

SparkNotes analysis of the Quentin Section

Source: <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/soundfury/section2.rhtml>

Summary

If I'd just had a mother so I could say Mother Mother

Quentin Compson wakes up in his dorm room at Harvard, hearing his watch ticking. He realizes that it is between seven and eight o'clock in the morning. Quentin remembers his father giving him the watch and saying that the watch might allow Quentin an occasional moment when he could forget about time. He thinks about the inevitability of his own awareness of time and remembers that St. Francis called death his "Little Sister," though, Quentin thinks, St. Francis never had a sister. Quentin gets up briefly, then goes back to bed. He has a memory of his sister Caddy's wedding announcement: "Mr and Mrs Jason Richmond Compson announce the marriage of. . . ." Caddy was married in April, just two months ago.

Quentin's roommate Shreve interrupts Quentin's thoughts, appearing in his doorway to remind him that the class bell will ring in only two minutes. Quentin says he had no idea it was so late, and that he will hurry to class. He tells Shreve not to wait for him. When Shreve leaves, Quentin goes to the window and watches the students rushing by. He spends a moment gazing at the unhurried Spoade, a Harvard senior who once mocked Quentin's virginity by calling Shreve his husband. He thinks about both his and Caddy's virginity.

Quentin suddenly remembers falsely confessing to his father that he had committed incest, and that he, not Dalton Ames, was the father of Caddy's child. He muses on Dalton Ames's name and remembers his father telling him that his great tragic feelings were meaningless and that there was no help to be had.

Quentin breaks the glass face of his watch against the corner of his dresser, cutting his finger in the process. The watch continues to tick. Quentin cleans up the glass and then packs a suitcase. He takes a bath and shaves. He puts the key to his trunk in an envelope along with two notes, which he addresses to his father. At the post office he mails the envelope, then tucks a similar note to Shreve inside his front pocket. Outside, Quentin looks for Deacon, a black man he knows, but when unable to find him he goes to a store for breakfast. Quentin then goes into a clock shop and shows his broken watch to the proprietor, but then tells the man not to fix it. Quentin asks if any of the clocks in the window are correct, but then asks not to be told what time it is.

Quentin buys a set of tailor's weights, hoping they will be "heavy enough," but he does not say for what. He goes to the train station and boards a train. As he rides, he remembers counting the seconds to himself as a child in school. He remembers that he never counted correctly, and never was able to guess exactly when the bell would ring. Quentin briefly remembers the day Benjy's name was changed from Maury. The train stops and Quentin gets off. He walks to a bridge and looks down at the water, thinking of shadows and of drowning.

Quentin sees Gerald Bland, a swaggering Harvard student, rowing across the river. Quentin goes through a series of painful memories, thinking of Caddy's promiscuity and her marriage to Herbert Head. He remembers his mother's letters about Caddy and Herbert, and Herbert's promise to give Jason a job in his bank. Quentin thinks vaguely about his mother's pride and emptiness, musing that Caddy never had a real mother and that he himself could never turn to his mother in times of need. Quentin finds Deacon, the black man he was seeking earlier. He gives Deacon the note he has written for Shreve, and asks him to take it to Shreve tomorrow.

Quentin rides a trolley, thinking abstractly about time and about his past. He remembers talking to Herbert Head two days before the wedding, and that he and Herbert nearly came to blows before Caddy came in and sent Herbert away. Quentin remembers telling Caddy she was sick and that if she was sick she could not be married. Caddy replied that because of her pregnancy she had "got to marry somebody." Quentin asked Caddy if she had slept with many men, and she answered vaguely. He then asked her whether she knew the identity of the father of her unborn child, and she again answered vaguely. Quentin then recalls another memory, when his father told him that the only reason Quentin was upset at Caddy's pregnancy was because he himself was still a virgin. Mr. Compson was relatively unconcerned with Caddy's pregnancy because he said that virginity was just a meaningless concept invented by men.

Quentin stands on a bridge looking down into the river. He remembers the time when he tried to persuade Caddy not to marry Herbert. Quentin told Caddy that Herbert was a "blackguard" who was thrown out of his club at Harvard for cheating at cards. He tried to convince Caddy to leave Jefferson with him, saying they could live off of the money meant for his Harvard tuition. Caddy refused, saying that Quentin's tuition money was raised through the sale of Benjy's favorite pasture, and that Quentin cannot drop out. Caddy is concerned that after their father's death Benjy will be put in the mental hospital in Jackson.

Quentin meets a little Italian girl in a bakery. He buys the girl some bread and she follows him. Quentin tries to find out where she lives. Finally, the girl's older brother Julio sees them and attacks Quentin, accusing him of kidnapping his sister. A constable arrives. As Quentin is being taken away to the squire, he sees Shreve, Spoade, Gerald Bland, and Mrs. Bland driving with some young girls. Quentin's friends accompany him to the squire's office. Quentin pays seven dollars in fines and is quickly released.

As they drive, Gerald Bland regales the group with stories about his exploits with women. Quentin remembers his confrontation with Caddy after discovering that she had had sex with Dalton Ames. Quentin frantically suggested to Caddy that they both kill themselves. Then he suggested that they claim it was Quentin who had taken Caddy's virginity and that they could go away together and even believe that it was true. Indifferently, almost numbly, Caddy accepted all of Quentin's suggestions. Afterward, in a frenzy, Quentin confronted Dalton Ames and threatened to kill him.

Quentin suddenly asks Gerald if he has a sister. Gerald says he does not, and Quentin hits him. Gerald fights back and gives Quentin a black eye. Quentin finds a trolley and rides back to Harvard. In his room, Quentin cleans a bloodstain off his vest and thinks about his mother. He

remembers the time he told his father he had committed incest with Caddy, and that his father did not believe him. His father told Quentin that his feelings of despair about Caddy's behavior would quickly pass. The class bell rings outside. Quentin puts his watch in Shreve's desk, brushes his teeth, takes up his hat, and leaves the room.

Analysis

This section of the narrative relates Quentin's tormented and jumbled inner thoughts on the day that he commits suicide. Faulkner uses Quentin's narrative to continue his exploration of the human experience of time. Though not quite as disorienting as Benjy's narrative, Quentin's is nonetheless very abstract. Benjy is able to offer only vague impressions and objective observation. Quentin, however, has a conscious, subjective voice and frequently tends toward abstract thought. Quentin's narrative plunges us into questions of human motivation, cause and effect, and circumstance that Benjy is unable to identify or consider.

Like Benjy, Quentin has memories of the past that intrude on his narrative constantly and without warning. Quentin's memory is complicated because it is largely intertwined with his fantasies. Sometimes it is difficult to tell which of his memories are based on events that actually occurred and which are based on fantasy or wishful thinking. Quentin's mind is far more complex than Benjy's, and, unlike Benjy, he is clearly aware that his flashbacks are just memories. Quentin, however, is just as likely as Benjy to associate past events with people or objects from the present.

Faulkner emphasizes the importance of time and memory in Quentin's world through the frequent appearance of clocks and watches. Quentin is effectively trapped in time, obsessed with his past and memories. He always notices the bells of the Harvard clock tower. The ticking of his watch haunts him even after he breaks the watch against his dresser. Quentin asks the owner of the clock shop whether any of the clocks is correct, but does not want to know what time it is. Additionally, Quentin repeatedly mentions walking into and out of shadows, which are constant reminders of time as gauged by the position of the sun throughout the course of a day. Unlike Benjy, who is oblivious to time, Quentin is so obsessed and haunted by it that he sees suicide as his only escape.

Clearly, the main thrust of Quentin's section is his struggle with Caddy's promiscuity. Quentin is horrified by Caddy's conduct, and he is obsessed by the stain it has left on the family's honor. Quentin, like Benjy, has a strong sense of order and chaos. However, while Benjy's order is based on patterns of experience in his mind, Quentin's order is based on a traditional, idealized Southern code of honor and conduct. This code is a legacy of the old South, a highly paternalistic society in which men were expected to act as gentlemen and women as ladies. Quentin believes very strongly in the ideals espoused under this traditional code: family honor; gentlemanly virtue, strength, and decency; and especially feminine purity, modesty, and virginity.

Caddy's promiscuity deeply hurts Quentin because he views it as dirty and shameful, a blatant violation of the ideal of femininity found in his Southern code. Quentin takes his code very seriously, as it forms the basis of order in his world. When Caddy's promiscuity breaks the code, Quentin attempts to maintain his sense of order by responding in a manner he considers honorable. Thinking that suicide is the only way to salvage the family name, Quentin tells Caddy that he will kill himself if she does the same. When she is uninterested, Quentin's next idea is to falsely accept the responsibility for fathering Caddy's child—a lie, but one he considers honorable and gentlemanly.

Quentin's anguish is compounded when he learns that his father really could not care less about Caddy's promiscuity. Mr. Compson is an articulate but cynical man. Recognizing the source of Quentin's torment, he discourages his son from taking himself so seriously. Mr. Compson argues that the concepts of virginity and purity—cornerstones of Quentin's paternalistic sense of Southern morality—are hogwash. Mr. Compson claims that virginity is a flimsy, unnatural idea that men have constructed. He believes that the concept is meaningless to women and should not be idealized. Quentin, on the other hand, finds his father's indifference completely dishonorable to the Compson name. Though Quentin never actually had sexual relations with his sister, he brings the story up again in front of his father. For Quentin, the false confession is a desperate attempt to assume Caddy's guilt and atone for it himself. However, Mr. Compson, like Caddy, dismisses Quentin's concerns. When Quentin sees that no one else in his family shares his code and his convictions, he reverts to suicide as the only remaining option, a means of exit while preserving his ordered universe.

Quentin's struggle to reconcile Caddy's actions with his own traditional Southern value system reflects Faulkner's broader concern with the clash between the old South and the modern world. Like a medieval code of chivalry, the old South's ideals are based on a society that has largely disappeared. Men and women like Quentin, who attempt to cling to these increasingly outdated Southern ideals, sense that their grasp is slipping and their sense of order disappearing. Their reliance on a set of outdated myths and ideals leaves them unequipped to deal with the realities of the modern world. Several characters in *The Sound and the Fury* embody this changing of the guard from old ideals to modern realities. Damuddy, the lone representative of the old South left in the Compson family, dies before any of the other action in the novel takes place. Miss Quentin, the lone member of the Compsons' new generation, is not only a bastard child, but has continued in Caddy's promiscuous ways without displaying any of the guilt Caddy feels about doing something wrong.

Quentin's obsession with his moral code is just one indication of his overall tendency toward thought rather than action. Quentin is clearly very bright, but his fixation on abstractions paralyzes him. He spends all his time thinking about nebulous concepts—time, honor, virginity, and so on—that have no physical presence. Existing only as words, these abstractions are difficult to act upon tangibly. Indeed, we see that Quentin is largely incapable of effective action:

he frequently comes up with ideas, but never carries them out successfully. Quentin devises the double suicide pact with Caddy as a means of escape, but Caddy rejects the idea and escapes the Compson family without him. Likewise, Quentin talks frequently about confronting Dalton Ames and Gerald Bland, but his words win him nothing but two embarrassing beatings. The only actions we see Quentin take are meaningless and impotent, conforming to his Southern code but having no real outcome.

Though Quentin's moral code plays a large part in his anguish over Caddy's promiscuity, we get the sense that there is something more going on beneath the surface of this brother-sister relationship. When Quentin encounters the Italian girl in the bakery, he refers to her as a "little dirty child," which evokes a memory of Caddy. After Quentin's first encounter with a girl, Caddy disapproved of the girl and called her dirty. Just as Quentin seems jealous of the men Caddy encounters, we sense that Caddy is jealous not only of this first girl but of any girl Quentin might pursue. Faulkner implies that there is an unconscious sexual frustration between Quentin and Caddy, and that each of them might use his or her lovers to make the other jealous. Since Quentin is still a virgin, it seems likely that Caddy has made him far more jealous than he ever made her. While the shame of Caddy's promiscuity is clearly upsetting to Quentin, his despair may also contain elements of jealous rage.