

Life is full of sound and fury, signifying nothing: An Ironic Representation of Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury" through Dilsey's Fortitude

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Abstract:

Dilsey's faith and fidelity to the Compson household, her compassion for the idiot Benzy, her common concerns for all the children in that household, and her steadfast devotion to her employers win her our regard and admiration. She is the only one in the novel who acts positively and unselfishly, and who depends on Christian faith and love as a defense against sin and evil. Dilsey transcends chaos by her vision of Christian equilibrium and order. She also embodies much that the Compsons lack, especially a duty to her position as a servant and her total faith in God. In the final section of the novel, Faulkner greatly emphasized her role and gave her much attention and importance. For instances, the Easter Sunday service in the negro church is immensely moving, a glorification of simplicity, innocence, and love, with Dilsey and Benzy as the central figures. The other meaningful rite in which Dilsey participates is the birthday-cake of Benzy's 34th birthday which she has bought with her own money. Into this novel about selfish characters obsessed with time, the expressions of Dilsey's love and the Easter sermon introduce the dimension of eternity and the power of unselfish love. Benzy, as the innocent human and Dilsey as the redemptive figure, thus; serve to reverse the irony of the title of the novel and to offer the positive values. Through this attempt I have ventured to substantiate that Faulkner did not write his novel "The Sound and the Fury" with the sole purpose of cynicism or pessimism, rather he said through his spokesperson Dilsey that life is not full of sound and fury signifying nothing: for her life does have meaning and significance. Here the irony lies in the very name of the title of the novel and somehow it seemed that he made himself stand beside Dilsey's fortitude and see himself very optimistic in his vision of life.

Keywords: Christianity, Dilsey, Faulkner, Fortitude, Pessimism

Date of Submission: 27-07-2020

Date of Acceptance: 11-08-2020

I. INTRODUCTION

Human life, according to Faulkner's view, is most pessimistic and his writing is of a principally melancholic tone. Some notable critics have failed to make the certain distinction between his characters' statements in the novels and his own radical ideas. The words of Mr. Compson that "history is an illusion of philosophers and fools" have, for examples, been much attributed to Faulkner himself. Indisputably, Faulkner, like any other novelist or dramatist, stands behind some of his characters, but which of them are his spokespersons can be decided only in terms of the preponderance of his ideas. In most of the stories of Faulkner there is the compassionate unquiet observer. Such is Quentin Compson in this novel and in "Absalom, Absalom" also. Such also are Benbow in "Sanctuary", Hightower in "Light in August", and Radcliff in "The Hamlet". It is unquestionably indicative of Faulkner's own attitude that these compassionate observers so largely provide the reflective points of view from which the story is told and thereby determine its moral atmosphere. This typical technique is in itself a vindication of the charge that Faulkner is nihilistic and merely sensational. Indeed, it shows that Faulkner's temperamental intention is idealistic, while its awareness of the preponderant realities of human behavior is pessimistic. It is also remarkable that the counterpoise of mood in his novels usually swings to positive assertion. Hightower and Benbow, for examples, return again and again to the struggle. Even the crazy Quentin Compson realizes that beyond despair is something still more impatient and that something is nonchalant. To show his views he says: "It's not when you realize that nothing can help you- religion, pride, anything- it's when you realize that you don't need any aid." He is much obsessed by his father's education that "all men are just accumulations, dolls stuffed with sawdust" etc. but still he cannot accept his father's notion that virginity of a woman is all about a silly thing. These characters do not surrender their principles. In fact, even the skeptical Mr. Compson often shows some awareness that the moral issue is not fragmentary and he sees human virtue manifested sometimes in acts of apparent evil. Another point within the

ethics of Faulkner's characters is an idealization of honesty. It is frequent that the unassuming virtue of some straightforward people provides the foil to evil and furnishes the atmospheric tension in his scenes. And, accordingly, Faulkner's deep pessimism does not go ahead from a denial of values but from a melancholic recognition of the good weight of evil opposition to very real values.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

To carry out my work competently, I have surveyed some major critical works and some scholarly articles relating to this novel and the other novels of Faulkner. Cleanth Brooks in his "William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha County" discusses 'Yoknapatawpha' as an imagined community whose genealogical history becomes the subjects of the novels. The reading of "William Faulkner and Southern History" by Joel Williamson has immensely helped me to enrich my knowledge of the American Southern history. And, in this respect, surely I should mention the book "William Faulkner: A Biography" by Joseph Blotner. The book helps a lot to get the information about Faulkner's personal history and the contemporary age as well. Faulkner himself belonged to an aristocratic family, which collapsed as a result of the Civil War. After losing the superior status of the society his family also became poor- poor not only in respect of riches but in the issues of ethics also. This work almost differs from the rests which have been done before. The reading of scholarly papers and online sources has also given me useful information to write in respect of Dilsey's fortitude in Faulkner's novel "The Sound and the Fury". Her loyalty to the Compson family, her compassion for the idiot Benzy, her common concerns for all the children in the family, and her steadfast devotion to her employers win her our regard and admiration. She is the only one in the novel who acts positively and unselfishly, and who depends on Christian faith and love as a defense against sin and evil. Dilsey transcends chaos by her vision of Christian equilibrium and order. She also embodies much that the Compsons lack, especially a duty to her position as a servant and her total faith in God. Into this novel about selfish characters obsessed with time, the expressions of Dilsey's love and the Easter sermon introduce the dimension of eternity and the power of unselfish love. Benzy, as the innocent man and Dilsey as the redemptive figure, thus, serve to reverse the irony of the title and to offer the positive significance. The methods in which way I will prove my research problem consist of close reading, interpreting and in depth analysis of the sources. I will also support my study with a significant number of critical writings as well as scholarly writings which deal with the subject which I want to prove. My approach will be interdisciplinary and will consult some of the matters to understand the inter-connectedness of literal and ironical meaning of the title of the novel; characters of the white and of the negro (especially of Dilsey); and Dilsey's unfailing courage, fortitude, endurance, integrity, and so on. Further, it is intended to consult some major works of the period concerned through libraries as well as collect primary and secondary sources through internet and libraries.

The title of Faulkner's novel "The Sound and the Fury" is borrowed from Shakespeare's play "Macbeth." Towards the close of that play, the protagonist makes a soliloquy in which he says, 'life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' In other words, according to the view expressed in that speech, human life is meaningless and futile though it is full of noise, tumult, and indignation. Now, in certain ways, the title of this novel is very appropriate because the novel gives us the impression that life is really meaningless and futile. It has as its major theme the decay and disintegration of an aristocratic family living in the American South. This aristocratic family has had eminent ancestors and a highly honorable tradition. But the family has now fallen on evil days and has to face crisis after crisis, disaster after disaster, setback after setback. The section wise discussion of the novel, at least, says so. To illustrate, the first section is, literally, a tale told by the idiot Benzy. The second section is all about the muddiness of the lives of Quentin and Caddy. The third section tells us about the monstrous nature of Jason. The fourth and final section deals with the theft committed by Miss Quentin, her elopement from home and the discomfiture of Jason. Faulkner's vision of life as exposed to his chronicle of the Compson family is, as a matter of fact, cynic and pessimistic. Not a single member of the Compson family represents any positive values with the possible exception of Quentin whose finer side is, however, swamped by his negative impulses. Notwithstanding, the novel is not one of unrelieved gloom and pessimism. There is a ray of hope and some positive values which emerge victorious. These positive values are embodied to a small extent in the figure of the idiot Benzy but abundantly and plentifully in the negro servant Dilsey. Dilsey is one of the most memorable characters in the entire range of Faulkner's fictions. In "The Sound and the Fury" itself, her role is conspicuous, even though the main story centers round the Compson family. She is a negro woman who works in the Compson household as a cook-cum-children's nurse and who, in fact, does more work than would normally be expected of hers. She attends to all the requirements of the constantly ailing Mrs. Compson; she looks after the welfare of Benzy, the idiot; she puts all the children to bed at night; she does the entire cooking; and so on. In fact, it is she who has brought up all the children, and she, merrily, accepts the responsibility for bringing up the child Quentin, Caddy's daughter, when this child is brought into the house by Mr. Compson. She devotes herself to all the children (including Miss Quentin), though she does not have any liking for Jason. The fundamental trait of Dilsey's character is faith or fidelity to the family she serves. And this

faith shines in the novel like a beacon-light in the midst of the encompassing gloom. Dilsey, in fact, offers a striking contrast to all or any of the members of the Compson family which is now in a state of decay and decadence.

The themes and subjects of almost all the novels and short stories of Faulkner need to do with the elementary Christian virtues of self-respect and mutual respect, forgiveness of others also as oneself, fortitude, a perfect balance between humbleness and self-exaltation, and charity. Although he is not in favor of any particular orthodoxy; he, obviously, accepts the Christian moral code. He does not, however, wholly admire the practicing Christian. Some of his pungent satire is written at the expense of self-assured piety. He despises stiff-necked and literal-minded righteousness whether it is in the service of the Southern mode or life and behavior, or of Christian doctrines. Since a vast number of his stories have Southern settings, these virtues and vices are, often, presented in a context of white and black relationships. And sometimes his concern with them leads him to review the Southern heritage and the 'Southern Code' as well. When Faulkner undertakes subjects of a particular magnitude and order; as he did in his novels "Pylon" and "A Fable", he flounders severely. But when he deals both the subjects and the themes that he feels in his bones, he is superb. The themes underlying in the latter variety are: the negro's frustration in "Dry September", Dilsey's decency and endurance in "The Sound and the Fury", Anse Bundren's egocentrism in "As I Lay Dying", and, of course, young Sarty Snopes's woe in "Barn Burning". The decent and enduring Dilsey appears to us in a very favorable light in "The Sound and the Fury". Her loyalty to the Compson family, her spirit of sacrifice, her powers of endurance, her constant concerns for the Compson children, and especially for Benzy, and her fortitude arouses our deep admiration. In the final section, she emerges, particularly, as a genuinely heroic figure. She was a big woman once, we learn; and it is sheer hard work and toil in the service of the Compson family which have reduced her to a skeleton. Her reaction to the priest's sermon in the church, whither she has taken Benzy also in spite of what the white folk might say, shows her deep piety. This woman, with her Christian humility and compassion, and her faith in eternal values, does rise to the stature of a heroine. The kind of life she has lived makes her genuinely a tragic figure because of her unflinching courage, fortitude, endurance, and integrity

Thus, of all faithful servants in the fictions of Faulkner Dilsey, the negro, is unsurpassed in every respect. Her episodic courage is an aspect of her humanity and compassion constituting the one source of love and order in the family. She tells Jason that she would not blame Miss Quentin if she did break his window, with him nagging at her all the blessed time he is in the house. Faulkner incorporated Dilsey, Sutpen, and Joe Christmas as his three most tragic characters and said that Dilsey held the family together not for the hope of reward but just because it seemed to her the decent and proper thing to do. It is Dilsey, with the limited assistance of her husband and her adolescent son (who is Benzy's attendant), who must sustain the Compsons in what passes for custom and ceremony in their deranged and disharmonious existence. Present in the awareness of others, she pervades the entire story, a critical but constant guardian whose each and every glimpse and act is a just evaluation. She is not called upon to account for herself in the way in which Benzy, then Quentin, then Jason do. Through the first three sections of the novel her appearances, actions, and utterances show her truly even through such different eyes; and in its last or final section she is assigned to an all-knowing narrative which is applicable to the remaining members of the family at this time, after Quentin's suicide eighteen years earlier, and then his father's death and Caddy's defection, and now the elopement of Caddy's daughter Quentin after stealing the cash-box of Jason. In the novel, so to say, Dilsey is a symbol of the forces of ritual and order as against those of chaos.

One of the important events in the final section and one of the highlights in the entire novel is Dilsey's visit to the church. Dilsey is, by nature, a religious woman and she is religious not only in theory but in actual practice. Her solicitude about Benzy and her great affection for the girl Miss Quentin are enough to prove that. When Frony objects to Dilsey's taking Benzy, a white man, to a negro church, Dilsey rejects the objection on the ground that the white folk are unreasonable in criticizing her action in taking Benzy to her own church. The white folk would not like Benzy to go to their own church and they would not like him to be taken to a negro church. What do they expect then? At the church, Dilsey is deeply moved by the preacher's sermon about the birth of Christ and the Crucifixion. Tears flow from her eyes, as she listens to the sermon so eloquently delivered. The author says, "Two tears slid down her fallen cheeks, in and out of the myriad coruscations of immolation and abnegation and time," and this speech has been quoted by almost every critic to indicate the deeply religious nature of Dilsey and the sincerity of her religious emotion. In fact, the entire negro audience sits spell-bound by the sermon the text of which is: "I got the recollection and the blood of the Lamb." The preacher is physically the most unimpressive man with a monkey-face, but he is a brilliant orator. This whole account is very moving, indeed. As a consequence, she serves in this novel as a mirror in which the other characters can see their reality. The reader, at any rate, becomes keenly conscious of the striking contrast between the degenerate Compsons and the negro servant Dilsey who is sound to the core and whose steadfast loyalty shines in the novel like a beacon-light.

III. CONCLUSION

Thus, though the title literally applies to the lives of the several members of the Compson family; ironically it is to be interpreted in relation to the two positive characters, Dilsey and Benzy, but mainly Dilsey. For Dilsey, life is not sound and fury, signifying nothing; for her life does have meaning and significance. And it is not in theory only that she sees a meaning in life. One of her outstanding qualities is 'fortitude'. She was once a 'big' woman but is now just a skeleton. Her labors have worked havoc with her body, but she has faced the tribulations of life with fortitude. She embodies the life-sustaining values of which the Compsons have become absolutely oblivious. Dilsey, the negress, is decent, sympathetic, and responsible; who provides the coherence and moral principles against which the Compsons are, by implication, judged. She is one of Faulkner's most memorable characters. This is how a critic describes the character and the role of Dilsey: "The one member of the Compson household who represents a unifying and sustaining force is the negro servant Dilsey. She tries to take care of Benzy and to give the girl Quentin the mothering she needs. In contrast to Mrs. Compson's vanity and whining self-pity, Dilsey exhibits charity and rugged good sense. We are told that she had once been a big woman, but now the unpadded skin is loosely draped upon the indomitable skeleton which is left rising like a ruin or a landmark about the somnolent and impervious guts. . .Dilsey's essential hopefulness has not been obliterated; She is not an embittered woman, but her optimism has been chastened by hurt and disappointment. Faulkner does not make the mistake of accounting for Dilsey's virtues through some mystique of race in which good primitive black folk stand over against corrupt wicked white folk. Dilsey herself has no such notions."

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Md Selim Akhtar, et. al. "Life is full of sound and fury, signifying nothing: An Ironic Representation of Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury" through Dilsey's Fortitude." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(8), 2020, pp. 36-39.