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Coming Full Circle: Caddy's Safety Circle to Secure Benjy

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1. Introduction

The first section of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is written in a very specific way: that is, through consciousness of a man who has mental retardation called Benjy. In Benjy's consciousness, time goes flexibly back and forth with a little hint of the association of ideas. Thus, at first, it is difficult for the readers to understand what is happening around him. The uniqueness of the narrative of the first section, which follows Benjy's consciousness, is a part of the reason why this novel has established its reputation as a masterpiece of modernist literature. Yet, the idea that inspired Faulkner to write this novel is not connected to Benjy, but is connected more to the idea of Benjy's sister, Caddy. Here is what William Faulkner told about *The Sound and the Fury*.

That — the explanation of that whole book is in that it began with the picture of a little girl's muddy drawers, climbing that tree to look in the parlor window with her brothers that didn't have a courage to climb the tree waiting to see what she saw. And I tried to tell it with one brother, and that wasn't enough. That was Section One...Caddy was still to me too beautiful and too moving to reduce her to telling what was going on, that it would be more passionate to see her through somebody else's eyes....
(Thompson 9)

He also said as follows: "Now I can write. Now I can just write. Whereupon I, who had three brothers and no sisters and was destined to lose my first daughter in infancy, began to write about a little girl" (Thompson 5). For Benjy, Faulkner left these words:

I became interested in the relationship of the idiot to the world that he was in but would never be able to cope with and just where he could get the tenderness, the help, to shield him in his innocence. I mean 'innocence' in

the sense that God had stricken him blind as a birth, that is, mindless at birth, there was nothing he could ever do about it. (Meriwether and Millgate 146)

To what degree we can trust Faulkner's words we never know, but it is true that in order to understand the first section of *The Sound and the Fury*, one needs to focus on the relationship between Benjy and Caddy, the two protagonists of the story. Those two statements of Faulkner about Caddy and Benjy interconnect with each other in the way that Caddy is someone, who tries to shield Benjy in his innocence. And her trial and failure of it make her "too beautiful and too moving" for Faulkner. My goal for writing this paper is to analyze how she tries to "shield" Benjy in his innocence and why it ends up in failure. More specifically, I will mainly focus on Caddy's act of putting her arms around Benjy, which is repeated throughout the whole section where Caddy and Benjy are together. Caddy tries to make a safety circle around Benjy to protect him from getting hurt. The motif of a circle is important to interpret this section.

2. Benjy's Five Senses and Bright Shapes

Benjy's world is incomplete. From the text, it is clear that Benjy does not seem to have five senses. His sight, hearing and especially his smell are very acute. He relies on his sense of smell for his security. He even smells death. However, he does not have acute senses of touch and taste. His sense of touch must be weak and it seems that he does not have a sense of taste at all. There are many descriptions by Benjy about sight, hearing and smell whereas for the sense of touch, there are only a few. Caddy realizes that Benjy cannot recognize the sense of touch very well. That is why, in the scene where Caddy and Benjy deliver Uncle Maury's love letter to Mrs. Patterson, Caddy worries about Benjy's hands getting frozen. She blames Versh for that: "'Did you come to meet Caddy,' she said, rubbing my hands. 'What is it. What are you trying to tell Caddy'" (6; underline mine). This next conversation of Caddy is crucial.

"Uncle Maury is going to surprise Mrs Patterson with it. Keep your hands in your pockets good, now." We came to the branch. "It's froze." Caddy said. "Look." She broke the top of the water and held the piece of it against my face. "Ice. That means how cold it is." (13; underline mine)

Caddy repeatedly tells Benjy to keep his hands in his pockets: “Keep your hands in your pockets” (13). Caddy tries to teach Benjy the sense of touch: what it means, looks and feels to be cold.

Benjy’s having relatively weak or no sense of touch is proved through the scene where he burns his hands by putting his hands on the fire. Benjy externalizes his sense of pain. In this scene, Caddy is not there to protect him: “I put my hand out to where the fire had been.... My hand jerked back and I put it in my mouth and Dilsey caught me”(59). In this scene, Benjy gets hurt without Caddy, who teaches him the sense of touch and warns him knowing that he cannot protect himself by recognizing hotness or coldness. After all, Caddy is the only person who tries to understand the cognitive system of Benjy and tries to protect him through the knowledge of it.

Caddy protects him from getting hurt because she knows that Benjy has no sense of alertness though the touch of his hands. Possibly with the help of Caddy’s guidance, Benjy recognizes the sense of cold vaguely. One of the few descriptions about his sense of touch is about the coldness of the gate. As he often does, Benjy mixes five senses up. Benjy tries to understand coldness through smell and sight: “I couldn’t feel the gate at all, but I could smell the bright cold” (6). Benjy seems to connect coldness with brightness. And brightness, obviously, is connected to the idea of Caddy: “He went on and we stopped in the hall and Caddy knelt and put her arms around me and her cold bright face against mine. She smelled like trees”(9; underline mine). This is the first description of Caddy’s putting her arms around Benjy, which would be repeated over and over again later. Even though it is usually impossible for Benjy to feel the coldness, he can feel the coldness on Caddy’s face. Caddy tries to protect him by teaching him the sense of cold and warns him of getting hurt. This education for him and her act of putting the arms around Benjy have the same purpose. She wants to protect him from getting hurt both emotionally and physically. She tries to make Benjy’s five senses more rigid. From the scene where Benjy gets his hand burned, one could recognize that he can easily get hurt without someone to protect him. It proves how Caddy constantly makes a metaphorical safety circle around Benjy to protect him.

Caddy also tries to teach him the sense of taste. She voluntarily tries to encourage him to eat. Apparently, Benjy is not interested in taste.

“I’ll feed him tonight.” Caddy said. “Sometimes he cries when Versh feeds him.”... It got down below the mark. Then the bowl was empty. It

went away. “He’s hungry tonight.” Caddy said. The bowl came back. I couldn’t see the spot. Then I could. “He’s starved, tonight.” Caddy said. “Look how much he’s eaten.” (71)

Here, Benjy could not tell how “hungry” he is. He could not tell that he is “eating” something. Only through the mark of the spot of that bowl does he understand that something comes into his body. Caddy names it. Again, this is Caddy’s education to teach him the sense of taste. This also substitutes her act of putting the arms around Benjy.

It is reported that Faulkner once told, “Benjy doesn’t feel anything” (Roggenbuck 586). This statement is doubtful since it seems that Benjy is very articulate about his feelings even though he does not have a voice. Through moaning and crying, he can communicate well with Caddy. Benjy connects brightness with Caddy in his mind. And those mysterious bright shapes could be interpreted as a representative of Benjy’s feelings. That signifies his sense of security, joy, excitement and probably happiness. It is all the more painful that Benjy’s memory of being castrated is connected to the bright shapes as well, which, according to *Reading Faulkner*, could be explained as follows:

[I]n this case, the “bright shapes” are probably the bright lights used to illuminate the surgeon’s table, and the thing that he is trying to get off his face is the mask through which the surgeons are applying anesthesia to put him to the sleep before performing the castration. (Polk and Ross 33)

Or in this case, probably, bright shapes appear more simply because he is sleepy under the influence of anesthesia.

For Benjy, the bright shapes somehow substitute his lack of sense: feelings of joy, excitement and happiness. The important thing is that Caddy is connected with brightness in Benjy’s consciousness. Indeed, fire is what brings him the image of brightness and Caddy’s red hair is directly connected to this image. Bright shapes themselves appear as a kind of circulative images to Benjy, which might signify the sense of completion. The image of a circle is very important to him. Caddy, who helps to teach him senses and tries to listen to his moaning and make up his lack of the power of speech, has something to do with these bright shapes, which represent his way of feeling both physically and psychologically.

These bright shapes might be a proof that Benjy has much more humanity than most scholars have assumed. It shows that Caddy's trial to teach Benjy senses has succeeded to some extent.

As Ted Roggenbuck suggests, after Caddy leaves the house, Benjy seems to lose his ability to feel and becomes more retarded than when he is little. Roggenbuck's statement is as follows: "Benjy does not get the tenderness and help he needs, and as a result, by his thirty-third birthday his experience of loss have worn away his interest in the world around him" (591). In the next chapter, I will discuss how the fact that Caddy leaves Benjy threatens him and breaks the circle.

3. A Broken Circle and the Open Gate

Caddy's protection of Benjy has to come to an end eventually. While Benjy stays at the same place and never grows up, Caddy is in her developmental process. The problem occurs when the circle that she makes for Benjy breaks both symbolically and literally. A fence and a gate symbolize the circle. According to *Reading Faulkner*,

The first words in the novel find one of the Compson brothers behind a fence which has enormous symbolic value in the novel, suggesting the degree to which all the Compson children are fenced in, trapped, on the Compson property. Metaphorically the fence comes to symbolize the psychosexual constraints that govern their lives, the unpleasant things that happen when the characters in the novel go through, over, or under fences to whatever physical or psychic world is on the other side and forbidden to them. The word "fence" appears seven times on the first page. (Polk and Ross 8)

The gate could be a boundary that restricts Benjy inside the Compson property, but it is also the substitute for Caddy's arms after she leaves the house. Inside the gate and fence, Benjy is safe. When he goes out of it, he gets into a trouble. Meanwhile, Caddy is not restricted inside the gate: "'Hello, Benjy.' Caddy said. She opened the gate and came in and stooped down. Caddy smelled like leaves" (6).

She can come and go through the gate and fence. According to Storhoff, who

analyzes the novel from the viewpoint of alcoholism states as follows:

The family's splitting of the world into "inside" and "outside" has been essential for the survival of the alcoholic family, and it is Caddy who symbolically ties together these bifurcated worlds. Her identity as child-mother serves to sustain domesticity in the Compson home; but she also coalesces in her character the world outside the closed family system, which she achieves through her active sexuality. (169)

This explanation goes well with the explanation of *The Reading Faulkner* about the gate. The fact that Benjy is forever imprisoned in the gate while Caddy has a power to come and go through it foretells their separation in the end. Although the gate and the fence might imprison Benjy, they protect him. Caddy comes through the gate and makes yet another circle by putting her hands around him. So with Caddy, Benjy can safely go beyond the gate and play outside.

Once she is gone, Benjy is always at the gate, putting his arms around it. As long as Benjy is inside the gate, he is safe, because inside of the gate is something like a safety circle. The open gate means the broken circle. When the gate is open, Benjy goes out of it and as a result, he gets castrated. Without Caddy, just like when he gets his hands burned, Benjy gets hurt.

Without Caddy to protect him and make a circle around him, Benjy's syntax also changes. His narrative becomes more incomplete. Caddy repeatedly asks Benjy "What are you trying to tell Caddy?" Her asking this encourages Benjy in a way that it gives him an opportunity to claim something. So this is another symbolical act of her putting the arms around Benjy so that he can feel more complete and safer. Without Caddy, without someone to put one's hands around him to make him complete, his syntax is left open: that is, his sentences become incomplete just like the gate that was left open and caused him troubles.

I was trying to say and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say and trying and the bright shapes began to stop and I tried to go out. (53)

This sentence is like a broken circle. Without Caddy, the safety circle to secure him is broken. This open gate and open syntax symbolize that Caddy's power to

protect him has been expired not simply because she is away from home but also because she is not capable of putting her arms around Benjy to make him feel secure anymore in an essential way.

If Benjy is the blind innocence as Faulkner claims, Caddy is the opposite. Therefore, it is impossible for Caddy to keep this circle. If Benjy's existence is defined by his innocence and shielding Benjy means shielding his innocence, Caddy could not be the keeper of the innocence. Faulkner said that he wrote this story by an image of a little girl with muddy drawers. Muddy drawers represent Caddy's loss of virginity. Caddy cannot help growing up. She pretends that she has not grown up by giving up her perfumes and by washing her mouth after dating with a boy. However, it is unavoidable that she eventually reaches the point where she cannot wash away the trace of growing up. That is when she loses her virginity.

I went toward her crying, and she shrank against the wall and I saw her eyes and I cried louder and pulled at her dress. She put her hands out but I pulled at her dress. Her eyes ran.... We went in the hall. Caddy was still looking at me. Her hand was against her mouth and I saw her eyes and I cried...she shrank against the wall, looking at me. She opened the door to her room, but I pulled at her dress and we went to the bathroom and she stood against the door, looking at me. Then she put her arm across her face and I pushed at her, crying. (69)

This is the point where Caddy becomes forever incapable of putting her arms around Benjy to protect him. Even when she goes to the bathroom, she cannot wash away what happened to her. That is why, this time, instead of putting her arms around Benjy, she "put her arms across her face" (69). And after this, the secure circle of Caddy breaks and Benjy gets castrated, burns himself and his syntax becomes open.

4. Conclusion

The most heartbreaking element of this first section of *The Sound and the Fury* is that the guardian of Benjy's innocence is also the symbol of anti-innocence in the novel. It is simply impossible for Caddy to keep sheltering Benjy by keeping her safety circle around him to prevent him from getting hurt

no matter how both Benjy and Caddy want it. Caddy is “too beautiful and too moving” because she is trying to do something that can never be achieved: to shelter Benjy’s innocence. She understands Benjy very well but she simply cannot stay in the same world as he is in no matter how hard she tries. This is how tragic the story can get.

Instead, Faulkner attempted to complete the circle by himself. If Caddy cannot shelter Benjy’s innocence and neither any of the family can, then it is apparently Faulkner’s job to do that, because, after all, innocence needs to be sheltered.

In order to make a safety circle that Caddy failed to keep, Faulkner tries to make yet another circle to protect Benjy by manipulating his narrative. It is noticeable that some phrases and images are circulative in the first section of *The Sound and the Fury*. The most important thing is that a certain phrase repeats itself. In the beginning, Benjy narrates, “Caddy smelled like trees and like when she says we were asleep” (6). And, this is how Benjy’s narrative closes its section.

Caddy held me and I could hear us all, and the darkness and something I could smell. And then I could see the windows, where the trees were buzzing. Then the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes, like it always does, even when Caddy says that I have been asleep. (75)

The same phrase comes both at the beginning and at the end, which means that this narrative comes full circle. Even though Benjy’s present situation appears time to time, his consciousness always wants to go back into the past: where he originally is. It is the movement of circle. Cleanth Brooks states as follows.

Benjy’s world is not a mere confusion — the blooming buzz which psychologists conjecture the world of the newborn infant to be. Benjy has a fund of experience, limited though it is and incoherent though it is, to which he returns and for which he constantly deserts the world of the immediate present. Moreover it is not an experience which has been casually selected for retention by memory. The world to which he returns is held together by love. (9–10)

The whole narrative is like a little circle that Caddy makes in order to protect Benjy with her two arms. That is why Faulkner used this confusingly fragmented

narrative to go between past and present flexibly. And then Faulkner closes the section by completing the circle. In the end, Faulkner protects the little magic safety circle, which Caddy tries to protect so hard for Benjy. This is Faulkner's act of tenderness. By using the flexible tense in this novel, Faulkner sides with Caddy and Benjy, who are two of the unavoidably tragic characters in the novel. By putting Benjy into sleep where he can go back into his happiest time with Caddy, the first section of *The Sound and the Fury* comes full circle.

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Coming Full Circle: Caddy's Safety Circle to Secure Benjy

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Summary: William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is one of the most puzzling pieces of works in American literature because the first section of the novel is narrated by mentally disabled Benjy. In this paper, I will specifically focus on the first section of this novel and analyze the relationship between the two protagonists: Caddy and Benjy, who have an opposite characteristics. I will pay attention to the circles, which are Caddy's arms and the fence and the gate of the house they live in as well as analyzing other metaphorical circles. I claim that these circles function as a safety circles for Benjy and when they break, the tragedy for him begins. By closely analyzing the original text, this paper tries to uncover hidden symbols and meanings in this section.