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**Exploring Quentin Compson's Neurotic Mind in William
Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury***

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I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading – treading – till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through –

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum –
Kept beating – beating – till I thought
My Mind was going numb (...)

Emily Dickinson, “I Felt a Funeral in my Brain”, 1862

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Abstract

Quentin Compson's section in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) has been widely studied and researched on in an attempt to analyze and explain one of Faulkner's most complex characters. Not only did Faulkner present a character during the day he commits suicide, but also he managed to evoke his emotions and state of distress very clearly (e.g. the sense of meaninglessness, or the seemingly unapparent lack of attention to the life that lies right before his eyes – the life that Sartre referred to as a present that is already past (Sartre 1994: 267)). He achieved these effects by means of exposing Quentin's neurotic way of thinking as it would actually be going on in his mind. For this reason, when analyzing Quentin Compson, many critics have focused on explaining the complexity of his thoughts – e.g. Quentin being “time-bound” (Sartre 1994: 265) and his “incestuous love for his sister” (Irwin 1994: 310) – by deconstructing them and explaining the effect they have on Quentin.

However, it is necessary to enter into Quentin's neurotic state of mind to understand two main points; on the one hand, his impossibility to enter the life that is right in front of him that is chronologically speaking the present, and, on the other hand, how the chaos in his mind caused by the overflowing and overwhelming amount of thoughts works within him. That is to say, the power of his uncontrolled mind is what takes control over him and makes him live in a life conditioned by the completely distorting perception of neurosis; i.e., by an accumulation and mixture of repetitive thoughts, memories and obsessions from which he cannot escape. Neurosis is a state of mind by which someone finds himself in a state of distress in which, for instance, compulsive acts and, even more relevant in this case, obsessive thoughts govern and condition life; in the case of Quentin, even to the extreme of finding no other way out than committing suicide. Nevertheless, the questions to be answered then are: to what extent is Quentin Compson's neurosis conditioned by the past and traditional values of the South? How is he related to it and what role does the family play in its transmission? What does his suicide represent? The aim of this paper, therefore, is to provide an analysis of and to explain how Quentin's neurotic and obsessive thinking mind works. Also, to explain how these affect him and to what extent his suicide is a symbolical representation of his conscious determination of putting an end to the rotten past.

1. Introduction

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is generally acknowledged to be his most representative and influential novel in the Modernist context, though not the only one. The break that it represents is all together wrapped within the newly established conventions of Modernism in which highly experimental changes were taking place; from the narrative techniques, through the conception of structure, to the insight of the characters. Hence, as Kenner states, Faulkner was unquestionably a writer "ahead of his time", in the sense that "a change in the assumptions of fiction occurred earlier in [his] work than (...) in the mind of the reading public" (Kenner 1986: 112-3). For this reason, Faulkner's work has been reconsidered by critics innumerable times, until reaching the ultimate consensual status of him being "the strongest American novelist of [the 20th] century" (Bloom 1986:1).

The crucial constituents in Faulkner's works are the characters themselves, who are conscientiously and complexly elaborated. They are not only the means by which the story lying behind the novel is presented, but also those through which his experimental creativity takes place. Therefore, in spite of the fact that the original idea behind *The Sound and the Fury* is that of "Caddy climbing the pear tree to look in the window at her grandmother's funeral while Quentin and Jason and Benjy and the negroes look up at the muddy seat of her drawers" (Faulkner 1994: 227), the eagerness of experimenting falls upon the conceiving of the narration through which the characters come to life. Each of them, i.e. Benjy, Quentin, Jason, and Dilsey, constitutes a section of the novel that could be considered as a separate entity due to their own particular intricacy, especially in the first two sections, yet what makes the novel stand out as a unique referent is the overall picture that their unity offers.

Therefore, it is important to notice a couple of aspects of the novel as a whole: on the one hand, the clear movement of the sections from the abstract and the obscure to the objective and comprehensible, in terms of its narrative technique, and, on the other hand, the gradual liberation from the chains of time, from the past to the future time. The first two sections of the novel are the ones that cause a greater impact on the reader precisely because of the conceptual approach that they raise; the first section is narrated by Benjy Compson, the idiot, who is completely unable to make sense of any chronological notion of time and also, his idiocy incapacitates him from consciously processing any kind of information, thereby, remaining in his own existing limbo. The second section dives directly into the neurotic mind of Quentin Compson who is slightly capable of rationality, at this point, and also forever lost in his misfortune of being time-bound to a past from which he cannot escape. The final two sections are less experimental in that they differ from the former two in their conceptual approach: the third section embodies the figure of the rational man that Jason Compson represents, despite his impulsive rage brought up from his lack of power and control over the people around him. The fourth section is the only one that escapes this chaotic past and embraces the future to come through the character of Dilsey, the black servant of the Compson family. Finally, it is also necessary to mention the fundamental idea of doom that Faulkner presented in his characters, as will be explained later on.

The object of interest of this paper is the character of Quentin Compson. His neurotic burst that evokes all kinds of obsessions regarding his own past, together with the conceptual idea of the absurdity of life induced by his own father, make of him one of the most interesting characters, not just of *The Sound and the Fury*, but of Faulkner's entire fictional Yoknapatawpha County. Despite the fact that the character of Quentin Compson reaches his distinctive yet fatal state in *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner

seemed to pay a kind of tribute to this character by making him undergo a regression, in some of his later works, to a previous past time in which his neurotic burst was still to come out: in two short stories, 'A Justice' (1931) and 'That Evening Sun' (1931), in which a young Quentin Compson appears, and in another of Faulkner's most significant novels, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Nevertheless, because of the extension of this paper, the analysis of Quentin Compson will only be carried out in the novel *The Sound and the Fury*.

2. Quentin Compson

Quentin Compson is one of William Faulkner's most intricate characters due to the multiplicity of aspects that he embodies and deals with; from his fatal neurotic breakdown, to his idealized conception of his family, together with his inevitable doom of being cased in the past. Although he is barely mentioned in the first section of the novel, that of his brother Benjy, the second section begins with a submersion into the liminal state in which Quentin Compson finds himself in at that moment; i.e., between life and death. As the section evolves, the reader is automatically thrown into what appears to be an endless revisit to the same scenes, sentences, phrases and words that resound again and again in Quentin's mind evoking his powerful memories of the members of his own family that denote his repetitively fossilized conceptions of them. These thoughts and recollections, however, are the remains of Quentin's previous rational thoughts that had been carefully reasoned and developed before his mental breakdown took place and that, therefore, have been altered by the distorting effects of his neurosis. Thereby, this makes what constitutes the central element of this section stand out more prominently: his mental breakdown.

While this happens, however, there is also a projection into Quentin Compson's

last day before he commits suicide in which it is possible to follow his events in a somewhat more rational way; thus enlightening a bit the abstraction and obscurity of this section. Hence, Quentin's section challenges the reader first of all in what may appear to be an initial quest for identifying the events that did actually take place and the ones that are a product of Quentin's own imagination – derived from his neurosis. Nevertheless, Faulkner goes beyond it by making it an almost philosophical matter about the various truths that may exist in relation to one single event, as Vickery points out (1994), and whether an absolute truth about that event can even be attained when considering the novel in its totality.

In spite of this, it is only throughout the other sections of the novel that the importance and influence of the character of Quentin Compson within the Compson family begins to unfold until eventually gaining the symbolical state of being the most representative figure to capture the overall sense of despair that the novel contains: the decay of the Compson family as a symbol of Southern decay. Therefore, even though his own particular section is of crucial importance and could stand on its own, the various perspectives that the novel gives enable the possibility to discover a different dimension from which to perceive the same object of interest. In this case, after obtaining the picture of the Compson family as a whole, it is possible to grasp the binary interpretation of Quentin Compson's neurotic state; i.e., of him as an individual, and as an embodiment of the Compson family's decay.

In order to understand this duality presented by the character, it is necessary to point out how both interpretations are interrelated; in other words, the diverse recurrent obsessions that Quentin has, show the impact that these different elements caused upon him to the extent of conditioning his fatal neurosis. This is why by analyzing his thoughts and obsessions it is possible to single out the origin of the factors that were of

greater concern to Quentin - the same ones that become an unstoppable booming of thoughts from which he cannot detach himself. In addition to this, it also becomes clearer how Quentin is impregnated with the very same essence of despair and chaotic disassembling of the family. The focus of this analysis then will be placed upon the disintegrating components of the past – to which he is deeply rooted - and the family - upon which a detrimental symbolical doom seems to be cased.

2.1 Quentin Compson: The South and the Past

The foundation of Faulkner's entire fictional Yoknapatawpha County lies at the basis of one of Quentin Compson's main neurotic obsession: time. Yet time in Faulkner does not include the notion of any chronological construct *per se*, but rather it seems to denote a frozen conception of it that eliminates any possible chronological progression – such is the case of Quentin Compson: “Time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life” (*TSTF* 54). Yet to be more precise, Faulkner's interest in time did not only consist on approaching it abstractly; instead, his perception of it is very much rooted in him being a southerner and, thus, an immediate connoisseur of the mind of the South. Although Brooks claims that “it is tempting to read [the decay of the Compsons] as a parable of the disintegration of the modern man” in which “individuals no longer sustained by familial and cultural unity are alienated and lost in private worlds” (Brooks 1994: 295), it seems undeniable that Faulkner's intention was rather that of symbolically capturing the decay of the Old South. For this reason, in order provide a more conscientious analysis as to how time, and more specifically the past of the Old South, conditions Quentin Compson, it is necessary to briefly introduce the origin and the elements of this past that clings to the Old South and that is embedded in Quentin Compson.

Ever since this novel was published, many critics have established connections between incidents and events that constitute the novel and Faulkner's own life. To start with, Faulkner's own family establishes a clear parallel to that of the Compson family; William Faulkner had three brothers and as he suggests, he "did not realize then that [he] was trying to manufacture the sister which [he] did not have and the daughter which [he] was to lose" (Faulkner 1994: 230). Yet the parallels do not merely end here; in fact, as Williamson and Minter point out the three Falkner¹ brothers called their grandmother² Damuddy, which is the exact same way the Compsons refer to their grandmother (Williamson 1993: 145). Though, Minter extends her impact on Faulkner by stating that "to anchor [the Compson brothers] in time and place, [Faulkner] took a central event and several images from his memory of the death of the grandmother" (Minter 1986: 174) and made it constitute one of the key events of the novel. All these parallels, apart from sharing the bond of the family, also have another element in common; the southern state of Mississippi.

The Falkner family had been three generations in the state of Mississippi when William Faulkner was born, which ties the family to the historical past of the old South. In fact, his great grandfather, William C. Falkner³, was the most relevant figure in the family in relation to the old South: better known as Colonel Falkner, he had an active role in the Mexican War and the American Civil War, though in the latter one, he only took part of it initially as a Colonel in the Confederate States. In spite of this, the Falkner family was not well-known for holding a large plantation of slaves; instead, their interest was placed on the railway business, although they did actually hold some slaves. The figure of the great grandfather is particularly relevant because it seems to

¹ William Faulkner's surname adopted the "u" later on in his life, although the exact reasons why remain uncertain. See Williamson's *William Faulkner and Southern History* (1993) page 180.

² William C. Faulkner's grandmother from his mother's side of the family was Leila Butler.

³ William C. Faulkner's great grandfather.

have his fictional alter ego in Quentin Compson's grandfather Jason Lycurgus II who was a Brigadier General of the Confederate States. This connection is of crucial importance because it enables a correlation with the influence that the South had on both William Faulkner and Quentin Compson, and from which Faulkner approached the matter of the South and deliberately criticized it.

The impact that the American Civil War had on the southern states was nonetheless significant not only to their landscape, political and economic power, but also to the mind of the southern society. The clash that it entailed was translated into an astonishing cultural shock of values that would make the southern society try to hold on to their old values and beliefs, even if that meant to remain living in an imaginary world that had suddenly expired; i.e., the wealthy old South based on the plantations. Their difficulties in facing reality and in processing the change their world was forced to embrace was certainly unwelcome. Instead, their reaction was to project a romanticization of the past that is exactly what William Faulkner insistently presents already in its decaying state and from a negative perspective in his intention to criticize it. As Warren states "the South which Faulkner had grown up in – particularly the rural South – was cut-off, inward-turning, backward-looking. It was a culture frozen in its virtues and vices [...]; that South offered an image of massive immobility in all ways" (Warren 1994: 244), which is exactly what Faulkner portrays in *The Sound and the Fury*. In it then, the representation of the South is already in its ultimate state of putrefaction and decay which explains why the Compson family embodies this breakdown within it, and also, why the character of Quentin Compson is its maximum exponent, as it will be explained later on.

The notion of time in *The Sound and the Fury* prevails in all the characters since it transmits their impossibility to detach themselves from the past mentioned above;

such is Quentin Compson's case. His relation to time is fundamentally captured in one of the most remarkable statements from his own section that reflects the relevance and the pressure that Faulkner puts on this endless circular dimension that time acquires: "a man is the sum of his misfortunes. One day you'd think misfortune would get tired, but then time is your misfortune" (*TSTF* 66). Sartre stated that this "is the real subject of the book" and that "man's misfortune lies [precisely] in being time-bound" (Sartre 1994: 266). Yet the particular relevance of this statement in Quentin's section is that it accounts for two of the main points that surround this tight relation between Quentin and time. On the one hand, it gives in the notion of this irreversible and never-ending state of constant disgrace in which the Compson family seems to be completely rooted to and from which the notion of doom that is casted upon them begins to emerge. This, of course, also affects Quentin as it inevitably ties him to an irresoluble and inexhaustible palpable chain of misfortunes that progressively heighten the critical neurotic state he is dealing with - regardless of the paradoxical fact that his fate is already taking place as the reader learns about his last day. Thereby, it evokes the helpless condition of doom that he is bound to carry and that eventually reduces him to nothingness: "Man the sum of what have you. A problem in impure properties carried tediously to an unvarying nil: stalemate of dust and desire" (*TSTF* 78).

On the other hand, the final element that casts and induces this absolute incapacity for evolving, and even for counter-acting this despondent state induced by the doom and fate of both the Compson family and Quentin himself, is the ultimate encounter with time. What this element incorporates is an alteration of the boundaries within which the characters are delimited; i.e., the past time to which the Compson family clings to is embedded in the crumbling existence of the Old South. Because of this, Faulkner forbids them the opportunity of crossing the threshold between this past

and the present - a present that would automatically imply succumbing to a change of perceptions, values and morals. Nevertheless, Quentin represents the maximum exponent of this impossible chronological progression that time perceived as a constructed notion imbues due to the fact that he is not only chained to the past, but is also terminally abducted by it. Namely, at the beginning of his section, he stands in a kind of limbo between life and death that has been otherwise defined by critics as the “infinitesimal moment of death” (Sartre 1994: 270), as “a kind of suspended moment before death” (Millgate 1994: 305), and even “like one note of music indefinitely sustained” (Brooks 1994: 291); what all these definitions denote, then, is this in-between state that disables any further alteration.

From that moment onwards, Quentin’s “memory begins to unravel its recollections” (Sartre 1994: 270) and the reader gains access to the past. This explains why his first recollections are that of the symbolical moment in which his father gave him the watch that had previously belonged to Quentin’s grandfather. It is important to notice that the intention behind this gesture is to capture the symbolism of the transmission of values from generation to generation. This, at the same time, also signifies a point of inflexion because it constrains Quentin to the past and marks his definitive progression towards his suicide. In fact, even Quentin seems to notice how time, and by extension the watch, make him reflect on his awareness of being compelled to destroy himself; “There was a clock, high up in the sun, and I thought about how, when you don’t want to do a thing, your body will try to trick you into doing it, sort of unawares” (*TSTF* 53). However, this is not the only relevant factor that needs to be considered in relation to this powerful symbolical gesture.

As a matter of fact, one of the most influential factors that notoriously prevails in a very obsessive way throughout Quentin’s mental breakdown can be tracked down to

the point of origin that his father represents. Quentin keeps obsessively recalling his father's apparent use of rhetorical assertiveness that enabled him to transform every single event into a seemingly transcendental moment by paradoxically appealing to, and empowering, the wise voice of experience:

I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it's rather excruciatingly apt that you will use it to gain *reducto absurdum* of all human experience (...). I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools. (*TSTF* 48)

What becomes noticeable in this passage is the knowledge with which the father speaks, since it gives the impression that he is giving advice to Quentin against what he has experienced himself and fought against; the generational past that he tried to deal with and overcome unsuccessfully. Mr. Compson is stuck in this endless circular dimension that the past has acquired for him and that has conditioned him permanently; therefore, in an attempt to make his son aware of this, he gives him the advice of forgetting time.

Initially, Quentin follows his advice and struggles to get rid of his watch in a frustrated attempt by throwing it onto the dresser, yet this is quickly overcome by a complete sense of despair and helplessness when realizing that even though the protecting glass of the watch has exploded, "the watch [keeps] tick[ing] on" (*TSTF* 51). At this stage, the character of Quentin becomes conscious of the fact that he will neither be able to escape time and that his failed attempt to break away from the boundaries of time implies that he will remain forever chained to the symbolical past that the watch embodies and empowers. As a result, his irreversible and unstoppable walk towards the "immobile wall" that his suicide represents, as Sartre defined it (Sartre 1994: 269), is triggered and, therefore, the opportunity to "envisage the possibility of *not* killing

himself” (Sartre 1994: 269) is completely vanished; thus rendering no other choice to the character except his suicide.

Likewise, though contrary to his father’s advice, this failed attempt to break the watch is what releases even more prominently Quentin’s lethal neurosis. This is made explicit by the innumerable references to time and his overwhelming, and obsessive-compulsive, over-awareness of it, mainly in the form of reflections; these not only magnify his sense of despair and helplessness, but also evoke his complete sense of degradation and lack of control over his mind throughout the last day that leads him towards his suicide.

Hearing the watch (...) I lay listening to it. Hearing it, that is. I don’t suppose anybody ever deliberately listens to it a watch or a clock. You don’t have to. You can be oblivious to the sound for a long while, then in a second of ticking it can create in the mind unbroken the long diminishing parade of time you didn’t hear. (*TSTF* 48-9)

Ultimately, his excessive sensitivity to any ticking of the little wheels of the watch seems to achieve a somewhat relaxing effect on him in which he is able to think a bit less confusedly. At the same time though, it is also the main source of pain and tension that reminds him of all what he has tried to leave behind; his and his family’s past. His section ends with the symbolical sentences that evoke his imminent suicide: “there is nothing else in the world its not despair until time its not even time until it was” (*TSTF* 113). These three last words, “until it was”, recover and round up a complete and final understanding of his father’s advice of forgetting time that has been mentioned above. Also, at this point, he reaches the climax of his neurotic burst and lack of control over his mind by allowing it to lead him towards his suicide. Consequently, he notices how “The last note sounded” and that “At last it stopped vibrating and the darkness was still again” (*TSTF* 113). This final ceasing of the ticking that he hears then embodies the eventual end of his tormented existence.

2.2 Quentin Compson: Family

Nevertheless, the origin of this agonizing past is directly related to one of Faulkner's most emblematic themes throughout his works; that of the family. Quentin's idealized mental representation of his own family, with a special emphasis placed on the figures of the father, the mother and the sister, has a crucial influence on him. Part of Quentin's misfortune is that "the order of the past is the order of the heart" (Sartre 1994: 268), which means that he, being unable to detach himself from his relatives' lives, adopts elements of the lives of his father, mother and sister as if they were his own. Consequently, this unconsciously results in a fatality for Quentin, as it will be thoroughly argued later on, since he either takes their flaws, in the case of his father and his mother, or distorts certain circumstances into a horrendous suffering, in the case of Caddy.

The presence of Mr. Compson in Quentin's mind is that of the wise voice of experience that keeps advising and warning him against the dangers of time; or as Vickery suggests "the bitter prophet and inflexible corruptless judge" (Vickery 1994: 284). Mr. Compson's statements do not merely arise from his own life experience, but also from that of his own father, Jason Lycurgus II, in some occasions. This is what makes Quentin assimilate the notion of time, and the past, as a conception overcharged with meaning that even becomes absurd in being presented as having no possible conciliation with the present. As Waldington states, the habit of Mr. Compson is that of "thinking in terms of conflicts between assertive irreconcilable opposites" (Waldington 1994: 362) and this, in the end is what prevails in Quentin's mind. In this sense, the influence that Mr. Compson has on Quentin is based on bringing into his mind the notions of the "meaninglessness of existence", "the claims of honor" (Brooks 1994:

293) – as will be seen later on -, and the irresoluble conflict of time, as well as transmitting him the enormous weight of tradition.

Mrs. Compson, contrary to her husband, frontally rejects the idea of tradition that she strictly connects to the Compson blood, despite being one of its main constituents and the principal figure transmitting its absolute decay. Even though Quentin expresses his conviction that Mrs. Compson has undoubtedly failed to stand up as a real mother and instead she has fomented a “maternal abandonment” (Waldington 1994: 365), he still imagines her as the mother he would like her to be; i.e. someone who would be able to truly express her love for her children. However, Quentin feels disappointed when realizing that she is actually completely incapable of feeling any kind of love towards her children, because she fails at fulfilling the expectations he put on her. In addition to that, although his mother’s irrational despise for her own children for being descendants of the Compsons, and by extension carriers of their blood, is perceived by Quentin, it is not until the end of his life that this bursts out as an feeling of indignation towards his mother, as can be seen in the following passage: “Done in Mother’s mind though. Finished. Finished. Then we were all poisoned” (*TSTF* 84). Instead, throughout Quentin’s entire life this had generated a feeling of “inverted pride” (Brooks 1994: 292) and absolute hatred towards himself.

Finally, the expectations that his mother places on Quentin are beyond what he believes to be his capacities and this is one of the reasons why Quentin only commits suicide once he has finished his first year at Harvard; in other words, he is very aware of the fact that as he recalls being told: “for [him] to go to harvard has been [his] mothers dream since [he] w[as] born and no compson has ever disappointed a lady” (*TSTF* 113). Yet in being conscious of this pressure he has been put under, at the end of his section he also states that “every man is the arbiter of his own virtues but let no man prescribe

for another mans wellbeing” (*TSTF* 113); hence, clarifying his disagreement on other people’s dictations over another person’s life.

The last member of the family upon whom Quentin projects an idealization is that of his sister Caddy. His idealized depiction of his sister’s purity is an almost conceivable Virgin-like figure, which again shows Faulkner’s predilections for Biblical ironies (Bloom 1986: 5)⁴, and is related to the values of honor that his father has transmitted to Quentin. Therefore, when Quentin acknowledges not only his sister’s immediate marriage, but also becomes aware of her promiscuity, his mind enters in a terrible suffering from which, and together with the two previous cases of his father and his mother, he cannot recover. His almost mental breakdown and what he understands as the ultimate appeal to honor that he makes is what eventually leads him to the “idea of announcing that he and Caddy had committed incest” (Millgate 1994: 305). Unfortunately, this shows Quentin’s failure to understand that his sister is actually the only one in the family who seems to be determined to fight against the tradition and decay that is destroying the family and, therefore, marks more evidently his rooted existence to the past.

At this point, it is possible to understand how the reader “learn[s] what it is like to live in such a family through” the mind of Quentin Compson, in this case, and how that projects this “sense of frustration and “entrapment” [that is] is overpowering” (Brooks 1994: 290). Therefore, it would be plausible to argue that although the novel *The Sound and the Fury* is well-known for portraying the breakdown of the decaying Compson family that represents the old values of the South, its rotten symbolism is captured in its totality by the mental breakdown of Quentin Compson.

⁴ Bloom argues that Faulkner’s ironies are Biblical because precisely “what Faulkner’s people lack is the blessing” since “they cannot contend for a time without boundaries. Also, he claims that it juxtaposes incommensurable realities: of self and other, of parent and child, of past and future”. (Bloom 1986: 5).

2.3 Quentin Compson: Mental Breakdown

The neurosis and mental breakdown from which Quentin Compson suffers is the most evident trait that characterizes him throughout his section. It is inevitable to perceive his acute neurotic state in which he deliberately premeditates his suicide by sending the two letters and leaving everything ready, as if he were to be gone for the summer vacations, before starting his second year at Harvard. What prompts his neurosis to burst out is undoubtedly the major weight that tradition has and that has become implicitly represented by the constituents of time and the family; these constituents then are the same ones that show to what extreme Quentin has lost his ability to control his mind and is governed by his neurosis. Therefore, certainly, as Brooks states “Quentin [...] is a human being who, in spite of his anguished speculations upon the nature of time, is related to a culture; he is not a monstrous abstraction but a young man who has received a grievous psychic wound” (Brooks 1994: 292). This “grievous psychic wound” that Brooks refers to is what entails the greatness not only of Quentin as a character, but also of his section within the novel, and even of Faulkner’s experimental narrative.

In order to explain thoroughly Faulkner’s astonishing achievement particularly in relation to Quentin Compson’s neurosis, it is first of all necessary to introduce his conception of the writer in relation to his work. Faulkner defined the figure of the writer as that whose “prolixity [...] is simply the desire to put all experience into one word. Then he has got to add another word, another word, another word becomes a sentence, but he’s still trying to get it into one unstopping whole – paragraph or a page – before he find a place to put a full stop” (Faulkner 1944 cited in Inge 1999: 205). This process of writing is related to a perfectionism and accuracy that Faulkner referred to as the

writers' failure "to match [their] dream of perfection"; hence, he "rated [writers] on the basis of [their] splendid failure to do the impossible" (Faulkner 2004: 118). It is particularly interesting to notice then Faulkner's own "splendid failure to do the impossible" in the novel *The Sound and the Fury*. Not only did he manage to capture what he believed to be the only thing worth writing about, i.e. "the problems of the human heart in conflict" (Faulkner 2004: 118), but also he mastered the dream of perfection in relation to what would eventually gain recognition as the most experimental narrative of his entire career - to which Quentin Compson's section would prove to be its fundamental piece.

As Guetti states, after reading Quentin Compson's section the reader has the "feeling that the inexpressible has been communicated", in spite of its verbal contradictions and complexities (Guetti 1986: 58). This is so because what Faulkner achieves is to transmit the feelings of entrapment, despair, helplessness and meaninglessness to the reader by means of his narrative. Quentin's overflow of neurotic thoughts and obsessions that are abruptly cut-off, entangled or even almost juxtaposed to one another creates the exact sensation of chaotic disorder of his neurotic mind; i.e., of a neurotic mind that has become completely subjected to its fatal mental breakdown and remains entirely unable to regain any control over it. This unbearable state in which Quentin Compson is found does not only represent that of the individual *per se*, but also acquires the symbolical representation of the human condition in relation to the fall of the South – which is also embodied by the Compson family.

At this point, what comes into play are the two factors that have adopted the depiction of the cultural shock and ruined state of the South and its tradition in the novel, and that have been the main part of the discussion so far; the past and the family. The fact that Quentin is portrayed as the most capable of the siblings and yet is

presented in such deplorable state is what distinguishes him from his two brothers, his mother and father, in terms of embodying the Old South more accurately and in its totality. In other words, the South's regression from being the richest part of America to the poorest part, together with the radical change of the traditional values that the southerners refused, is projected in Quentin's own existence. His regression goes from having the best capacities and conditions to have a very promising life and career, to being immersed in an absolute miserable and terrible state that ends with his life, as will be explained in the following section. Therefore, this regression that both the South and Quentin present, the former into poverty and decay, and the latter, into a neurotic mental breakdown, establishes a unique parallel that suggests Faulkner's criticism on the need for southerners to leave the past behind that can only be attained by casting it entirely away.

3. Suicide

The act of suicide of Quentin Compson is not to be taken as simply the irresoluble will of an individual in being determined to end his life, but rather as the cumulous devastating experience of being raised in the long enduring values of the traditional South. What this entails is the major role that the weight of the past and tradition adopt in prompting the collision of the old traditional values, and even the old mentality, with the new ones; thereby proving an absolute incompatibility. It is important to notice how the past in a chronological perception not only enlightens the generational dissimilarities and divergences among society, but also highlights the lack of evolution to which Quentin is subjected in his family – precisely, because the family suffers from it, too. This is the key to understanding the crucial role that the element of the family plays in representing the detrimental state that the Old South conveyed and

that would also be applicable to Faulkner's own case.

By raising their children in an environment that was hostile to the present and the future because of the significant renewal that it entailed, the Compsons deprive their children from the opportunity to have contact with progress and to discover that the nature of society beyond the South does, in fact, look forward; that it does not remain afflicted and mourning for past events forevermore without being able to advance, no matter what major impact it may have undergone. Instead then, the Compson brothers are haunted by their impossibility to forget and erase their generational memory; though to forget not the past that was terrible to them directly, but the postmemory⁵ of what was intolerable to their previous generations and that has eventually become detrimental to them. To be more precise, the generations that suffered this affliction directly were that of Quentin's grandparents – e.g. Jason Lycurgus II, the Brigadier General, C.S.A⁶ - and by extension his parents, since they could also immediately perceive the consequences through their parents' behavior. Therefore, Quentin, Jason, Benjy and Caddy have been indirectly reached by this generational suffering to the point of being inevitably impregnated with and conditioned by it without them realizing it.

However, there is a crucial distinction to be made among the siblings: Quentin's suffering is different from that of his two other brothers precisely because he understands what it is about; i.e., his obsessions with the watch connected to his fathers' statements on time and experience, as well as his recollections of his mother cursing and expressing her detest towards the Compson blood, gives him the tools to acknowledge

⁵ This term is used by Marianne Hirsch. It makes reference to a "distinguished form of memory by generational distance (...). [It] characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (Hirsch 1997: 22). See reference in Further Readings.

⁶ The Compson Genealogy appears in both: the appendix of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1994) and in Cleanth Brook's *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1967).

that the origin of his hatred is to be found in a generational past to which paradoxically he never had direct access. This is Quentin's curse: knowing what the origin is and being unable to change his doom in spite of his efforts and attempts to embrace change and integrate himself in the environment that he has the opportunity to encounter at Harvard. Benjy and Jason, on the contrary, never come even near to understand the extension to which their lives have been conditioned because of their family. The former, on the one hand, because of his idiocy and incapacity to reason is left out to be and exist as if nothing around him happened, since he would not be able to process it anyway. The latter, on the other hand, is not provided with the brightness that allows his brother Quentin to see beyond immediacy and, therefore, he fails to see any further than the immediate miseries that take place right in front of his eyes.

For this reason, Quentin's suicide can be interpreted as the understanding of the doom that has been placed on him as to how his generational past was never able to move forward and how this has remained a stigma on the following generations to come. His over-awareness of the past and of the family gives him an insight that the other members of his generation seem to lack, except for his sister Caddy. She is the only one determined to revolt more aggressively against tradition, and ends up expelled even from her own family for adopting behaviors that are shameful, according to her mother's perception. Additionally, her promiscuous behavior and her rebellion are also perceived to be shameful by the rest of the family, once again, due to the enormous weight of tradition. Therefore, Quentin, in being unable to abide it any longer, commits suicide and symbolically puts an end to the insufferable past that has conditioned him to an unimaginable extent.

4. Conclusions

By exploring the neurotic mind of Quentin Compson, it has been possible to single out how his thoughts work in a bombarding way in his mind, and by disentangling them, the turmoil of the apparent chaos formed in his mind has been slowly discerned. First of all, the factor of time in relation to the watch has shown how through it Quentin symbolically received the enormous weight of the past generations, thus, acquiring at the same time the fatal doom that characterizes the Compsons. Also, this watch and the sound of its little wheels ticking are what make Quentin be obsessed and excessively aware of the time that almost sounds like a countdown towards his suicide. Secondly, the Compson family has proven to be perhaps the most influential factor in conditioning Quentin's neurosis; in raising him in a context completely submerged in the old values and in failing to stand up as the parental figures he should have had, in spite of Quentin's idealization of them that eventually turns into hatred and rejection, he has been directly tied to this rotten South that the decaying Compson family also embodies. Additionally, Quentin's failure to understand his sister's will to diverge from the traditional values of the family highlights how in the end his frozen perspective induced by them is what prevails. Finally, the last two aspects that have been analyzed, the neurosis and the suicide, offer the possibility to perceive how Faulkner through the character of Quentin Compson mainly as well as "*The Sound and the Fury* make[s] it clear that there is no way out of history and time but in death" (Jehlen 1994: 322). Quentin's deliberate suicide then puts an end to his suffering as an individual and also symbolically exterminates the detrimental values of the Old South. Therefore, as Bloom states the "agon [of Faulkner's characters] is the hopeless one of waiting for their doom to lift" (1986: 5), yet, in fact, paradoxically speaking this is exactly the greatness of the character of Quentin Compson.

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