

Intertextuality in *The Sound and the Fury*

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This paper analysed *The Sound and the Fury* with the theory of intertextuality, with the aim of going back to intersubjectivity, as promoted by Mikhail Bakhtin. Drawing insight from Susan Sontag's opinion on "interpretation", the author highlights the importance of openness and indeterminacy, as well as the significance of the "form". The author argues that Faulkner found his own voice in the dialogue with previous writers and invited readers to interact with the texts as well.

Keywords: interpretation, intertextuality, William Faulkner, Julia Kristeva, Mikhail Bakhtin

Introduction

Since the Greek philosophers developed the theory of mimesis, i.e., the art is mimetic of worldly things, which are themselves mimetic of ideal models, generations after generations of critics have sought to extract the essence out of pieces of literary text. To Susan Sontag, however, there is no such thing as the essence of art. She calls for an overthrow of the never-ending project of interpretation that seeks to "tame" the literary texts. Also, the paradigm of literary criticism has shifted in a way that there is no definite interpretation of a literary work. In my opinion, bearing in mind the notion of intertextuality is valuable for a contemporary reader or critic when interpreting a text, since it emphasizes on the text's openness and indeterminacy, which re-vitalized the "tamed" texts and therefore is more and more esteemed in the modern literary criticism.

Julia Kristeva came up with the idea of intertextuality on the basis of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of intersubjectivity. To her, every text is a kind of adaption or assimilation of another text. Bakhtin also asserted that the vitality of a text comes from joining a dialogue with other texts. The term "dialogue" preferred by Bakhtin was originated from the Greek word "dialogos", combining "dia: through", and "logos: speech, reason". This means that one meaning is interwoven with other meanings, and during this flowing chain of meaning, new meaning is manifested. Every text is a re-fabrication of "déjà" signs with a particular intention. Thus, as Derrida said that "Iteration alters," it is important for readers or critics to focus on the confluence of two or more texts and ponder over the new meaning created in the process of "Iteration".

Yin Qiping, in his essay exploring the general patterns of intertextuality, quoted these sentences from *Against Interpretation*: "The interpreter says, Look don't you see that X is really—or, really means—A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?" (Sontag, 2001, p. 5). With this quotation, Yin intended to support one of the functions of interpretation, i.e., "to raise specific details to a more abstract and general level" (Yin, 1994, p. 44), and indeed this type of interpretation does suit well for an intertextual reading. But we should not forget that

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Sontag summarized the “perennial, never consummated project of interpretation” only to criticize it (Sontag, 2001, p. 5). Therefore, I suggest that it might not necessarily be the task of critics to extract the essence of a text, though it might endow a critic a sense of accomplishment. It is perilous to fall into the pattern of claiming X is actually A, which goes hand in hand with the traditional western logocentric philosophy, as shown from the separation of signifier and signified. But of course Yin is right in believing that the biggest function of intertextuality is its negation of traditional authoritative criticism and that it highlights the indeterminacy of a text and continuous reviews of it (Yin, 1994, p. 45). Indeed, I aim at analyzing different forms of intertextuality and their effect in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, which was apparently largely indebted to previous texts. As Sontag pointed out: “The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means” (Sontag, 2001, p. 14). In this essay, I submit that a contemporary reader of *The Sound and the Fury* fathom out how the elements of intertextuality shaped the novel.

Danish Prince in Harvard

On the Anderson Bridge over Charles River, there is a plaque in memory of Quentin Compson III, who was “drowned in the fading of honeysuckle” on June 2, 1910. Quentin was the most promising descendent of the once glorious Compson family, which collapsed tragically along with the Old South. Mrs. Compson sold Benjy’s pasture so that he could go the Harvard, for “a fine sound” (Faulkner, 2009, 148). However, determined to finish his own life, he thought that “then I’ll not be” (Faulkner, 2009, p. 147). This utterance reminds us of the famous dilemma immediately—“to be, or not to be.” Now, the Danish prince’s question was taken up by the Southerner in Harvard under different circumstances.

It has been widely acknowledged that *The Sound and the Fury* echoes with *Macbeth*, as shown both in the title and the body. In a nutshell, Benjy’s section is a tale told by an idiot, and Quentin is a walking shadow, a poor player who, after drowning himself, was heard no more. Quentin had spent days and days trying to undo the fact that Caddy was no longer a virgin, but it turned out that those days only lead him to the dusty death. The motif of fatality is underpinned with the reference to the utterance of *Macbeth* when he learned the news of the queen’s death:

Macbeth: Wherefore was that cry?
 Seyton [an officer]: The Queen, my lord, is dead.
 Macbeth: She should have died hereafter.
 There would have been a time for such a word.
 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 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, pp. 15-28)

Macbeth had also strutted and fretted upon the stage and did not realize the futility of his struggles until he saw the Birnam wood was indeed approaching the Dunsinane Hill and that his opponent really was not born of a woman. He finally became aware of the fact that he schemed, and murdered, and slaughtered for nothing. If a reader has read Macbeth's soliloquy before, it would dawn on him/her that the title probably implied the meaninglessness and chaos of life.

This attitude towards life is very close to that of Nietzsche's view. Marco Abel claims that Nietzsche's spirit, i.e., the modern society is decadent and Christians are ultimately nihilists, dominates *The Sound and the Fury*, and that the novel achieved in revealing the chaos of the world (Abel, 1995, p. 43). To illustrate the Nietzschean view of the society, earlier on his last day, Quentin tried to find a little girl's home, but got arrested for kidnapping instead. He did not explain himself when charged with the crime, but burst into laughter, making people believe him to be crazy. This episode seems insignificant at first glance, but actually reflects his consciousness of the world's absurdity and farcicality, foreshadowing his attempt to "not be" (Faulkner, 2009, p. 147). With the pretext of Hamlet and Nietzsche, Quentin's statements reverberate among readers: "Non fui. Sum. Fui. Nom sum" (Faulkner, 2009, p. 147), which means "I was not, I have been, I am not."

Quentin's Odyssey in the South

A closer comparative research on the relationship between this novel and James Joyce's famous work *Ulysses* will provide more perspectives and render the interpretation more complicated.

The first thing to do, apparently, is to resolve the question "has Faulkner read *Ulysses* before he wrote this novel?" Scholars' answers seem to be quite affirmative, though throughout his career Faulkner contradicts himself as to whether he had read *Ulysses* in the 1920s. Michael Groden indicated that Faulkner's "close friends in the 1920s included several Joyce enthusiasts, especially Sherwood Anderson and Phil Stone, and he must have seen at least a significant part of *Ulysses* at the beginning of his career, long before he wrote *The Sound and the Fury*" (Grodén, 1975, pp. 265-66). In his biography of Faulkner, Joseph Blotner observed that Phil Stone gave Faulkner a copy of *Ulysses* in 1924 (Blotner, 1974, p. 352). Since there has been a consensus regarding this question, we can presume that Faulkner had read *Ulysses* before composing *The Sound and the Fury*.

Scholars have noticed the relationship between the two novels from the textual and thematic aspects. Joseph Csicsila delineated the revealing similarities between "Nausicaa" episode and Quentin's section. First, it might be quite obvious that Quentin Compson, like Stephen Dedalus, Leopold Bloom, also lead an Odyssey-like journey in a single day, if we are not sure about the similarities between the two fictional dates—June 16, 1904 and June 2, 1910, two Thursdays. It is suggested that Faulkner, by setting Quentin's death on the Maundy Thursday, intended that guilt was one of the factors motivating his suicide. The reason given by Margaret D. Bauer is that Maundy Thursday was also the day Judas betrayed Christ, and that Quentin betrayed Caddy, who sacrificed herself for others (85). It was argued that Quentin sinned by having ruined the only one in the Compson clan who could break away from the destructive codes, by stopping the relationship between Dalton Ames and her, and that Caddy was parallel with Christ by pausing that relationship for her brother and marrying Herbert Head for the honor of the Compson family.

Another thing to be noticed is the image of feminine underwear in both two novels, which actually can be symbolic of the theme of sexuality. In the first half of "Nausicaa", Gerty's wardrobe of underwear is described as

immaculate and pristine, in sharp contrast to Molly's underwear, which was carelessly discarded. This dichotomy of sexuality, i.e., the purity, virginity compared to infidelity and decadence, is also presented in Quentin's section. In a mental scene, where he tried to commit double suicide with Caddy, he asked, "do you remember the day Damuddy died when you sat down in the water in your drawers" (Faulkner, 2009, p. 128). Thus, a reader immediately connects the image of soaked drawer with Caddy's purity and promiscuity at the same time. In fact, Faulkner affirms that *The Sound and the Fury* was rooted in the image of Caddy's underwear: "It began with a mental picture. I didn't realize at the time it was symbolical. The picture was of the muddy seat of a little girl's drawers" (Blotner, 1974, p. 245). Therefore, it is safe to say that with the motif of sexual dualism in *Ulysses* in mind, a critic is better enabled to discern this motif in Faulkner's novel and can thus understand why Quentin cared about Caddy's drawer so much. With the image of the muddy drawer haunting his mind, he could not get over the fact that Caddy is no longer virgin.

Just as Quentin broke his watch and cut himself, Bloom's watch was also not functioning. It is believed that the malfunction of the watch can symbolize the escaping of mechanical time, so that the two characters' state of mind can switch freely in the past, now and future, when triggered by events. But the design of a broken watch seems more apt in Quentin's case, since it highlighted his struggle and agony, in his effort of forgetting time, or, the past. He is so aware of time that when he woke up, he estimated what time it was and said he was "in time again" (Faulkner, 2009, p. 63). As compared to Bloom, Quentin is more overwhelmed with the weight brought by the past events and is unable to repress the bubbling-up of the memories, foreshadowing his final escape. As rose-scented perfume often reminds Bloom of Molly's infidelity, honeysuckle the "saddest odour of all" prompts Quentin to recall Caddy's promiscuity from time to time (Faulkner, 2009, p. 142). Clinging to the ideal purity of Caddy in her childhood, he did not do what his father told him to:

I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it...Because no battle is ever won...The field only reveal to man his own folly and despair. (Faulkner, 2009, p. 63)

Thus, Quentin became a fool who tried to conquer the time but ended his own life at last, and a poor actor that struts and frets upon the stage. His tragedy lies in that he can't break away from the southern codes of female respectability like his brave and daring sister Caddy. His obsession of Caddy's lost virginity is so much that he once tried to end his and her lives with a knife, after asking whether she loved Dalton Ames multiple times. Thus, the same motif of a malfunctioning watch here takes a more significant implication: the destructiveness of time and outdated Southern codes.

Readers' Journey in the Text

As suggested by Susan Sontag, Critics' attention should be paid more on the form of a piece of art, so it can be quite revealing to look at the intertextuality in terms of the form. Michael Groden concluded that Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and especially Quentin's section, was evidently influenced by James Joyce in terms of the techniques he used in *Ulysses*—first-person narration, interior monologue and stream of consciousness.

What especially interested Faulkner, according to Groden, is the interior monologue of "Penelope" episode, what with the unpunctuated and exceedingly prolonged sentences, which are most suitable for presenting the chaotic inner workings of Quentin Compson. Successfully assimilating monologue technique with first-person

narration, Faulkner used it both as a reflection of mental agitation and a means of characterization. In Quentin's section, the narration is close to that of *Ulysses*, combining interior monologue with the external description limited to the character's perception. However, with the similar techniques, Faulkner's characterization is different from Joyce. Faulkner "portray[ed] not a character balanced between an external and an internal life but one whose present life is completely and fatally engulfed by the past" (Grodén, 1975, p. 275). Overall, Faulkner achieved his own artistic purpose on the basis of inheriting the legacy of Joyce.

Also, Abel commented that Faulkner's work "is eerily empty of any form of real communication," and "readers are asked to search for the meaning of the novel" (Abel, 1995, p. 48). In this sense, Faulkner really is a modernist who "adopted the strategy of dismantling forms in order to coerce the viewer or reader to resemble them and thereby preventing them from remaining a passive bystander or consumer of art" (Broughton, 1981, pp. 64-65). Like Joyce, Faulkner's particular writing skills make readers and critics speculate about what he actually meant, leaving an unfathomable text to be analyzed with their wits. It is close to the reader-response approach to literary texts put forward by Wolfgang Iser in *The Act of Reading*. He wrote that:

The process of assembling the meaning of the text is not a private one, for although it does mobilize the subjective disposition of the reader, it does not lead to day-dreaming, but to the fulfillment of conditions that have already been structured in the text (Iser, 1978, p. 49)

Conclusion

The intertextuality in a text means borrowing or assimilating elements current in another text, voluntarily or involuntarily. It is important to recognize the transformation and renewal of the same topic, theme, ideology, as well as the inheritance of them. Faulkner, in *The Sound and the Fury*, adapted a number of previous texts such as *Macbeth* and *Ulysses*, but he did not merely produce a mosaic of texts. In treating the recurrent themes like the meaninglessness of life, sexuality, decay of aristocracy, he blended them with the history, customs and circumstances of the South, thus creating impressive characters like Caddy, Quentin, Benjy and Dilsey. So it seems that Roland Barthes went too far in claiming the "death of the author", I would rather agree with the opinion of Bakhtin that the author's voice is equally present in his work as other voices.

There is an incisive observation by Stoicheff that Quentin was totally overwhelmed with others' voices, and that Faulkner identified with Quentin in that he also was struggling to find his unique authorial voice.¹ He further stated that Faulkner surmounted the challenge in the fourth section, with his delineation of Reverend Shegog's sermon which was his ideal of unmediated communion:

Shegog's sermon, in fact, becomes a model for the voice that is introduced at the beginning of the fourth section and that will characterize much of Faulkner's subsequent writing: heavily intertextual, rhythmically poetic, trance-like in its repetitive and oratorical weight. (Stoicheff, 1992, p. 459)

Thus the whole novel seems like a metaphor of how the novelist established himself among previous writers whose texts and traditions he had borrowed and inherited. At first the writer, like Quentin, yields to the powerful voices he/she inherits, then goes too far in castrating all the preceding authors, and finally succeeds in finding his own voice by incorporating the foregoing legacies smoothly.

¹ In 1955 Faulkner told Jean Stein that himself is Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury* (Blotner, 2: 1522).

In his novel, we see Faulkner talking with previous writers like Shakespeare and Joyce, and in the process of reading, we find ourselves interacting with them too, so it is through this dialogue that equal communication and aesthetic appreciation is made possible. Contrary to Kristeva, I submit that we at last get back to intersubjectivity, which gave equal rights to the author, reader and even the characters, thus proving the arrogance or fallacy of scholars who, for instance, ferociously criticized Quentin for being unable to protect his sister or deal with the reality. Empathy and understanding should be the premise of interpreting the character Quentin, partly a self-portrait of an artist as a young man, who perished because he grew in and formed false cognition from the Old South lapsing to its end. We may disagree with his actions, but we should respect his choices, since he is a character with “independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 63).

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