

LIVING CLOCKS AND MONUMENTS: AFRICAN AMERICANS IN *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*

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“There is never a time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment. The time is always now.” – James Baldwin

Albert Einstein’s theory of special relativity states that time can be different based on a person’s velocity and position with respect to gravity, but, in *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner portrays time as relative to the color of a person’s skin. Scholars have analyzed William Faulkner’s representations of time and his portrayals of African American characters in the novel, specifically for what they reveal about the Compson family and Southern society. African Americanists like George Hutchinson, John Rodden, Craig Werner, and Carol Polsgrove laud the honesty with which Faulkner portrays the racial sins of his white characters, but also decry his static portrayal of African Americans as Others. Scholars of modernist literature, like Arthur Geffen, Deland Anderson, and Masahiko Seki, explore the high modernist use of temporality in the novel. Ulfried Reichardt, Michael Hanchard, Patricia McKee, and Cynthia Dobbs have blended the studies of Faulkner’s use of time and African American characters in enlightening ways. This article will supplement such studies by examining how the novel measures and represents time through African American characters resulting in an objectifying devaluation of African Americans as living timepieces while also, ironically, using them as representations of a white, Southern time period that has decayed.

Faulkner stands in the tradition of high modernism with his creative blend of mythic and profane time throughout *The Sound and the Fury*. Time in the novel often does not flow chronologically, but rather moves to serve different purposes. The past constantly comes around to the present, often in repetitions that feel like *déjà vu*. The tension between profane and mythic time aligns with several prominent tensions in the story: modernity and an idyllic past, racial progress and Confederate racial oppression, prosperity and economic decline, high social status and familial collapse. There is a blend of nostalgia and horror for the past as a site of beauty and innocence as well as a place of backwardness and heinous racial crimes. The chapter headings point to one of the prominent ways in which Faulkner uses mythic time in the novel. Each chapter title is a date, three of which refer to the Christian Passion Week, but out of chronological order. The second chapter breaks the pattern. Tragedy laces this date in the novel as it is the anniversary of Mr. Compson’s death and Caddy’s sad marriage necessitated by pregnancy. Faulkner creates a present reality for the novel that is haunted by a mythic past partly desired and partly disdained while poised on the brink of a modern future with the hint of racial progress but also of destruction for the Compsons and Southern society. Easter, the mythic time around which the story swirls, is all about resurrection, and in *The Sound and the Fury*, Confederate society and the Compson family are in the process of a slow death, but Faulkner remains ambiguous about whether white Southern society, African American freedom, or nothing at all will rise from the ruins. Time functions and moves in different ways for each of the various characters, or groups of characters in *The Sound and the Fury*. The white, Compson family cannot get into sync with time’s flow. In *Producing American Races: Henry James, William Faulkner, Toni Morrison*, Patricia McKee notes that Quentin and Jason, and to a lesser extent Benjy, fight with time, partly out of their intense collective sense of loss (109-110). All three brothers, to differing extents, experience the loss of Caddy and of their mother, Caroline Compson, along with a loss of their family’s once prominent status. The Compson family declines along with the white power structures of Confederate society, leaving angry and confused

white men in its ruins. In his doctoral thesis for Wayne State University titled *Time in American High Modernism: Reading Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner*, Masahiko Seki notes how time has stopped at a fixed point for Benjy, is chaotic for Quentin, and is meaningless for Jason (95). In stark contrast, some of the African American characters display a comfort with and mastery over time. Roskus, for example, makes simple and accurate predictions of the future, while Dilsey knows the correct time even though the clock is off. At face value, these abilities to synchronize with time would appear positive, but black characters become more vulnerable to white people to use as timekeeping tools.

A primary issue becomes discerning the reason that African Americans have this ability, in the novel, to understand and interpret time infallibly, and the reason boils down to the way that Faulkner places African Americans within mythic time. Anthropologist Johannes Fabian posits that people often use “temporal distancing” to make a group of Others through describing them with words like mythical or primitive (30). Here lies a danger in Faulkner’s portrayal of African Americans in *The Sound and the Fury*. Black people in the novel are slow and primitive, part of pleasant nostalgia, but unfit to enter into the fast-paced, modern world on their own. Patricia McKee points out that, in the novel, Reverend Shegog is likened to a monkey, Dilsey to a cow, and a black man and his donkey become figured together in a way in which one is not distinguished from the other (116). African Americans often appear more likable, kind, patient, brave, and attuned to time than white characters in the novel, but they never seem like progressive, civilized humans prepared for the modern world. They do not seem fully human.

Faulkner presents a complex, modernist version of time, however, the version of time and history remains clearly white, Euro-American. The fact that the final chapter, often called Dilsey’s Chapter, stands out as the only chapter not narrated in the first person highlights the fact that, though represented in the novel, even favorably, African Americans lack a true voice. In his article, “Time and the African American Experience,” Ulfried Reichardt states “While time is universally present, conceptions and experiences of time are not universal but rather historical and culturally contingent” (465). Time functions differently in African American literature. Craig Werner notes that the European diachronous time serves to differentiate roles while African, synchronous time unifies people with the community and ancestors rather than differentiating them (725-26). Faulkner’s use of time does resemble an aspect of African American time in that it often is non-linear. African American literature often goes back to a point of major trauma to process and deal with it, usually a trauma of racial oppression (Reichardt 479). Faulkner uses this technique of revisiting trauma, but notably, only with his white characters. Benjy constantly howls over the loss of Caddy; Quentin obsesses over Dalton Ames’ treatment of his sister; Jason’s anger swirls around his lost opportunity at a banking job. Black characters, like Dilsey and Roskus, suffer as well, but time spirals around issues of the suffering of the Compson family, not the suffering of the black, Gibson family.

African American characters do not move the action within *The Sound and the Fury*; they seem to be in a perpetual state of waiting. Werner calls this tendency of African American time in Faulkner stasis (721). Reichardt views stasis as the time of African Americans as represented in slaveholding society, a time with no future orientation. African Americans just wait, content and happy in the present (475). Christianity has often been critiqued as encouraging African Americans in slaveholding times and the Jim Crow era to be content and peaceful in the present and look to heaven as their future reward, not to justice on earth. Indeed, such critique could be leveled at the church scene portrayed in “April 8 1928,” in which Reverend Shegog preaches a rousing sermon about resurrection and heavenly rewards. Faulkner parodies Shegog’s blackness by saying, “He had a wizened black face like a small, aged monkey” (309). Faulkner goes on to say, “When the visitor rose to speak he sounded like a white man” (310). This odd combination of white and black characteristics in this preacher bolsters the view of religion being used to serve white domination by preaching restraint and silent suffering. Werner notes that Faulkner uses “ritual grounds” like this black church in the novel as decidedly black areas in stasis. The sermon presses

for endurance in the present with the hope of a heavenly reward, not social action to end oppression in the present. Werner notes such black social stasis is typical of Faulkner's black ritual grounds and that it perpetuates his narrative of African Americans as suffering saints (714-15). Polsgrove, Werner, and Hutchinson look to the actions of Faulkner himself and discuss how, though he believed Southern society had sinned against African Americans, he also called for change to be slow, on the pace that white Southerners could tolerate (Polsgrove 94, Werner 720-21). Hutchinson writes "When confronted with a conflict in temporalities between what one might call 'white time' and 'black,' one finds the conversion of white people, their guilt, their duty to 'the Negro' and themselves, the important thing. This puts the needs of white southerners to exorcise their demons ahead of black southerners to be free" (70).

The Sound and the Fury reads as a story about a white family, and a comment on white Southern history, in which African Americans reside as part of the setting. Werner has noted that black characters are presented as Others in a white world (721). White characters constantly measure themselves against African American characters. Dobbs writes, "Through Quentin, Faulkner exposes the ways in which a viable Southern white masculine identity is dependent upon certain reified, dehumanizing views of femaleness and blackness" (38). Quentin famously says, "That was when I realized that a n_____ is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the people he lives among" (91). This view of African Americans begins with them being Others, mere reflections of white people who hold agency. John Rodden extends Quentin's obverse reflection concept to its limit by asserting that Faulkner has set up an African American character as such a reflection of each white character. For example, Versh, T.P., and Luster mirror Benjy; while Dilsey mirrors Mrs. Compson; and Roskus mirrors Mr. Compson (74-75). Rodden notes that the "...tribulations and durability of the Gibsons and the Negro community" is juxtaposed with "the comparative luxury and impermanence of the Compsons" (76). Still, as reflections, the African Americans come across as static Others in the novel. Werner contends that Faulkner does not understand African mythos and lacks a realistic black voice (725). Shelly Brivic states that Faulkner focuses on African American characters as "a creation of white imagination, rather than on the actuality of black people" (56).

Quentin intends his comment about African Americans being "obverse reflections" of the white people they live among to be a statement about black identity, but the novel uses these black, obverse reflections of white characters to reflect the mirror into the souls of these white, Compson men. As Toni Morrison contends is true within most, if not all, of the white, male canon of American literature (5-7), the African American characters in *The Sound and the Fury* speak more to white identity than black identity. Faulkner delves into the interior of Quentin, Jason, and Benjy by writing from each of their perspectives and showing the reader their interactions with and thoughts about black people. Each of the brothers uses African American characters in the novel as timekeeping tools.

In the second chapter of the novel, Quentin wrestles to understand the "obverse reflections" around him. He fights constantly against time, and that fight seems to also be a fight against the African American Other. Quentin says that he has learned to take black people "for what they think they are, then leave them alone" (91), but his actions toward them in this chapter of the novel betray fear and animosity, except when they are demure toward him. Quentin fondly remembers a Virginia black man on a mule who had been servile to him and reminded him of Roskus (92), but moments after this reverie, he seems repulsed by a more Northern African American who touches his knee to pass in the streetcar (94). Quentin is comfortable with servile black people, not independent ones. Quentin portrays an ambivalent relationship with Deacon, a character that mixes qualities of Southern black diminution with Northern independence. Deacon measures off time for Quentin. Quentin sees Deacon in every parade and can mark off the holidays by Deacon's presence at a parade. Likewise, much of Quentin's machinations with regard to his own suicide plans hinge upon Deacon following his instructions to deliver a letter to Shreve at the correct time (104-05). Quentin realizes Deacon is a "natural psychologist" who had "bled" him, yet

whenever Deacon is more servile, he fondly sees him like Roskus, but when he puts on Northern airs, Quentin sees him as “pompous, spurious, not quite gross” (102-05). Deacon stands as the perfect “obverse reflection” because he changes according to what a white character presents to him. Quentin struggles with time in the sense of eras, which to him are represented by the two distinct types of African American men, servile Southern or independent Northern, which blend together in Deacon. The era of the subjugated black man is ending, and Quentin is not ready for such change.

Quentin’s fear and animosity toward African Americans mirrors his relationship with time. In “June Second 1910,” narrated by Quentin, time rushes anxiously forward towards impending doom, the suicide of Quentin. Within the first few sentences of the chapter, Quentin reminisces about how his father called the watch he bequeathed to him “the mausoleum of all hope and desire” (81). He proceeds to break the crystal of the watch and pull off the hands (85). Quentin’s smashing his own watch hearkens back to his beating the Compson’s African American servant, T.P. when T.P. and Benjy got drunk at Caddy’s wedding (21). Quentin defaces his watch by pulling off its hands, but later he feels the watch continue to tick in his pocket, keeping time despite him, almost seeming to laugh at his futile violence, much like T.P. laughed as Quentin beat him. Despite his defacing the watch, Quentin remains obsessed with time throughout the chapter as he anxiously seeks to discern time through shadows, whistles, and the position of the sun. Quentin purposely tramples his shadow, which can be seen as another form of African American “obverse reflection.” James A. Snead notes, “Quentin intuitively knows he is fighting a losing battle against, above all, time” (27). A specific category of profane time that comes out most prominently through Quentin in this chapter has been called “Confederate time” by Geffen, who notes that in this section, Quentin constantly broods on thoughts of his grandfather, Confederate General Compson (178). The date of this chapter corresponds to Jefferson Davis’ birthday and a Confederate holiday (175), and it occurs during Quentin’s one year at Harvard, where he rarely attends class. The once proud Compson line had a proud Harvard tradition, but now their precarious financial situation affords only one Compson, Quentin, one year at the school, which was paid for by selling off “Benjy’s pasture.” This fallen state of this once proud Southern family, boasting a general and a governor as ancestors, mirrors the decline of the South. Both Quentin and the Confederate South move toward impending doom, which is inextricably linked with the independence of African Americans.

While Quentin displays anger and fear toward certain African American characters, his brother, Jason rages toward all black characters. Erskine Peters notes that Jason sees himself, not African Americans, as the victim of Southern history (141). Jason remains stuck in a self-pitying eternal present. He is constantly, frenetically moving, but never actually accomplishing anything at the store where he works for Earl, yet he takes a perverse pride in noting how slow the African American, old Job, works. Jason measures the passing of time through the day by what Job has accomplished each time he returns to the store and sees him. Jason sees Job as so slow that he does not believe Job is fairly earning his wages. Ironically, Job actually does accomplish some work, which cannot be said for Jason (200-01). Jason’s time is doomed in stagnation. He impotently rages against everything around him to absolutely no avail. Jason’s hate dominates this section. The chapter is filled with chaos and violence, much of it caused by Jason, and portrays the Compson family and home in decay, near complete dissolution. The chapter Jason narrates occurs on Good Friday, which in Christian tradition is a day dominated by the theme of death, specifically the death of Christ, and this chapter bears a deathly weight throughout. Deland Anderson views Jason as a sort of Christ figure and even asserts that the very end of the novel is salvific (316-18), where order is restored for Benjy when Jason turns the carriage to drive the correct way. But if order is restored, it is the already ruined Confederate order. Of note is the fact that Luster, in a proud state to be riding through town, turned the “wrong” way, left, at the statue of a Confederate soldier. The mentally disabled Benjy bellows, and Jason runs over in a rage and beats Luster, then steers the carriage

back to the normal path, on the correct side of the Confederate monument (338-39). Jason's act restores this ending scene back into sync with Jim Crow, racially segregated time.

Benjy stands out in the novel as the one white Compson male that, due to his mental delay, does not hold animosity or racism towards African Americans. Benjy measures the span of his own life against his caretaker, Luster, when Benjy notes that his shadow is higher than Luster's on the fence (4). As a mentally-challenged adult, Benjy's narration of the novel's first chapter is disjointed in both time and content. He flows back and forth in time from early childhood, through memory, to the present day of the story as words spoken or sensory stimuli prompt seemingly disordered memories. Past events are narrated by Benjy as if they are happening in the present. Benjy's time is present, and his mental challenge roots him firmly in the present. Loss haunts Benjy as he constantly looks for the return of his beloved sister Caddy, with whom he is obsessed. Cynthia Dobbs points out that his constant, desperate desire for Caddy places him in a state of "continuous loss" (47). The chapter Benjy narrates occurs on and is titled "April 7 1928." This day corresponds to the day before Easter and to Benjy's thirty-third birthday, providing a link between him and Christ, whom tradition says died at 33.

Faulkner links Benjy to the African American characters in distinct ways. Like Roskus, Benjy, in his own way, predicts the future. Benjy has an infallible knowledge of future disasters and death through smell (Geffen 179-80). This contrasts sharply with his brother Jason, whose predictions (like his stock market predictions and bet on the Yankees winning the World Series) consistently fail. Benjy is also the only white man in the black church the Gibson family attends on Easter Sunday. Benjy's original name of Maury, after his maternal uncle, is changed due to his mental delay, making him the only Compson brother without an historical family name. The reader of this book has to discern Benjy's age at any specific point of the narration by which of the three African American caretakers is watching him at that point in time. Versh cares for Benjy in his youngest childhood years, then T.P. takes over with caretaking during adolescence, and Luster watches over him when Benjy is an adult. These three African American boys seem interchangeable; another young black boy is swapped in whenever the need arises. In Luster's case, the task of watching Benjy could prove daunting with Benjy clearly dominating him in size as a thirty-three-year-old man. The reader, along with the Compson brothers, begins to keep time in the novel through African American characters. These uses of African Americans to measure time, benign by Benjy and more controlling by Quentin or Jason, represent, again the lack of real agency of African American characters, who measure action rather than acting themselves. In this Jim Crow era when they are technically free of slavery, African Americans are caught between times, between enslavement and meaningful liberation, relegated to marking the passing of white men's time.

Faulkner uses African American characters in this novel not only as tools for measuring time but also as temporal monuments, physical markers representing periods of time. One such character is the iconic African American on a mule. Quentin narrates his recollection of a train ride through Virginia where, at a stop, he sees a black man sitting on a mule. The black man sits, unmoving, waiting for the train to pass. The train symbolizes modernity, with its speed, automation, and set time schedules (like those for trains). For the moment, the train has stopped. Quentin has just woken up from sleep and is not sure how long the black man or the train has been parked. This rare moment is important, with the bustle of the modern world halted. The black man has his head wrapped in a piece of blanket and is so large on his shabby mule that the mule looks like a rabbit under him and his feet nearly touch the ground. Quentin likens the black man on the mule to a "sign put there saying You are home again" (92). This scene would seem dismal, but it brings particularly fond memories for Quentin, making him realize how much he has missed Roskus and Dilsey. Quentin has a brief exchange with the man in which he charitably gives the black man a quarter. The man's grateful, servile demeanor, epitomized by the words, "Thanky, young marster" (92), pleases Quentin. As the train pulls away, the man and his mule remain standing there like a monument, shrinking into the distance "with that quality about them of shabby and timeless patience, of

static serenity” (92-93). Quentin speaks of them having “childlike and ready incompetence” (93). Bryant says this sign of the black man and his mule is a static sign of the Southern lifestyle Quentin has grown accustomed to and loves, a lifestyle already deteriorating and beginning to fade into the past (Bryant). Quentin bluntly views the man as shabby, childlike, and incompetent, which rings with a disturbingly patronizing, patriarchal tone. The view of black people as inferior subjects grateful to their superior white benefactors bolsters Quentin’s sense of his own manhood.

The next black monument is not as satisfying to Quentin. Deacon holds some of the same qualities as the African American on a mule, particularly when Quentin meets him for the first time at the train station, where Deacon wears his “Uncle Tom’s cabin outfit, patches and all” (102). Deacon at this point plays the part of the servile, poor black man completely and acts gratefully dependent upon his white benefactors. Quentin realizes that image of Deacon’s was a scam, and he is much less drawn to Deacon in his “cast-off Brooks suit” (103). Deacon purposely presents this more stylized version of himself as a symbol as he seeks to prominently march in every parade. Encountering both the negro on the mule and Deacon reminds Quentin of Roskus, which brings a sentimental fondness for each. As Deacon acts less servile, more like a Northern African American, Quentin notes, “But Roskus was gone. Once more he was that self he had long taught himself to wear in the world’s eye, pompous, spurious, not quite gross” (105). Quentin clearly has fond memories of Roskus and Dilsey, but his fondness surfaces only when he sees other African Americans as poor, broken, and servile, accepting gratefully his own charity. Deacon symbolizes an odd transitional symbol for Quentin as part Southern black man and part Northern African American. With Deacon, the South, in effect has already gone and is just a façade or sham. Quentin does not believe this new black identity is natural, the correct order of things. Quentin says Deacon “had long taught himself to wear” the new Northern persona. If the African American on a mule is a monument to the fading time period of the old South, Deacon stands as a monument of the changing transitional time away from Quentin’s cherished Confederacy.

The third, live African American monument takes one of the most prominent positions in the novel. The unnamed, third-person narrator of “April 8 1928” presents Dilsey as a monument of time, calling her a “ruin or a landmark” (282). The description focuses on her bones and “indomitable skeleton” which stand out amongst her sunken flesh (282). Dobbs posits that the deteriorating flesh of Dilsey represents the wearing away of her courage and vitality by the ravages of years of servitude, while the skeleton symbolizes her mythic fortitude and internal force against these ravages (42). Dobbs views Dilsey as tragic for accepting her place and fate within Southern society (45), yet also finds hope through her, because she endures the collapse (48). Dilsey is a monument to the dying past of the Confederate South and its abuse of African Americans. Her portrayal could be viewed as heroic or tragic. The shabby brokenness recalls the earlier image of the African American on a mule, but the difference here comes from more fully developed characterization. The African American on a mule was no more than a sign, but Dilsey has stood the test of time as one of the most beloved characters from any Faulkner novel. She is not a caricature like Deacon, but rather embodies the full image of a loving mother figure who is the true warmth and heart of the Compson home. Dilsey and Mrs. Compson both are worn old women ravaged by the years, but Mrs. Compson has no internal strength. Mrs. Compson was mother to the Compson children in name alone, and once Caddy left home, Dilsey became the only nurturing presence within the family. Dilsey’s strength stands out in the ways that she protects the female Quentin from Jason’s rage. Many scholars agree that Dilsey is the one true hero of *The Sound and the Fury*, but they see her as a static figure, the classic African American enduring saint who is ineffectual to affect any change. Douglas Messerli feels she demonstrates Faulkner’s nihilism in this ineffectuality (40-41). McGann states that Dilsey observes but cannot act (16). Werner laments that Dilsey represents the type of static character African American scholars critique Faulkner of creating, sympathetic figures lacking the true agency held by white characters (713). Peters describes Dilsey as a sort of powerless Christ

figure, whose goodness is unquestioned and in the end is “crucified” through her immense suffering for the Compsons. Peters, however, sees no resurrection power in Dilsey, no salvation (154). Geffen does see a possibility of more agency with Dilsey. He goes back to the several times Dilsey refers to seeing the beginning and the ending during her “conversion experience,” positing that the ending Dilsey views is the ultimate demise of the Compson household (185). He believes she begins distancing herself from the Compsons and points to the fact that the appendix to *The Sound and the Fury* does note her separation from the Compsons to focus solely on her own Gibson family. Geffen’s theory ignores the fact that Jason dismisses Dilsey; she does not leave the family on her own.

The mythic time theme of Easter resurrection implicit in this final chapter of the novel does hold out the possibility of more positive, restorative power through Dilsey. Dilsey keeps better time than the Compson family clock (290), and she has clearly been their most valuable servant through the nearly 30-year time span of the novel. Dilsey could possibly keep the Compsons rooted in mythic time, but the Compsons won’t follow her time for anything but the most mundane tasks as the most reliable tool in their home. They can’t have a real relationship with her because their relationships with Dilsey mirror that of the female Quentin when she knocked Dilsey’s hand away and yelled, “You damn old n_____,” when Dilsey kept Jason from hitting her (197). As a “landmark” she can’t be missed in the Southern landscape, a force of nature, beautiful to behold. But as a “ruin,” Dilsey represents the destruction that years of Southern slavery and oppression had on African American lives.

The Sound and the Fury provides a complex and perplexing view of African American characters. While revolutionary for a white Southerner at the time, the portrayal of African Americans as enduring saints lacking personal agency, needing to wait for a time for a white savior to alleviate their racial problems, is deeply unsatisfying. Defaced and devalued, like Quentin’s watch, African American characters continue to measure out the limited days for this oppressive system as living timepieces. It is precisely the horrific abuse of and violence towards African Americans that proves white society to be lacking through such measurement. Faulkner portrays time to be running out for the old racist regimes of the antebellum South, which the Compson family epitomize. The African American characters stand as specific monuments to the decay and imminent destruction of white Southern society, yet it is hard to imagine what good could rise from those ruins because Faulkner’s African American characters are dehumanized tools that lack agency and purpose.

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