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## TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*

**Nadia Putri Nazara<sup>1</sup>, Pioro Benevolent Lariesto<sup>2</sup>, Anselmus Chartino Ade<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, Universitas Katolik Santo Thomas

Email : [nadianazara25@gmail.com](mailto:nadianazara25@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup>, [Pioro\\_lariesto@ust.ac.id](mailto:Pioro_lariesto@ust.ac.id)<sup>2</sup>, [anselbelajar29@gmail.com](mailto:anselbelajar29@gmail.com)<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the traumatic experiences of the main character, Quentin Compson, in *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner using a psychoanalytic approach developed by Sigmund Freud, specifically the concepts of the id, ego, and superego. This study also focuses on identifying the types of trauma faced by Quentin and studying how conflicts within his personality structure impact his mental state. The method used is descriptive qualitative. Data collection was conducted through several steps, namely in-depth reading, marking relevant quotes, studying supporting theories, and filtering the data to select the most appropriate textual evidence. Data analysis used the Miles and Huberman framework, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions and verification based on Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The results of the study indicate that Quentin experienced six interrelated types of trauma: moral, existential, relational, family, identity, and social trauma. These traumas are reflected through the stream-of-consciousness narrative style and furthermore reinforced by the use of symbols the pocket watch, river, and forest. The chaos between id drives, superego pressures, and the failure of the ego as a mediator leads to Quentin's mental breakdown.

**Keywords:** *traumatic experiences, psychoanalysis, id-ego-superego*

### I. Introduction

In recent decades, mental health issues have become an increasingly prominent global concern in the fields of psychology, public health, culture, and literature. Rapid social change, increasingly complex life pressures, and the high demands of modern life make many people vulnerable to mental disorders, particularly those rooted in traumatic experiences. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), approximately 970 million people worldwide experience mental disorders, including depression and anxiety, many of which are triggered by trauma. This fact demonstrates that trauma is not simply an individual problem, but a complex phenomenon that impacts various aspects of human life.

Psychological trauma triggers profound emotional reactions that can develop into serious mental disorders. Herman (1992) explains that trauma occurs when a person experiences a painful event or threat that compromises their sense of physical and mental safety. Its impact varies depending on the individual's personality, level of intensity, and social support received. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2020) notes that trauma can cause symptoms such as anxiety, vivid memories, sleep disturbances, a

sense of detachment from reality, and even an identity crisis. One of the most severe forms of trauma is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which affects approximately 5% of the adult population in the United States each year (NIMH, 2022).

The phenomenon of trauma is also evident in Indonesia. The 2004 Aceh tsunami, which claimed more than 230,000 lives, left a profound psychological impact on survivors. WHO data, cited by DetikNews (2005), indicates that approximately one million people affected by the tsunami experienced psychological disorders, and approximately 200,000 required psychiatric assistance due to severe trauma. Symptoms ranged from difficulty sleeping, high anxiety, difficulty socializing, and even suicide attempts. Research also shows that adolescent survivors experienced long-term behavioral changes, such as withdrawal, emotional disturbances, and difficulty adapting. In literary studies, trauma is often used to illustrate the complexity of the human psyche. Literature serves as a medium of expression that presents psychological conditions symbolically and narratively. From Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic perspective, the understanding of trauma deepens through the concept of personality structure consisting of the id, ego,



and superego. Freud (1923) explained that the id is a basic, subconscious drive oriented towards the pleasure principle. The ego acts as a bridge between id drives and reality, while the superego represents moral values and social norms. When these three structures experience unresolved conflict, individuals can experience anxiety, mental stress, and even destructive behavior.

The conflict between the id, ego, and superego can reveal how a person copes with poorly managed emotional stress. The id's urge to immediately satisfy desires often clashes with the moral boundaries of the superego and the reality faced by the ego. This imbalance can trigger depression, anxiety, or more severe mental disorders. Freud (1923) asserted that "the ego is not master in its own house," meaning that a person's behavior is often influenced by unconscious impulses without awareness.

Through this psychoanalytic approach, traumatic experiences are understood not only as responses to past events but also as ongoing psychological conflicts that influence thoughts, behavior, and social relationships. This study applies the theory of the id, ego, and superego to analyze how trauma shapes the personalities of characters in literary works, particularly the main characters in William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*. Quentin Compson's character is the most vivid representation of psychological trauma in the novel. He exhibits various symptoms of serious mental illness, such as an obsession with time, excessive guilt, and an inability to accept the collapse of his family's honor. His life is constantly overshadowed by this lost honor and his complicated relationship with his sister, Caddy. His inability to accept this reality drives Quentin to despair, leading him to end his life.

Several previous studies have examined *The Sound and the Fury* from various angles. Feki (2015) highlighted the influence of Caddy's loss of virginity and the decline of Southern moral values on Quentin's trauma. Widiyantari & Annaningtyas (2015) discussed Faulkner's stream of consciousness narrative technique as a way to express the character's fragmented psychology. Trisulistiwati (2018) observed Quentin's

melancholic tendencies as a result of family and societal pressures. Other studies, such as Sadjadi (2022), Dallaire (2023), Sao (2024), Wu (2024), and Aziza (2025), have enriched the study, although not many have in-depth links between trauma and the conflicts of the id, ego, and superego. Therefore, this research is important to deepen our understanding of how trauma influences the formation of a character's personality through inner conflict, as well as how unresolved trauma shapes Quentin Compson's thoughts, emotions, and destructive actions.

## **II. Concepts And Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Traumatic Experiences**

Painful experiences in literary works not only serve as a setting, but also serve as a source of inner conflict that underpins the overall structure of the story. Trauma is not simply a memory of the past, but rather a mental wound that lingers, disturbing the main characters' thoughts and influencing how they interact with their environment. Caruth (1996) explains that trauma is an experience that has not been fully absorbed by the victim because of its shocking and unexpected nature, making it difficult to remember or express in ordinary words. As a result, trauma in literature often appears through disjointed plots, repetitive symbolism, and narrative styles that break down chronology all of which reflect the individual's difficulty in understanding and reassembling the traumatic event as a whole.

Furthermore, Caruth emphasizes that trauma is an experience that "recurs, not by will, but by inability to avoid it," often appearing as sudden memories and unresolved repetitions. In this context, trauma not only becomes a theme but also shapes the way the narrative is structured and conveyed. Tal (1996) states that trauma literature often breaks logical flow and linguistic norms in order to express profound suffering that is difficult to express conventionally. Techniques such as repetition, narrative gaps, and fragmentation not only reveal the character's inner wounds but also invite the reader to experience this mental turmoil emotionally. This aligns with Freud's view in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) regarding the "repetition tendency" as a



subconscious attempt to master unresolved traumatic experiences. Thus, traumatic events in literature become central to the development of the plot and the character's personality, as well as a narrative framework that depicts the impact of trauma on the reader, not only as information but also as a shocking aesthetic experience.

## **2.2. Psychological Trauma**

Psychological trauma is an emotional reaction that arises from a shocking, painful, or threatening event, and can disrupt the way a person thinks, feels, and acts. According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020), trauma can trigger anxiety, nightmares, dissociation, and even identity crises. Freud (1917) in *Mourning and Melancholia* asserted that unresolved trauma can be stored in the subconscious and give rise to psychological symptoms such as depression or melancholia. LaCapra (2001) highlights the importance of reading trauma not only as a theme in a story but also as part of the text's structure, often appearing in inconsistent narratives, repetition, and symbols of loss. Thus, trauma is not only present as content but also shapes how the text communicates with its readers.

In literary works, trauma is often depicted through breaks in the logical flow, sudden repetitions, or non-chronological sections of the story. Caruth (1996) defines trauma as a memory that is not present intact, but rather appears as a sudden interruption in the narrative a sign that the character's psychological wounds have not fully healed. Whitehead (2004) adds that literary works that depict trauma often use non-linear, reflective, and rhetorical narrative forms to depict the character's inner imbalance. In this way, trauma not only serves as a setting or theme, but also forms a fragmented reading experience, inviting the reader to experience the mental turmoil of the characters.

To understand trauma more deeply, experts distinguish several types of psychological trauma. Litz et al. (2009) define moral trauma as the mental distress that arises when someone engages in, witnesses, or fails to prevent actions that contradict their moral principles, giving rise to feelings of guilt and a

loss of meaning in life. Viktor Frankl (1963) emphasized existential trauma, namely mental suffering resulting from the loss of life's purpose, which triggers an identity crisis and feelings of alienation. Herman (1992) describes relational trauma arising from painful interpersonal interactions such as betrayal or emotional rejection. LaCapra (2001) highlights family trauma resulting from unhealthy dynamics, while Caruth (1996) discusses identity trauma that arises when someone fails to rebuild their story. Erikson (1976) adds social trauma, which arises from systemic injustice or the collapse of social structures, triggering alienation and social identity confusion.

## **2.3 Symbol**

Symbols in literary works serve to connect the characters' inner experiences with the way the story is told. In literary psychology, symbols are not merely decoration, but represent unconscious conflicts, feelings, and drives that are difficult to express directly (Abrams & Harpham, 2009). Freud (1915) explained that symbols emerge from repressed inner pressure, while Whitehead (2004) emphasized that symbols help reveal hidden trauma wounds. Through Saussure's (1916) semiotic approach, symbols are understood as signs whose meanings are culturally agreed upon and often layered. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner uses symbols to depict Quentin's traumatic conflict related to the id, ego, and superego, so that symbols function not only aesthetically beautiful but also reveal layers of the characters' psychological conflicts.

## **2.4 Theory and Method**

This study uses psychoanalytic theory to analyze the psychological trauma and inner conflict experienced by the main character in *The Sound and the Fury*. Psychoanalysis, introduced by Sigmund Freud in the early 20th century, highlights the dynamic relationship between the conscious and subconscious minds in shaping human behavior and emotional responses (Freud, 1923). In literary studies, this approach is useful for interpreting character behavior, symbolic meaning, and



story structure by highlighting inner struggles and suppressed emotions that are not directly expressed (Barry, 2009). By applying Freud's concepts of the id, ego, and superego, this study reveals how Quentin Compson's trauma emerges through an imbalance in personality structure and repressed drives. A psychoanalytic perspective suggests that literary works can reflect deep inner conflicts that emerge implicitly through symbols, irregular plots, and fragmented narratives. As Tyson (2006) and Holland (1975) suggest, this theory opens up space for readers to view literary works as reflections of hidden fears and inner conflicts that shape the content of the text and the experiences of the characters.

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method to interpret the main character's traumatic experiences through non-numerical data such as words, quotes, and symbolic scenes (Creswell, 2014; Moleong, 2013). William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) served as the primary data source, while secondary data were obtained from scholarly books, journal articles, and previous research discussing Freud's psychoanalytic theory and trauma studies. Data were collected through in-depth reading, marking important quotes, linking them to Freud's theoretical framework, and selecting textual evidence that represented Quentin Compson's inner conflict. The analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman (1994) model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. These steps help explain how trauma and psychological conflict are interwoven within the text and reflected through symbolism, narrative structure, and character actions, resulting in an in-depth picture of Quentin Compson's mental struggles.

### **III. Analysis**

This section presents the results of research and analysis on the traumatic experiences of the main character in William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic approach that emphasizes the role of personality structure in shaping an individual's reaction to psychological trauma. The character Quentin

Compson was chosen because his story shows symptoms of complex trauma such as obsession with time, moral crisis, excessive guilt, and a tendency to self-harm rooted in the collapse of family values and his relationship with his sister, Caddy. The stream of consciousness technique used by Faulkner shows Quentin's fragmented and unbalanced psychological condition, in line with Cathy Caruth's idea that trauma often appears through disconnected, repetitive, and disjointed narratives. This analysis answers the main focus of the research, namely how Quentin's trauma is depicted in the text and how the conflict of the id, ego, and superego reflects the emotional stress that forms the overall framework of the story and the inner interactions of the characters.

#### **3.1 Traumatic Experiences of The Main Character**

Quentin Compson, the main character in William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*, is a complex figure whose life is shaped by deep inner conflict. As the eldest son of the once-prominent Compson family, Quentin inherited the family's deeply rooted values of honor, but they were shattered when his younger sister, Caddy, became pregnant out of wedlock. For Quentin, Caddy's virginity was a symbol of the family's honor that should not be tarnished, so he saw this violation as the destruction of the entire family's identity. This is evident in the dialogue with his father: "In the South you are ashamed of being a virgin. Boys. Men. They lie about it. Because it means less to women," (68) which shows how these moral values became a burden that he found difficult to let go of.

Quentin's failure to accept the changes in new social values creates moral trauma that further ensnares him because he grew up in a patriarchal environment that emphasizes family honor on women's chastity, so that when Caddy violates that norm, his psychological foundation is shaken and excessive emotional ties make sibling affection become blurred with inner dependence, as depicted in the sentence "Caddy smelled like trees. We were in the trees again." (8); the peak is seen when Quentin creates a false confession about incest,





"I have committed incest," I said. "Father, I said it was I. It was not Dalton Ames." (112) which is not a fact, but a form of psychological construction of guilt and superego pressure that makes him willing to destroy himself to maintain the family's good name.

Quentin also experiences existential trauma, which is evident in his obsession with rejecting time. He attempts to stop time by destroying his father's inherited pocket watch: "I went to the dresser and took up the watch, with the face still down. I tapped the crystal on the corner of the dresser... The watch ticked on." (70). Even though the watch hands were removed, the ticking sound remained, a symbol that past trauma continues to cling to his mind. This aligns with Freud's (1920) concept of compulsion to repeat the urge to repeat traumatic experiences that have never been fully realized.

Quentin's trauma is also relational, arising from his unhealthy relationship with Caddy. He no longer sees Caddy only as a sibling, but also as the meaning of his life. When Caddy disappoints him, Quentin seems to lose his grip. The quote "Caddy smelled like trees. We were in the trees again." (8) is repeated as a symbol of the blurred connection between sibling affection and emotional dependence. According to Trisulistiwati (2018), this pattern of trauma continues to repeat itself even when they are physically separated.

Quentin's family trauma stemmed from a pessimistic father and a passive mother, causing him to lose his moral compass. His father undermined his principles, saying,

"Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature is hurting you, not Caddy." And I said, "That just words," and he said, "So is virginity." And I said, "You don't know. You can't know," and he said,

"Yes. On the instant when we come to realize that tragedy is second-hand."

(99)

while his mother said, "It's my place to suffer for my children." (176), demonstrating his failure to receive support. The absence of a

firm figure damaged Quentin's superego and added to his inner burden.

Quentin's identity trauma is reflected in the identity crisis that arises due to the loss of his grip on values in the midst of the ever-moving modern world. At Harvard, he should have found a future, but instead he carries the burden of old values that rot inside, making him feel like he has no place in the world. The symbol of the pocket watch he destroyed shows his despair in rejecting the reality of time, "I tapped the crystal on the corner of the dresser... The watch ticked on." (70). Life for him is just a shadow, seen when Quentin stares at the river and imagines death as the only end, which signifies the total collapse of his ego. In line with Caruth (1996), this trauma destroys the continuity of the self-narrative, making him lose direction, time, and purpose, to the point of making death the only 'solution'.

Quentin's social trauma stems from the alienation he feels in his new Harvard environment, which, for him, is not a space for adaptation, but rather a stage for inner destruction. There, the Southern aristocratic values he upheld no longer find a place, creating a distance between him and the modern social order. This exacerbates the clash between a conservative superego and an ego that fails to adapt. Caruth (1996) states that trauma can occur when someone loses a reference point for understanding their environment, and this is evident when Quentin is alienated, "I turned into the street and went on, but I went to the next corner before I stopped." (107). This sense of alienation manifests as a social wound that, according to LaCapra (2001), fractures Quentin's cultural and existential identity, leading to the tragic decision to end his life as a final escape from this alienation.

### **3.2 Conflict Analysis based on the Id, Ego, and Superego of the Main Character**

Quentin Compson's inner conflict in *The Sound and the Fury* reflects the relationship between the id, ego, and superego as explained by Freud. Quentin's id drive is clearly visible in his forbidden desire for Caddy, manifested through the false confession "I have committed incest," I said. "Father, I



said it was I." (112). This instinctive drive is an unconscious attempt to possess Caddy completely, even though it violates moral norms. This desire continues to suppress because the id only pursues the satisfaction of desires without regard for common sense, explaining why Quentin creates obsessive fantasies to the point of suicidal thoughts as a quick escape from pain, "I turned into the street and went on, but I went to the next corner before I stopped." (107).

Meanwhile, Quentin's ego, which should balance the desires of the id and the moral pressures of the superego, actually fails to function. This is evident from the symbol of the pocket watch he destroyed, "I tapped the crystal on the corner of the dresser... and twisted the hands off and put them in the tray. The watch ticked on." (70), which signifies his rejection of the reality of time. His weak ego makes him unable to reconcile with the changing values at Harvard, until he sinks into obsessive thoughts about family honor. His statement "Father said, 'A man is the sum of his misfortunes ; one day you'd think misfortune would get tired, but then time is your misfortune.'" (88) confirms that he continues to be trapped in past trauma with no rational way out.

Quentin's superego is shaped by the values of the Southern aristocracy that demand absolute honor and purity. When Caddy violates the norm, the superego punishes him with deep guilt, "It's not Caddy's fault. It's mine." (110). The tension between moral ideals and reality weighs on him until suicide becomes the final "redemption." The pressure of the superego is marked by the symbols of water and a ticking clock, "I held the watch. It was still ticking." (116). Thus, the unbalanced conflict between the id, ego, and superego plunges Quentin into deep trauma that culminates in self-destruction.

From this analysis, it can be concluded that Quentin Compson's tragic fate demonstrates how the balance between the id's unbridled desires, the ego's failure to mediate reality, and the superego's rigid moral demands creates a psychological tension he cannot overcome. Faulkner's narrative vividly illustrates that Quentin's trauma is not simply

the result of external events, but rather an inner conflict that destroys him from within, proving Freud's theory that when these three elements are out of balance, the individual's psyche collapses under the weight of unfulfilled feelings, repressions, and longings ultimately leading Quentin to choose death as his final exorcism.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This study shows that Quentin Compson experienced complex psychological trauma, especially moral, existential, and identity, which originated from his inability to accept changes in social norms that conflicted with patriarchal values since childhood, especially when Caddy, his sister, lost her virginity and made him feel like he had failed to maintain the family's honor.

Due to the pressure of his strong superego and his emotional bond with Caddy, Quentin creates a narrative as a form of refuge and self-sacrifice, rather than a factual confession, in order to protect his sister's honor. Faulkner emphasizes through the stream-of-consciousness technique that this confession is born of inner conflict and subconscious feelings. The conflict of id, ego, and superego makes Quentin unable to reconcile with reality, which is reflected through the symbols of the clock, the river, the forest, and the writing style. The novel emphasizes the theme of trauma through narrative and symbolism, presenting Quentin as a figure trapped in old moral norms.

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