

## CLASS CONFLICT AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*: A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

The paper explores the concept of class conflict and social inequality in William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) as created through Marxist interpretations, with focus on how the novel criticizes the economic decline, social hierarchy, and ideological domination in the postbellum American South. Although most of the available criticism addresses the modernist narrative techniques and the psychological complexity of Faulkner, the paper prefigures material conditions and class relations that define the existence of the characters. The analysis, which involves a qualitative close-reading method based on the Marxist theory, explains the breakup of the Compson family as the allegory of the breakdown of the aristocratic structures of South and the precariousness of inherited privilege in shifting capitalist realities. The paper notes the difference between all moral and economic bankruptcy of Compsons and the endurance of working-class characters like Dilsey who represents exploited labor and endured social hardship. It also examines how intersecting forms of social inequality in the novel are supported by structures of patriarchy and racial hierarchy that entails the patriarchal norms and racial subjugations as systems of ideology to normalize exploitation. These results prove that *The Sound and the Fury* is not only a literary experiment conducted by one of the modernists but also a effective social text that reveals the oppression of classes and the decline of ideologies which highlights the relevance of the Faulkner work to the Marxist literary theory.

**Keywords:** Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, Marxist literary criticism, class conflict, social inequality

### Introduction

#### Background of the Study

*The Sound and the Fury* (1929) by William Faulkner is considered to be the monument of modernist American fiction, both in terms of its experimental narrative style and as a work that discovered social decay of the post-Civil War American South in depth. Although a lot of critical discussion of the use of stream of consciousness, fragmented narration and psychological complexity has been given, Faulkner provides a solid representation of class struggle and social inequalities which also deserve a Marxist approach in the novel.

The action of the novel takes place in the rising Southern aristocracy and the main characters are the Compson family whose slow destruction is the reflection of the demise of the old

feudal system in the South. Marxistically, this decay is an indication of transformation in the social relations in the shifting economic circumstances. Marxist literary criticism focuses on the way within which literature captures the material conditions, the relationship between classes, and ideological organization within a society (Marx and Engels, 1970). The dissolution of the Compson family fortune and position in *The Sound and the Fury* reveals how the privilege in classes is unstable and points to the conflict between the ruling family and the marginalized one.

The issue of conflict between classes in the novel is very clear especially in the case involving the Compsons and their Black servants and Dilsey in particular. The Compsons are the symbol of a dying bourgeois which is attempting to hold onto the acquired power, but Dilsey is the symbol of the working classes who labored but were still oppressed economically and socially. According to Marxist critics, this kind of representation exposes the ideological processes in which the supremacy of classes is perpetuated despite the decaying economic foundation (Eagleton, 1976). The persistence of Dilsey is contrasted with moral and economic bankruptcy of the Compsons, thus, fighting the myth about aristocratic superiority.

Gender and economic hierarchies also help in strengthening social inequality in the novel. The marginalization of Caddy Compson is a combination of both patriarchal and class-based oppression, since her worth is calculated more by family honor and monetary usefulness. Marxist theorists argue that works of literature tend to naturalize these kinds of inequalities by internalizing them into cultural and moral discourses (Tyson, 2006). The character of Caddy as developed by Faulkner reveals the hypocrisies of a social structure which commodifies women and condemns them to breaking its conventions.

Using a Marxist approach, this paper aims to transcend mere psychological or formalist interpretation of the *Sound and the Fury*, and propose in advance the material circumstances and the class relations that guide the lives of the characters. This strategy can be added to the current Faulkner scholarship because it proves the way the novel criticizes the problem of social inequality, exploitation of classes and degradation of ideology in Southern capitalistic society. After all, it is possible to see, reading *The Sound and the Fury* in a Marxist manner, that it is not merely an experiment of a modernist form but also a very strong social document, as it echoes tensions and contradictions of the time.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although the *Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner has received a lot of critical analysis, the majority of the scholarly works has focused on the use of modernist narrative modes, the use of psychological issues and the stream of consciousness style of narration in the novel without much attention to the socio-economic issues in the novel. Thereby, the problems of the conflict of classes and social inequality, which the picture of the falling Compson family and the rest of the Southern social setup portrays, are still under-researched in Marxist terms. The novel is a mirror of the society influenced by the economic decline, racial structure and changing of the relations of classes, but existing criticism tends to discuss race, gender and morality without referencing to material conditions which generate them. This absence of a thorough Marxist critique leaves a fatal void in explaining the impact economic forms, the struggle of classes and ideological power on character affiliations and social stratifications within the text. Therefore, this study addresses the problem of insufficient Marxist engagement with *The Sound and the Fury* by examining how Faulkner's narrative reveals and critiques class conflict and social inequality in early twentieth-century Southern American society.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The current research study focuses on the following research objectives:

- To analyze class conflict in *The Sound and the Fury* from a Marxist perspective, focusing on economic decline and power relations.
- To examine how social inequalities based on class, race, and labor are constructed and sustained in the novel.

### Research Questions

Following are the research questions:

- How does *The Sound and the Fury* represent class conflict within the declining Southern social order from a Marxist perspective?
- How are inequalities, based on class, race, and labor, portrayed and ideologically reinforced in the novel?

### Significance of the Research

This paper is important because it brings a Marxist perspective of the sound and the fury by William Faulkner, illuminating on the much neglected socio-economic aspects of the novel. The study of the conflict of classes, social inequalities, and ideological oppression makes the research add to the further comprehension of the ways in which the story by Faulkner reflects and criticizes the material and social lives of the postbellum South. It broadens the Faulkner literature outside formalist and psychological perspectives, placing more emphasis on the intersections between class, race, and gender to maintain the hierarchical power structure. Literary scholars, students, and educators can also find the study helpful, since it proves the applicability of Marxist criticism to the interpretation of classic literature, and promotes the critical approach to the issues of social justice, inequality, and class relations at both past and present. Finally, the study highlights the necessity of employing socio-economic and ideological approaches to literature in order to have a more subtle interpretation of the literary work and its further cultural ramifications.

### Literature Review

Since its publication, *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner has elicited a lot of critical discourse as scholars have largely dwelled on its modernist narrative structure, its psychological insight as well as its experimental use of the stream-of-consciousness technique. Some of the early critics including Cowley (1958) and Brooks (1963) focused more on the artistic experimentation and moral vision that Faulkner pursued, and viewed the novel mainly in formalist and humanist light. Such works contributed greatly to the comprehension of the theme of fragmentation of narrative and psychology of characters but gave little focus to the socio-economic background of the thematic framework of the novel.

Later critiques were extended into psychoanalytic and feminist ones. The psychological breakdown of the Compson family was examined by such critics like Kartiganer (1985), whereas the feminist researchers analyzed how Caddy Compson was portrayed as an object of male dominance and moral panic. In spite of the fact that these readings point out the oppression of genders, they tend to isolate it against the bigger material and class circumstances that determine social relations. In the same argument by Tyson (2006), we cannot assume that the economic structures should be disregarded as this may lead to the loss of the ideological forces that perpetuate the inequality in literature works.

According to Marxist literary critics, literature is a product and comment on material circumstances, relations of the classes and ideological supremacy (Eagleton, 1976). In this sense, *The Sound and the Fury* can be interpreted as a story of a decline of the classes and economic change of postbellum South. The fall of the Compson family propagates the fade away of the Southern aristocracies whereas the survival of the Black working-class figures, especially Dilsey reveals the slavery labor system that propagates bourgeois dominance. Nevertheless, the explicit Marxist interpretations of the novel are quite few, and most of them

are represented as one of the short parts of the larger critical discourse, rather than as a continuing analysis.

Still more recent criticism has come to treat intersection of race and classes in Faulkner work, acknowledging the contribution of Dilsey as the moral and social opposite to the Compsons. However, according to Eagleton (1996), without a methodical Marxist construction, such interpretations run the danger of limited cultural beliefs by perceiving social inequality as a result of moral ineffectiveness, rather than an outcome of historical and economic processes. This literature gap implies that a special Marxist analysis should be done to predict the presence of conflict of classes, exploitation of labor, and ideological domination in *The Sound and the Fury*. The current study aims at filling this important gap in Faulkner studies and providing an insightful approach to the discussion of social inequality in a Marxist way.

Clearly, Cleanth Brooks (1963) and Malcolm Cowley (1958) developed the initial readings of the novel by focusing on the artistic creativity and the moral imagination. Subsequently, critics like Andre Bleikasten (1976) analyzed how the novel is told in fragments, and how time has been displaced, claiming that the dislocation of narrative and time itself is a symptom of moral and social disintegration of the Compson family. Although such studies can be useful in terms of form and meaning, they place most emphasis on aesthetic and psychological issues rather than on socio-economic analysis.

The novel has been handled by other scholars in the historical and cultural context. Eric Sundquist (1983) puts the work of Faulkner in the context of racial and economic life of the American South, and points out how the history of slavery and Reconstruction influences social interactions in the novel. On the same note, John T. Matthews (1991) explores how Faulkner responded to the issue of Southern history, and that the decline of the Compsons can be interpreted as a sequence of structural changes that happened to Southern society. As much as these studies recognize the influence of the social context, they are not able to develop a long-term Marxist critique of the relations of classes and the economic power.

The Faulkner studies have also been expanded by criticism that deals with race and labor. Thadious M. Davis (2001) also pays much attention to the importance of African American characters in Faulkner fiction, especially to their marginalization and moral perseverance. Critiques like Minrose Gwin (1990) have seen the influence of Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* as a force of parting in a crumbling social fabric. Nevertheless, such interpretations tend to place Dilsey in either moral or symbolic contexts and not focusing on her status as a victim of the exploited working classes in a capitalist hierarchy.

Marxist and materialist approaches to Faulkner are still relative in number. According to Fredric Jameson (1981), the contradictions of the socio- economical situations of the text are unconsciously registered in the texts, which can be applied to the description of the decay of classes and ideological puzzlement by Faulkner. In this light the preoccupation of the Compson family with honor and ancestry may be interpreted as a kind of ideological refuse of a feudal aristocracy that is having a hard time in the climate of capitalist change. The Marxist explanations of *The Sound and the Fury*, especially in terms of the oppression of the voices of the working classes, are further supported by a Marxist theory by Pierre Macherey (1978) that literary silences highlight the ideological tensions.

Notwithstanding these contributions, the body of literature has not yet completely integrated the concept of class conflict, labor exploitation and social inequality in a coherent Marxism approach. The majority of the literature considers the notions of class, race, and gender as independent analytical factors and does not discuss them as the products of material circumstances. This disjunction indicates the necessity of a specific Marxist approach to predetermine economic relations and the ideological power formations in *The Sound and the Fury*. The current research aims to fill this gap by considering how the current novel by



Faulkner reflects and criticizes the conflict of classes and social inequalities in the setting of the early twentieth-century Southern American society.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

The study assumes the qualitative research design through textual and interpretive analysis. Since the study aims at studying the conflict of classes and social inequality in the novel *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, a qualitative method is suitable to address the hidden meaning, ideology, and the socio-economic images in the literature work. The work will also be based on the Marxist approach to literary criticism, which focuses on material circumstances, class relations, and ideological authority in literature.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This study has a theoretical ground based on the Marxist theory, especially the concepts of class struggle, ideology, base and superstructure, and labour exploitation as expounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Other Marxist literary theorists like Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Pierre Macherey, whose work offers critical instrumentation of the ways of how literary texts are produced in response to and critique the socio-economic structures, are also used. This framework allows considering the way in which the class hierarchy and the social inequality are formed and preserved in the novel.

#### **Data Source**

The main source of this research is a novel *The Sound and the Fury* written in 1929 by William Faulkner. The secondary sources are peer-reviewed journals articles, scholarly books, critical essays and theoretical books on Marxism, class conflict, and Faulkner studies. These are some of the sources that give essential background and justification in the interpretation of the text in a Marxist paradigm.

#### **Data Collection Method**

The information is gathered by close reading of the main text, paying attention to the moments where the economic relations, division of classes, labor relations, and ideological contradiction are observed. The identification, categorization, and analysis of the relevant textual evidence, i.e., the interactions between the characters, the narrative point of view, the symbolic representation of the prosperity and decline, etc. The secondary sources are used in order to contextualize the interpretations and to argue against the critical arguments.

#### **Data Analysis Technique**

The data are processed with the help of the thematic analysis in the Marxist context. The major themes that are pointed out and analyzed include the decline of classes, labor exploitation, ideological control and social inequality. The analysis explains the role of these themes in the narrative construction and the way these themes indicate the wider socio-historical circumstances in the American South. Character comparison between characters at varying positions in the classes, like the Compson family and Dilsey are also used to emphasize on class conflict.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

#### **Class Struggle and the Fall of the Southern Aristocracy.**

The sound and the fury by William Faulkner vividly portrays class warfare by the crumbling Compson family whose fall is likened to the fall of the Southern aristocracy in the postbellum generation. To Marxists, the novel is an example of how the deprivation of economic strength and social status disrupts the conventional stratifications of society revealing the tensions between the dominant group and the workers. This case of the Compsons trying to retain their wealth, honor, and social positions reflects the historical fact of Southern families trying to save their position during the economic change and modern capitalistic influence (Sundquist, 1983).

The theme of conflict between classes is the most evident one in the novel as the author focuses on the relations of the Compsons and their Black servants, especially Dilsey. Dilsey is a representative of the laboring masses which means that he represents the oppression and deprivation that Marxist theory perceives as the main factor in capitalistic and feudal societies (Eagleton, 1976). As the Compsons are holding on to inherited wealth and privilege, they are also undermining through their dependence on unpaid or underpaid labor, making it clear how contradictory class dependency can be. The social and moral fabric of the Compsons and the persistence, strength and uprightness of poor Dilsey contrast with the crumbling of the Compsons, which highlights the Marxist value that the downtrodden economic class tends to be burdened with the social and economic life, yet the ruling class needs to carry on.

The symbolic and material decadence of the Compson estate is also another manifestation of the conflict between classes in the novel. The decline of their house, both the rotting structures and the financial catastrophe, is the collapse of the economic foundation of the Southern gentry, which in Marxist language means the undermining of the material situation of the ruling class. This loss does not only weaken the social power of the family but also brings their ideological influence to a mess as the strength of the class is shown as feeble when it is not supported by material nourishment (Jameson, 1981). The story of Faulkner is therefore a description of a society where the class structure is not natural or even stable but dependent upon wealth, labor exploitation and historical situation.

Besides, personal failures of the Compson brothers, such as the obsession with honor by Quentin and greed and moral corruption by Jason, depict the indoctrination of the ideologies of the ruling classes, as well as the panic of the declining ruling classes. According to Marxist critics, these internalized values are used in justification of classes, despite the fact that the material conditions that used to reinforce them are disintegrating (Eagleton, 1976). The conflict between inherited social position and financial vulnerability of the family is the example of structural contradictions in a receding aristocracy, which reflects the social struggle between classes in the American South on the large scale.

To conclude, *The Sound and the Fury* is a display of class conflict where the aristocratic Southern society contrasts with the working classes and shows material and ideological disparities. Faulkner has Marxist ideas of exploitation, struggle of classes and the precariousness of inherited privilege through the disintegration of the Compson family and the presence of the same characters such as Dilsey throughout his novel. The reading shows that social strata are upheld not only by riches but also by ideology and that the disintegration of material circumstances cannot but bring the well-established hierarchies of classes into a state of unrest.

### **Social Inequality and Ideological Oppression in *The Sound and the Fury***

*The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner describes the social inequality as the structural and ideological characteristic of the Southern society of the first part of the twentieth century. The novel is used to show how social differences in terms of class, race, and gender are conjoined to keep power relations in place as it is similar to Marxist ideas about exploitation and control of the ideology (Eagleton, 1976). Social inequality in the text does not only serve as the setting where the characters are developed, but rather it directly influences the identities of the characters, their relationships as well as their particular life paths.

The Compson family can be regarded as the example of the degradation of the Southern aristocracy whose power had been traditionally held by both money and social ideas. The economic instability of their lives reveals the instability of their social position and inherited privilege as arbitrary. Simultaneously, the black characters like Dilsey and other servants are placed in the status of labor exploitation, where they perform the necessary tasks that keep the home alive and continue to be sidelined socially, economically and politically (Sundquist,

1983). This shows the Marxist theory that the dominant social group bases its reproduction on oppression and exploitation of the oppressed to create its social and economic power.

The oppression of the genders also adds to the social inequalities within the novel. The marginalization of Caddy Compson can be seen as a patriarchal domination that is reinstated through the foundations of the class. To a large extent, her worth is determined by the respect of the family and social norms, and it depicts how gender roles of women are subjugated by their gender identity and gender interests. According to Marxist views on feminism, These formations of gender and class have a role in ensuring ideological compliance and increasing the legitimization of social divisions (Tyson, 2006).

The concept of ideology, as portrayed in the novel, perpetuates inequality by making the social order normal and covers up exploitation. The Compsons cling to notions of family honor, aristocratic superiority, and racial hierarchy, even as their economic base crumbles. Marxist critics argue that these kinds of ideologies obfuscate the material relations of exploitation and inhibit perception of systemic injustice. For example, Jason Compson's obsession with money and with exerting control over others is indicative of an internalized ideology which justifies his dominance and aggression towards those people socially below him, such as his sister's illegitimate child and the servants.

The novel also reveals the persistence and moral organization of peripheral characters. Through her steadfast presence and moral fiber, Dilsey contrasts with the disintegration of the Compsons in a way that reveals how social inequality is sustained not through inherent superiority but through structural and ideological enforcement. Thus, it underlines the Marxist claim of inequality as a social construction and its sustenance through ideology rather than natural order.

In short, *The Sound and the Fury* is the material and ideological expression of social inequality-class, race, and gender hierarchies-functioning in the postbellum South. Through Faulkner's narrative, the mechanisms of oppression, the results of social disintegration, and the survival of people under systemic exploitation show a shocking critique of the well-established social order presented from a Marxist perspective.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

### Conclusion

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* represents a comprehensive class conflict and social injustice in relation to the decline of the Southern aristocracy. Seen through a Marxist perspective, this novel demonstrates exactly how economic decline, labor exploitation, and ideological control interact to shape the social structure and interpersonal relationships within the Compson family and the community at large. In counterpoint to the disintegrating bourgeoisie in the character of the Compsons, resilient working-class figures, particularly Dilsey, stand in consciousness of contradictions of a society that has maintained privilege by means of oppression and subordination. Furthermore, the novel demonstrates how social inequality is reinforced not only by material conditions but also by cultural and ideological structures, including patriarchal norms and racial hierarchies, which normalize exploitation and maintain dominance. By foregrounding these themes, the study confirms that *The Sound and the Fury* is not merely a modernist literary experiment but also a powerful critique of social injustice and class-based oppression in the postbellum South. Ultimately, a Marxist reading of the novel illuminates the enduring relevance of Faulkner's work as a commentary on the interplay between material conditions, ideology, and human experience.

### Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that future research on William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* further explore the intersections of class, race, and gender through diverse critical frameworks, including Marxist feminism, postcolonial theory, and

intersectionality. Scholars could expand the scope by comparing Faulkner's depiction of social inequality with that in other Southern literature to better understand regional socio-economic dynamics. Additionally, a closer examination of minor and marginalized characters, such as Dilsey, may provide deeper insights into the experiences of the working class and the mechanisms of ideological oppression. It is also suggested that interdisciplinary approaches, combining literary analysis with historical and sociological perspectives, be employed to illuminate the material and cultural conditions that shape social hierarchies in the postbellum South. Finally, educators and literary critics could incorporate Marxist perspectives in classroom discussions and scholarly interpretations to foster a more comprehensive understanding of social justice and class dynamics in Faulkner's work.

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