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Eng. 599, Exercise #1

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First-time readers of The Sound and the Fury soon discover that, to gain an understanding of Benjy's unique point of view, they must become second and even third-time readers. Accordingly, they must delve into the sentences and paragraphs of Benjy's convoluted thinking to find, piecemeal, clues or references embedded within.

An example of such a paragraph occurs in the scene of Luster undressing Benjy.[1] At this point in the novel we know it is Benjy's thirty-third birthday and that Benjy cries a great deal. However, when Benjy recounts, "I got undressed and I looked at myself, and I began to cry," we learn that, idiot or not, he has good reason to be upset. Luster's retort, "Hush...Looking for them aint going to do no good. They're gone..." makes clear that the Compson family has changed not only Benjy's name (from Maury) but his sexual proclivity as well. Benjy, like all the other Compsons, suffers loss throughout the novel, but, unlike the others, he has no control over his destiny, thus rendering him not only his family's most burdensome member but also probably the story's most sympathetic character.

Equally revealing in this scene is Faulkner's understated characterization of Luster, caretaker of the adult Benjy. As T.P. and Versh show in Benjy's flashbacks to earlier years, Luster, too,

[1]William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 45-6. All subsequent references are from this passage.

gives both the love and understanding that, ironically, servants, not his own family, can provide. To get Benjy to stop crying Luster admonishes, "You keep on like this, and we aint going have you no more birthday," and Benjy immediately capitulates. Through Luster's firm but gentle methods of handling his difficult responsibility, Faulkner portrays a black servant who is better qualified as a person than anyone in the white family for whom he works. Gradually we perceive the vibrancy of matriarch Dilsey's family juxtaposed with the loveless, lifeless, and, eventually doomed Compsons.

However, perhaps the most evident aspect of this or virtually any passage from Benjy's section is the task placed before the reader, namely to ascertain concrete, tangible images from the vacuous, disjointed observations of a feeble-minded narrator. It is obvious Luster knows what is happening when he takes Benjy by the arm and leads him to the window. "'Here she come,' he said. 'Be quiet, now...' 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." On the other hand, readers must rely on previous allusions in the text (Quentin: "I hate this house. I'm going to run away." p.44) to realize it is Quentin's leaving home, which, to Benjy, presents the same image (shaking tree) as when Caddy climbed the tree thirty years earlier to watch Damuddy's funeral.

Thus, Faulkner, especially in the first section of The Sound and the Fury, employs a fictional technique of making the readers' world as difficult as that of the narrator. Benjy certainly is * incapable of understanding the hectic events spinning around him,

* In this case, it is only with some bracketing of the idea, though, that we can call Benjy a "narrator" at all.

presumed?

and we are appropriately left just as perplexed with his ^ commun-
ication of these events. One cannot help but wonder what Faulkner
may have had in mind for all those who try to hack their way through
a rhetorical jungle with Benjy as their guide. The novel may indeed
be a "tale told by an idiot," but it may just as well be interpreted
by readers not much better off.

Al—

You give a cogent and alert reading of the passage that extends, as you intend, to questions about Faulkner's broader intentions.

I suppose it is the mark of the challenge and frustration of this book that it is always somehow open to the question, "What *did* he have in mind?"