http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/soundfury/summary.html

Plot Overview

Attempting to apply traditional plot summary to *The Sound and the Fury* is difficult. At a basic level, the novel is about the three Compson brothers' obsessions with the their sister Caddy, but this brief synopsis represents merely the surface of what the novel contains. A story told in four chapters, by four different voices, and out of chronological order, *The Sound and the Fury* requires intense concentration and patience to interpret and understand.

The first three chapters of the novel consist of the convoluted thoughts, voices, and memories of the three Compson brothers, captured on three different days. The brothers are Benjy, a severely retarded thirty-three-year-old man, speaking in April, 1928; Quentin, a young Harvard student, speaking in June, 1910; and Jason, a bitter farm-supply store worker, speaking again in April, 1928. Faulkner tells the fourth chapter in his own narrative voice, but focuses on Dilsey, the Compson family's devoted "Negro" cook who has played a great part in raising the children. Faulkner harnesses the brothers' memories of their sister Caddy, using a single symbolic moment to forecast the decline of the once prominent Compson family and to examine the deterioration of the Southern aristocratic class since the Civil War.

The Compsons are one of several prominent names in the town of Jefferson, Mississippi. Their ancestors helped settle the area and subsequently defended it during the Civil War. Since the war, the Compsons have gradually seen their wealth, land, and status crumble away. Mr. Compson is an alcoholic. Mrs. Compson is a self-absorbed hypochondriac who depends almost entirely upon Dilsey to raise her four children. Quentin, the oldest child, is a sensitive bundle of neuroses. Caddy is stubborn, but loving and compassionate. Jason has been difficult and mean-spirited since birth and is largely spurned by the other children. Benjy is severely mentally disabled, an "idiot" with no understanding of the concepts of time or morality. In the absence of the self-absorbed Mrs. Compson, Caddy serves as a mother figure and symbol of affection for Benjy and Quentin.

As the children grow older, however, Caddy begins to behave promiscuously, which torments Quentin and sends Benjy into fits of moaning and crying. Quentin is preparing to go to Harvard, and Mr. Compson sells a large portion of the family land to provide funds for the tuition. Caddy loses her virginity and becomes pregnant. She is unable or unwilling to name the father of the child, though it is likely Dalton Ames, a boy from town.

Caddy's pregnancy leaves Quentin emotionally shattered. He attempts to claim false responsibility for the pregnancy, lying to his father that he and Caddy have committed incest. Mr. Compson is indifferent to Caddy's promiscuity, dismissing Quentin's story and telling his son to leave early for the Northeast.

Attempting to cover up her indiscretions, Caddy quickly marries Herbert Head, a banker she met in Indiana. Herbert promises Jason Compson a job in his bank. Herbert immediately divorces Caddy and rescinds Jason's job offer when he realizes his wife is pregnant with another man's child. Meanwhile, Quentin, still mired in despair over Caddy's sin, commits suicide by drowning himself in the Charles River just before the end of his first year at Harvard.

The Compsons disown Caddy from the family, but take in her newborn daughter, Miss Quentin. The task of raising Miss Quentin falls squarely on Dilsey's shoulders. Mr. Compson dies of alcoholism roughly a year after Quentin's suicide. As the oldest surviving son, Jason becomes the head of the Compson household. Bitterly employed at a menial job in the local farm-supply store, Jason devises an ingenious scheme to steal the money Caddy sends to support Miss Quentin's upbringing.

Miss Quentin grows up to be an unhappy, rebellious, and promiscuous girl, constantly in conflict

with her overbearing and vicious uncle Jason. On Easter Sunday, 1928, Miss Quentin steals several thousand dollars from Jason and runs away with a man from a traveling show. While Jason chases after Miss Quentin to no avail, Dilsey takes Benjy and the rest of her family to Easter services at the local church.

A Note on the Title

The title of *The Sound and the Fury* refers to a line from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Macbeth, a Scottish general and nobleman, learns of his wife's suicide and feels that his life is crumbling into chaos. In addition to Faulkner's title, we can find several of the novel's important motifs in Macbeth's short soliloquy in Act V, scene v:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
(V.v.18–27)

The Sound and the Fury literally begins as a "tale / Told by an idiot," as the first chapter is narrated by the mentally disabled Benjy. The novel's central concerns include time, much like Macbeth's "[t]omorrow, and tomorrow"; death, recalling Macbeth's "dusty death"; and nothingness and disintegration, a clear reference to Macbeth's lament that life "[s]signif[ies] nothing." Additionally, Quentin is haunted by the sense that the Compson family has disintegrated to a mere shadow of its former greatness.

In his soliloquy, Macbeth implies that life is but a shadow of the past and that a modern man, like himself, is inadequately equipped and unable to achieve anything near the greatness of the past. Faulkner reinterprets this idea, implying that if man does not choose to take his own life, as Quentin does, the only alternatives are to become either a cynic and materialist like Jason, or an idiot like Benjy, unable to see life as anything more than a meaningless series of images, sounds, and memories.