

The Fragmented Vision of Disabled Males: Reoccurrence of Disabled Masculinity in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury and Light in August*

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Abstract

The study investigates the ways in which William Faulkner draws upon William James and Sigmund Freud's theories of consciousness to create disabled male characters in his novels *The sound and the Fury* and *Light in August*. Close readings of passages from these novels demonstrate how Faulkner's characters exhibit mental and physical disabilities, through both stilted consciousness and impotency, to demonstrate disabled progress and masculinity. In consideration of Benjy's stilted consciousness, this study traces the reoccurrence of disabled masculinity throughout *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and Faulkner's later novel *Light in August* (1932). The consciousness of these characters is evaluated through William James theories on stream of consciousness and Sigmund Freud's theories of identity. James and Freud's theories inform Faulkner's characterization and enable one to read Faulkner's disabled male characters as a deviation from 'normal' conscious thought. Through these characters Faulkner communicates the internal organization of experience within a disabled consciousness and depicts the disabled male's inability to mature into an adult. One is

able to deconstruct the limited vision of these characters to uncover their ability to progress with modernity. The failure to progress is assessed based on the male characters' inability to adapt to the mechanized society of the industrialized modern world. Historical time and the concept of change are precisely what these disabled male characters are unable to recognize due to their disabled consciousness. Likewise, their inability to accept the changing gender roles in mechanized society is furthered through their disabilities.

Keywords: Disabled consciousness, stream of consciousness, Masculinity, Stilted cognition

Changes in depictions of consciousness in the late 1800s enable one to situate the disabled male figure in the history of psychology. William James' theories on stream of consciousness, published in *The principle of psychology* (1890), became widely accepted in the literary world during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and are significant to Faulkner's characterization. Faulkner's characterization responds to the theories of personal consciousness as a demonstration of how linear thought is problematic. Able adult consciousness only takes place when one can access the multitude of thoughts and experiences in consideration of all other thoughts and experiences. When one is able to do so he is able to coherently socialize with the external world. However, Faulkner's male characters fail to enact the notion of coherence and socialization in regards to personal consciousness.

William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*, published in 1929, opens with Benjy Compson's description of "hitting. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. Then they went on, and I went along the fence" (5). Here the reader finds Benjy watching a game of golf but his limited perceptions, due to a mental disability, obscure this scene. Through this narrative Faulkner provides an exceptional interpretation of the "unconscious," as Benjy cannot connect his observations of these actions to the greater concept of a

“game.” Benjy’s conscious thought cannot competently interact with the external world, as he lacks abstract language to communicate his experiences of events and people. His inability to communicate with others disrupts his ability to navigate the world and exist in a social context. Yet Faulkner’s choice to start with the scattered, fragmented, and partial impressions of a mentally disabled character creates a doorway to a phenomenon of stream-of-consciousness.

In The Sound and the Fury all three of the Compson men seem to struggle with their conscious thought -albeit in three different ways. Each male character seems to fixate on a different aspect of temporal consciousness: Benjy’s consciousness exists solely in the present, Quentin’s in the past, and Jason’s in the future. Each has the opportunity to control the narration of his own chapter, and because each of these characters seems to fixate on one time period, the reader is able to glimpse what life would be like if one were not able to access all of the parts of one’s consciousness or memory. Benjy’s perspective depicts a solely sensual perception of the world, one without interpretation of or interaction with the external world. His chapter provides snap shots of actions and events without the interruption of a revelatory force or conscious narrator. “Caddy smelled like trees,” Benjy tells us over and over again. It becomes clear that he continuously associates Caddy with the smell of trees. However, at no point does he say, “whenever I smell trees I think of Caddy,” or, “Caddy reminds me of nature and the smell of trees.” He simply says, “Caddy smelled like trees.” He does not provide any evaluative commentary on his perceptions, so a reader does not know how these perceptions inform Benjy’s other thoughts or memories. In this way Benjy’s mind functions like a child’s mind, and it is Benjy’s disabled consciousness that allows him to remain eternally a boy. Characters in Benjy’s foreground highlight his stilted cognition. Caddy asks Benjy, “do you remember when Mr Patterson sent you some candy last summer” to which there is no response (13).

Instead the narrator says, “There was a fence. The vine was dry,

and the wind rattled it" (13). Benjy sees the vine, he feels its dryness, and he hears it rattle, but he does not respond to Caddy's question and he cannot think of Mr. Patterson in a coherent way. Although Martha Winburn England argues that Benjy has an exceptional memory, this passage contradicts that claim. Instead it seems that Benjy lives in one moment of his life and conveys his sensual perceptions of the world during that "day." He does not relate this day to other events in the story of the Compson family, but instead leaves it up to the reader to make connections based on the information from ensuing chapters

Similarly, Faulkner conveys corporeal descriptions of sound throughout the chapter through the comments Benjy hears other characters make. However, like the flash bulb images of what he sees, Benjy does not express a cognitive response or reaction to the events in the plot. He describes his observations in the most basic terms of human perception. He says, "The trees were buzzing, and the grass" but does not explain why they do so. One can assume there are insects in the trees that would make them buzz; however, the reader is witness only to Benjy's base discernment. Later he says, "It came out of Quentin's window and climbed across into the tree. We watched the tree shaking. The shaking went down the tree, then it came out and we watched it go away across the grass. Then we couldn't see it" (74). The reader understands that someone climbed out of Caddy's bedroom window but Benjy does not tell the reader that he saw a person climb out of the window and into the tree, that as he climbed down the tree it caused the tree to shake.

Instead, Benjy describes the shaking because that is what he sees; lacks the capacity to connect the shaking to the person climbing the tree, and instead exhibits childhood consciousness as he only observes the shaking. This raw portrayal of human perception is precisely what makes this section so important. Through this technique Faulkner is able to point out what the world would look like if one were unable to connect various perceptions to one another to form memories and

interpretations of the external world. Benjy's consciousness is so disabled that he cannot recall memories or connect ideas within his mind to one another, and he communicates and interacts through other characters. He exists entirely in a single moment because he cannot recall the past and has no notion of the future. According to Cleanth Brooks in *The Yoknapatawpha County*, "The ability to endure is the virtue which Faulkner most stresses in his simpler peasant types," but Benjy is unable to do so (Brooks 39). He cannot take care of himself due to his limited consciousness and therefore will not be able to endure. Benjy's restricted consciousness suggests that one must actively participate in the external world and apply what he learns from nature to be considered an adult, or a man. Although Benjy cannot cognitively associate perceptions with social feelings and consequences, the reader, as a conscious observer, is able to use Benjy's perceptions to access the action from a different perspective.

As Winburn says, Benjy's section "establishes the fluid movement between past and present, it sharpens the five senses for the making of transitions by means of sense impressions." (232) Benjy functions in the present to appease his basic needs, which extends to all of the Compson men as they confine their consciousness to one aspect of temporality in sole consideration of the id. Jason's consciousness exists only in relation to his own future, but he is "utterly selfcentered" and "displays the sort of petty spite one might associate with a five-yearold" (Singal 136). His limited perceptions prevent him from developing beyond this self-centered state. Joe Christmas from *Light in August* also demonstrates a restricted consciousness and functions as an extension of Benjy. Chapter six of *Light in August* begins, "Memory believes before knowing remembers, believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders. Knows remembers believes..." (119). This chapter jumps back in time to the childhood of Christmas, and this cryptic message is reminiscent of Benjy's consciousness and also invites the reader to decode Joe's mind. This entangled explanation of memory

invites the reader to engage the text in order to untangle the inner workings of the narration and Christmas's disabled thought processes

Similar to Benjy's narration in *The Sound and the Fury*, Joe's character provides perceptions of images and events, but Joe does not interpret his thoughts or perceptions and does not connect his memories from the past to his present situation. On the train back to the orphanage after being kidnapped the narrator says: "he saw the same hills, the same trees, the same cows, but from another side, another direction" (140). From Joe's limited scope a tree is a tree is a tree, all cows are the same cows, and all hills the same hills. He does not have the cognitive ability to decipher or decode his perceptions but instead seems to log them systematically. He collects perceptions for survival and looks at his environment as a place to conquer instead of as a place to embrace and adapt to. Like Benjy, Joe functions as a child instead of an adult, as a boy instead of a man

Joe's thoughts are "arrested" and "held immobile" by a single word, which shows that, like James's disabled consciousness, he is unable to make the connections between the words on the pages in correspondence with other words and sentences. He is suspended on the current word, like the current emotion or experience, and observes the external world in isolation instead of in relation to other people and other experiences. As the narrative advances and the reader is able to make more sense of Christmas, it is clear that he fails to make sense of himself.

Faulkner's characters are unable to consider the consciousness of others, which enables them to remain children forever. In connection to James, Sigmund Freud was also highly regarded at this time, and was considered at the forefront of child psychology. Freud's theories on the development of identity work in conjunction to James's notions of consciousness and can also be examined in relation to Faulkner's characterization. According to Singal, modernists relied on the psychological theories of Freud in order to construct characters. Singal

says, “Freud went much further in restoring a modicum of coherence to the psyche and in setting the terms of how selfhood would be understood in the Modernist era when he assigned the ego the task of organizing the assorted fragments of identity acquired over the years into a more or less consolidated persona” (14-15).

To clarify, Freud suggests that personality develops as a process of organizing experiences as a collective, and is comprised of the id, ego, and superego. Freud claims that the “id” is present from one’s birth and is responsible for “pleasure seeking” and for finding ways to fulfill one’s own needs and desires. The ego, on the other hand, mediates the id and organizes the multitude of perceptions and experiences acquired in order to formulate the personality. Additionally, the superego ensures that the desires of the id can be expressed and fulfilled in ways that are acceptable to the external world. This concept of identity was utilized by modernists and can be observed in Faulkner’s characters.

Faulkner constructs character’s inability to properly socialize with the external world, which demonstrates a disabled identity. Like JM Barrie’s novel *Peter Pan*, Faulkner’s characters are unable to develop beyond consideration of the id, which renders them disabled and demonstrates their inability to escape childhood.

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