

SparkNotes analysis of the Benjy Section

Source: <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/soundfury/section1.rhtml>

Summary

Caddy smells like trees.

NOTE: Benjy, the narrator of the difficult first section of the novel, has no concept of time. He portrays all events in the present—April Seventh, 1928—regardless of when they actually occurred in his life. The events that actually take place on April Seventh are rather insignificant. Far more important are the memories evoked by Benjy’s experiences on that day. The summary below therefore includes not only the events that take place on April Seventh, but the past events that these cues from the present cause Benjy to recall.

On the day before Easter, 1928, a teenaged Negro boy named Luster is watching after Benjy, the severely retarded youngest son of the aristocratic Compson family of Jefferson, Mississippi. It is Benjy’s thirty-third birthday, and Dilsey, the Compsons’ cook and Luster’s grandmother, has baked him a cake. Luster takes Benjy around the Compson property to search for a quarter he has lost. Luster had intended to use the quarter to buy a ticket to the minstrel show in Jefferson that weekend.

Luster leads Benjy to a nearby golf course, hoping to earn back his lost quarter by fetching lost golf balls from the rough. The golf course lies on a stretch of what used to be the Compson pasture, which Mr. Compson sold to developers to pay for his son Quentin’s education at Harvard. When Benjy hears one of the golfers calling out to his caddie, he moans because the sound of the word “caddie” reminds him of his sister.

Luster helps Benjy climb through a fence. Benjy catches his clothes on a nail, which brings back a memory of a time when Caddy helped Benjy free himself from that same nail twenty-six years before. This event occurred around Christmas, 1902, when Benjy was seven years old. In this memory, Mrs. Compson and her brother, Uncle Maury, are arguing inside the Compson house. Uncle Maury lives off of the Compsons’ money and hospitality, and he is also having an affair with Mrs. Patterson, the Compsons’ next-door neighbor. Uncle Maury uses young Benjy and Caddy as messengers to deliver his love letters to Mrs. Patterson. Mrs. Compson worries that Benjy will get sick from the cold, but she seems more concerned about the prospect of Benjy’s sickness ruining her Christmas party than about his actual welfare. These memories of Caddy make Benjy moan again, which annoys Luster.

Returning to 1928, Benjy and Luster walk past the carriage house on the Compson property, which reminds Benjy of a time he saw the carriage house long ago during a trip to the family cemetery. In this memory, from approximately 1912 or 1913, Benjy and his mother are riding

in the Compsons' carriage to visit the graveyard where Quentin and Mr. Compson were laid to rest. Dilsey mentions that Jason should buy the family a new carriage, as the current one is getting old. Jason mentions that Uncle Maury has been asking for money from Mrs. Compson. Luster chides Benjy for his crying once again.

Luster leads Benjy through the Compsons' barn. The barn swings Benjy's memory back to a time in 1902 when he and Caddy were delivering one of Uncle Maury's love letters to Mrs. Patterson. Benjy then thinks of a different time when he was delivering one of the letters by himself. In this memory, Mr. Patterson notices Benjy delivering the letter. Worried, Mrs. Patterson runs over, which scares Benjy. Mr. Patterson gets to Benjy first and intercepts the letter, learning of his wife's affair.

Back in the present, Benjy and Luster walk down toward the "branch," or stream, that runs through the Compson property. The branch causes Benjy to recall the day his grandmother, Damuddy, was buried in 1898. Benjy is only three years old at the time and his disability has not yet been discovered. In this memory, Quentin, Caddy, Jason, and Benjy are all playing together in the stream. The children's black attendant, Versh, tells Caddy she will be whipped for getting her dress wet, so she takes the dress off. However, Caddy gets mud on her underclothes. Walking back to the house, Caddy and Quentin worry that Jason will tattle to their parents about Caddy's wet clothes. The children see Roskus milking a cow in the barn, which shifts Benjy to a memory of Caddy's wedding in 1910.

In this memory, Benjy and T.P., one of the Compsons' black servants, have gotten their hands on some champagne from the wedding, though T.P. thinks the beverage is merely "sassprilluh." The two boys are drunk and keep falling down as they watch some cows cross the yard. T.P. and Quentin get into a fight because T.P. has been teasing Quentin about Caddy. The fighting and the alcohol throw Benjy's world into chaos, and he begins to cry. Versh carries Benjy up the hill to the wedding party.

Benjy's memory of Versh carrying him returns his memory to 1898, when Versh was carrying Benjy up the hill after the Compson children played in the stream. In this memory, Versh tells the children that their parents have company over for dinner. When they reach the house, Jason tattles to Mr. Compson that Caddy and Quentin have splashed each other in the stream. Mr. Compson answers that the children will have to eat quietly in the kitchen because he has company over for dinner. Dilsey serves the children their meal, and as they eat, Benjy starts crying again. Quentin asks Dilsey if Mrs. Compson has been crying, and she deflects the question. Then, even Jason starts crying. Caddy teases Jason, knowing that he is upset because Damuddy is sick and he can no longer sleep in Damuddy's bed. The children walk down to Versh's house.

The memory of Versh's cabin reminds Benjy of several occurrences from 1910 and 1912. In 1910, Dilsey is singing in the kitchen, and Roskus complains that the Compsons are unlucky. In 1912, T.P. takes Benjy and little Miss Quentin—Caddy's illegitimate daughter—down to T.P.'s house, where Luster is playing in the dirt. Benjy steals Miss Quentin's toy, and when she gets upset, he cries. Roskus reiterates his conviction that the Compsons are unlucky. Dilsey and Roskus talk about the fact that Caddy's name is not to be mentioned around the house because of the disgrace her promiscuity has brought upon the family. Dilsey puts Benjy and Luster to bed.

We return briefly to the present, 1928. Luster has found a golf ball and Benjy wants to play with it. This returns Benjy to a series of memories about death. The first is from the evening in 1898 when the children had just finished dinner and walked down to Versh's house. Benjy wants to play with some lightning bugs T.P. has captured in a jar. Frony tells the Compson children that a funeral service is going on in the house. Damuddy has died and Mr. and Mrs. Compson have not yet told the children. Benjy recalls the death of the Compsons' horse, Nancy, and the buzzards that circled over the carcass afterward. He thinks briefly of Mr. Compson's death in 1912, then returns to the memory of Damuddy's death in 1898. The children worry that buzzards might pick at Damuddy's bones. Caddy is not convinced that a funeral is actually taking place, so she decides to spy on the adults through the parlor window. She climbs a tree and all three of her brothers catch a glimpse of her dirty underwear from below. When Benjy sees Caddy's soiled clothes he begins to cry again.

Benjy's memory briefly skips back to his drunken episode with T.P. at Caddy's wedding in 1910. He then thinks of a scene from 1905 when he became upset at the smell of Caddy's perfume. In this memory, Jason mocks Caddy for her "prissy dress" and claims that she is trying to act older than her age. Caddy washes off her perfume, but Benjy remains upset. Benjy thinks repeatedly that Caddy smells like trees. This returns him to the moment in 1898 when Caddy is up in the tree spying on the adults. In this memory, Dilsey reaches up, pulls Caddy down from the tree, and scolds the children for being outside past their bedtime.

Back in the present, Luster is still standing with Benjy as he plays in the stream. Luster tells Benjy not to approach the nearby swing because Miss Quentin is there with her boyfriend, the man with the red tie. This makes Benjy recall a time years ago when he saw Caddy and Charlie, her first suitor, kissing on the swing. In this memory, Benjy begins to cry very loudly when Caddy's suitor approaches. Charlie grows angry at Benjy's intrusion, which upsets Benjy even more. Caddy takes Benjy up to the house and cries, as she knows Benjy is upset with her for kissing Charlie. Caddy apologizes to Benjy and washes her mouth out with soap.

Benjy's consciousness then returns to the present day, 1928. He approaches the swing and interrupts Miss Quentin and the man with the red tie kissing on the swing. Miss Quentin gets upset with Luster for letting Benjy approach, and she runs back up to the house. Luster picks up an unused condom on the ground, thinking at first that it is his lost quarter. The man with the red

tie asks where Luster found it. Luster replies that men come to visit Miss Quentin every night and that she always climbs down the tree outside her window to meet them outside. Benjy and Luster walk along a fence and come to a gate, where they see some schoolgirls walking by.

The gate and schoolgirls remind Benjy of a day in 1910, when he ran out of the house to look at some girls who were walking by the same gate. In this memory, Benjy manages to open the gate and run through it, scaring the girls. Wanting to tell the girls how much he misses Caddy, he catches up with one of them. The girl screams in terror. The scene ends as an unspecified assailant—presumably the father of one of the girls—attacks Benjy. That night, Mr. Compson is concerned and wants to know how Benjy got past the gate. He and Jason mull over the idea of having Benjy castrated as a precaution.

The narrative returns to the present. Luster tries to sell his golf ball to one of the golfers on the course, but the golfer takes the ball away from Luster. When the golfer calls for his caddie, Benjy starts moaning again because the word reminds him of Caddy. Luster gives Benjy a flower to try to calm him, and he tells Benjy that when Mrs. Compson dies, Jason is probably going to send Benjy off to an insane asylum in Jackson.

Luster and Benjy finally reach the Compson house. Dilsey yells at Luster, thinking Benjy is crying because Luster has been teasing him. Benjy sits down in front of the fire, which briefly reminds him of a time when he and Caddy sat near the fire just after his parents changed his name from Maury to Benjy. Back in the present, Dilsey lights the candles on Benjy's birthday cake, and Luster and Benjy eat some of the cake. Benjy reaches into the fire, burns his hand, and bursts into tears. Mrs. Compson enters the room, exasperated at her son's wailing. She goes on a tirade of self-pity, complaining that she is ill and cannot get any rest with Benjy making so much noise. Luster takes Benjy to the library to quiet him.

The library causes Benjy to remember another time he was in the library with Caddy. This was in 1900, when he was only five years old. In this memory, Caddy is trying to pick Benjy up to comfort him, but Mrs. Compson argues that Benjy is big enough to walk by himself. When Caddy attempts to comfort Benjy by letting him play with a cushion, Mrs. Compson complains that Caddy spoils Benjy too much. Jason and Caddy get into a fight because Caddy finds out that Jason has maliciously cut all of Benjy's paper dolls into pieces.

Returning to the present, Benjy continues to fuss while he and Luster sit in the library. Jason enters the room, clearly exasperated with Benjy. Luster asks Jason if he can borrow a quarter to go to the minstrel show, but Jason disdainfully refuses. Miss Quentin comes in and is still furious at Luster for allowing Benjy to sneak up on her when she was with the man with the red tie. Dilsey calls the family to supper. Benjy then recalls the evening in approximately 1909 when Caddy went on a date and lost her virginity. In this memory, Caddy comes home from the date,

and Benjy cries loudly when he sees her. She is ashamed and runs up to her room to avoid Benjy, which makes him very upset.

Back in the present, the family is seated at dinner. Miss Quentin complains that she does not like living in the Compson house. Jason rebukes her, and she threatens to run away. The argument between Jason and Miss Quentin escalates, and Dilsey tries unsuccessfully to mediate. Benjy's mind remains stuck in the past throughout this section, but the argument going on around him in the present keeps intruding. Miss Quentin curses Jason and storms off. Benjy runs off to an empty room and gets undressed. He and Luster see Miss Quentin sneak out of her bedroom window and run away.

Benjy's memory returns a final time to the night in 1898 when Damuddy died and Caddy soiled her underwear. In this memory, Dilsey is putting Benjy and the other Compson children to bed. Caddy's rear end is still muddy, but Dilsey does not have time to bathe her before bed. Caddy asks Mr. Compson if Mrs. Compson is sick, but he says she is not. Caddy holds Benjy as he falls asleep.

Analysis

This first section of *The Sound and the Fury* is very difficult to navigate. Benjy, whose eyes are our only window on the Compsons thus far, is one of the most incomprehensible and challenging narrators in all of literature. Benjy's severe mental disability has left him with virtually no capacity for subjective thought. From his perspective, life is merely a string of images, sounds, and memories that he is unable to interpret, express, or organize in any meaningful way. Benjy does not understand any of the abstract concepts that underpin human existence, such as birth, death, love, family, virginity, intimacy, and marriage.

The greatest barrier to Benjy's ability to narrate is the fact that he has no concept of time. Benjy lives in an endless present tense. He interprets all events and memories as taking place in the present—April Seventh, 1928—regardless of when they actually occur in his life. Visual and auditory cues from the present cause Benjy to remember events from the past, but he does not understand that these remembrances are memories—he regards them just as if they were experiences from the present.

Faulkner uses Benjy's limitations to introduce one of the novel's key motifs, the human experience of time. Most humans rely on time to create a system of order out of the chaos of sensation, memory, and experience. For Benjy, however, time is a constant, not a flow, and is almost meaningless. The struggle we endure in reading Benjy's narrative forces us to confront what life would be like without the solidifying presence of time. Benjy offers us a few shattered pieces of truth, but they are difficult to discern.

Indeed, reading the chapter can be very disorienting. Benjy's flashbacks occur frequently and without warning, sometimes even mid-sentence. Faulkner sometimes marks these leaps in time with italicized text, but not always. The easiest way to tell when we are in the present is if we sense the presence of Luster: he plays a role only in the scenes from 1928. Compounding the temporal confusion of this section is the fact that several characters have the same names. Benjy's brother Quentin can easily be confused with Miss Quentin, Caddy's illegitimate daughter. Likewise, Benjy's brother Jason can be confused with the boys' father, Mr. Compson, who is also named Jason. Finally, we learn only implicitly that Benjy and Maury are the same person, as the Compsons renamed Benjy when they discovered his mental disability in 1900. The presence of Mrs. Compson's brother, Uncle Maury, confuses events in the novel even further.

One of Faulkner's primary reasons for using Benjy as the narrator of this first section is to hint at the tragic events and circumstances of the Compson family history through a completely objective voice that offers no commentary. Benjy's objectivity is based on his powerful, innate sense of order and chaos. He interprets the world by comparing his perceptions and experiences to the pattern of order and familiarity that exists in his mind. Benjy immediately notices if something—especially something involving Caddy—seems wrong or out of place. Any such deviation from Benjy's pattern of familiarity creates chaos in his mind and upsets him, making him cry or moan. Benjy's first whiff of Caddy's perfume, for instance, shocks his sense of order—he detects something awry and it disturbs him greatly.

Benjy's almost inhuman objectivity contrasts sharply with the perspectives of Quentin and Jason, who, as we will see in the next two sections, are both so skewed by their obsessions with Caddy that neither can narrate without significant embellishment or prejudice. Benjy's objectivity, on the other hand, allows us to gather clues on our own. His narrative gradually gives us an understanding of the relationships that govern the Compson household.

Mr. Compson is a distant figure, lost in his own cynicism and alcoholism. Likewise, Mrs. Compson is clearly ineffectual as a mother to her children, and her understanding of Benjy's needs is astonishingly feeble. She is constantly absorbed in self-pity and is neurotically insecure about her Bascomb family name. For whatever reason, Mrs. Compson favors Jason, the most wicked of her children. The only true role model and parent to the Compson children is Dilsey, who is the only real source of stability in the household. Though illiterate, Dilsey is faithful, devoted, and competent. She treats the children firmly but kindly, with clear concern for their welfare and character.

The Compson children's vastly differing personalities are apparent from a very young age. Caddy acts as a mother figure to Benjy and is his only real source of affection. However, Caddy seems somewhat headstrong, as we see when she insists that the other children "mind" her instead of minding Dilsey. Additionally, Caddy's muddying of her underwear in the stream as a

young child foreshadows her later promiscuity. Caddy literally dirties herself, and the fact that Dilsey is unable to wipe the mud off suggests that Caddy's indiscretions will irreparably taint the family name.

Quentin is quiet and extremely close to and dependent upon Caddy. He is inordinately concerned with Caddy's welfare and neurotically protective of her. Jason, on the other hand, is distant from the other children. We see that he is cruel even as a young child, when he maliciously cuts up Benjy's paper dolls and tells on Caddy and Quentin for playing in the stream. Also, the fact that Jason constantly has his hands in his pockets hints at his future stinginess. Indeed, we see an example of this stinginess in Jason's refusal to lend Luster a quarter for the minstrel show.

The key events of the Compson family's history gradually begin to fall into place as well. We can construct a rough timeline of the events in Benjy's section based on a number of context clues embedded in the text. Since Benjy is turning thirty-three on April Seventh, 1928, he must have been born in 1895. In 1898, Damuddy died and Caddy got herself dirty in the stream. The Compsons changed Benjy's name from Maury to Benjamin in 1900. Benjy and Caddy got caught carrying the love letter from Uncle Maury to Mrs. Patterson in 1902. Caddy first used perfume in 1905, lost her virginity near the swing in approximately 1909, and was married in 1910. Quentin committed suicide at Harvard shortly thereafter. Benjy scared the neighborhood girls and was castrated in 1910, and Mr. Compson died of alcoholism in 1912.

These events reveal a pattern of moral decay within the Compson family. We see the first examples of this decay in Uncle Maury's affair with Mrs. Patterson and his use of the unwitting Caddy and Benjy as accomplices in his adultery. Uncle Maury is a member of the Bascomb family; his immorality is partly responsible for Mrs. Compson's obsession about her old family name and her decision to rename her son Benjamin. However, Mrs. Compson's symbolic attempts to distance herself from her brother's immorality are not effective, as we soon see Caddy exhibiting similar indiscretions.

The mud on Caddy's underwear prefigures her later promiscuity. We see that Caddy begins experimenting with boys at a young age, wearing perfume and having amorous encounters on the swing near the stream. Benjy senses that something is amiss or out of place, which disrupts the familiar patterns in his mind. He can sense Caddy's promiscuity, which in his mind is linked to the smell of her perfume. Indeed, Benjy becomes upset and cries every time he smells Caddy's perfume. The first time he smells the perfume, in 1905, Caddy washes it off. Still a virgin at this point, she is literally able to wash away the evidence of her indiscretions. However, when Caddy comes home from a date in 1909, Benjy cries loudly when he sees her. Caddy knows that she cannot simply wash away her sin as she could before. Aware that Benjy is upset, Caddy avoids him. This evasion makes Benjy cry even louder.

Some critics argue that the moment the three Compson boys look up into the tree and see Caddy's muddy underwear represents one of the climactic moments in the novel's theme of moral decay. Whether or not they know it at the time, all three boys are made aware of the curse on the Compson name at this moment. The promiscuity heralded by Caddy's dirty pants eventually unravels each brother's emotional or mental stability. Quentin commits suicide due to his despair over Caddy's lost purity. Jason lives a life of resentment and hatred after Caddy's promiscuity ruins his chances of getting the job that Caddy's husband had promised him. Caddy's banishment from the Compson household destroys the order in Benjy's world, leaving him confused, haunted, and longing futilely for her return.

The parallels we see between Caddy and her daughter, Miss Quentin, indicate that this moral decay in the Compson family will not end with Caddy's generation. Like Caddy, Miss Quentin discovers illicit sexuality on the swing near the stream. Additionally, just as he interrupted Caddy and Charlie kissing, Benjy interrupts Miss Quentin and the man with the red tie doing the same. It is notable, however, that Miss Quentin feels no guilt or need to wash away her sin as Caddy does. Because her mother has set a precedent of indiscretion, Miss Quentin does not feel that she has committed any wrong.

The events Benjy recalls reveal not only this pattern of moral decay within the Compson family, but also a pattern of death. Chronologically, the earliest past event that Benjy recalls is Damuddy's death. Damuddy never appears in the novel herself while alive. As a member of the older generation, she represents the old South of the nineteenth century, and her death can be seen as a marker of the end of that world. Importantly, the first event in the Compsons' spiral of tragedy is this symbolic death of the old generation. Benjy's castration can be seen as an extension of this specter of death to the next generation, as castration is a powerful symbol of the death of a family line.

Benjy also recalls the deaths and funerals of Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Roskus. The deaths are linked in his mind by the image of buzzards circling over the carcass of the Compsons' horse Nancy, and by the sound of the Compsons' black servants' ritual moaning over the dead. It is significant that Benjy recalls Roskus's death alongside Quentin's and Mr. Compson's, since this juxtaposition allows us to contrast Dilsey's suffering and mourning with the Compsons'. While the Compsons—especially Mrs. Compson—are shattered and unable to recover from the deaths in their family, Dilsey demonstrates considerable strength of spirit in her recovery from her husband's death. In this regard, Dilsey is the foundation of the hopes for resurrection and regeneration within the Compson family, which are hinted at later in the novel.

Ironically, the only people in the Compson household who seem aware of the family's decay and impending downfall are those who are least able to do anything in response: Benjy and the Compsons' black servants. Benjy's acute sense of order and chaos enables him to sense Damuddy's death, Caddy's promiscuity, Quentin's death, and other signals of the Compsons'

decline. However, Benjy's disability prevents him from responding to these signals in any other way but moaning and wailing. Likewise, on the day of Mr. Compson's death, Roskus notes that the household is unlucky—"Taint no luck on this place." Though the black servants seem to have a sense for the Compsons' curse and anticipate the family's downfall, their position as servants makes it unlikely that their warnings will ever be heard or taken seriously.