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ABSTRACT

To best understand the ways in which the Compson siblings of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* interact with each other and with their changing surroundings, one must view their actions and judgments through a rhetorical lens focused on the Aristotelian modes of *pathos*, *ethos*, and *logos* in the context of the forces of *eros* and *thanatos*. The setting of the "broken" antebellum South provides a backdrop of tension behind the story of the equally broken, and breaking, Compson family. Each brother employs a different rhetorical mode — Benjy pathos, Jason logos, and Quentin ethos — to comprehend their relationship with their sister Caddy, the eros and thanatos of them all. Within the workings of the novel, Caddy herself is less a person than she is a strong symbol of the erotic and thanatotic forces present in human nature. She metamorphoses between representing eros and representing thanatos throughout each brother's piece; eventually the two forces become interchangeable as her erotic vitality accelerates her family's thanatotic downward spiral. Benjy's plaintive displays of love, anger, pity, and fear; Jason's logotic hypocrisy and selfrighteous sense of injury at his loss of the Old South; and finally Quentin's sense of self so unrelenting that the pressure he feels from distinguishing right from wrong leads him to end his life—each demonstrate that the eros and thanatos Caddy symbolizes govern every decision her brothers make. Without the completeness of multiple modes of thinking and existence at their disposal, none of the brothers ever reach Faulkner's ironic suggestion of "each in its ordered place." Instead they remain perpetually trapped in their fugue-like mindsets, without the relief of another mode to render them whole and set them free.

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Fractured Humanity in a Broken South

Modes of Rhetoric in The Sound and the Fury

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In William Faulkner's *The sound and the fury*, Quentin, Caddy, Jason, and Benjy Compson each suffer from an abbreviated sense of self, one that stops short of what they may have been had the South not fallen years before and put their family's "prolonged and suspended fall," into motion.[1] Each Compson sibling suffers from an imbalanced perception of the world, and so each, "apprehending some fragment of truth, seizes upon that fragment as though it were the whole truth and elaborates it into a total vision of the world, rigidly exclusive and hence utterly fallacious."[2] In *The sound and the fury* each of these fallacious angles is the account of a brother, and only through several of these accounts can Faulkner approach a wholly truthful tale. To best understand the ways in which the Compson siblings interact with each other and with their changing surroundings, one must view their actions and judgments through a rhetorical lens focused on the Aristotelian modes of *pathos*, *ethos*, and *logos*[3] in the context of the forces of *eros* and *thanatos*.[4]

Applying these modes to the text of *The sound and the fury* requires examination not of how the author applies them but of how his characters rely on them, and how this in turn reflects the novel's setting of the broken South from 1898 to 1928. The fractured South and household in purpose which the Compson children live have splintered them into separate shards of the human experience – each into the embodiment of a separate mode of existence – thus preventing each from "fulfilling his human character."[5] Faulkner's narrative techniques leave the reader no time or space in which to examine the characters' surrounding of

[1] William Faulkner, *The sound and the fury: the corrected text* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 319.
[2] Michael Millgate, "The Sound and the Fury," in *Faulkner; a collection of critical essays,* ed. Robert Penn Warren (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 95.
[3] Briefly, rhetorical strategies employed by a speaker to persuade an audience. Aristotle defines *ethos* as a form of argument whose validity is predicated upon the credibility that an audience perceives in the speaker; *pathos* as an emotional appeal to an audience's sensibilities; and logos as an 'objective' appeal that can employ inductive or deductive logic. See Book 1, Chapter 2 in *Aristotle*, W. Rhys Roberts, and W.D. Ross, *Rhetoric (*New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010), 6-11.
[4] *Eros* is used here to refer to sensual desire or longing, especially in reference to a drive to create something greater than and beyond oneself; *thanatos,* conversely, to refer to an unconscious urge towards death or self-destruction, especially in the context of a greater purpose based on moral principles.
[5] Jean-Paul Sartre, "On The Sound and the Fury: Time in the Work of Faulkner," in *Faulkner; a collection of critical essays,* ed. Robert Penn Warren (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 92.

the fallen South, and instead present the Compson children as both a direct product of and an explanation for their society's collapse. The antebellum South lives on in the values of their parents' generation as "a clean, pure space of remembered innocence" that, like Caddy's purity, is "defined by a transgression or violation of moral limits that virtually brings them into being."[6] In the present generation, however, the Old South is nothing more than a memory, and the transgressions of moral limits that once offended the older generation are increasingly becoming the inescapable reality. The South is slowly and painfully moving into a new, foreign era of industry and democracy, and, like the Compsons, collectively responds with "resentment at the changes which are inevitable."[7] The line between Old and New becomes blurred and at times indefinable as the new generation moves on and fails to uphold – or blatantly disregards – the distinction and familial reputation associated with the Old South.

Beyond inspiring pity for his family's reputation, Benjy singularly employs pathos – the only mode intellectually accessible to his emotional capacity for love, anger, pity, or fear – to comprehend what goes on around him. Benjy finds his own downfall not in the setting of the New South, but in his own conscious tendency to recognize "the antithesis between the human power to create chaos and the human power to create order."[8] Without a conscious distinction of right from wrong or the capability to use reason and subjective judgement to his advantage, Benjy's state of mind is at the mercy of his emotional sensibilities and the teetering balance of power that exists in the Compson family. His exclusively pathotic mindset enables him to sense change, but never to fully grasp its significance. Because the rest of his family "was too proud for him," and resents having to "keep him around here where people can see him," he goes to Caddy as the only person in his world who can connect with him on his own level of pathos and emotion.[9] In her he senses the thanatos of her moral downfall surrounding the Compson family. He perceives her threatening sexuality, most acutely in the *absence* of her purity, on every sensory level: smelling her perfume, hearing golfers yell the word "caddie," seeing the swing where Caddy would take her lovers, touching "the tall dark place on the wall" where the mirror he associated with her image used to hang.[10] Without a concept of time he cannot

[6] Eric J. Sundquist, *Faulkner: the house divided* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 23.
[7] William Faulkner, Paul Gardner, and Eric Mottram, *A Faulkner perspective: a companion-guide to the limited first edition of the Selected letters of William Faulkner* (Franklin Center, Pa: Franklin Library, 1976), 134.
[8] Lawrence Thompson, "Mirror Analogues in The Sound and the Fury," in in *Faulkner; a collection of critical essays,* ed. Robert Penn Warren (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 119.
[9] Faulkner, 170, 186.
[10] Ibid., 61.

organize these feelings into chronological order, and thus experiences everything in the present; he is subject to momentary mental pandemonium from any emotional stimuli, past or present.

Benjy consistently defines himself by his relationship with Caddy while acting as her "moral mirror."[11] He relies on the eros she symbolizes in the sense of eros as appreciation of her beauty, or simply of beauty itself. Even "the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes" when "Caddy held me and I could hear us all."[12] This eros inspires Benjy to seek truth by seeking *her* – Caddy's "love for Ben evoked his love for her" in the most reliable relationship he would ever know.[13] The sensual side of eros that she also represents, however, cannot in Benjy's mind coexist with her love for him; Caddy's erotic development ultimately translates to thanatos in his mind and signifies the end of their relationship as brother and sister. Benjy protests "against Caddy's sexuality because it threatened to deprive him of Caddy's love," and his cries impress shame upon her for her loss of sexual purity.[14] Caddy eventually can no longer meet Benjy's pathotic needs and, after she leaves, his feelings about her shift from fear and hurt to "unrelieved, and for him meaningless, suffering" and longing.[15] Benjy represents "the pure need, the Freudian id, a zone of helplessly free-floating desire" and needs emotional exchange even at the most foundational level to function.[16]

Within the workings of the novel, Caddy herself is less a person than she is a strong symbol of the erotic and thanatotic forces present in human nature. In this way Benjy sees her perhaps the most accurately of all her brothers, because in his simple mind she *is* love and later she *is* the end of that love. Though Faulkner points to the scene in which her brothers "watched the bottom of her muddy drawers"[17] as the originating myth of the novel, careful analysis of the text reveals that "this scene stands in the same relation to Caddy as Caddy does to the entire novel."[18] Faulkner means for the reader to understand Caddy in terms of that one scene's implications and then understand the novel in terms of Caddy, yet Caddy's so crucial "presence is more felt than perceived" through-

[11] Thompson, 112.
[12] Faulkner, 75.
[13] Thompson, 114.
[14] Melvin Backman, *Faulkner, the major years: a critical study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 17.
[15] David Minter, "Faulkner, Childhood, and the Making of The Sound and the Fury," *American Literature* 51, no. 3 (1979): 386.
[16] Jay Parini, *One matchless time: a life of William Faulkner* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 117.
[17] Faulkner, 39.
[18] Eric J. Sundquist, *Faulkner: the house divided* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 10.

out.[19] Without her own personal account, Faulkner subjects her to the fragmented judgments of her brothers. She becomes a "lost" character who accordingly functions in the novel as the very symbol of loss itself: of virginity, of respect, of time, of an era. Caddy is incontrovertibly intertwined with each story like the forces of eros and thanatos that she represents. In her, "each brother's discontent" with both the eros and thanatos against which they personally struggle "finds its focus."[20] She metamorphoses between representing eros and representing thanatos throughout each brother's piece; eventually the two forces become interchangeable as her erotic vitality accelerates her family's thanatotic downward spiral.

Though Faulkner treats Caddy as simply a personification of the forces in her environment, he permits her avengement more than he does for any other character. From the time Caddy marries and leaves the Compson house, Quentin's narrative especially asserts that while "the Compson children were doomed like their parents to empty lives and hopeless dreams…only Caddy knew and accepted that."[21] Jason, conversely, convinces himself with logos of the opposite and remains in denial of the direction in which his family is going. His logos cannot reason away Caddy's and later Miss Quentin's eros, and further cannot even begin to comprehend the actuality of thanatos in his life. When Jason tries to make "Caddy the instrument of a substitute fortune"[22] to avenge himself against his parents, Miss Quentin's irresistible drive toward her own future compels her to avenge her mother and steal the money back. Ultimately, Caddy is her indirect means of escape from Jason's logotic oppression. Faulkner allows Miss Quentin to use Jason's "golden fleece" of the money to avenge her mother against Jason in the same way Jason tried to use Caddy to avenge himself against his past. Aristotle's modes obey his concept of poetry superior to history in this "ridiculously fine burlesque of poetic justice";[23] the virtue of pure eros punishes the vice of logos and moral Aristotelian logic triumphs, even if only fleetingly in the midst of the South's looming thanatos.

Instead of coming to terms with reality, Jason immerses himself in the hypocrisy and flawed self-judgement that his brand of logos entails. Even his choice to accept the society of the New South exemplifies his hypocrisy, for in this cession he is only looking for a way to return to the glory of the Old South that he considers his birthright. In Jason's mind he is "not the totality of what he has, but

[19] Parini, 113.
[20] Minter, 380.
[21] Stephen B. Oates, *William Faulkner, the man and the artist: a biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 76.
[22] Minter, 383.
[23] Thompson, 121.

the totality of what he does not yet have, or what he might have";[24] he is only tolerating the idea of a New South until he can devise a plan to overcome it. He becomes so sure of his logic's infallibility that he ignores input from others, "his attitude…that of one who goes through the motions of listening in order to deceive himself as to what he already hears."[25] His hypocrisy is evident on a more practical level, as well, when he obsesses over possession of the same money that he claims has "no value" and "don't belong to anybody."[26] His self-contradictory logic always concentrates on "his fanatical belief that… he is the eternal loser, sufferer, and underdog."[27] Jason has convinced himself that he is a justified victim who needs no help or sympathy from anyone, not even God himself: "And damn You too…see if You can stop me," he thinks.[28] He rationalizes his rage at Miss Quentin in terms of her disregard for him and his patriarchal authority without recognizing that *his* oppression is the cause. In response to Mrs. Compson's demand that she respect Jason as a father, Miss Quentin says, "It's his fault…he makes me do it…If I'm bad it's because I had to be."[29] Without the sympathy of pathos or moral compass of ethos to balance his psyche, Jason's self-righteous sense of injury feeds on itself until he loses himself in logos.

Quentin, representative of the values of the Old South, acts as a foil to Jason's New South morality, but he too suffers from an incomplete and flawed sense of self. While Jason drowns his ego in his own self-destructive rage, Quentin's strong sense of self fragments into multiple ideas of "ego" each time he encounters ideas or memories that challenge his beliefs. To Quentin the New South is like the watches he sees in the shop window on the day of his death: "a dozen different hours and each with the same assertive and contradictory assurance that mine had."[30] Instead of accepting the New South, Quentin holds on to his Old South ideals as the sole way he can return not only his sister but the entire South to the virgin space they once occupied. He insists on "treasuring some concept of family honor his parents seem to have forfeited"[31] in the face of their, and seemingly the world's, apathy to his concerns. Unlike Jason, who gauges the present's value based on calculated future potential, Quentin

[24] Sartre, 93.
[25] Faulkner, 280.
[26] Ibid., 194.
[27] James Guetti, "The Sound and the fury and The bear" in *William Faulkner*, Modern critical views, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 56.
[28] Faulkner, 206.
[29] Ibid., 260.
[30] Ibid., 85.
[31] Minter, 383.

"interpreted his present in terms of his past."[32] Even the past to which he strives to return challenges his ideals: for example his recollection of the rape of Persephone in conjunction with the memory of Dalton Ames running away with Caddy in his arms spurs his identity to fracture into multiple and contradictory roles.[33] Quentin at once conceives of himself as Eubouleus, the innocent bystander watching Persephone's descent to the Underworld; Hades, the king of the dead, securing Persephone a place on the throne at his side; and finally the narcissus, the tempting bloom which led Persephone to her misfortune. In the same way that Jason effaces his ego with logic, Quentin shatters his to pieces as he struggles to extract a moral "right" from the "wrong" he perceives all around him. In the face of his unsteady ego, Quentin searches for a significant and honorable justification for his regression from the world of the New South into his own personal idealized Underworld.

Quentin's section gives the reader the duty of separating his actual memories from his imagined fantasies, but more relevant to the novel is not on what psychological plane his actions are taking place but rather the ethos that motivates him to contemplate them in the first place. Regardless of Faulkner's appendix to *The sound and the fury* or his later comments regarding the novel, the text itself reveals that all of Quentin's actions "approach and dwell in the *imaginary* whether or not we conceive of them as actually taking place."[34] Quentin's concern with the ethics surrounding actions takes the place of the significance of the actions in question. In reply to his false confession of incest his father tells him that "every man is the arbiter of his own virtues whether or not you consider it courageous is of more importance than the act itself."[35] Quentin depends so much on his personal idea of virtue that he possesses his memories only as they support his ideals; the ethos in which he places all of his being drives him to seek authority and credibility at any cost, whether by the further corruption of his sister to reach a space of higher purity or through the corruption of his own memories. At Harvard, away from the South, Gerald Bland's disrespect towards women and their purity presents to Quentin the "prospect of a moment when Caddy's corruption no longer matters to him." His father, whose views "are complimentary to the point of schizophrenia" to Quentin's,[36] tells him in the same conversation that "you are not thinking of finitude you are contemplating an apotheosis…you cannot bear to think that

[32] Sartre, 90.
[33] Faulkner, 148.
[34] Sundquist, 17.
[35] Faulkner, 176.
[36] Sundquist, 17.

someday it will no longer hurt you like this now."[37] With time eroding the grief and despair that lends his ideas credibility, Quentin directs his ethos at time itself and attempts to manipulate it, even if only in his own mind, to fit his purposes.

Quentin's desire to stop time leads him to combine his ethotic virtue with a thanatotic desire for death, the condition in which time both stops and comes alive. His obsession with time "derives primarily from his recognition of it as the dimension in which change occurs and in which Caddy's actions have efficacy and significance."[38] Quentin is "a gull on invisible wire attached through space dragged," and believes that only in death – the absence of time – can he save both himself and his sister from the relentless pull of the "invisible wire" of time toward the future.[39] Caddy refuses, however, to take part in his thanatotic vision of a double suicide that would place them in a circle of hell where they would be "only you and me then amid the pointing and the horror walled by the clean flame."[40] When he suggests suicide she places his hand on her throat so he can feel the surge of blood whenever she hears Dalton's name to show him that she is still *alive*, and possesses some force of the human experience that Quentin has never and will never recognize as valid. Quentin cannot accept the eros in her because he does not understand it, and with the ethos on which he functions can only see the thanatos in her: namely, her loss of virginity. Her eros both defies his ethos and refuses his thanatos as her vitality and humanity "act in counterpoint to Quentin's obsessions" and push him away.[41] After Caddy refuses to confirm Quentin's passion, his "own estimate of himself" – which is essentially the success of his subconscious ego's ethotic appeals to his conscious self – fails to meet his own ethotic standards in a circular *reductio ad absurdum* of the mind.[42] His identity is scattered both amongst separate roles in relation to Caddy and across the time he wishes to harness. Before his suicide he contemplates "the peacefullest words…*Non fui. Sum. Fui. Non sum,*" Latin for "I was not. I am. I was. I am not."[43] Quentin's mind betrays him as he starts to think about how "I could not be a virgin, with so many of them…but if it was that simple to do it wouldn't be anything it if it wasn't anything, what was I."[44] As the irrelevancy of virginity and purity dooms upon him, he cannot continue watching time eat away at his ethotically dependent identity. He begins to identify with Narcissistic images of his shadow and his reflection in water, which are "nicely symbolized by

[37] Faulkner, 177.
[38] Millgate, 102.
[39] Faulkner, 104.
[40] Ibid., 117.
[41] Sundquist, 23.
[42] Backman, 28.
[43] Faulkner, 174.
[44] Ibid., 321.

his elaborately planned act of suicide by drowning."[45] Up to the day of his death Quentin never manages to think past Caddy, both in terms of his failure as her protector and of his irrelevancy as his own authority.

None of Caddy's brothers, in fact, can ever manage to think past her, for the eros and thanatos that she symbolizes govern every decision they make. Their "vision of the world can be compared to that of a man sitting in an open car and looking backward. At every moment, formless shadowings, flickering, faint trembling and patches of light rise up on either side of him, and only afterward, when he has a little perspective, do they become trees and men and cars."[46] At the conclusion of the novel's omniscient fourth section, the Compson family's story approaches meaninglessness, for "each in its ordered place," is merely a transient and material illusion.[47] Without the completeness of multiple modes of thinking and existence at their disposal, none of the brothers ever gain Sartre's "perspective" or reach Faulkner's ironic suggestion of order. They remain perpetually trapped in their fugue-like mindsets, without the relief of another mode to render them whole and set them free.

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[45] Thompson, 114.
[46] Sartre, 89.
[47] Faulkner, 321.