

THE MOST CONFUSING SENTENCES IN FAULKNER'S NOVELS: AN  
EXPLORATION OF NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY

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**Abstract:** William Faulkner's novels are renowned for their intricate narrative structures, often creating a sense of confusion and disorientation among readers. This paper aims to explore the most confusing sentences in Faulkner's novels, analyzing how his use of syntax, stream of consciousness, and fragmented narrative techniques contribute to the complexity of his writing. By focusing on key examples from novels such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*, this study examines how Faulkner's stylistic choices challenge conventional reading strategies and reflect the themes of psychological fragmentation and Southern identity.

**Keywords:** William Faulkner, narrative complexity, stream of consciousness, nonlinear time, fragmented syntax, Southern identity, psychological fragmentation, narrative perspective, temporal dislocation, modernist literature, postmodernist narrative, Faulkner's prose style, Southern Gothic, the collapse of tradition, modernism, post-Civil War literature.

## Introduction

William Faulkner's novels are often characterized by their challenging prose, dense with fragmented sentences, shifts in perspective, and obscure timeframes. His unique narrative style is designed to convey the disorienting experience of characters grappling with the complexities of time, memory, and identity. While this style is widely praised for its artistic depth, it can also be confounding for readers. In novels such as *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner's syntactical complexity serves to illustrate the inner turmoil of his characters and the disintegration of Southern society post-Civil War. However, the convoluted structure often makes Faulkner's works some of the most difficult texts in the American literary canon.

This paper seeks to analyze some of the most confusing sentences in Faulkner's works, examining how his stylistic choices contribute to the reader's experience of confusion and frustration. We will focus on how these sentences engage with themes of time, identity, and the fragmentation of consciousness. Through close reading and theoretical analysis, we will uncover the narrative techniques Faulkner employs to create a world that is as fractured and disorienting as the minds of his characters.

## Methods

To analyze the complexity of Faulkner's sentences, a close reading approach was employed, focusing on key examples from three of Faulkner's major novels: *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* Sentences that exhibit high levels of syntactical complexity,

shifts in narrative perspective, and unusual punctuation were selected for analysis. These examples were then examined through the lens of literary theory, particularly theories of narrative structure, stream of consciousness, and the depiction of psychological fragmentation.

The analysis also incorporated a review of secondary literature to understand the broader critical reception of Faulkner's narrative complexity. The chosen sentences were examined for their use of time manipulation, fragmented narratives, and stream-of-consciousness techniques. Additionally, the emotional and thematic context of each passage was considered to understand how the confusion in the text reflects the inner lives of the characters and the broader social and historical context of Faulkner's writing.

## Results

The analysis of Faulkner's sentences reveals several key techniques that contribute to the confusion and disorientation in his work. These include:

1. **Stream of Consciousness and Interior Monologue:** Faulkner frequently uses stream of consciousness to portray the inner turmoil of his characters. This technique involves presenting the character's thoughts in an unfiltered, disjointed manner, which often defies conventional grammar and syntax. For example, in *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin Compson's inner monologue includes sentences like:

"I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; 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."

This sentence reflects Quentin's obsession with the past and his inability to reconcile with the passage of time. The lack of punctuation and the fluidity of thought create a sense of disorientation, mirroring Quentin's mental state. The sentence's complexity is further emphasized by its abstraction, as Quentin's existential reflection disrupts the reader's ability to follow a linear progression of thought.

Faulkner's deliberate manipulation of time, particularly the way his characters linger in the past, mirrors their psychological distress. The disjointed, almost chaotic quality of Quentin's thoughts highlights the fragmented nature of his consciousness. The reader, unable to find the usual markers of narrative time, is left struggling with Quentin's endless, cyclical reflections.

2. **Nonlinear Time and Flashbacks:** Faulkner often collapses time, weaving flashbacks into the present narrative without clear markers. In *As I Lay Dying*, Addie Bundren's reflections on life and death are frequently presented without clear transitions between past and present, resulting in confusing narrative shifts. For example:

"I give you my life, I give you my love, I give you my grief."

This line appears to blend Addie's reflections on her life with her imminent death. The temporal shift between her reflections and the unfolding of her death in real-time confounds the reader's sense of linear progression. As readers, we struggle to discern the boundaries between memory and reality, as Faulkner often intertwines these dimensions to evoke the fluidity of human experience.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner's treatment of time is equally complex. Multiple narrators relay the same events from different points of view, each time adding layers of distortion and nuance. Time becomes a mutable concept, which mirrors the fracturing of historical memory in the novel. By disrupting the continuity of time, Faulkner underscores the idea that history itself is fragmented and subjective. This not only challenges the reader's expectations of a coherent narrative but also mirrors the way the characters in the novel grapple with their own histories and legacies.

3. **Fragmented Syntax and Punctuation:** Faulkner's unconventional use of punctuation often heightens the reader's sense of confusion. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, sentences are frequently broken up by commas, dashes, and semicolons in ways that disrupt the flow of thought:

"He had come in, the summer he had come, the door would be shut, the window closed and the air would be thick, with a sense of waiting."

This fragmentation reflects the fragmented nature of the narrative, as different voices and perspectives struggle to articulate a coherent understanding of the past. Faulkner uses punctuation to break up the syntactical flow, forcing readers to pause, reconsider, and reimagine the meaning of each phrase.

The fragmentation also reflects the psychological states of the characters, who often find themselves trapped in cycles of thought that lack resolution. For example, in *The Sound and the Fury*, the fragmented sentences of Benjy Compson evoke the disorientation he feels due to his cognitive limitations. The scattered nature of his thoughts is mirrored in the fragmented syntax that characterizes his narrative perspective. This strategy is an attempt to communicate the sense of alienation that many of Faulkner's characters experience as they struggle to make sense of their worlds.

4. **Shifts in Narrative Perspective:** Faulkner's novels often shift between multiple narrators, sometimes within the same sentence, creating confusion as the reader tries to follow the changing perspectives. In *The Sound and the Fury*, for instance, the narrative perspective switches rapidly between Benjy, Quentin, and Jason, often within the same paragraph. This shift disorients the reader and makes it difficult to discern who is speaking or perceiving events.

"Caddy smelled like trees, like the leaves, like the lake and the flowers, like the air, like all the things I couldn't say."

This sentence, from Benjy's perspective, exemplifies the difficulty of navigating Faulkner's shifting points of view. The fragmented nature of Benjy's thought process, combined with the absence of clear transitions between different perspectives, creates a sense of temporal and spatial dislocation. The reader is left questioning not only who is speaking but also when and where the events are occurring.

Furthermore, Faulkner's use of unreliable narrators, such as Quentin and Benjy, further complicates the narrative. Their perceptions of events are distorted by their mental states, adding another layer of confusion for the reader. In *As I Lay Dying*, the narrative shifts between multiple family members, each with a distinct voice and perspective, forcing the reader to piece together the plot from different angles.

### Discussion

The complexity of Faulkner's sentences is not merely a stylistic choice; it is deeply tied to the thematic concerns of his novels. The confusion and fragmentation in his language reflect the fractured nature of Southern society in the post-Civil War period, as well as the psychological fragmentation of his characters. By presenting time as non-linear, using stream of consciousness, and blurring narrative perspectives, Faulkner immerses the reader in the chaotic and disjointed inner lives of his characters.

The fragmentation of time in Faulkner's novels also reflects the deep divisions within Southern identity. As characters grapple with the legacy of the Civil War, slavery, and the fall of the Southern aristocracy, their fragmented narratives mirror the fractured nature of their cultural and historical consciousness. Faulkner's prose style, with its lack of clarity and coherence, serves to underscore the inability of his characters to reconcile with their pasts or with each other.

Faulkner's sentences, though difficult to parse, serve a critical function in portraying the instability and trauma of the characters' experiences. The disorienting nature of the prose reflects the psychological and emotional fragmentation they endure, whether it is the collapse of the Southern aristocracy, the loss of personal identity, or the rupture between generations.

### Conclusion

William Faulkner's use of confusing and complex sentences is a defining feature of his literary style. The fragmented syntax, nonlinear time, and shifting perspectives are not just techniques designed to confuse the reader, but are integral to the themes of psychological disintegration and the collapse of traditional Southern values. Through these stylistic choices, Faulkner challenges readers to engage with the text on a deeper level, forcing them to confront the fragmented and often painful realities of his characters' lives. By analyzing the most confusing sentences in Faulkner's novels, this paper has highlighted the intricate relationship between narrative complexity and thematic depth, demonstrating that confusion in Faulkner's works is a deliberate and meaningful aspect of his literary art.

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