

## The Influence of the Past on the Present in William Faulker's Narratives

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Two years ago at a workshop on literature in Tokyo, Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer spoke of the importance of establishing the viewpoint of her narrator in each of her works. In *Burger's Daughter* it is an eleven year old girl, in *My Son's Story* it is the young son telling his father's story from both his own knowledge and his imagination. She emphasized that once she establishes the voice of the narrator, she automatically writes from that voice since it becomes the reference point for everything that follows.

If William Faulkner was alive today, he too may stress the role of the narrator or more likely the role of multiple narrators as a force that weaves the intricate details of his stories representing both the past and present into a whole. Faulkner's narrators often reveal fragments of their memories in small doses usually out of sequence leaving it up to the reader to put together the fragments as if he is putting together a puzzle. One reading is seldom enough to put the fragments together accurately. Perhaps only James Joyce has more complex narration in works such as the revolutionary *Ulysses*.

In Faulkner the past often looms more predominately in the lives of his characters than the present. The present is made understandable by the past. Characters such as Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*, Rosa in *Absalom, Absalom*, and Hightower in *Light in August* are living in the past. These characters evoke the past through

passages of stream of consciousness or the retelling of stories. There are also characters who have a personal quest to immerse themselves in the past such as Quentin and Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom*. Byron Bunch in *Light in August*, has both the position of listener to Hightower and the one who retells the stories of Lena, Joe Christmas and Lucas. And, Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury* lives in a state in which there is no clear demarcation between past and present.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, not only Benjy and Quentin but other characters are profoundly affected by the past. The father, Jason III is an alcoholic who is living in the despair of the family's demise; and the mother is overwhelmed with self-pity, viewing her motherhood for all but Jason IV as a punishment. The mother seems constantly depressed or unwell, often bedridden. These parents who are licking their own wounds instead of leading their children have created what is now referred to as "a dysfunctional family." It has been left up to Caddy the only daughter and the black maid, Dilsey to give warmth and comfort to the three boys. Jason IV warms to no one. He has become embittered towards his siblings since childhood. With the absence of their parents love, Quentin's and Benjy's relationship with Caddy becomes the center of their lives.

The first three chapters which each of the three sons narrate in turn, represent different images and memories of Caddy. Benjy's Caddy is someone who talked directly to him, and helped him to do little things by himself whereas the mother just called him "the baby" because of his mental retardation:

'Why, Benjy,' she said. She looked at me and I went and she put her arms around me. 'Did you find Caddy again.' she said.

'Did you think Caddy had run away.' Caddy smelled like trees.

We went to Caddy's room. She sat down at the mirror. She stopped her hands and looked at me.

'Why, Benjy, What is it.' she said. 'You mustn't cry. Caddy's not going away. see here' she said. She took up the bottle and took the stopper out held it to my nose. 'Sweet. Smell. Good.'  
(p. 35)

When Caddy left home to get married, Benjy was left with his memories of her, a slipper of hers to caress, and the tendency to cry especially when the golfer's next door on the former Compson land, called out "Caddie!" in between shots.

Quentin is disturbed by his sister's sexuality for she had a lover, Dalton Ames and was two months pregnant when she had married a few months before Quentin's suicide. Here are fragments from Quentin's subconscious as he goes about his life at Harvard. Caddy is a constant part of his thought process. He is remembering when she used to meet Ames out in the woods. Even though she's married now, he hasn't come to terms with this past:

*Caddy's a woman too remember. She must do things for women's reasons, too.*

*Why won't you bring him to the house, Caddy? Why must you do like nigger women do in the pasture the ditches the dark woods hot hidden furious in the dark woods. (p. 79)*

Next Quentin recalls Caddy's decision to marry:

*Got to marry somebody*

*Have there been very many Caddy*

*I don't know too many will you look after Benjy and Father*

*You don't know whose it is then does he know*

*Don't touch me will you look after Benjy and Father (p. 99)*

Quentin feels guilty being asked to take care of Benjy and Father, he has already decided to die, he even alludes to already being dead. He feels guilty about the pasture having been sold for his Harvard education, also. Full of guilt and the desire to die to end his agony and instability, for an instant he hopes for the impossible wish to run away with Caddy and Benjy. He wants a return to the innocence of youth and he wants to protect Benjy from being sent to an institution:

*But now I know I'm dead I tell you*

*Then why must you listen we can go away you and Benjy  
and me where nobody knows us where (p. 106)*

In the third chapter, Jason IV, the son whom his mother preferred is portrayed as the sane, but scheming brother whose bitterness and jealousy towards Caddy and Quentin knows no bounds, and his callousness towards Benjy gives him satisfaction when Benjy is castrated. His attitude which stems from their sibling rivalries grew as Quentin was allowed to go to Harvard, and he was not, and Caddy's husband's promise to give him a job falls through when Caddy is divorced. He hates Caddy so vehemently that he pilfers all the money that she sends to the illegitimate daughter named after Quentin that is in the care of the Compsons. He also refuses to have Caddy meet her daughter. He is an example of the kind of person who never outgrows his grudges from the past. Here is an example of the kind of relationship that Jason and Caddy had from the memory of Benjy:

They fought. Jason began to cry.

'Caddy.' Father said. Jason was crying. He wasn't fighting

any more, but we could see Caddy fighting in the mirror and Father put me down and went into the mirror and fought too. He lifted Caddy up. She fought. Jason lay on the floor, crying. He had the scissors in his hand. Father held Caddy.

'He cut up all Benjy's dolls.' Caddy said. 'I'll slit his gizzle.'  
(p. 55)

When Jason and Caddy are looking at their family graves, what he says to her reveals his consuming hate towards her:

'You'd be be better off if you were down there with him and Quentin,' I says. 'You know that?' (P. 175)

And, in the last chapter, after his niece Quentin takes off with the money for her from her mother that he had hidden all these years plus his own savings, he blames all the family problems on her:

'... The bitch that cost me a job, the one chance I ever had to get ahead, that killed my father and is shortening my mother's life every day and made my name a laughing stock in the town. I won't do anything to her,' he said. 'Not anything.'

'You drove that girl into running off, Jason,' the sheriff said.  
(p. 263)

In *Light in August* the majority of the novel is narrated by the omniscient narrator yet several of the characters do narrate when they return to the past. When there are short passages of a personal point of view, those are printed in italics. Bryon Bunch, though not a narrator, retells parts of the story of Joe Christmas as he overheard Lucus Burch/Brown tell it to the sheriff in a dialogue with Hightower. He also tells the story of Lena Grove in this way.

There are several characters that are burdened by their past: Joe

Christmas an orphan who may or may not have had a partially black father; Hightower who was cast out by his congregation and whose wife left him and later committed suicide, and Doc Hines who is the grandfather of Joe Christmas. Surprisingly, Lena Grove, another orphan who was abandoned by her lover after she became pregnant, does not seem to be burdened by her situation. She shows an alternative to all the characters who can not escape their humiliation and pain.

The birth of Lena's baby with Hightower and Mrs. Hines attending brings back the past. Those two were present at the birth of Joe Christmas over thirty years previously. Mrs. Hines who has worried all these years about her grandson has a flashback to the day Joe was born. Her patience has been tried continually by the rantings and ravings of her insane husband who has waited to see the destruction of his own grandson.

Joe Christmas and Hightower are outcasts from society. Joe was taunted in his white orphanage for being a "nigger." Though he never knows who his father is, he identifies himself as black even though he could have been accepted in white society. His experience in both the orphanage and with the family that adopted him was stern and unforgiving. He had a strong self-destructive streak that turned violent when he left the family, and when he comes to despise his aging, white lover; he kills her. Hightower in contrast, resigns himself to live like a recluse in the town that he had chosen because of ties with the grandfather who he sees as a hero even though this town has rejected him.

Faulkner shows sympathy with the bleak environment and bitter

experiences of Joe's past. In a stream of consciousness style of narrative Joe evokes his days in the orphanage: "... a corridor in a big long gabled cold echoing building...enclosed by a ten foot steel-and-wire fence like a penitentiary or a zoo, where ... orphans in identical and uniform blue denim in and out of remembering but in knowing constant as the bleak walls, the bleak windows where in rain soot from the yearly adjacent chimneys streaked like black tears." (p. 91)

This kind of narration gives a realistic and depressing account of Joe's first environment. It goes on to describe him as a "shadow" which is one way to describe how alienated he felt in the orphanage and society in general for the rest of his life. Another narration also in the stream of consciousness style reveals his utter humiliation as he lays down on the floor, immobile from pain and the shock of being jilted by Bobbie the prostitute: "While they finished their preparations to depart they stepped now and then across him, like people about to vacate a house forever will across some object which they intend to leave." (p. 166)

The end of *Light in August* shifts to Hightower's story. When Hightower was growing up, his father and ailing mother were but phantoms to him, the person most real to him was the grandfather who had died 20 years before he was born, shot off his horse in Jefferson. This obsession with his grandfather continued all his life. As Hightower thought to himself:

... that I had already died one night twenty years before I saw light. And that my only salvation must be to return to the place to die where my life had already ceased before it began.

(p. 359)

Hightower felt accused by God that he took a wife only to use “as an instrument to be called to Jefferson.” (p. 367) He reflects that it “is any man’s privilege to destroy himself, so long as he does not injure anyone else.” (p. 368) then he remembers with horror that it was at the price of his wife’s life. These are the thoughts and guilt that he has lived with all these years, and perhaps only then has he made sense out of the past and is “freed of his burden” (p. 368)

In the *Light of August*, it is Byron Bunch who takes on a healing role somewhat like Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*. Byron has many roles as the one who listens and helps Hightower to break away from his past; the one who retells the most recent stories about Joe Christmas; and the one who comes to the aid of Lena Grove. Yet, for Lena who has traveled all the way from Alabama to Tennessee, her travels seem far more fascinating to her than the heroic love of Byron. These simple, trusting and purehearted characters add comic relief and diffuse the tales of darkness and despair. This balance adds to the credibility of Faulkner’s story and characters and the credibility of the narrative itself. After all, in spite of chaos and destruction life does go on.

*Absalom, Absalom* is even more concerned with the past than the other two works. In this novel Quentin from *The Sound and the Fury* reconstructs the story of Thomas Sutpen with his Canadian friend Shreve in their dorm room at Harvard in 1910. Quentin had heard bits and pieces from the different perspectives of Rosa Coldfield, Sutpen’s sister-in-law, and for a short time his fiancée; and from Quentin’s father Jason III; and from what General Compson had



told Jason III. The part of the story that Quentin and then Shreve become most absorbed in is the relationship between Sutpen's son Henry and daughter Judith and Charles Bon. They want to know why Henry killed his friend Bon. Was it because he thought he was his half-brother so he wouldn't let him marry their sister, or was it because he was part black? When Jason III told his version of why Henry killed Bon, it was because he didn't want her to marry a man who would not renounce his black wife and child.

Putting the fragments of the past together becomes Quentin's and Shreve's obsession. Not even knowing the whole story, they continue to narrate their own version. Certainly, this form of narration goes beyond anything Faulkner had created before or after, not only are there several narrators, but part of the narration is being spontaneously created by people who were born after the story took place. This is not only a novel about Sutpen and his family, but a novel about how narrative is created and how far removed from the true story a narrative may be. Such a representation by Faulkner underlines the great need for various eye-witness accounts when reconstructing the truth.

Through days of sieving through the facts and hearsay, and developing their own version Quentin and Shreve become one with Henry and Charles Bon:

it might have been either of them and was in a sense both; both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thinking become audible, vocal; the two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob ends of old tales and talking. (p. 378-9)

Then they take on the persona of the two men leading up to the shooting in 1865:

So that now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts of that Christmas eve; four of them and then just two---Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry ... (p. 417)

They formulate several conclusions. One is that Charles would have given up his quest to marry Judith if his father would only have acknowledged him. But acknowledging a son with black blood was not part of Sutpen's plan. His whole life he had carried rage inside of him because of an insult. That all-consuming rage was behind his "design" to have "land and niggers", a respectable wife and children and the largest house around. As Quentin learned from his grandfather who was probably Sutpen's only friend: As a barefooted son of a poor, white family, Thomas was turned away from the front door of a large estate by a black servant and told to use the back door. And, Sutpen by refusing to acknowledge his own son showed he had not learned anything from his past and unleashed the destructive cycle that followed and destroyed his "design."

The other conclusion was that before Henry shot Charles, "Charles-Shreve" says, "So, it's miscegenation, not the incest which you can't bear." (p. 445) A key to their solving process came from Quentin and the direct experience that he had in the story. For though he only tells about it at the end of the novel, Rosa had taken him out to the Sutpen's estate to see what was there and they found Henry and Clytie, a black member of the Sutpen family that convinces Quentin that Clytie's presence substantiates that Sutpen was indeed

inclined to have a black son as well; even though he would not accept that son like he would a daughter with no hereditary rights as a part of the family. Shreve told Quentin that everything fell into place when he saw Clytie. After seeing Clytie, what Quentin had heard from his father and grandfather had a greater meaning for him.

How like real life Faulkner made his novels. Just like in real life each person hears only bits and pieces of the lives of their parents and of their grandparents or neighbors and the truth is seldom known because few people try to find the truth as actively as the characters Quentin and Shreve.

Faulkner reconstructs the past of his main characters by using numerous narrators. The past is used to give meaning to the present. There are characters who are haunted by their past and whose past greatly determines their outcome: Quentin, Jason IV, Joe Christmas, Hightower, Thomas Sutpen, Henry, Charles Bon, Rosa and others. Their personal failures are often brought about by the sins and failings of their parents; and represent the sins of mankind and in particular the sins of the South towards the black people. Only a few characters like Dilsey, Byron and finally Hightower rise above the destructive cycle around them. It is as if Faulkner repeats: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

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