The Sound And The Fury: Benjy Analysis

Written in 1929 William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury is regarded as one of the most difficult to interpret American novels due to its challenging narrative style. The novel is structured by the narration of four sections with three being told in the stream of consciousness of Benjy, Quinten, and Jason Compson with the last section being narrated by Faulkner himself. With each of the first three narrators being brothers the novel begins with the narration of Benjy, a severely mentally-handicapped 33-year-old who is unable to communicate verbally. With Benjy unable to communicate any way of interpretation must pave to understanding the emotions expressed by Benjy instead of seeking to comprehend it in a traditional sense. Faulkner’s use of the stream of consciousness narrative style to exercise a core foundation throughout the novel in which Benjy’s section in particular utilized as the center point of the novel. The title of the novel is an allusion to the Shakespearian play Macbeth in which highlights a tale full of sound and fury that is told by an idiot. This sparks the beginning of the reasons as to why Faulkner decided to have such a complicated narrative style.

Benjy’s section being inherently difficult to understand Faulkner’s main goal was to portray key events of the novel without the explicit statement of them. Benjy’s interpretation of what he sees is utilized to foreshadow events that arise later in the novel such as when Caddy gets her dress dirty from climbing up the pear tree Dilseyreacts to her dress saying “‘It done soaked clean through onto you.’ she said. ‘But you won't get no bath this night.’” (Faulkner, 74) which signifies how the Compson family will become soiled after the pregnancy of Caddy. This foreshadowing is crucial for the further understanding of other sections of the novel, in which Faulker intends to forbode the idea of skipping the section in search of easier to understand the content. Benjy, for this reason, is seen as a sensitive and sentient observer of his family as his stream of consciousness is the only one to remain pure. This allows for the background information towards the foundational understanding of the Compson family to be portrayed in a fashion that has an emotional appeal. With Benjy’s section narrated on an Easter Sunday, it starts many similar reasonings to signify that Benjy is portrayed as a Christ-like character with many characteristics such as his age, his innocence/purity, and his ability to experience reality out of time pointing this notion in the right place. The main characteristic mentioned is Benjy’s experience reality without time with one of the main examples being when Benjy first gets snagged on a fence nail that drops his thought process back to a memory from Christmas 1902 where Benjy had also snagged himself upon a nail. Benjy’s mindset is remarkable throughout the novel as it provides a confusing but concise message that Benjy’s mind exists in both the past, the present, and the future with the inclusion of foreshadowing. For this reason, Benjy’s section is imperative to the storyline as it provides a circling union of the the entire history of the Compson family.

Benjy’s communicative skills and emotional responses are very intricate upon further detail. He is frequently told to stop crying, in which this crying is a clear eliciting of an emotional response of a negative stimulus towards Benjy, hinting that whatever he may be crying about holds important backstory towards the Compson family. Examples of these emotional moments can be seen with Benjy waiting for Caddy at the gate, which indicates her absence holding a large emotional weight on Benjy as his reaction towards changes are always negative. His distaste towards change provides insight into aspects of Benjy’s reality of being mentally handicapped,

in which his main senses are through shapes and the feeling of the world around him. Oftentimes Benjy is seen describing reality by how he feels it such as when he states “He put my hands into my pockets. I could hear him rattling in the leaves. I could smell the cold. The gate was cold”(Faulkner, 7) Through all of these statements it is clear that Benjy is certainly observant, and his sensitivity towards his surroundings is perceived through his descriptions of his current awareness. By this Benjy clearly shows his sentence, in which a description of him as a sentient observer of the Compson family certainly applies to Benjy when visualizing Benjy’s observations towards his family. Benjy’s perceptions of the world around him are not interpreted by him, by which Benjy’s role by Faulker is to describe in his best ability what is going on around him. Benjy constantly whimpers and cries because of his inability to control over how he feels, in which he is constantly desiring either Caddy or a comforting presence such as a flower or an object to chew on.

With Benjy’s observations provided at the beginning of the novel, readers are able to perceive the world filtered by the reality of Benjy. This forces readers to invoke an ability to be sensitive similar to Benjy and interpret emotional responses of the character in order to gain insight on what is going on in their surroundings. Benjy’s narrative is critical in invoking the ability to understanding the Compson family, as Quentin’s section lacks a similar insight of objectivity towards the foundational understandings of the novel. The dialogue's of Benjy’s stream of consciousness allows for an important understanding of the rise and the fall of the Compson family, leaving room for personal interpretation of characters from an undeveloped memory of the mentally handicapped speaker. Benjy’s attentiveness to conflicts between family members is a notable example of this, for example, his description of Caddy and Jason fighting was told as “Caddy and Jason were fighting in the mirror. ‘You, Caddy.’ Father said. They fought. Jason began to cry.”(Faulkner, 64) is a clear example of Benjy’s observations being simple observations of his family’s interactions. This observation-based narration detailed by Benjy contributes a pure and undisturbed capturing of the Compson family members by his flow of memory. Faulkner was surgical in his methodology of providing Benjy’s narration as a way of guiding an understanding of the Compson family by gaining knowledge from observations.

Benjy Compson is portrayed as the Christ figure of The Sound and the Fury due to his pure innocence, prescribing an untampered observation of the Compson family due to his inability to rationalize his surroundings. This allows for Benjy to be rightfully seen as the sentient observer of his family to which his role is allowing for the filtered surveying of his reality. Through his struggle to communicate a concise message, and his ability to provide unique insight into all aspects of the Compson family and reality around him, Benjy’s stream of consciousness is imperative to the comprehension of the Compson family.