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seing@unizar.es

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William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. A study of time sequences, shifts in time

and linking mechanisms

Teresa Sauri

Universitat de València

teresa.sauri@uv.es

ABSTRACT

*The aim of my current research in the frame of my PhD studies is to study the time structure of William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, with special attention to Benjy's chapter, in order to establish whether there is a cohesive link between any two consecutive, apparently disconnected episodes narrated in Benjy's part. The theoretical framework builds upon the theories on **narrative syntax**, from Aristotle to Propp, Lévi-Strauss, Greimas, Todorov and Genette, on the one hand, and the research on **the concept of time** across disciplines such as physics, psychology and philosophy, on the other. The methodology includes both quantitative (measurement of the number of lines devoted to each episode) and qualitative (analysis of the shifts in time and classification of linking mechanisms) techniques. The analysis shows that we can determine the element acting as a connector between two episodes, and identify the different events where the episodes belong to, so as to be able to make a diagram of the many shifts in time contained, and a scheme of the Compsons' farm where the action takes place. The results will help readers to locate in space and time the different episodes and events in the novel, and also may shed some light on the narrative structure and cohesive mechanisms in William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury.*

Keywords: Faulkner, Narrative, Time, Syntax, Cohesion.

INTRODUCTION

Thanks to University of Zaragoza for granting me this opportunity to share my work with you all.

My PhD research is focused on time structure in William Faulkner's well-acclaimed novel The Sound and the Fury (TSF), from the nineteen-thirties.

For those of you who don't know the novel, TSF tells the story of a Southern family in the United States. It is divided into four parts or chapters, each of them narrated by a different character, all members of The Compson family.

In this lecture I will give an overview of my project focusing on three points: number 1, the research on the novel's **timeline**, number 2, the question of **cohesion** in an apparently chaotic discourse pictured by a chaotic mind, and number 3, how the expected **outcome** of this project can contribute to the knowledge base, to the scientific community and to society.

1. TIMELINE

The first time I read TSF I was shocked, like I guess most of its readers, by the novel's timeline.

As I said, TSF is divided into four chapters and each of them is named by a date, the date when the action is set in each case. This gives us an idea of the importance given to time when writing the novel.

But what shocked me most was the narrative timeline used in the first chapter.

Events in the story do not follow a chronological order. In fact, they do not follow any order.

Shifts backwards and forwards in time in the narrative line are marked by the editor's print, so when there is a jump in time, the paragraph is printed differently than the previous one, using italics or normal style as a mark.

When I finished the story, I was puzzled. Flashes of different episodes or events were dancing on my mind, mixed, entangled. I felt, like Sartre says in his study *On The*

Sound and the Fury: Time in the Work of Faulkner (Sartre: 1957), tempted to analyse those shifts in time in the storyline, and I quote here:

> "The first thing that strikes one in reading *The Sound and the Fury* is its technical oddity. Why has Faulkner broken up the time of his story and scrambled the pieces? Why is the first window that opens out on this fictional world the consciousness of an idiot? The reader is tempted to look for guide-marks and to re-establish the chronology for himself".

The theoretical framework needed at this point builds upon two main lines; the first one, the theories on storytelling throughout the history of Literary Theory and their postulates on the category of time in narrative, and the second one, the concept of time across disciplines such as Physics or Philosophy.

Let's consider Literary Theory first. From structuralism to post-deconstructivism, different approaches were made by literary theorists to the time parameter in literary analysis. Barthes, in his ***An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*** (1966), talks about time in relation to narrative syntax and the chronological order of events; so did many others, from Aristotle to Propp, Lévi-Strauss, Greimas, Todorov and Genette (Sullà: 1985). We will consider also here the theories on time from a thematic point of view and its relevance as a subject matter in narrative, such as Currie's work *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Currie: 2006).

Closely connected to chronology in the narrative, the theoretical framework includes the concept of time developed by human perception and scientific knowledge in the fields of Physics, Psychology and Philosophy, since we cannot study time in the

narrative without referring also to those dimensions. This is an on-going task and at present I am accessing the results of the studies in Physics and Psychology by means of their public communication materials, such as Carlo Rovelli's lecture on the physics of time available on YouTube (The Royal Institution: 2018).

So those are the two main lines upon which the theoretical background is built.

On the practical side, much work is needed to compile and read all relevant literature on this subject, namely, studies on time in TSF. This task is of an utmost importance in order to acquire the necessary knowledge base and also to compare different points of view and proposals of analysis, from the classical ones, like Sartre's, to state-of-the-art ones.

It should be mentioned here that William Faulkner is, and I am quoting Oprah Winfrey's Book Club website, "the most studied author in the world, the subject of more books and articles than any other writer besides Shakespeare", so there is a huge load of hours allocated to this task.

As for my proposal of analysis, I am currently working on the first chapter's timeline; second chapter, third and fourth ones will follow, as well as an overall vision.

2. COHESION

Another aspect of my current research in the frame of my PhD studies at Universitat de València is cohesion.

Closely connected to the category of time in narrative syntax, we find cohesion in linguistics as the fabric that keeps syntax and meaning together, a sort of narrative strong nuclear force, like the one that keeps protons and neutrons together, forming the nuclei of atoms in matter.

Here, the theoretical framework is two-fold: it builds upon the theories of linguistics, such as Halliday's work *Cohesion in English* (Halliday: 1976), where he accurately describes the types of cohesive devices we find in English language, and other relevant studies in the field, on one side, and the theories on narrative cohesion that constitute our present knowledge base, on the other.

But why cohesion?

To cut a long story short, I was fascinated by the way cohesion was present throughout the book's first chapter, in spite of its eccentric timeline, where events are narrated in a fragmented, disconnected way throughout the chapter, not following a chronological order, jumping backwards and forwards from one event to the other disorderly.

It should be noted here that this chapter is narrated from the point of view of Benjy's, a mentally-disabled character of the novel, so, to my mind, this chaotic, illogic narrative concerning the timeline of events contributes to a portrait of Benjy's discourse as the picture of a chaotic mind.

Going back to cohesion, what intrigued me most was the way cohesion was achieved. And a question raised on my mind: Which are the specific mechanisms here, in this chapter, by which cohesion is granted?

So I decided to research on that particular subject, with the objective of finding out how cohesion is achieved in the mentioned Faulkner's novel not only at chapter level, that means, considering every chapter as the text unit subject of analysis, but also at novel level, that is, the story of the Compsons as a text unit, narrated by the novel as a whole.

Currently, I am concentrating in Benjy's part, with an aim to establish whether there is a cohesive link between any two consecutive, apparently disconnected episodes narrated.

The analysis so far shows that we can determine the element acting as a connector between two episodes, and identify the different events where the episodes belong to, so as to be able to make a diagram of the many shifts in time contained, accompanied by a scheme of the Compsons' farm where the action takes place.

3. OUTCOME

The resulting work will contribute a new, up-to-date multidisciplinary insight into William Faulkner's narrative, and may open some new research paths for literary data analysis in this field.

Eventually, the project can deliver a new edition of The Sound and the Fury based on the project outcome, taking the chance of its 100th anniversary, when there will be most probably different academic and cultural events celebrating the birth of this prominent novel all around the world.

To this regard, it is also necessary to study the different editions of TSF through time, both printed and electronic ones, so as to identify their common aspects as well as their particularities, including the degree of fidelity to the original text, and the different interpretations of the chronology of events that the specific editions allow, depending on the scholars' proposals on which they are based.

CONCLUSION

Well, as a conclusion, in this lecture entitled "William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. A study of time sequences, shifts in time and linking mechanisms"

delivered at University of Zaragoza, we approached William Faulkner's TSF from an analytical point of view and focused on two aspects of my current PhD research, namely the novel's timeline and its cohesion. Finally, we discussed about the project outcome and results, and its contribution to the knowledge base, the scientific community and, eventually, to society.

Thanks for your attention.

Teresa Sauri

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