

A Study on the Motifs of Shadow and Water in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

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Abstract

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is among the best novels of the 20th century. Although Faulkner is an American novelist, his focus has always been on the Southern part of American society. America faced a major financial crisis in 1929 and the world termed it the "Depression Period". It was about this time the novel; *The Sound and the Fury* also was published. Considered his masterpiece, contains a whole plethora of themes that have become universal. Faulkner has himself claimed in one of his interviews that the influence that he had garnered for his writings were from *The Bible* and the *Greek Tragedies*. Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* serves as a testimony to the degeneration of the once powerful and wealthy white families into a period of turmoil ravaged by decadency. The Compson Family is given the complete focus in the novel. This paper attempts to study on the motifs of shadow and water employed by Faulkner in the novel. The goal of any writer is to reach out to the common reader through his ideas on life, society or values that are considered valuable to him/her and through one's writings in turn inform the world. Motifs supplement the effect provided through symbolism in Literature. It is a device, which supplies the reader with inferred meanings and is also the technique of the writer to connect to the minds of his readers. Motifs serve as a catalyst towards a change or it creates causes destruction depending on the various circumstances the writer offers to the readers. This aspect reaches a superior motive when a writer of Faulkner's status has mastered the technique of symbolism and has successfully employed them in the novel.

Keywords: William Faulkner, Motifs, Shadow, and Water.

1. Introduction

In American Literature, William Faulkner (1897-1962) has been regarded as one of the pioneers in using symbolic devices along with Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill. And his novel, *The Sound and the Fury* contains in it a whole lot of motifs that demand our complete attention.

John B. Padgett one of the admirers and critics of Faulkner famously quoted "*Until Faulkner is buried he belongs to the family. But once he is, he belongs to the world*". And yes it is very much so that Faulkner's themes and influences have resonated cutting across the world transcending boundaries, which have resulted in created a huge impact.

Before we begin to understand the importance of the novel from the motif's perspective, we need to look at its definition. According to M.H Abrams & Geoffrey Galt Harpham's A Glossary of Literary terms

"A motif is a conspicuous element, such as a type of an event, device or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature."

- A Glossary of Literary Terms (229: 10-11)

The title of the novel assumes great significance as it has been influenced from William Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*. William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*'s soliloquy in Act V, Scene V goes thus

*"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the Last Syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterday have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.
Out, out, brief candle.
Life's but a walking shadow,
A poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more.
It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of Sound and Fury, Signifying nothing"*

- Act V, Scene V

Faulkner's core theme in the novel revolves around the motif of 'shadow' much like that of *Macbeth*'s emphasis

on it. In one of Faulkner's interviews in Japan organized by the US State Department in 1955, he was asked:
Q: In Macbeth's "sound and fury," there is no article before "fury." Why did you place a "the" before "fury"? To which Faulkner replied

A: For emphasis! Sound and Fury wasn't quite enough for the ear. The ear said it needs rhythm, emphasis – *The Sound and the Fury*.

The interview attaches significant value to the importance Faulkner attributes to the title. In Faulkner's world too the characters in the novel seem to crumble into chaos much like Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

2. A Brief Summary of *The Sound and the Fury*

The novel is filled with four narrative voices. A character is narrating each section of the novel in the stream of consciousness technique employed by Faulkner. We meet the Compson's family in the novel and much emphasis has been placed on their role in the Southern American society. Their dynasty has been traced between the years 1695 – 1945. In the novel, the siblings Caddy, and Quentin generate from a state of original innocence, succumbing to the family pattern of incest, erotomania, and suicide.

One of the brothers Benjy is a severely mentally handicapped. The first section in his stream of consciousness voice is extraordinary. Another brother Jason self – pitying and tyrannical succeeds their father as the head of the family. In the background, the Compson Negro (not an offensive word at the time) servant's watch and witness in Faulkner's own words they endured.

The novel describes the decay and fall of aristocratic Compson family and implicitly often entire social order, from four different points-of-view. The first three sections are represented from the perspective of three Compson's sons: Benjy an idiot, Quentin a suicidal Harvard freshman, and Jason the eldest. Each section is focused primarily on a sister who has married and left home. The fourth section comments on the other three, the Compson's black servants, whose chief virtue is endurance, reveal the family's moral decline.

3. The Motif of Shadow

In the second section of the novel, Quentin's section the word 'shadow' is repeated many times. Faulkner appears to be playing with the idea that life is a shadow. The word occurs through out the novel. The modern man is only a shadow of being. He is unable to cope with the problems of life today. Like Quentin, he has to commit suicide or he has to become a materialist like Jason who loves nothing but money. The other way out is to become an idiot like Benjy, who can see only shadows of life and respond only to sensations.

When Quentin commits suicide by drowning, he sees his shadow rising up from the water below him. Benjy aged 33 years narrates the first part of the novel. He is an idiot indeed. The entire novel is full of all kinds sound and fury. The last section balances the nihilism and the emphasis on service and self-assessment of the Negro servant Dilsey. The Negro servant Dilsey, in many ways is able to witness the rise and fall of the Compson family. Faulkner has laid enormous emphasis on Dilsey, so much that she becomes a symbol of redemption.

Quentin constantly lives in the assumption that he is tamed by his shadow wherever he travels irrespective of time and place. Also, Faulkner's obsession to shadow is very evident especially when he begins the second section of the novel with the first sentence containing in it the use of word 'Shadow'. Quentin narrates the second section of the novel and the events described occur on June 2nd, 1910.

"When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight o'clock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch. "

- *The Sound and the Fury* (63: 1 – 3)

Quentin is more intellectual than the other members of the Compson's family and in retrospect secures an admission at Harvard University, which is regarded as the most prestigious institution in the whole of America during his times like today. But, is constantly troubled with the disturbing scenes that float over his life and is unable to live with it.

Further, Quentin is filled with a sense of guilt and is ambitious much like Hamlet in William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*. Faulkner considered the American Shakespeare, Places Quentin in the shoes of Hamlet. Although their roles differ drastically their lives are compounded and magnified by their own guilt. We find both Quentin and Hamlet are young and ambitious men, one who seeks to shine out of the best university in the world and the other who is ambitious to place himself above all his subjects as the king. However, frivolous circumstances that occur in their lives do not let them pursue their goals.

Quentin's obsession to shadow is almost inescapable as much as it results in ensuring his demise. This by far is an important factor to which Faulkner attributes his complete attention much to demand the reader's attention is completely juxtaposed.

Quentin is psychologically fixated on his other self much like the 'alter ego' propounded by Sigmund Freud.

When Quentin's decides to end his life further impetus is added. The motif of shadow accompanies

him till his demise. He is found to be accompanying it in a scene, which Faulkner describes best in the second section of the novel. Quentin is seen walking toward a bridge and narrates the scene from Quentin's point of view.

"The shadow of the bridge, the tiers of railing, my shadow leaning flat upon the water, so easily had I tracked it that it would not quit me. At least fifty feet it was, and if I only had something to blot it into the water, holding it until it was drowned, the shadow of the package like two shoes wrapped up lying on the water."

- *The Sound and the Fury* (75: 9-14)

The excerpts taken from the novel clearly stipulates on two narratives. One, that the word 'shadow' has been repeated three times. And the second narrative is that the excerpts draw a clear relationship between the motifs of 'shadow' and 'water'.

Shadow plays a huge role in the life of Quentin. He had made up his mind to end his life since the time his journey towards the bridge had started. However dismayed it may sound to the reader; the reflection of his own shadow kept reminding him that he has possessed a body to protect much to the reflection of water that is inviting him to his demise.

They are by definition a pair of contrasting forces. And Quentin chooses to walk across threadbare the journey he had undertaken which leads to his ultimate demise. The account of Quentin's constant fight with his shadow is reminiscent of the opposition between a man's body and his spirit.

4. The Motif of Water

Faulkner has utilized the motif of water in his novels more on the negative undertone than projecting it on the positive connotation. Readers have known 'Water' since the time immemorial as elixir for life in more than many ways. Water plays a substantial role in the lives of characters in the novels.

Water is usually connected towards auspiciousness of a certain kind either for cleansing, redemption or for quenching one's thirst. But Water in the novels of Faulkner does play dual role both as a catalyzer and as a destroyer. And Faulkner does his best to balance their equations on the right terms within his own rights creating his own conditions.

What makes Faulkner special in creating the world of characterization is that he is not only highly imaginative in creating human conditions. But is also known to be giving his utmost attention to the role women as the central characters in the novels. Novels of Faulkner such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* are published with complete focus established on the role of women as the central character of the novels.

As in the case of the novel, *The Sound and the Fury* it is Caddy who assumes the central role. Anse Bundren finds herself as the central character in the novel *As I Lay Dying*. In both of their lives, the motif of water plays a critical role. In the case of Caddy Faulkner always knew and the readers world across that the novel *The Sound and the Fury* was originally developed based on Caddy as a short story. But due to the immense sense of gravity it levied, Faulkner developed the novel into a full-fledged novel.

"The muddy drawers" of Caddy in the opening sections of the novel assumes significance to comprehend the role of water in Caddy's life and how it endures and shapes influence over other characters in the novel. This aspect rigidly symbolizes over the virtue that Caddy's muddied drawers represent the fact that she carries dirt in the eyes of the reader though the characters are innocent during their times. It merely serves as a warning and presents itself as a foresight that a sin is going to be committed.

Quentin's choice of drowning himself not only created a sense of animosity in the novel but also sent shocking waves across the general population who later found him floating on the river.

"Niggers say a drowned man's shadow was watching for him in the water all the time. It twinkled and glinted, like breathing, the float slow like breathing too, and debris half submerged, healing out to the sea, and the caverns and the grottoes of the sea. The displacement of water is equal to the something of the something."

- *The Sound and the Fury* (75: 14-20)

Quentin's demise serves as a warning to all of mankind that even an intellectual who is by far superior to others in the novel in his foresight can fail miserably. Faulkner sets this incident as a reminder to the readers; Quentin borne out of his guilt seeks redemption but chooses to end his life eventually by drowning in the water.

Caddy, being warned not to have any physical contact with her boyfriend is seen to doing so in her own peril. But over time, she realizes her mistake that it is a sin to commit so and washes her mouth with water when she kisses Dalton Ames. This notion of Faulkner in the role of Caddy is that she tries her best to cleanse herself in spite of having coming adultery.

In other significant novels penned by Faulkner, Water is seemed to play a havoc causing a significant destruction. The floods caused due to the over pouring of the waters in the Mississippi river also serves the

reader that water could also wash away communities or create massive casualties and create significant loss of precious lives and extensive damage to properties. And beyond human power, there is an immense presence of natural force that is beyond the control of the entire mankind put together.

5. Conclusion

Faulkner has always been known as a writer who attaches equal importance to his characters and the readers and the mastery of him balancing it equally makes him even more special in the world of fiction.

And the outstanding ability of Faulkner is that he is able to combine subjective views with objective reality. And Faulkner successfully utilizes the motifs of Shadow and Water in his novel "The Sound and the Fury" and much of it reiterates his point of view to a whole new level every single time when one reads the works of William Faulkner.

Faulkner has always utilized a unifying character often ending his novels with a perfect blend of good and bad virtues for he believes in the readers to take it from there on. Critics do call Faulkner's work as inconclusive. But a character like Dilsey in *The Sound the Fury* serves a unifying character towards the last section of the novel.

Dilsey, the black servant does not belong to the Compson family in principle. But her actions toward taking care of them are exclusively commendable and are worthy of our appreciation. Her actions accompanied by Faulkner's writing technique toward the last section of the novel provide a panoramic view of the entire novel filled with objectivity.

Faulkner's use of motifs in the novel is more valuable to the reader because of its tendency to leave the reader in constant questioning phase. The reader is left with no choice but to further expect from what Faulkner would love to offer in his future writings.

As much as times, the motifs are recurring in the novel, the readers too are fascinated with the continuous emphasis it carries through out one's reading. The themes fill the void of not only reflecting the issues faced by the Southern American community but the world at large. Faulkner's writing technique has been inspiration for many countless contemporary novelists of our times including famous novelists like Kunal Ray and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

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