Critical realism in *The Sound and the Fury*

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**Abstract.** Academic research on Faulkner mostly focuses on the stream-of-consciousness technique, but fewer people pay attention to the connection between his creation and critical realism. Faulkner has a strong focus on reality, which can be seen from the three aspects of the timeline arrangement, character’s characteristics, and dimensions of the family-social history in his novel *The Sound and the Fury*. Obviously, the author has inherited traditional critical realism.

**Keywords:** critical realism; timeline; character typicality; Family; Socio-Historical Dimension.

1. **Introduction**

*The Sound and the Fury* is often viewed as a stream-of-consciousness novel by academic circles. Tu Xianfeng and Zhang Jianfei argue in *Foreign Literature* that this work stands alongside James Joyce's *Ulysses* by the Irish writer as a classic example of stream-of-consciousness literature. However, few people have noticed that in such a work with obvious modernist characteristics, it actually contains a certain overtone of critical realism. This article aims to explore the perfect fusion of critical realism and stream-of-consciousness techniques in *The Sound and the Fury* from three perspectives: structural framework, characterization, and social-historical perspective.

Critical realism usually refers to works written by writers such as Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Ibsen, and Tolstoy, who analyze social phenomena in depth, portray characters, and reveal social contradictions. These writers used delicate descriptions, sharp satire and profound analysis to show the dark side of society and the complexity of human nature, and conducted profound reflections and criticisms on the social reality at that time. Engels's definition emphasizes the characteristics of critical realism in terms of authenticity of details and typical character creation. Among them, in order to reflect social life more truthfully, critical realism works often need to follow a clear and reasonable timeline to ensure the coherence and logic of the story. Gorky also explained critical realism in *Talk about How I Learned to Write*: "Critical realism exposes the bad habits of society and describes an individual's life and adventure under the suppression of family traditions, religious dogmas and regulations." Gorky here not only pointed out that critical realism exposed social evil habits, but also emphasized that it should be carried out in the socio-historical dimension.

The three aspects of *The Sound and the Fury* are in line with the artistic pursuit of traditional critical realism, from the timeline arrangement, character typicality to the family-social historical dimension. Judged from the timeline arrangement, Faulkner skillfully used the techniques of circulation and retrospection to construct an intricate but logically rigorous story framework. This precise control of time is consistent with the concept of critical realism's pursuit of truth. In terms of character typicality, *The Sound and the Fury* creates a series of typical characters with distinctive personalities and commonalities, which is consistent with the requirements of critical realism for character creation. From a socio-historical perspective, *The Sound and the Fury* shows the impact of social and historical changes on the fate of the characters through the narration of a family, thus revealing the injustice and darkness of social reality, and it is consistent with the creative concept of critical realism that reflects on the society of the times through personal history and family history.
2. Clear and rigorous timeline

Affected by the key influence of Bergson's "psychological time" theory, most stream-of-consciousness novels have overturned traditional narrative frameworks. They blur external real time and instead utilize the flow of consciousness as the driving force for plot development. As Liu Qingxue elaborates in "Analysis of the Artistic Techniques of Time and Space Jump in Stream of Consciousness Novels", stream-of-consciousness novels, as the central branch of stream-of-consciousness literature in modernist literature, focus on exploring the inner worlds and flowing consciousness of characters. Their narrative structures often transcend the boundaries of time and space, manifesting as jumps and changes in time and space, and sometimes even breaking conventional temporal and spatial sequences, thereby opening up a new dimension for literary expression.

"The Mark on the Wall" deliberately disrupts the relationship between time and space, and uses the psychological activities of the characters as the structural basis of the novel; In Search of Lost Time captures the impressions that emerge in the narrator's mind and displays them, and the order of events has no practical significance; Despite Ulysses having two narrative strands—myth and reality—the author does not explicitly mark time during the writing process, and the short span of a single day and night does not align with Ian P. Watt's assertion that the connection of plotlines in traditional realistic novels necessitates a lengthy time frame. In his book, "The Rise of the Novel: A Study of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding," Ian P. Watt delves deeply into the historical development and narrative characteristics of British realistic novels. He observes, "The portrayal of stakes in everyday life in novels also relies on their ability to unfold across a temporal expanse." To better mirror reality, novels often stretch their timelines over extended periods, showcasing character growth and societal transformations. This approach to time management enhances the work's capacity to comprehensively reflect social and historical contexts, deepening the depiction of characters' personalities and destinies.

The Sound and the Fury is unique in that it uses specific time points to connect back and forth to construct the plot blocks of the novel. The novel uses specific time nodes instead of chapters in the structural framework. The four nodes are April 7, 1928, June 2, 1910, and the 6th and 7th of 1928. Each node is closely related to the cultural connotation of Christianity and Easter, echoing the date of Jesus' crucifixion. This arrangement not only contrasts the novel's characters with their mythological and religious prototypes, but also constructs a unique structure of modernity. Although the novel adopts a very different strategy from traditional narrative methods, its internal time clues always maintain strict integrity.

The narrative of the novel generally develops linearly from 1898 to 1928, and the narrator of each chapter provides perspectives and memories from different time periods. The realistic narration of Lester on April 7, 1928 in the novel mentioned that Benjy was exactly thirty-three years old in the morning, and he had looked like a three-year-old for thirty years. It can be inferred that Benjy's memories began in 1898, when Benjy was found to be mentally retarded and at the same time the Compson family's grandmother passed away. Benjy’s memories end with Caddy’s accident, which happens to connect with the second paragraph of Quentin’s confession. Quentin's Confessions delves into the decline of his family and his experiences as a student, covering the period from 1906 to 1910. It focuses particularly on the time period around 1910 when Caddy got married, which was a stage when the Compson family experienced major changes. Jason's chapter focuses on showing the family's financial situation and the trivial details of daily life, including Caddy's living conditions in middle age. This part of the narrative basically follows the real timeline, roughly starting from 1910, when Jason took charge of the family affairs, to the end of the narrative in 1928. Dilsey's chapter witnesses the final conflicts of the Compson family and provides a comprehensive overview of the family's history. As the end of the entire story, 1928 marked the completion of a complete narrative cycle of the Compson family history.
The plots of the same event appear at different points in time. These seemingly different but actually echoing plots are connected back and forth, which not only enhances the sense of historical reality, but also significantly enhances the heaviness of the text. The incident of Lust watching the show unfolds in different plot developments in each chapter of the novel: in the first chapter, while Benjy was focused on watching the golf game, Lust was anxiously begging for a quarter to fulfill his dream of watching a show; in the third chapter, Luster watched Jason burn the two tickets worth twenty-five cents that were crucial to him; in the fourth chapter, the old man Dilsey mentioned that Luster finally got to attend the show, which brings the whole story to a happy ending, with each chapter linking to another. Faulkner narrates the cause, course and result of the same event in different chapters. The plots of these three parts echo each other and are connected from beginning to end, which not only maintains the authenticity and coherence of the story, but also reflects the author's clear thinking and rigorous attitude in designing the plot. Faulkner narrates the cause, course and result of the same event in different chapters. The plots of these three parts echo each other and are connected from beginning to end, which not only maintains the authenticity and coherence of the story, but also reflects the author's care in designing the plot. Clear thinking and rigorous attitude. Another example is that in the first chapter, Benjy describes through his inner monologue the scene of him watching people playing ball through the fence and tangled flower branches. This plot lays the suspense for the entire story. Later, it will be explained that behind this scene is actually a major change that occurred in the Compson family around 1910—in order to support the eldest brother in Harvard University, the family had to sell the ranch that the younger son loved. The following text supplements and interprets the suspense of the previous text, allowing the text to unfold in a broader and connected space. The thickness of the entire story is elongated and the details are rigorous.

To sum up, the novel uses a timeline spanning thirty years as a bridge in the framework construction, and most of the plots form a close echo with other parts. The plots of different chapters explain each other and are narrated around a core event; through clever interweaving and echoing, each part is finally brought together into a story with a complete structure. The timeline of the entire novel is rigorous and complete, demonstrating the author's superb narrative skills.

3. Typicality of character creation

The novel's characterization and timeline complement each other, and can also display critical realism. The typicality of characters usually refers to the characters created through artistic means in literary works that have distinctive personal characteristics and at the same time can profoundly reveal certain social phenomena or universal human characteristics. The unity of personality and commonality makes the characters both unique and universal. Engels emphasized the relationship between typical characters and typical environments in his letter "to Margaret Harkness". The commonality of typical characters is reflected through the typical environment in which they live, and their distinct personalities are also displayed in this environment.

Stream-of-consciousness novels tend to avoid external depictions when creating characters, and focus more on showing the flow and changes in the characters' inner world, that is, emphasizing the characters' subjective and intuitive feelings rather than objective and rational reality. Therefore, they focus less on characters in the traditional sense, less on personality building and refining of commonalities. Zhang Man's "Characterization in Stream of Consciousness Novels from the Perspective of Thematic Structure" mentions that stream of consciousness novels have also left many well-known characters in people's minds. However, unlike traditional novels, stream of consciousness novels do not focus on portraying the external characteristics of characters, but rather delve deeply into their inner worlds. It is difficult for readers to grasp the characters in these novels, and what they often get are merely carriers of certain thoughts, emotions, or personalities, which are fragmented and scattered throughout the novel. The existence of characters serves as a background for the flow of consciousness. The characters in The mark on the Wall are looming and placed in the
waves of the stream of consciousness as a postposition; the characters also gradually show their multi-facetedness and depth in the flow of consciousness. The characters in *In Search of Lost Time* become fuller and more and more vivid through the interweaving of memories and consciousness; therefore, the characters in stream-of-consciousness novels often show extremely complex characteristics. They are not only the carriers of consciousness, but also the creators of consciousness, this complexity makes the character often difficult to summarize in simple language, The characters, emotions and experiences of the characters in *Ulysses* are all intertwined, forming a multi-dimensional and multi-layered image. This depth and richness are the unique characteristics of stream-of-consciousness novels in character creation and where their charm lies. *The Sound and the Fury* shows a distinctive color in the portrayal of characters. The novel does not completely abandon the traditional typical characters, but cleverly combines the characteristics of the stream of consciousness to gain an in-depth and accurate grasp of the characters' personalities.

The main characters have distinct personalities, each with its own unique focus. Personality refers to the unique character's traits, behavioral habits and emotional reactions displayed by characters in literary works. In critical realist literature, characters with distinctive personalities tend to attract readers' attention more because they reflect various groups of people in real life and show the complexity and diversity of human nature. As one of the important characters in the story, Benjy's character is mainly characterized by simplicity. The author cleverly uses this characteristic of Benjy to connect his previous and later memories through simple sound and smell information, vividly showing Caddy in the eyes of a three-year-old child in front of readers. This way of narrating from Benjy's perspective not only adds to the interest of the story, but also deepens the understanding of the changes in Caddy's character before and after. Quentin, on the other hand, is a traditional man caught between the cracks. His character is full of sensitivity and weakness. The author connects the entire stream of consciousness fragments in the second part through Quentin's sensitive thoughts about time——Starting from the "time" represented by the clock, to Caddy's loss of virginity and breaking the established "tradition", to in-depth thinking about the "future", a complete and philosophical closed loop is formed, which not only shows Quentin's complex inner world but also reveals the impact of time on the fate of characters. As an extreme egoist, Jason's personal traits have become the source of all conflicts. With his blackmailing of Caddy, misappropriation of property, and a series of conflicts and struggles with Quentin, the author not only highlighted the tension in the family, but also used profound dramatic conflicts to successfully create the image of an extremely egoistic Jason. Dilsey is the "God" in the whole story. She is a witness and recorder of history. The image of the grandmother created by later writer Marquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has the shadow of Dilsey. They are both benevolent and long-lived "gods", witnesses and recorders of history.

But each character is different, and each represents a different social group. Faulkner's novels themselves are "a series of interconnected myths (or aspects of a myth) surrounding specific conflicts." As stated in George Marion O'Donnell's "Faulkner's Myth", Faulkner's novels themselves are a series of interconnected myths centered around specific conflicts, or various aspects of a single myth. The colorization of myths has become the author's unique creative habit. From a Biblical perspective, the character Caddy is like Eve in *Genesis*. Her name contains the meaning of "life" and is a symbol of fertility. In Faulkner's writing, Caddy bears the original sin for eating the
forbidden fruit and becomes a representative of the fallen devil girl - this kind of corruption is not simply moral corruption, but a challenge and rebellion against traditional moral concepts and social norms. Caddy's image is complex and multi-faceted. She not only has Eve-like temptation and charm, but also has her own unique tenacity and persistence. From the perspective of emerging female criticism in later generations, Caddy's image has received a new interpretation: She is no longer just a fallen devil girl, but a symbol of an extremely vigorous young girl who pursues free vitality; her actions and challenges are a rebellion against the gender norms and constraints of the society at that time, and a pursuit of self-worth and dignity. Quentin is the embodiment of a weak intellectual. His confusion and bewilderment are the true spiritual portrayal of the "lost generation". With the unique nobility, confusion, feudalism and stubbornness of intellectuals, Quentin tried to find his own position and way out in a chaotic era. Sensitivity and vulnerability are not only his personal characteristics, but also a reflection of the predicament of the entire era. The character of Jason reveals another aspect of social reality. As a representative of pragmatic, sophisticated and self-interested small businessmen, he was full of the habits of petty citizens and philistines. He was always dissatisfied and jealous of the success and income of his brothers and sisters. This narrow-minded and selfish mentality was a mockery of the utilitarian and materialistic concepts prevalent in society at that time. Dilsey represented the vast black community in the American South. She was emancipated after the Civil War and witnessed the decline and disintegration of the white South. Her image carries Faulkner's feelings for "Aunt Caroline". It is not only a praise of the tenacity, optimism and kindness of the black community, but also a profound reflection on the racial and cultural conflicts in historical changes.

In general, the characters in *The Sound and the Fury* have both commonalities and distinct personality aspects. The author has successfully created these distinct and pure characters through in-depth psychological descriptions. They intertwine and influence each other in the story, and together, they create the brilliance of this novel. In these characters, Faulkner combined the mythical and legendary color of the novel with his profound insight into social reality, not only showing the complexity and multi-faceted nature of human nature, but also revealing various problems and contradictions in social reality. This unique creative style and profound thematic thinking make Faulkner's works own lasting artistic charm and social value.

4. Socio-historical dimension

The characterization and timeline structure ultimately lead to the socio-historical dimension of the novel. Critical realist novels often present a broad social background and profound exploration of human nature within an epic framework. Works such as Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine* series, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* all depict the myriad facets of society through their grand narrative structures. While stream-of-consciousness novels usually focus on the inner world of individuals, emphasizing the flow and changes of personal emotions, and the epic sense of social history is relatively weak. Faulkner used a rather grand development method to deeply explore the complex relationship between individuals and society, that is, family novels. This method cleverly integrates the family's living conditions and emotional changes into the broad social background, making the work own profound psychological insight and full of critical awareness of social reality, which shares quite a few similarities with Hardy's Wessex novels and the series of *The Human Comedy* from the last century.

Faulkner's "Yoknapatawpha" novels were born out of the real southern issues after the American Civil War. Therefore, every novel in the series inevitably pays attention to real issues. Social decline is a very important theme in the literary world. *Dream of the Red Chamber* uses huge brushwork that spreads across several families to truly express the feeling of decline; *The Human Comedy* uses the most meticulous realistic brushwork to meticulously portray every character in a vast society; Zola centers on a heroine, Adelaide Fouque, and uses the life trajectories of the five generations of the Rougon-Macquart’s family as clues. He uses a naturalistic approach to analyze
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genetic issues in an attempt to explain social contradictions. However, Faulkner's method is irreplaceable. By creating an entire lineage of novels, centered on a fictional town of Jefferson, he condensed the grand issue of social decline into the most subtle changes and movements in the minds of several family members, using the smallest changes and movements in the minds of several family members to deal with the biggest problems, and using the tiniest sound waves to create the biggest "commotion".

The Sound and the Fury is first and foremost a family story. The elders of the family, the Compsons' bad relationship and failure to educate their children undoubtedly caused the children's twisted personalities and abnormal thoughts. Jason was isolated because of his mother's doting way and became a cold and heartless person. This kind of doting did not make Jason feel warm and cared for. Instead, it made him selfish, indifferent, and unable to establish normal emotional connections with others. Quentin, on the other hand, was deeply influenced by his father. His hatred for his mother and his helplessness at the decline of his family made him fall into deep confusion. He could not escape the shadow of the past, nor could he face the real predicament, which eventually led to tragedy. In the end, before death, he even said that his mother was his own hell. There were also conflicts between the children. Caddy and Quentin isolated Jason, and Caddy, a free rebel of new generation, was gradually stifled by Quentin's old-school chastity views... In the novel, regarding Benjy, the author also raised the issue of whether physical defects and diseases should be regarded as family scum and family punishment. After his mother discovered that Benjy's intelligence was abnormal, she changed his name from Maury to Benjy in an attempt to clear the relationship between Benjy's IQ and his family lineage. Benjy's intellectual disability became an obstacle to his regular communication with the society, making him unable to understand and respond to the world around him like a normal person. This makes him an outlier in the family and was seen as an insult to the family lineage and reflects the society's prejudice and discrimination against physical defects at that time. However, Faulkner challenged this prejudice and discrimination through the character of Benjy. Although Benjy had limited intelligence, he possessed a special ability of perception and could discern the fate of family members. In an innocent way, he showed his love for his family and his desire for life. This innocent emotion was in sharp contrast with the hypocrisy and indifference of other people in the family, making Benjy one of the most compelling and popular characters. Children are the hope of the next generation of the family, and the distortion of the children further accelerates the decline and demise of the family, causing confusion among generations.

The Sound and the Fury is also a story about the American South, a story about "modernity" in the twentieth century. The death of the old family truly presented an aspect of the historical changes in the American South. The foundation of the plantation economy had already collapsed, and the remaining superstructure was also crumbling. Caddy, who was born in an old aristocratic family, lost her virginity, which means the official loss of traditional standard morality. However, as a representative figure of emerging capitalism, the emergence of Jason did not bring about the newer and better changes that Faulkner expected. The emerging capitalism abandoned old value standards but failed to establish new, healthier values. Jason's ruthlessness, selfishness and greed make him one of the "six villains" in Faulkner's works. This reflects Faulkner's double thinking: on the one hand, he realized that the old value system had collapsed and new forces were needed to promote social progress; On the other hand, he was also vigilant to see that emerging forces might not necessarily bring about real progress and beauty, but could instead bring about new problems and dilemmas.

Faulkner not only paid attention to black issues and the disintegration of the old plantation economy, but also further criticized the northern capitalist economy and superstructure through his criticism of Jason, and reflected on the damage caused by the capitalist spirit to people and families. Just like the ending sentence of the novel "They are suffering", it is not only a summary of the fate of the characters in the novel, but also a profound reflection on the entire human society.
5. Conclusion

The Sound and the Fury shows the basic context of the story with a clear timeline. The novel skillfully uses narrative perspectives at different time points, and greatly enhances the historical reality of the story and the heaviness of the text through the mutual echo of plots at the same time and the contrasting display of plots at different time periods. In characterization, Faulkner showed extremely high precision. He not only deeply captured the uniqueness of each character's personality, but also showed their commonalities. Each character is like a mirror of society, reflecting different social groups and classes. Not only that, in terms of ideological depth, Faulkner also paid full attention to issues in reality. His works not only focus on family disputes and personal struggles, but also touch on the pulse of social decline and the heavy reality of the disintegration of the southern plantation economy. Through profound criticism of extreme egoists, Faulkner conducted an in-depth reflection on the erosion of human nature and family by the capitalist spirit. The treatment of these realistic themes fully demonstrates Faulkner's keen insight into social reality and his profound thinking ability. It is these elements that are intertwined and supported by each other, and jointly build the literary charm of The Sound and the Fury, making it a rare masterpiece in the history of literature.

References


