

Focalization and the Perception of Female Characters in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

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Introduction

The Sound and the Fury is a novel written by the American writer, William Faulkner¹. It is considered a modernist conical work that demonstrates how novelists experiment with style through the utilization of different narrative techniques. In this paper, an analysis of these techniques will be carried out based on Gérard Genette's² concept of focalization for the purpose of focusing on the perception of female characters in the novel. The novel employs a different narrator for each of its four sections, none of which is narrated by a female although the plot of the four sections of the novel are around one or two of these female characters. Focalization analysis of this fictional narrative discourse reveals, in addition to the narrator, the focalizers and the focalized, and shows which of these categories is designated for any of the four female characters.

Literary Review

Focalization is a textual narrative typology proposed by the French literary theorist Gérard Genette (190-211) in his analysis of narrative discourse and is further extended and elaborated by Slomith Rimmon-Kenan (72-86) and Mieke Bal (263-292). In this typology, certain relationships among the narrator, the focalizer, and the focalized are clearly identified and categorized. Genette distinguishes between mood and voice in narration, or in other words *who sees* and *who speaks*, which are often confused when referring to the point of view in the narrator discourse. While *point of view* in narration confuses speaking and seeing, focalization specifies "the relations between the elements presented and the vision through which they are represented" (Austenfild 295). Narration and focalization, i.e. speaking and seeing, therefore, can be carried out by either the same agent or by different agents. According to Rimmon-Kenan, it is important to distinguish between the two activities of narration and

focalization. He considers this distinction "a theoretical necessity, and only on its basis can the interrelations between them be studied with precision" (72).

Bal has contributed to Genette's typology of focalization by distinguishing "who sees" from "what is seen" (263-292). The agent of focalization is the 'focalizer' (who sees), and what the focalizer sees is the object of focalization, or the 'focalized'. Bal also builds on Genette's 'external focalization' by proposing the categories of "external" and "internal" focalizer. External focalization is referred to as 'narrator-focalizer' because it is usually associated with the narrating agent. The agent of internal focalization, on the other hand, is usually from within the story of the narratives (i.e. one of the characters) and is often called character-focalizer (270). As explained by Rimmon-Kenan, an internal focalizer can be identified if the narrated text is read normally when rewritten in the first person, if not, then the focalization is external (75).

In addition to the distinction between an external and internal focalizer, the mechanism of focalization extends to the focalized (what is seen), which, according to Rimmon-Kenan, "can be seen either from without or from within" (77). When the external focalizer sees from *within*, he/she can penetrate to the focalized thoughts and feelings, whereas when focalized from *without*, the feelings and thoughts of the focalized are opaque to the reader. Rimmon-Kenan, in addition, points out that focalization is presented in the narrative text through three facets: perceptual, psychological, and ideological facets (77-82). In the perceptual facet the focalizer orients the narrative towards his sense of perception, of what he/she smells, tastes, hears, sees, or/and touches. In the psychological facet, the focalizer's state of emotion influences his/her perception of the world as represented in the narrative. The focalizer in the ideological facet represents the world in the narrative from his/her own ideologies.

Focalization is significant and "penetrating" in providing authors with "means of manipulation" through which they allow the reader to propel into the feeling and thoughts of one character while declining this for another character in the same narrative text (Bal 116, 110). This will be examined in this paper to see how degrees of focalization in the narrative discourse of *The Sound and the Fury* are used to penetrate

into the male characters' feeling and thinking, revealing to the reader their worldviews, while declining this for the female characters.

Discussion

Focalization analysis of *The Sound and the Fury* gives an example of multi-layer perspectives and facilitates the stream of conscious narration. It is, as articulated by Rimmon-Konan, presenting the textual story "through the mediation of some 'prism', 'perspective', 'angle of vision', verbalized by the narrator though not necessarily his" (72). There are eight main characters in *The Sound and the Fury*: four males; Mr. Compson and his three sons, Quentin, Jason, and Benjy; and four females; Mrs Compson, her daughter Caddy, granddaughter Miss Quentin³, and the housekeeper Dilsey. The novel consists of four sections. Each of the first three has a different character narrator, who happens to be one of the sons of the Compson family, each reflecting on his personal worldviews. The last section has a heterodiegetic narrator and external focalizer. Analyzing the narrative discourse of these four sections will show which of the main characters has been the *focalizer* (who sees) and which of the characters has been the *focalized* (who has been the focus of the focalizer).

The first section of *The Sound and the Fury* is narrated by Benjy, the "idiot," who is very limited in his perception of the world. He is a homodiegetic narrator and internal focalizer, focalizing on events in both the past and the present of the narration time which mostly involve his sister Caddy, to whom he is very emotionally attached. Being mentally retarded, Benjy narrates events and incidents through the window of his confused mind, depending mainly on the "perceptual facet" (Rimmon-Kenan 78) of focalization that involves the senses of seeing, smelling, and touching, for example when he says:

Versh's hand came with the spoon, into the bowl. The spoon came up to my mouth. The steam tickled into my mouth. Then we quit eating and we looked at each other and we were quiet, and then we heard it again and I began to cry. "What was that." Caddy said. She put her hand on my hand. (26)

Benjy's narration is similar to a camera that records the surrounding events without much comprehension of what is going on, switching his focalization from one thing or person to another as he sees it: "But I didn't stop and Mother caught me in her arms and began to cry, and I cried. Then the cushion came back and Caddy held it above Mother's head. She drew Mother back in the chair and Mother lay crying against the red and yellow cushion" (57). Benjy here moves his focalization like a camera; the mother is focalized then the cushion followed by Caddy then back to the mother. His spectrum is a very limited view; he records what he sees on the mirror: "Caddy and Jason were fighting in the mirror" (57).

The second section of the novel is narrated by Quentin, the eldest son of the Compsons, who also has a very affectionate relationship with his sister Caddy and regards her with great fondness: "she ran out of the mirror like a cloud, her veil swirling in long glints her heels brittle and fast clutching her dress onto her shoulder with the other hand, running out of the mirror the smells roses roses the voice that breathed o'er Eden" (70). Most of the details in his section deals with his confused feeling and suffering towards what happened to his sister and consequently to the social values of the American South, which ultimately lead to his suicide. Considering himself as the hero, Quentin in this section is not just a homodiegetic but also an autodiegetic narrator and at the same time an internal focalizer who reveals his own thoughts to the reader. His focalization involves the ideological facet (Rimmon-Kenan 81) most of the time, reflecting his own beliefs and social ideology. Caddy, on the other hand, is a *focalized* in this section too in spite of the important role she plays in Quentin life. She is seen through the eyes of her brother Quentin, who in his narration does not penetrate to her inner thoughts (i.e. focalized without) but only delivers to the reader his own perception of characters and events and eventually his worldviews.

Jason, the bitter son, is the homodiegetic narrator and internal focalizer of the third section of the novel. He is focalizing most of the narration on Caddy and her daughter, Miss Quentin, to whom he holds hostile feelings. He expresses his bitterness towards them for being the cause of missed opportunities⁴. The "psychological facet" (Rimmon-Kenan 80) of focalization is obvious in this section. Jason's hostile feeling towards Miss Quentin is noticeable when he says: "She hadn't got around to painting

herself yet and her face looked like she had polished it with a gun rag. I went and grabbed her wrist" (149). Miss Quentin is the focalized in this narration and Jason the narrator is the internal focalizer. However, Jason the narrator sometimes gives away his internal focalization to Jason the boy. This is when he narrates about his experience as a young boy regarding Caddy's reaction when she was mad at something:

She looked at me for a while. There wasn't any street light close and I couldn't see her face much. But I could feel her looking at me. When we were little when she'd get mad and couldn't do anything about it her upper lip would begin to jump. . . . and all the time she'd be as still as a post, not a muscle moving except her lip jerking higher and higher up her teeth. But she didn't say anything. (167)

Here Jason the boy is the focalizer, but Caddy keeps her assigned position as the focalized now, at the time of the narration, as well as when she was a little girl.

Sometimes, Jason focalizes on his mother and Dilsey too, utilizing the "perceptual facet" (Rimmon-Kenan 78) of focalization as he focuses on his auditory sense. For instance, he focalizes on Dilsey, saying: "I heard her climbing the stairs, dragging her feet and grunting and groaning like they were straight up and three feet apart" (203). He also focalizes on his mother when he says: "Then I heard Mother on the stairs. I might have known she wasn't going to keep out of it" (150). Here, he is revealing to the reader his thoughts and expectations about his mother's actions. While most of the narrative in this section deals with Jason's interaction with the four female characters in the novel, he retains the advantageous position of internal focalizer and the female characters are left with the focalized position.

Since the narrator in the fourth section is heterodiegetic, it is expected to allow the reader to view some or all of the events from the perspective of one of the female characters as a focalizer. However, the heterodiegetic narrator in this section is an external focalizer through most of the narrative as it is noticed when narrating the event of feeding Benjy, which is narrated earlier by Benjy, the internal focalizer, in section one: "Ben ceased whimpering. He watched the spoon as it rose to his mouth. It was as if even eagerness were musclebound in him too, and hunger itself inarticulate, not knowing it is hunger. Luster fed him with skill and detachment" (218).

The mechanism of focalization, as explained in the previous section, permits the focalized to be *within* or *without*, i.e. either allowing or preventing the reader from penetrating to his/her thoughts. Although the external focalizer in the fourth section is focalizing mainly on Dilsey and in some parts on Jason, Dilsey is not giving the opportunity to be focalized *within* and is restricted to being focalized *without*. For example, the reader observes her actions without knowing the intention behind them until she declares this in words:

She entered the kitchen and built up the fire and began to prepare breakfast. In the midst of this she ceased and went to the window and looked out toward her cabin, then she went to the door and opened it and shouted into the driving weather. "Luster!" she shouted, standing to listen, tilting her face from the wind. (212)

Being focalized *without*, Dilsey does not have the advantages of revealing her thoughts to the reader. The reader does not know why she suddenly has ceased preparing breakfast and looks out through the window until she shouts "Luster." This is when the reader knows that she is looking for Luster.

Jason, however, has the advantage in section four to be focalized *within*, revealing his thoughts and feelings. His thoughts are always exposed to the reader, for example: "He looked at the sky, thinking about rain, about the slick clay roads, himself stalled somewhere miles from town. He thought about it with a sort of triumph, of the fact that he was going to miss dinner. . ." (240). This exposure of Jason's thoughts occurs many times whenever the focus of the heterodiegetic narrator is on him: ". . . then he thought of the money again, and that he had been outwitted by a woman, a girl. If he could just believe it was the man who had robbed him" (242).

Conclusion

Although *The Sound and the Fury* is narrated and focalized from different perspectives and personal worldviews of the three male narrators and focalizers in the first three sections and from a heterodiegetic narrator and an external focalizer in the fourth section, the story mainly revolves around the role played by Caddy in the life of the three brothers, in addition to the other two women, the mother and Dilsey, as well

as Miss Quentin in Jason's section. The four female characters, regardless of their role in the story, do not have the advantage of telling their own part of the story, as narrators, or the advantage of allowing the reader to see the events from their own perspective as focalizers, which widely permitted for the male characters all through the novel. The female characters are always the focalized, i.e. object of focalization, through the eyes of three different male characters. They are not even allowed to be focalized *within* as it was permitted for Jason in the fourth section of the novel. The reader may speculate about the reasons that lead Faulkner to do so. Is it an example of misogyny, a personal attitude, or a reflection of the Southern traditional mentality towards women? This question, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. It requires more research to the intention of the author and the social and political forces influencing him and consequently his work.

Nevertheless, as Paula M. L. Moya asks about the "mechanism of silencing and erasure" in relation to gender that is "consciously or unconsciously employed" in *The Sound and the Fury* (190), the focus of this paper is on the organizational structure of narratives that produces such mechanism. The answer seems to be found in the narrative mechanism of focalization and the multiple layers of perspective that enables the author to manipulate the perception of female characters in the novel, thus silencing their voice and shutting off their worldviews. Analysis of focalization in the narrative discourse of *The Sound and the Fury* shows how Faulkner blocks female worldviews from being revealed to the reader. Indeed, Genette's typology of focalization permits us to understand how Faulkner controls the perception of female characters in *The Sound and the Fury*.

Notes

1. **William Faulkner** (1897 – 1962) is one of the celebrated writers in American literature. He was a Nobel Prize-winning novelist of the American South who wrote challenging prose. He is best known for such novels as *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. In 1998, the Modern Library ranked his 1929 novel *The Sound and the Fury* sixth on its list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century (www.biography.com).
2. **Gérard Genette** (born 1930) is a literary French scholar and structuralist theorist who has had a broad impact on the development of narratology. Although narratology was established as a field of study before Genette, he developed a terminology to describe the functioning of narrative that has become universal. Genette's classifications were rigorously formulated, and his gift for typology has

gained him widespread acknowledgement among scholars of poetics in general and of narratology in particular. Genette is a writer and teacher, and is currently a professor of French literature at the Sorbonne and a senior lecturer at the École normale supérieure (<http://www.signosemio.com>)

3. Miss Quentin is Caddy's daughter, named Quentin after her brother, Quentin's death.
4. Jason was promised to get a job as a banker by Caddy's ex-husband, but he did not get one.

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