. Compson is of the view that in course of time he will not even remember any event, which seems to be dreadful now. “ They cannot even remember tomorrow what seemed dreadful today” (The Sound and the Fury 61)

Quentin begins to contemplate suicide so that he will not have to forget the horror he now feels. He picks up his watch and twists the hands of the watch. Quentin symbolically tries to stop time before time allows him to forget his bereavement.

If Mr. Compson is right and all human experience is absurd, then the grief that Quentin feels over Caddy's sins is also absurd. Then all of Quentin's values are meaningless. But Quentin cannot live without some values; therefore suicide is his only way to escape from the absurdity of life. When Quentin sits beside a Negro in the streetcar, he remembers Dilsey, the Negro cook of his house. He thinks of the difference between the northern and southern Negroes. The thought of 'home' recalls to his mind the saying of his mother that Jason is the only one who looks after her side of the family.

"The others they are not my flesh and blood like he is, strangers nothing of mine and I am afraid of them, I can take Jason and go where we are not known" (The Sound and the Fury 79)

Quentin's thoughts revert again and again to 'Caddy'. His meeting with the Italian girl reminds him of the girl named 'Natalie' whom Caddy branded as a dirty little girl. Quentin is reminded of the day when he told Caddy that he would take care of her and Caddy's response. "I don't give a Goddam what you do" (The Sound and the Fury 106)

Caddy's motivation behind her promiscuity is her inner urge to reject all that Compsons stand for. But Quentin is surely vexed over the promiscuity of Caddy. When his attempts to punish the seducers of Caddy fail, he is depressed over his ineffectual actions. He decides to commit suicide to atone for Caddy's sins.

As we approach the end of Quentin's section, his memories become more devastating and horrible. Thoughts of the neurotic mother, the bellowing Idiot Benjy, the cynical father

(Compson) and the sinful sister (Caddy) combined with his (Quentin's) futile and ineffective attempts to restore order, force Quentin to at the decision that "suicide is the only way to get rid of his mental tension".

The third section is a narrative by the youngest of the Compson brothers. The section namely Jason's section, takes place on a good Friday. Jason is approximately 35 years then. His brothers and Caddy do not trust Jason. He is always alone and he delights in doing mean things and in tormenting other people. Jason takes a perverse delight in annoying them. Unlike Benjy and Quentin, Jason never gives the past a thought and feels no allegiance to his ancestors as does Quentin. The Jason section therefore moves on swiftly. Whereas Quentin's mind is complicated and terribly involved in the intricacies of life, the Jason section is simple. Reminiscences and old memories are the essence of the Benjy and Quentin's sections, whereas moving actions like the fast carriage, the chase, and rushing with the false cheque leaf are the motifs of this section.

The final section narrated by the author is the shortest of the four sections. The dominant figure in this section is 'Dilsey'. Amidst the Sound and the Fury of the Compson's, Dilsey is the only calm and unruffled soul endeavoring to bring peace and order. Dilsey's faith in God, the care with which she handles Benjy despite his idiocy and desertation by the other members of the family, her appreciation of the sermon about the equalizing force of death and about the beginning and end of things from the essence of this section. The only 'Stream_of_Consciousness' evident in this section is the memory of Dilsey about the story of the Compson family, the days of the prosperity as well as the adversity and in short the beginning and end of the family.

The first three parts are in the stream-of-consciousness mode. In the last section, the author replaces even the method of narration, The stream of consciousness is replaced by the straight forward narrative of the author.

Conclusion

While using the technique of the Stream-of-Consciousness, Faulkner adopts the style suitable to each section. There are no difficult words in first section, because the vocabulary of an idiot (Benjy) would naturally be simple. It becomes complex in the second section where the intricate mind of Quentin is presented. Benjy is interested only in images and impressions whereas Quentin is interested in complex and difficult ideas. Quentin is trying to solve complicated moral issues; therefore his section is more complicated. The style changes drastically in Jason's section. Jason's mind is involved, but it is the mind of a monomaniac. He is concerned only with earning money and teasing others. This section flows at a rapid pace because Jason is not troubled with the intricacies of life. He is not concerned with images or impressions. The order and simplicity of this section is a result of his single-minded viciousness. The final section is a straightforward narrative. Faulkner adjusts his style in this section to fit the character of Dilsey. Thus we see a quiet dignified style in this section.

The states of consciousness of the three brothers interpret the events in the Compson household by three different modes. The first three sections prepare for an action that will discharge itself only in the last section of the novel. Though the pioneering honour of using this technique goes to James Joyce and Virginia Wolf, it may be stated with assertion that the technique reaches perfection at the hands of Faulkner. Often novels of this technique are unexciting and taxing. Faulkner, however imparts dramatic vividness and variety to this story, utilizing his and imaginative powers. The reader's minds find a very wholesome and stimulating exercise in piercing through the scattered fragments and forming a whole. It is soon discovered that unlike novels with a predominantly psychological orientation, Faulkner's novel has distinct movement and action.

The chief interest of the novelist is to reveal the essential self or personality of each narrator through the use of interior monologue. Faulkner takes us as close to the heart and mind of the narrator as is within the power and range of language. Not only this, the novel brings in value Judgment by just juxtaposing the past and the present of the Compson family.

To put it succinctly the success of the novel is due to the deft handling of the technique of ‘Stream-of-consciousness’ Faulkner, richly deserves. “The Nobel Prize”, that was awarded to him. Faulkner will be remembered by posterity for this masterpiece alone.

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About the Author:

K. Mathuramani ,Asst. Prof & Research Scholar, Dr. S. Ganesan ,Prof & Head Department of English, Vel tech Dr. RR & Dr. SR Technical University, Avadi, Chennai-62

