



COURSE CODE: MAEGD 304

COURSE NAME: AMERICAN
LITERATURE

**CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND
ONLINE EDUCATION
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY**

MASTER OF ARTS

**ENGLISH
BLOCK II**



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To provide quality higher education at door step through barrier-less, flexible and open learning mode in conformity with national priority and societal need.

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- **To offer job oriented and vocational programmes in flexible terms in the line of the national and regional level demand of manpower.**
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- **To undertake various research and academic activities for furtherance of distance education in the region.**
- **To contribute to conserve and promote cultural heritage, literature, traditional knowledge and environment conducting short programmes, workshops, seminars and research in interdisciplinary field.**

MAEGD 304: American Literature I

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Published by **The Director** on behalf of the Centre for Distance and Online Education Tezpur University, Assam.

BLOCK II

MODULE III: NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE:
THE SCARLET LETTER

**UNIT 4: READING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY
AMERICAN NOVEL: *THE SCARLET LETTER* AS
AMERICAN ROMANCE**

**UNIT 5: *THE SCARLET LETTER* AS A CRITIQUE OF
AMERICAN PURITANISM**

**UNIT 6: HESTER PRYNNE AS REBEL: STUDY IN EVIL,
GUILT AND REDEMPTION**

**MODULE IV: FAULKNER: *THE SOUND
AND THE FURY***

**UNIT 7: *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*: THE TITLE AND
THE FOUR SECTIONS**

**UNIT 8: THE AMERICAN SOUTH AND *THE SOUND
AND THE FURY***

**UNIT 9: THE STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS
TECHNIQUE IN *THE SOUND AND THE FURY***

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COURSE INTRODUCTION: BLOCK II

The aim of this Course is to acquaint students with the Americanness of American Literature, by bringing out its goals and anxieties. For this reason, a study of its background - including the early American experience, the settlement of people from Europe, the struggle between European culture and the American environment, and the subsequent search for an American cultural identity – is necessary. Major issues and influences in the shaping of American Literature will be addressed. For this purpose, seminal texts will be examined in depth to set American literary culture in a context.

This Course covers a wide range of texts as well as issues pertaining to the growth of the American identity in literature.

Block II deals with two of the most read and wellknown authors of American fiction Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Faulkner. We have engaged two modules to discuss the fictions written by them feeling the necessity of a details reading of various issues by our learners for an indepth knowledge of the novels.

Module III: Hawthorne: *The Scarlet Letter* has three units in it. ***Unit 4: Reading the nineteenth century American novel: The Scarlet Letter as American Romance*** will discuss the emergence of novel in nineteenth century in America which is also an era of the formation of the nation- the creation of an American identity. The novels produced in America offered a romantic view. Gradually there arose the concept of the 'Great American novel', that is to say, novel which adequately reflects the spirit of the age and becomes a national symbol. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is one of the classic texts of American literature and an important example of the American romance. In this unit we are not only giving you an elaborate details of the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* but also tried to see the novel as an ideal American Romance with a heroine like Hester Prynne. ***Unit 5: The Scarlet Letter as a Critique of American Puritanism*** presents through the novel a vivid social, moral and religious set up of seventeenth century Puritan America. The society strictly adheres to Puritan norms and beliefs which restricts a free movement of its beings, specially women. In this novel, Hawthorne goes on to analyze

and critique the essential hypocrisy in the Puritan way of life, how the flaws in this system of belief lead them to be ruthlessly rigorous about some practices which in turn lead to moral corruption on their part. **Unit 6: Hester Prynne as rebel: study in evil, guilt and redemption** tries to examine through its protagonist, Hester Prynne, the predicament of the free thinking individual pitched against a patriarchal society. Moral questions relating to evil, sin, guilt etc. are critically examined in this unit.

Module IV: Faulkner: *The Sound and the Fury* deals with the American South and the decadence which had set in by the turn of the twentieth century. The novel, using the stream of consciousness technique, offers the monologues of three brothers in the first three sections, followed by a fourth section given to the character Dilsey, controlled by the author. Drawing upon Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the novel shows the collapse of a Southern family and tradition, and ends up by suggesting that there is more sense in the idiot, Benjy's, sense of order. **Unit 7: *The Sound and the Fury: The Title and the Four sections***, will elaborate on the source and background of this great classic of American Literature. In this unit you will also be acquainted with the Four Sections that the novel is constituted of, namely, April 7, 1928, June 2, 1910, April 6, 1928 and April 8, 1928. **Unit 8: *The American South and The Sound and the Fury*** sees *The Sound and the Fury* against the backdrop of the post civil war American South, also known as the antebellum South. This unit would also introduce you to the Southern American culture and the perspectives it offers in the novel. It would also give a brief account of the myth of the Old South which has contributed largely to both the physical and social set up of the region. Faulkner in this novel draws a parallel between the fall of the Compson family and that of the Old South which finds attention in this unit. **Unit 9: *The stream of consciousness technique in The Sound and the Fury*** will acquaint you with one of the important experimental techniques used in Modernist literature, the Stream of Consciousness, first used by William James in his *Principles of Psychology*. Side by side the unit will explore how successfully Faulkner used this technique to unfold the psychology of the characters of his landmark novel of Stream of Consciousness. **Unit 10: *The Sound and the Fury: The Story of the Compson Brothers*** will elaborate on the disintegration of the Compson family and the Old Southern order. The story is told from the point of view of the three Compson brothers told in different style of narration. Different responses and narrative

manner not only places the plot in a critical phase, but also creates curiosity and anxiety amongst thinking readers of this novel.

Though best effort has been made to present a detail storyline of the novels, it is always expected from the learners to read the texts which will enable them to grow substantially good knowledge of these classics

MODULE III: NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE: *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Unit 4: Reading the Nineteenth Century American Novel: The Scarlet Letter as an American Romance

UNIT STRUCTURE

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Learning Objectives
- 4.3 Nineteenth Century American literature
 - 4.3.1 Formation of a National identity
 - 4.3.2 The Novel
- 4.4 American romance
 - 4.4.1. Romance
 - 4.4.2 Myths
 - 4.4.3. Literature
- 4.5. *The Scarlet Letter*: The Plot in Brief
 - 4.5.1. As an American Romance
 - 4.5.2. Hester as a romantic heroine
- 4.6. Summing Up
- 4.7 Assessment Questions
- 4.8 References and Recommended Readings

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Nineteenth century American literature saw the emergence of literary romance as a genre. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is one of the classic texts of American literature and an important example of the American romance. The plot is set in seventeenth century Puritan Boston. The narrative involves Hester Prynne, a married woman who commits adultery and is punished by the society by making her wear the letter "A" which stands for adultery. Hester's dealings with her husband Roger Chillingworth, her lover Arthur Dimmesdale and the rest of the Puritan community form the core of the story. In this novel, the author raises important questions relating to evil, sin and guilt.

The novel can be termed romance as it mixes the realistic with the supernatural, esoteric events.

4.2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This unit aims at introducing you to the literary scenario of nineteenth century America with particular reference to romance. Also, the unit will discuss features of the romance genre as present in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- have a brief idea of the nineteenth century American literary scene
- know something about the genre of romance
- analyse *The Scarlet Letter* as a typical example of American Romance

4.3 NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

4.3.1 FORMATION OF A NATIONAL IDENTITY

The nineteenth century in America is an era of the formation of the nation- the creation of an American identity. The previous era had seen the American War of Independence, a war aimed at attaining an independent status of America, free from that of the British colony. The War resulted in the victory of America. While political leaders were looking for new forms of governance, writers and artists started forging new models for their craft. All these lead to the creation of a uniquely American identity. American literature consisted of symbols which would aptly reflect the American sentiment. In order to do away with the sense of cultural belatedness, writers and philosophers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman came up with philosophical treatises, essays, epic poems etc. which would then go on to form part of the country's mythology.

America, unlike Great Britain with its meadows and lush green countryside, had a rocky terrain. The first settlers of the New World still had fresh in their minds the comforts back home and were struggling with the new landscape. Life in the New world consisted in a lot of speculation- speculation

as to what is there beyond the frontier, how would life be tomorrow, and also moral speculations relating to the code of conduct and obligations in a rugged terrain. Therefore literature had to aptly describe the struggles of people in new rough terrain. The realistic genre which was successful in England would not be apt to describe the American people's religious dealings, their taming of a rough terrain, and exploration of new lands and water masses. Thus emerged the genre of romance. It is in this genre that the writers understood they would be able to offer people fantastic stories of courage, sea fare, mysterious happenings relating to the occult and so on. The romance was apt for a group of people whose lives in an alien world devoid of comforts were both dreary and adventurous at once.

4.3.2 THE NOVEL

The first half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of the novel as a major literary form, both in England and in America. While in England, most novels were realistic, the novels produced in America offered a romantic view. Gradually there arose the concept of the Great American novel, that is to say, a novel which adequately reflects the spirit of the age and becomes a national symbol. The term "The Great American novel" was first used by American civil war novelist John William de Forest. Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of The Mohicans*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are the great American novels of the nineteenth century. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Earnest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* etc. are some examples of the same from the twentieth century. These novels have themes that are unique to the American landscape-race, slavery, the American Dream, Puritanism, American oceanic explorations etc.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Which century marks a deliberate attempt on the part of scholars, statesmen and writers to forge an American identity?

2. Name two American philosophers from the nineteenth century.

3. How was America different from England?

4. Which genre of writing was America's answer to the realistic novel in England?

5. What do you understand by the term "Great American Novel"?

6. Name four Great American Novels

4.4 AMERICAN ROMANCE

4.4.1 ROMANCE

Romance is a fictional genre which includes both real and fantastical elements. The setting in a romance is often real, with the characters visualising or engaging in supernatural events. According to Hawthorne, romance is “an oscillation between fancy and reality.” (citation)

4.4.2. MYTHS

American Romance owes in large part to the myths of the nation. While the romance novels codify the American national symbols, they also draw from the myths of origin and other myths that the first group of settlers gave themselves. America desperately wanted to sever its former historical and cultural ties with England. However, America with only a history of a few hundred years was facing strong competition from England with a history of over a thousand years. The Americans therefore did not have substantial past to fall back on. In order to make up for this lack of history, the Americans gave themselves myths. These myths contained stories of the origin of the American nation, the American work ethic, duties and moral responsibilities of the American nation and so on.

The Americans believe that they are exceptional. This concept is best explained by the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville in his work, *Democracy in America*:


The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one. Their strictly Puritanical origin, their exclusively commercial habits, even the country they inhabit, which seems to divert their minds from the pursuit of science, literature, and the arts, the proximity of Europe, which allows them to neglect these pursuits without relapsing into barbarism, a thousand special causes, of which I have only been able to point out the most important, have singularly concurred to fix the mind of the American upon purely practical

objects.” (Tocqueville 42)

This notion of exceptionalism led the American people to think that they are people without any past. Their life on the rough American terrain is a new life where they are to start from scratch. They saw themselves as children of Adam who were to recreate Eden out of the rocky terrain with their hard work. The New World was apparently the Zion for these chosen people of God and represented limitless possibilities.

The Puritan work ethic called for hard work, discipline and austerity. The impetus for hard work also came from their belief in Predestination and the Elect. To determine who the elect were, their work habits were closely followed. This led the Puritans to work as hard as possible so to confirm their status as elect. This work ethic eventually became the national ethos of the American nation and manifested itself in the American dream. It is the dream of a better, richer and happier life. The Americans believe that every American can attain success with help of hard work. This work ethic is also the reason behind the settlers venturing out to alien lands, pushing the frontier and also its oceanic explorations

LET US STOP AND THINK

	<p>Predestination</p> <p>The Puritans believed in the concept of Predestination. According to this belief, their life on earth and afterwards was predestined to be happy or miserable. Also some of them were predestined to go to heaven and others to hell after death, irrespective of their actions. This means that no matter what their deeds, good or bad, this would not affect their after-life. Being the children of Adam and Eve, they had already fallen from grace and could not, in any way attain it back. However, some of them, known as the Elect were chosen by God for attaining salvation.</p>
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The Puritans believed in devils as much as they believed in gods. Any kind of suspicious behaviour in an individual would immediately be termed the work of the devil. The Puritans believed in witches- people who assisted the devils. The Salem witch trials were an example of how far the superstitions could lead them.

All these factors suggest the importance of fantasy in the American way of life. These imaginative aspects of the Americans could find their fullest expression only in romance. This led to the emergence of romance as an important mode in novels.

4.4.3 LITERATURE

The nineteenth century saw the growth of romance as a genre. Writers like Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Charles Brockden Brown etc form the corpus of nineteenth century American romances. The genre became so popular in the nineteenth century that the terms “novel” and “romance” were used interchangeably, as observed by Nina Baym.

Most of Hawthorne works can be placed in the category of romanticism especially dark romanticism which emphasizes on the dark or negative side of humanity such as evil, guilt, hypocrisy, punishment, redemption etc. It was part of an anti-transcendental movement popular in the nineteenth century. The most representative writers of the movement were Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe.

	CHECK YOUR PROGRESS
1. What are the features of the romance genre?	
<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	
2. Name two myths of the American nation.	
<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	

3. Why did America need its own set of myths?

4. Which writers wrote in the romance tradition?

5. What do you understand by the term “Dark Romanticism”?

6. Who were the Dark Romantic writers?

4.5 THE SCARLET LETTER: THE PLOT IN BRIEF

CHAPTER I – THE PRISON-DOOR:

The first scene of the novel sets in Boston in the seventeenth century. A crowd of grievous looking and cheerless people have gathered outside a wooden heavy oak door of a prison which is studded with iron spikes. The founders of new colonies may possess good human qualities, but their first necessity is to build a prison and a cemetery. After fifteen or twenty years, the growing rusting

of the prison iron and the gloomy colour of the wooden building create an overall appearance of decay and dullness. Only the rosebush that grows outside the building brings the difference in the atmosphere as it symbolizes liveliness and kindness of nature that can relieve the sorrows and weakness.

CHAPTER II – THE MARKET-PLACE:

The curious eyes of the Puritan people are waiting for the opening of the prison's door and viciously discussing about Hester Prynne's sin and its punishment. In the mean time, Hester Prynne, a tall, beautiful woman, wearing a gown, on the breast elaborately embroidered in gold thread the letter "A", carrying a three month old infant in her arms, emerges from the prison. The town beadle made the way for her through the crowd to the scaffold where she will be publicly condemned. From the gossips, whisperings of the crowd, it is come to know that she has committed adultery and as a penalty she is led to the scaffold. All the men, women even the school boys taunt and ridicule her. Standing alone on it in shame, the flashes of her past life in Old England come in front of her eyes and suddenly the infant's cry brings her back to the reality.

CHAPTER III – THE RECOGNITION:

In the crowd, Hester suddenly recognizes a small deformed man dressed in a strange combination of civilized and savage clothing with an Indian man. He also makes gestures to her and asks a stranger about her sin and penalty. As soon as he knows all the things and that Hester refuses to reveal the identity of the infant's father and as a punishment she has been sentenced to stand on the scaffold for three hours and must wear the scarlet letter for lifetime, he disappears in the crowd.

The three religious clergymen, scholars Governor Bellingham, Reverend Wilson and Reverend Dimmesdale demand Hester to speak the name of the infant's father and not to be silent out of sympathy for him. But Hester adamantly refuses it. Reverend Wilson delivers a sermon on sin and Hester, with the scarlet letter, goes back to the prison.

CHAPTER IV-THE INTERVIEW:

Hester's husband, Roger Chillingworth enters the prison as a physician and urges Hester to tell the name of her lover. When Hester refuses to tell, he

says that she will reveal neither his lover's identity nor their own relationship and warns her that he will revenge.

CHAPTER V-HESTER AT THE NEEDLE:

Hester's confining years in prison come to an end and there begins a new life in Boston that is more challenging for her. Her life with her child as all alone without any social status and honour and her only way of living is needlework. She is also doing charity for the poor, but they, on the contrary, insult her. The gestures, words, murmurings, expressions even the silence of the people towards Hester indicate that she has no place in the society. Even the children keep distance from her as she is a horrible thing. In the midst of such intolerable torture and dreadful agony, the scarlet letter constantly reminds her sin and shame.

CHAPTER VI-PEARL:

Hester's daughter is named Pearl as she is Hester's only treasure. Pearl has inherited all the beauty, attitude and temperament from her mother. But Hester fears for Pearl's robust, desperate and disobedient behavior and thinks that she is a demon's offspring because she is the consequence of her sin. The enmity and hatred towards people grows in Pearl's heart because the people often taunt and ridicule her and her mother. The object that captures most her attention is the scarlet letter on her mother's chest. Hester fears more when Pearl denies having a Heavenly father.

CHAPTER VII-THE GOVERNOR'S HALL:

When there is news comes to the ears of Hester that Pearl will be taken away from Hester, she goes to the Governor's Bellingham's Hall with Pearl to find out the truth and to deliver the gloves. On the way, some children taunt them throwing mud and Pearl also replies them with threatening gestures and screaming. Pearl is fascinated by the structure of the mansion and its armor. Hester is horrified to see that the scarlet letter dominates the reflection on the armor.

CHAPTER VIII-THE EFF-CHILD AND THE MINISTER:

The Reverend John Wilson, Reverend Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth, in the Governor's hall, tell that Pearl should be taken away from

Hester. Hester replies that Pearl should be with her to learn lesson from her shame. At this, to test Pearl's knowledge, Mr. Wilson asks Pearl who makes her and she replies with ignorance that she has plucked off the roses that grow outside the prison. Hester says that Pearl is given to her by God and although she is her happiness as well as torture, she is her life. Dimmesdale also persuades the Governor to accept what Hester says. Finally they accept it and Hester leaves with Pearl. Then Mistress Hibbins, Governor's sister invites her to witchcraft and Hester refuses by saying that she still has Pearl.

CHAPTER IX- THE LEECH:

Hiding his past life, Chillingworth establishes himself as a good physician in Boston city. People are initially grateful to him, when he urges the authority to live with Dimmesdale to cure his severe health problems. Thus Chillingworth gets an opportunity to scrutinize not only his disease but also his character and his life. Later, Chillingworth is doubted to appear as a devil for Dimmesdale.

CHAPTER X-THE LEECH AND HIS PATIENT:

Chillingworth desperately and constantly investigates every detail of Dimmesdale's life. One day, they are in a conversation interrupted by the voices of Hester and Pearl outside the hall. Noticing them, Pearl pulls Hester away and says that the Black Man has already gotten the minister and he must not capture her. Dimmesdale agrees with Chillingworth that it is better Hester lives with her sin openly rather than concealed. Chillingworth tries to go to the root by suggesting that Dimmesdale can be cured only when he will reveal everything to him. The minister says that he will not reveal his secret to "an earthly physician". After a few days, Chillingworth pulls Dimmesdale's vestment, when he is sleeping and is shocked finding the clue and becomes very happy.

CHAPTER XI-THE INTERIOR OF A HEART:

To take revenge, Chillingworth now starts to torment Dimmesdale persistently and wants to make him suffer more and more as he can. As a result, Dimmesdale grows weaker both physically and mentally that he wants to confess his sin of committing adultery with Hester publicly. Unable to bear his burden of suffering and to confess openly, he begins to give himself by torturing himself with a whip, taking fasts and staying awake by mediating about his sin with

vigils. And on one of such nights, Dimmesdale leaves the house in the attire of clerical cloths.

CHAPTER XII-THE MINISTER'S VIGIL:

On that night, Dimmesdale goes to the scaffold where Hester stood with Pearl seven years ago. Standing on it, out of suffering, he cries aloud and sees Hester and Pearl returning from Governor Winthrop's deathbed. They also join him on the scaffold and Pearl asks him if he will stand there with them on the next day and as Dimmesdale replies he will on the great judgment day, a sudden light in the shape of "A" shines the sky. Meanwhile, Chillingworth appears and Dimmesdale asks Hester about his true identity, but she remains silent. On next morning, the sexton returns Dimmesdale one of his gloves which is found on the scaffold and also asks about a meteor in the shape of "A" that has been fallen last night.

CHAPTER XIII-ANOTHER VIEW OF HESTER:

Hester now becomes a changed woman. Not only that, her position in the society is also changed. Her scarlet "A" no longer stands for "Adultery" but for "Ability". She is admired for her courage to bear her shame alone. But, on the other hand, Dimmesdale has suffered amply and Hester decides to help him.

CHAPTER XIV-HESTER AND THE PHYSICIAN:

One day Hester and Pearl encounter Chillingworth who informs Hester that the authority allows her to remove the scarlet letter and Hester says that it is Divine Providence not human authority can remove it. Chillingworth admits that he is now a completely transformed person of evilness. He releases Hester from her promise of concealing his identity from Dimmesdale.

CHAPTER XV-HESTER AND PEARL:

Chillingworth's evilness makes Hester to hate him, although it is a sin. Assuming the appearance of a mermaid, Pearl uses eelgrass to make the shape of an "A" placed on her chest like that of her mother. She asks Hester about the meaning of the scarlet letter continuously. Irritating by it, Hester tells her that she wears it because of its golden thread. Not satisfying with her answer, for several days, Pearl asks about it and the reason of Dimmesdale's habit of holding his hand over his heart.

CHAPTER XVI-A FOREST WALK:

Hester and Pearl go to the forest to meet Dimmesdale to tell about the identity of Chillingworth. Pearl tells Hester that she has overheard some women discussing that Hester's scarlet letter is the mark of the Black Man and asks her about his identity. Hester replies that she met him once in her life and the scarlet letter is his mark. Pearl again asks that if the reason of Dimmesdale's holding his hand over his heart is the Black Man's mark on his chest too. And suddenly Dimmesdale emerges.

CHAPTER XVII-PASTOR AND HIS PARISHONER:

Finally Hester and Dimmesdale can meet and talk with each other, while Hester tells him about the identity of Chillingworth. Dimmesdale reacts suddenly with anger and condemns her for his suffering. Hester begs him to forgive her and tries to console him. Eventually Dimmesdale forgives her, realizing Chillingworth is a demon, hypocrite, doing the bigger sin than them. Now Dimmesdale worries that knowing Hester's revelation of his secret, Chillingworth can expose them publicly.

CHAPTER XVIII-A FLOOD OF SUNSHINE:

Hester, Dimmesdale and Pearl will go to Europe; such thoughts invigorate as well as make both Hester and Dimmesdale happy. Hester throws the scarlet letter and becomes blissful because Dimmesdale and Pearl will be able to know one another as the father and the daughter.

CHAPTER XIX-THE CHILD AT THE BROOK-SIDE:

Hester calls Pearl to join her and Dimmesdale; Pearl, noticing the empty place of Hester's chest, refuses to approach them. Then Hester again places the scarlet letter on her chest; Pearl comes and kisses her and the scarlet letter. Pearl asks Dimmesdale if he will stand with them in public and Hester replies that he will do it in future. Dimmesdale hesitantly kisses Pearl on her forehead to appease her; but she surprisingly goes to the brook and washes off it.

CHAPTER XX-THE MINISTER IN A MAZE:

Leaving the forest, Dimmesdale becomes a new, energetic man and thinks that the decision of moving to Europe will be better for his ill health. Moreover, it is Election time that can give him an opportunity to end his career with honour. As he passes, Dimmesdale ignores an elderly woman of the church,

a young lady and finally holds back from teaching wicked words to some children. Then he encounters Mistress Hibbins who admires his way of covering his true feelings during the day and tells that she will meet him in the forest in the night. Reaching home, Dimmesdale is offered some medicines by Chillingworth which he refuses to take and begins to write his Election Sermon.

CHAOTER XXI-THE NEW ENGLAND HOLIDAY:

Hester and Pearl watch a grand procession of Election, while Pearl irritates Hester by asking if the minister will stand with them in public. However, Hester thinks about her future life with Dimmesdale. But her expectation is smashed away as the captain of the ship informs her that the ship needs a physician and so Chillingworth will join them. At a distance, Chillingworth smiles mischievously at her.

CHAPTER XXII-THE PROCESSION:

In the procession, Dimmesdale appears as an energetic and a changed person that Pearl cannot recognize him and Hester feels surprise. In the mean time, Mistress Hibbins meets Hester and Pearl and tells that she knows that Dimmesdale hides his sin. At this moment, Hester hears Dimmesdale's voice full of sadness and sympathy giving his Sermon. Pearl brings a message from Chillingworth to Hester that he has secured the approval of journey for himself and Dimmesdale. Suddenly Hester realizes that that the people stare at her in the market place.

CHAPTER XXIII-THE REVELATION OF THE SCARLET LETTER

After Dimmesdale's Sermon, the crowds, inspired by his words, shout to give him a tribute. Dimmesdale becomes weak, hardly walks and at last with the help of Hester, stands on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl. Chillingworth wants to stop him. But Dimmesdale scolds him, calls Hester and Pearl and confesses his guilt. He tears his garment and people stare at him and become horrified. Hester asks him if they will live their afterlives together and Dimmesdale says that God will decide it and he dies.

CHAPTER XXIV-CONCLUSION:

Most people say that they saw the scarlet letter "A" on Dimmesdale's chest and some opine that it is his own physical torture on himself, others think it is the result of Chillingworth's poisonous medicines. After Dimmesdale's

death, within a year, Chillingworth dies leaving a huge amount of wealth for Pearl. After his death, Hester and Pearl disappear. But many years later, suddenly Hester returns alone to live in the cottage wearing the scarlet letter and does the charity work needlework again. When she dies, her grave is built next to Dimmesdale's, sharing a tombstone having the symbol of a scarlet letter "A".

4.5.1 THE NOVEL AS AN AMERICAN ROMANCE

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is a classic example of an American romance. Hawthorne has skilfully fused realistic and fantastic elements in the novel. The characters in the novel frequently claim to perceive unrealistic events. The lives of these characters and in fact, the society around them are to a great extent affected by these events.

The setting of *The Scarlet Letter* in Puritan Boston paves the way for the interplay of romantic and realistic elements. The people in this society form the first group of settlers in an alien land. These are people that engage in an everyday struggle with the harsh conditions and wilderness trying to tame the rugged landscape. These struggles combined with their religious beliefs have led them to live an austere life. With little scope for creative and artistic diversions, the Puritans channelized their imagination to theological myths of Predestination, fall etc. Any unnatural happening was ascribed to either the will of God or the working of the devil. Any person not following the code of conduct was termed as the agent of devil- the witch. In this novel too we find the people using the divine will as accountable for the punishment that has befallen on Hester. She has committed adultery and therefore, according to the divine will, merits punishment. Similarly, when Hester lives in complete seclusion, without any human contact, she is thought of as a witch. Parents would not allow their children to mix up with Pearl, who again was thought of as a little devil.

Even Hester is affected by the Puritan concepts of devil. When she sees the magnified image of Pearl on the glass at the minister's place, for a minute she visualises Pearl as an imp or evil. She thinks for a moment that Pearl might indeed be the embodiment of the evil, that other people had been talking of all along.

The presence of a real witch in the novel is often mentioned. Pearl tells Dimmesdale that he had sold his soul to Mrs. Higgins, a witch in the locality. Witch hunting was prevalent in the seventeenth century Puritan society and the Salem Witch trials between 1692 and 1693 bear tangible evidences of this notorious practice.

Other romantic elements pointed at in the novel are the visualising of the letter A in the sky, as if the entire cosmos were reminding Dimmesdale of his adulterous act and asking him to confess.

Again there is a mention of the radiance that Pearl emits. Pearl looks like a bundle of light. Hester notices that sunlight follows only Pearl but not her. It is a sign that Pearl remains untainted by the sin that her mother is guilty of.

Also, the last scene showing Dimmesdale confession is dream-like. Dimmesdale reveals the letter A, but whether the letter is carved on his chest or is actually a mark that he feels in his heart which has borne the guilt all along is not clear.

4.5.2. HESTER AS THE ROMANTIC HEROINE

Hester fits in to the description of a romantic hero/ine. A Romantic hero is one who refuses to restrict herself/himself to the norms formed by the society, is opposed to tradition, is often amoral, lives in isolation being rejected by the society. The rebellious attitude of these romantic heroes does create repugnance in the reader, but instead in turn becomes an emulated figure.

Hester represents the freedom that the Puritan society is opposed to. By committing the very act of adultery in a rigid Puritan society, she gives out a message that she does not have qualms in going against the norms of the society for what she believes to be right. Going by the conversation between her and her husband, it can be understood that her husband had married her at a time when she was not mature enough to understand her mind. Therefore she decided to pursue her happiness not caring much about the Puritan restrictions.

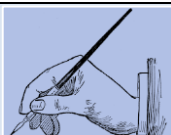
At no point in the story does she seem to be guilty of her sin. Even while standing on the scaffold facing public humiliation, Hester manages to have a

proud smile on her face. Also she beautifully embroiders the letter A which shows that the badge of shame conferred on her is an ornament of love for her. Though subtle, these are acts of rebellion nevertheless. This qualifies her for a romantic heroine.

The scene between Hester and Dimmesdale in the forest further throws light on the romantic attributes of Hester. The bush or the wilderness is traditionally seen as opposed to the civilisation established by the Puritan society. The forest or wilderness represents uninhibited freedom and primitive nature which is most dreaded by the Puritan society. Hester discusses their (her and Dimmesdale's) elopement in the secrecy of the forest. She can thus be seen to represent the wild spirit of the forest calling for freedom which the Puritan society so fears. Hester exemplifies the dream of freedom on the empty land which the European settlers had seen

Freedom is at the centre of all American symbols and myths of origin. This preoccupation with freedom is what forms the crux of American romance literature. Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* seems to raise pertinent issues regarding the freedom of the individual. Hester according to the romantic view seems entirely innocent. Hawthorne in this novel by presenting Hester in a sympathetic light and as a victim of the callous Puritan society questions the traditional notions of sin and evil. While traditional depiction of Hester would have been entirely dark, more of a type than an individual, Hawthorne's presents Hester as a human showing her vulnerabilities and her

good nature. This absolves Hester of the sin of adultery to some extent. Hawthorne espouses freedom of the individual as against the restrictions of the society in this novel.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How does Hester interpret Pearl's magnified image on the mirror?

2. Who is the witch mentioned in the novel?

3. When did the Salem Witch Trials take place?

4. What happens in the last scene of *The Scarlet Letter*?

5. What do you mean by the term “Romantic hero”?

6. Is Hester a romantic heroine?

4.6 SUMMING UP

Nineteenth century American literature consisted mainly of romance novels. These were works of fiction with actual realistic settings combined with fantastic events. The process formation of American identity in this period laid to the creation of American national symbols, myths and stories. These provided the impetus for the growth of the romance genre. The terms “romance” and “novel” came to be used interchangeably in this period. The Great American novels consisted mainly of the romances. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* exemplifies characteristics of the romance genre, mixing real and fantastic events. Also in the treatment of religion, sin and evil, the novel can be neatly classified in the romance genre.



4.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. How was nineteenth century American literature affected by the formation of a national identity in the country?
2. In what ways is the genre of romance related to the myths of the nation?
3. Discuss *The Scarlet Letter* as an American Romance.
4. How do you see the role of Hester as a heroine in *The Scarlet Letter*?



4.8. REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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UNIT 5: THE SCARLET LETTER AS A CRITIQUE OF AMERICAN PURITANISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Learning Objectives
- 5.3. Puritanism
 - 5.3.1 Puritanism in England
 - 5.3.2 Puritanism in America
- 5.4 Hawthorne and Puritanism
- 5.5 *The Scarlet Letter* and Puritanism
 - 5.5.1 The Setting
 - 5.5.2 Critique of Puritanism
 - 5.5.2.1. The Society
 - 5.5.2.2. Children
 - 5.5.2.3. Attitude to Women: Patriarchy
- 5.6. Summing up
- 5.7 Assessment Questions
- 5.8 References and Recommended Readings

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The Scarlet Letter is set in seventeenth century Puritan America. The society strictly adheres to Puritan norms and beliefs which causes it to condemn adultery in Hester. In this novel, Hawthorne goes on to analyze and critique the essential hypocrisy in the Puritan way of life. The flaws in this system of belief lead them to be ruthlessly rigorous about some practices which in turn lead to moral corruption on their part. Hawthorne's interest in the Puritan way of life can be traced back to his Puritan ancestors who came from England to settle in Massachusetts in the United States in 1630. Moreover, his reference to the witchcraft draws from Salem witch trials (1692-1693) in American history. The

novel centers on the aspects of sin, suffering, repentance, guilt, and damnation by sketching the characters of Hester Prynne, Dimmesdale and Hester's husband Roger Chillingworth. The novel is one of the first mass-produced books in the United States. D.H. Lawrence said that there could be no more perfect work of the American imagination than *The Scarlet Letter*.

5.2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The unit aims at introducing the reader to the Puritan American society of the nineteenth century in context of *The Scarlet Letter*. By the end of this unit, readers will be able to:

- know Puritanism, its beliefs and history
- understand the Puritanical scene in nineteenth century America
- examine the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* as it unfolds against this backdrop
- analyse the critique of the Puritan strain in this novel

5.3 PURITANISM

Puritanism refers to a religious movement in the late 16th and 17th centuries to bring certain reforms to the Church of England under Queen Elizabeth I. The word "Puritan" derives from its adherents' desire to "purify" the church of Catholicism, and by implication, the society of its corruption. Later, it became a national movement which contributed both to Civil War in England and to the founding of colonies in America as working types of the Puritan way of life.

5.3.1 PURITANISM IN ENGLAND

Puritanism in England was lead by Protestant leaders like Thomas Cromwell who sought to drain the Church of England in Henry VIII's time of its Catholic remnants. The Puritans were insistent on removing the corruption inherent in the Catholic churches and the indulgences of the Pope. They wanted to do away with the Papist order. Puritanism is one of the sects of Protestantism, the other being Presbyterianism. The Protestant movement was spearheaded by

Martin Luther and John Calvin. The following were the beliefs of the Protestant leaders:

- The word of God is already present in the Bible and other scriptures. Therefore mediation of the Pope is unnecessary
- The Papal order is the root cause of all the corruption inherent in the church
- The spirit of God as believed to be present in the wine and bread of the Eucharist is a myth

Elizabeth I was more or less supportive of the Puritans and even urged them to attack Catholic churches of Spain leading to what is known as Spanish Civil War. The Protestants saw their victory in the war as a sign of the support of God (Bremer 9). While the Presbyterians could incorporate some of the Catholic elements in their religion, the Puritans insisted on the removal of anything remotely Catholic. For example they wanted the ministers to pray extemporaneously rather than using the Book of Common Prayer. (Bremer 8). In the reign of James I, the Puritans saw that some of the Catholic practices were brought back. This led them to hold underground meetings and privately practice their belief. James I was succeeded by Charles I whose policies were less tolerant of the Puritan practices. That was when a large number of Protestants started migrating to the New World (America). The growing dissatisfaction between the royalty and the Puritans led to the Civil War.

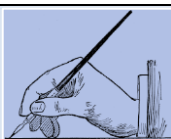
5.3.2. PURITANISM IN AMERICA

In 1630 the Puritans started arriving in America. The first group of immigrants had landed upon a rocky barren land. They saw themselves as children of Adam in the Promised Land which they were to turn into Eden with their hard work. Also they believed that the land was empty, that is, devoid of inhabitants. Only later, they came to know that there were other tribes who they called Indian. They imagined a frontier between themselves and that of the Indians and initially spent a lot of time fighting them off. The people formed a system of belief of their own, distinct from the Church of England and gave themselves a few myths. The following were the important features of the Puritan belief in New England:

- Fall: The Puritans believed themselves to be the children of Adam and Eve who had sinned against God and fallen from grace. The entire humanity, therefore, was sinful by nature.
- Predestination: The destiny of each of them was fixed by God and could not be changed through any work, good or evil.
- Elect: God, however, had selected a few, whom he would want to save with his grace
- Exceptionalism: The Puritans who landed up in the New World were exceptional in the sense that they were given a second chance by God to work up the barren land and transform it into an Eden like world.

Puritanism eventually became a way of life rather than a system of religious beliefs. The Puritans led an austere life. The following are the features of Puritan society in America:

- The Puritans made it a point to pray and read the scriptures everyday
- Drunkenness was prohibited; drinking wasn't
- Sexual intercourse outside of marriage was forbidden. The idea was to engage in sex for a blissful marriage , not lust
- Blood sports were prohibited
- Too much time should not be spent idly; they were insistent on hard work



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Why did the Puritans flee England?

2. What kind of life did the Puritans live?

2. What do you mean by Predestination?

5.4. HAWTHORNE AND PURITANISM

Nathaniel Hawthorne's interest in the Puritan way of life owes much to his Puritan ancestry. His ancestors were amongst the first settlers who arrived in Massachusetts in early seventeenth century. Hawthorne therefore was well aware of the Puritan customs, traditions and way of life often seen as extremely austere. Most of his works focus on some aspect or the other of the Puritan American society.

Hawthorne was born on July 4, 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts in the United States. He was the second of the three children born to a sea captain, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Elizabeth Manning. He was the only son of his parents and he had two sisters. In 1630, his Puritan ancestors emigrated from England first to Dorchester and then to Salem. Being the earliest settlers Hawthorne's forefathers exerted an influence on the socio-political affairs of that society. William Hathorne and his son John Hathorne were magistrates in Salem. But when Hawthorne came to know of John Hathorne's involvement in Salem witch trials, he added the "w" to his surname so that people could not see him in the lineage of his forefathers. His reference to the witchcraft in his works threw light on the Salem witch trials (1692-1693) in American history and his ancestors' involvement in it.

The Scarlet Letter was published in 1850 which was well-received. Before it, Hawthorne wrote short stories and only one novel. His income from

writing was not enough to support his family and he was relieved when appointed at the Salem Custom House. After working for three years, in 1849,

he lost his job owing to some political reasons. His trouble did not end here. After six weeks, his mother died. He was deeply depressed and began to feel hatred towards the town. He wrote, "I detest this town so much that I hate to go out into the streets or to have people see me." Hawthorne even started writing a book in which he displayed his anger towards the people of Salem, replacing it in the book as the hypocritical Puritan society. Here, he poured down his own experiences in The Custom house job at Salem, Massachusetts during the years from 1642 to 1649. This book was the novel entitled *The Scarlet Letter*. After his wife, Sophia's reading of the novel, Hawthorne wrote that "I broke her heart and sent her to bed with a grievous headache, which I look up on as a triumphant success".

5.5 PURITANISM AND THE SCARLET LETTER

5.5.1 SETTING

The Scarlet Letter is set in the seventeenth century Boston Puritan society. The Puritan society of the seventeenth had a strict moral code. The moral code to be followed is stated out in the Ten Commandments. Anyone who dared to violate the law would merit severe punishment. Adultery, as being an expression of illegitimate desires was also punishable. Hester was accused of adultery and therefore she has to wear the letter "A" around her neck as a badge of shame. Also she is seen as boycotted by the rest of the society.

5.5.2 CRITIQUE OF PURITANISM

5.5.2.1. SOCIETY

In *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne shows Puritan legalism as the most omnipotent aspect of the society which is too harsh, strict, confining, forceful and unsympathetic. Right from the first chapter, Hawthorne subtly directs his critique against the overall social setup. The Puritan society in the novel had terribly mixed the secular and religious and religious domain. Adultery after all, is a moral crime and not punishable by the secular law. In sexually engaging with another man, Hester had wronged only her husband, not the rest of the

society. But the Puritan society punishes her in accordance with its religious laws which are frequently confused with the secular laws. The conversation between two women shows how the two domains have been mixed up in this society:

“What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of her gown, or the flesh on her forehead?” cried another female, the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self constituted judges. “This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there no law for it? Truly there is, both in the scripture and the statute book. Then let the magistrates who have made it of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray” (Hawthorne 38)

This conversation brings to light a very important aspect of the Puritan society, which was ruthlessness. This brutality was the natural outcome of the austere life in a God- fearing society which frequently insisted on the control of the senses.

Most of the beliefs and rituals of the early Puritan American society have been derived in large part from the Old Testament. While The New Testament views God as all loving and merciful, The Old Testament sees God as angry and vengeful who would rightly punish the sinners. The adoption of this kind of view makes the Puritans God-fearing rather than God-loving people. This also makes them cold blooded, jealous and cruel and believers in retributive justice, or justice without mercy. The condemnation of adultery is also based on The Old Testament-(“Thou shalt not commit adultery”- The Scripture).However, the reaction of these women springs more out of jealousy of Hester’s liberty rather than out of a moral concern. Nevertheless, this jealousy can also be attributed to the Puritan society’s internalization of the retributive justice of the Old Testament.

LET US STOP AND THINK



Salem Witch trials

Puritan European settlement in America: The early Puritans who first came to America in 1620 founded a precarious colony in Plymouth, Massachusetts. These first settlers

were followed ten years later by a wave of Puritans that continued in the 1630s and thereafter, until, by the 1640s, New England had over 25,000 English settlers. The second group in the 1630s settled in the area of present day Boston in a community named Massachusetts Bay Colony

In the very first sentence of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne makes his critique of the Puritan society very clear. He describes the townspeople standing in front of the prison door:

“A throng of bearded men, in sad colored garments and gray, steeple crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes.”
(Hawthorne 35)

The phrase “sad colored garments” in the passage particularly refers to how the gloom pervading the Puritan society is also reflected in its clothing, often without colour and monochromatic.

Hawthorne is also critical of the overall setup of the Puritan society which needs prison houses and cemeteries more than anything else. The New World was initially meant to be a place of exile wherein the convicts of England would be sent for as punishment. This led to the creation of a large number of prison houses in the colony. The first settlers in the New World met with this system and decided to incorporate it into their own social setup. Hawthorne writes:

“ The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of prison.” (Hawthorne 35)

The reference to Utopia is sarcastic, as the actual society in the Puritan New England stands in contrast to that of the happy Utopian vision which the settlers had before they landed on this land. Hawthorne wants to drive home the fact that a society which thinks of prison houses and cemeteries as its utmost necessities is bound to be surrounded with gloom and despair and disbelief.

The Puritan society, as presented in *The Scarlet Letter*, is full of contradictions and hypocrisies. Arthur Dimmesdale, a priest entrusted with upholding the Puritan morals himself engages in adultery. While Hester is standing on the scaffold to face public humiliation, Dimmesdale as her pastor asks her to confess the name of her partner, without himself coming forward to share her humiliation. Again her husband, Chillingworth accuses Hester of committing a sin and cheating while also asking her not to reveal him as her husband. Hawthorne also points to how the society can bend its own rules when it comes to gaining something. The same society which condemns Hester and ostracizes her also uses her skill of sewing and weaving for the community. The hypocritical nature of the Puritan society is, in fact an outcome of the contradictory foundations of its theological beliefs according to which some people are saved and others doomed by God arbitrarily.

Hester does not follow the Puritan beliefs and rules and lives an isolated life apart from the society. Although she confesses her sin before the Puritan authority, she always believes that earthly sins do not necessarily condemn her and Dimmesdale and it is apparent in the end of the novel when she asks Dimmesdale if they will live their afterlives together. Moreover, Dimmesdale conceals his sin because he fears its consequences and knows well that the Puritan authority will never forgive him.

5.5.2.2. CHILDREN

The Scarlet Letter as a critique of the Puritan society also directs its focus on the children who are born with Puritan values. The ruthlessness and cold heartedness of the parents have also trickled down to the children who display traits of harsh behavior right from childhood. Hester while going about her work often becomes the object of jeers and foul cries from children on the road:

She grew to have a dread of children; for they had imbibed from their parents a vague idea of something horrible in this dreary woman, gliding silently through the town, with never any companion, but one only child. Therefore first allowing her to pass, they pursued her at a distance with shrill cries, and the utterance of a word that had no distinct purport to their own minds, but was none

the less terrible to her, as proceeding from lips that babbled it unconsciously. (Hawthorne 60)

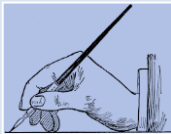
The austerity and dreariness of the Puritan way of life was also reflected in the kind of games that the children played. They would be seen playing going to the church or whipping Quakers, fighting the Indians or acting like possessed people or witches who would scare people off. Pearl being the child of an ostracized mother would never be approached in a friendly manner by children to join them in games. The children would instead shout cuss words and mock Pearl and her mother. This also made little Pearl of a bitter temperament who would counter their cries with a fierce outburst.

5.5.2.3. ATTITUDE TO WOMEN- PATRIARCHY

The seventeenth century Puritan American society is essentially patriarchal. While sexual transgression is condemned both in men and women, it is the women folk who bear greater part of the humiliation. In this novel too we see that while Hester is initially pressed on by the society to reveal the name of her partner, this concern with her male counterpart eventually diminishes as time passes. Hester alone was made to bear the punishment of the sin which was collectively committed and no further inquiry was made of her partner.

Again, women in this society are also the victims of the belief of witchcraft. The Salem Witch Trials show how an entire society turned up to arbitrarily condemn a few women as the cause of their grievances and executed them. Any woman in this society who transgresses social norms is seen as the embodiment of the devil. It is for the same reason that Hester is driven out of the society. She is seen as a witch like figure and hence no person tries to establish a contact with her for fear of being bewitched.

In this novel, the patriarchal attitude is more apparent in women than in men. The women who believe that Hester is a corrupt woman and should instead be branded with hot iron represent the patriarchal mindset. In this kind of society, the women have no empathy for their fellow women.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How did the women in the crowd want to punish Hester?

2. What kind of games did the Puritan children play?

3. What is the position of women in seventeenth century Boston as shown in *The Scarlet Letter*?

5.6 SUMMING UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt the following things:

- ✓ *The Scarlet Letter* is a critique of the Puritan American society of the seventeenth century
- ✓ The first settlers in the New World were Puritans who fled religious persecution in England
- ✓ The Puritans believed in an austere life
- ✓ The Puritans believed that the entire humanity had fallen from the grace of God owing the sin of their original parents and were predestined to be doomed.
- ✓ The Elect among the Puritans, however, were saved from damnation

- ✓ The Puritan society in *The Scarlet Letter* terribly confuses the religious with the secular
- ✓ Hester in this society is made a criminal as she had committed adultery which is forbidden by religion
- ✓ Hawthorne critiques the cold and cruel attitude of the inhabitants of this society which owes much to their rigid theological beliefs
- ✓ The novel brings to light the hypocrisy of the Puritan society in its attitude to Hester and the in the questionable characters of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth
- ✓ The cruel attitude of the Puritan parents is also reflected in their children
- ✓ The Puritan society is overtly patriarchal and is harsh in its treatment of women as can be seen in case of Hester



5.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. How did Puritanism come into being in America?
2. What are the beliefs of a Puritan community?
3. How does Hawthorne offer a critique of the Puritan American society in *The Scarlet Letter*?
4. Why the children in the Puritan community cold do hearted?
5. How does Hawthorne bring to light the patriarchy inherent in the Puritan society?



5.8. REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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UNIT 6: HESTER PRYNNE AS A REBEL: STUDY IN EVIL, GUILT AND REDEMPTION

UNIT STRUCTURE

- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Learning Objectives
- 6.3 Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*
 - 6.3.1. Hester's Sin and Redemption
 - 6.3.2. The Puritan Justice
- 6.4 Hester's character
 - 6.4.1 Rebel
 - 6.4.2 Hester in relation to the other characters
 - 6.4.3 Hester and the society
 - 6.4.4 Hawthorne's heroine
- 6.5 Hester Prynne's moral attitude
- 6.6 Summing Up
- 6.7 Assessment Questions
- 6.8 References and Recommended Readings

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* casts Hester Prynne as the protagonist. Hester Prynne's apparent sin of adultery and her subsequent consequences in a seventeenth century Puritan Boston society forms the core of the story. In this novel, Hawthorne examines moral questions relating to evil, sin, guilt etc.

6.2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to introduce you to Hester's character and position in *The Scarlett Letter*. By the end of this unit, you will be able to

- understand Hester Prynne's position as an adulteress in seventeenth century Puritan New England

- evaluate Hester as a Hawthorne heroine
- examine Hester's moral positioning

6.3 HESTER IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Hester Prynne is one of the important female protagonists in American literature. She has committed adultery and as a punishment she stands on the scaffold for three hours, undergoes imprisonment for seven years and must wear the scarlet letter in the shape of "A" for the rest of her life.

Hester is not only beautiful in physical appearance but also intelligent, strong and brave enough. She married a scholar, Roger Chillingworth who sent her to America with a promise of following her. She had been waiting for him and eventually had an affair with the minister Dimmesdale with whom their daughter, Pearl was born. After being released from prison, she lives a terrible life with her daughter, alienated from the society and ostracized from the society, as an object of shame and scorn. She bears people's comments, taunts and insults all alone, never disclosing the identity of her child's father. She raises her daughter by doing needlework and it brings her peace and inner satisfaction in spite of her bitterness with life.

6.3.1 HESTER'S SIN AND REDEMPTION

Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* has been convicted of adultery. As a punishment, she is required to wear the letter "A" which stands for adultery. This she is made to bear a badge on shame for her the rest of her life. We find that she has wronged her husband Roger Chillingworth by fathering a child with Arthur Dimmesdale, a priest.

The nature of Hester's sin should be examined in relation to that of the other characters and the community. Hester is engaged in adultery which is a sin in the Puritan code of conduct. She expiates for her sin by exposing herself to humiliation and living in complete seclusion from the rest of the society. By doing so, she earns her redemption.

Though Hester wears the badge of sin, it is the other characters who appear more sinful. Arthur Dimmesdale commits adultery with Hester, but he suffers terribly since he cannot confess it in public like Hester. In the beginning, Dimmesdale appears to be a pure and virtuous religious person giving moral advice to people, but later he appears as corrupt and sinful. Roger Chillingworth's sins were committed by wanting to avenge Hester and tormenting Dimmesdale physically and mentally almost to the point of death. Dimmesdale's weakness of mind and Chillingworth's vengeful nature are the manifestations of their sins. Hester by admitting her sin is able to lead a peaceful life, while Dimmesdale's sin tears him out, so much so that he has to secretly brand himself on his chest with the letter "A". In addition, Chillingworth's vengeful attitude does not let him live in peace. The so called sin that Hester is accused of affects Dimmesdale and Chillingworth more than her.

6.3.2. HESTER: THE EVE-IL

The story of Hester and Dimmesdale can be related to that of Adam and Eve where suffering and expulsion are the result of sin. Hester is often seen as an Eve like figure, who leads to the fall of her Adam, Dimmesdale. This makes her look like an evil having engineered the moral degradation not just of herself and her lover Dimmesdale, but also of the society, since her action has certain social implications as well. Her youth and beauty combined with her sexual transgression make her a seductive figure. From a seventeenth century Puritan society's perspective then, she is seen as some sort of evil. This is also the reason behind her ostracism. Apart from punishing her for the sins committed, the society ostracized her because they feared moral pollution by her evil disposition.

Even to the readers in Hawthorne's time, that is, the nineteenth century, Hester is seen, if not as an evil, surely as a sinful figure. Her desire for freedom and guiltlessness make her immoral for the nineteenth century readers. Apart from her adulterous act, she also seeks to elope with Dimmesdale with some other place. In making such a request, she is ignoring the religious

obligations of Dimmesdale as a priest. Escaping to some faraway land with Hester would mean double corruption- religious and moral- for Dimmesdale. These acts equate her with the idea of Eve who was seen as the reason for the original sin. However, like Eve, the reception of Hester has changed over time. Just like Eve, Hester now represents the modern liberated woman who refuses to be fettered by set patterns and customs. She can be seen in the league of female characters who are termed evil, mad or corrupt by the patriarchal society if they try to pursue their happiness. Modern readings of *The Scarlet Letter* look at the character of Hester Prynne as a romantic heroine whose instinctive nature though not permitted by social norms eventually finds expression in her so-called transgressive acts.

6.3.3. THE PURITAN JUSTICE

In the Puritan society of the seventeenth century, Hester's transgression is seen as a serious crime. This is a society, which has mixed up the secular and the religious sphere. Therefore, any moral or religious transgression is met with lawful condemnation. The law book in Boston called for a punishment of wearing the symbol "A" for adultery.

We meet with Hester when she comes out in public standing on the scaffold wearing the badge of her shame (The letter "A") on her chest. The purpose behind such exposure is to subject the guilty to public humiliation. Hester is seen carrying a child in her arms and clutching it tightly as if it were an attempt to protect it from the humiliation. This brings to mind the image of Virgin Mary, devoid of any sin, carrying a divine child. Hester's first appearance therefore arouses sympathy rather than denunciation.

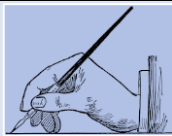
However, there were also women, utterly bitter towards Hester. Two of them, pushing their way through the crowd directed their bitterness towards the apparently unrepentant Hester. They thought that mere humiliation was no justice for such a heinous crime. Hawthorne brings to focus the cruelty of these women resulting from the austerity of Puritan life:

"What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of her gown, or

the flesh of her forehead?” cried another female, the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges. “This woman has brought shame upon us and ought to die.” (Hawthorne 38)

Again, there are also people who sympathise her plight and understand the pain in her heart:

“O, peace, neighbours, peace!” whispered their youngest companion. “Do not let her hear you! Not a stitch in her embroidered letter, but she has felt it in her heart.” (Hawthorne 40)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the sin committed by Hester Prynne?

2. The story of Hester and Dimmesdale can be compared to which mythical figures?

3. How does the Puritan society punish her for this sin?

6.4 HESTER'S CHARACTER

6.4.1 REBEL

Hester has been convicted of the sin of adultery by a Puritan society. She gracefully accepts the punishment of wearing the letter “A” as a mark of her shame. She is also ostracised by the society and lives in absolute seclusion with her daughter. However, never for once in the novel is she seen to be guilty. She does what she believes in and is ready to face the consequences. Her guiltlessness is further proved by the fact that she wears a “haughty smile” while standing on the scaffold to face the people. Though she wears the letter “A”, she makes an outrageous move by beautifully embroidering the letter. Thus she turns the badge of shame into one of honour. Acts like these make Hester a rebel. Her rebellion as a seventeenth century woman is subtle and symbolic.

6.4.2. HESTER IN RELATION TO OTHER CHARACTERS

Hester has been presented as a stronger character when seen in comparison to that of the Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth. Dimmesdale suffers from a weakness of body and mind. He fails to publicly admit his guilt and leaves Hester to bear the shame all alone. Even the love of his little daughter Pearl could not bring him to bear the responsibility of the act. Again Chillingworth does not acknowledge Hester as his wife fearing condemnation but instead warns Hester against revealing his identity to anyone. He uses his mistaken identity as a weapon to torture Dimmesdale and make a hell out of his and Hester's lives. Unlike these characters, Hester gracefully accepts the punishment of her action. Instead of being a passive recipient of the trouble and living in despair, she jumps to action and does not shun the responsibility of her daughter Pearl. She creates a community of her own with Pearl and even makes a living out of her needlework. While the other characters create a hell out of heaven with despair and revenge, Hester manages to create a heaven out of hell with her determination and love.

6.4.3 HESTER AND THE SOCIETY

The character of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* is often pitted against the wider Puritan community. This contrast is made clear right from the scene where Hester has to confront the society for her punishment. Hester performs the acts of repentance with perfect grace. She wears the letter “A” and faces the crowd standing in front of her. She also has her child in her arms which should have been reason enough for the people to be sympathetic. However, the Puritan society meets her with a cold and callous attitude. The attitudes of the women who demand branding or death sentence for Hester exemplify the Puritan society at its worst. Their attitude towards Hester springs not from a strong moral sense but out of jealousy regarding Hester taking liberties. The calm and dignified attitude of Hester towards the crowd differentiates her from the sadistic Puritan women.

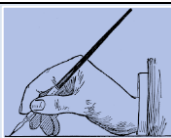
Modern readings of the novel look at the plight of Hester as resulting from the passivity of the two males, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. Hester in a way is a victim of the patriarchal setup of the society that condemns sexual transgression more in women than in men. She can be seen as wronged by both her husband and her lover, none of whom come forward to take responsibility of Hester and the child. Seen by the societal standards of the seventeenth century Puritan Boston society, Hester’s inability to reveal any of the two men’s identities seems obvious.

Hester accepts her ostracisation and lives in a hut on the outskirts of the town. She decides to engage in needlework and embroider clothes. She dresses her daughter Pearl up in beautiful clothes which draw everybody’s attention. In course of time she became skilled in needle work and started getting orders from people to sew clothes for them. Except for the wedding gown, she began to sew and embroider all kinds of clothes, even for people like ministers of churches and other dignitaries. People who would condemn her otherwise came to her to sew clothes for themselves and their children. Hester with her work transformed the meaning of the letter “A” from “adultery” to “able”, that is, able with her weaving skills. This is evidence to the hypocrisy of the Puritan

society which would condemn a person in private but would go to her for something private. Hester, in contrast, remains steadfast in her position to live in seclusion and does what she does staying within her private sphere, never attempting to establish contact with anyone in relation to anything other than her weaving.

6.4.4 HAWTHORNE'S HEROINE

Hester Prynne in many ways is a typical Hawthorne heroine. Hawthorne's heroines are free spirited women, who can transgress societal norms if they stood in the way of their fulfilment. In most cases, their transgression leads to their ostracism from the society. Like Miriam in *The Marble Faun*, Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*, Hester is an ostracised character. All of these women try to channelize their passion in creative ways—painting in case of Miriam, writing in case of Zenobia and needlework in case of Hester (Milder 105). Like all of Hawthorne's heroines, therefore, Hester is a romantic figure.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How does Hester Prynne treat the letter A on her chest?

2. How is Hester's attitude on the scaffold?

3. What kind of a heroine is Hester?

6. 5 HESTER PRYNNE'S MORAL ATTITUDE

Hester Prynne is an embodiment of the new liberated woman. Though she gracefully accepts the punishments for her adulterous act, she is never guilty of her act. She stands for freedom, which the Puritan society opposes. She is not devoid of morals, which is why she goes through the motions and performs what is required of her. However, deep down, she does not find the act sinful but an outcome of the love between her and Dimmesdale, love which is forbidden by societal standards, not her own moral standards. Thus, she consoles the repentant Dimmesdale by saying "What we did had a consecration of its own." (Hawthorne 133) Apparently, she has wronged her husband, but since Chillingworth married her when she was not mature enough to understand her mind, this marriage was not marriage for her at all. In this way, she justifies her transgression.

The moral weakness for Hester is no weakness at all. She seeks to find her freedom beyond the realms of the Puritan society. While in the woods, she asks Dimmesdale to sail with her to another place where they could find happiness and create a world of their own with their child Pearl. Hester's spirit can be equated with that of the woods which represents the wilderness, the very antithesis of civilisation. The wilderness symbolises freedom which the Puritan society is so afraid of.

Hawthorne though sympathetic of Hester, never seeks to present her as a moral figure. Her transgression, if not condemned, is also not championed by the narrator. Hester's transgression is nevertheless illicit and in any civil society, this behaviour will be met with retribution. Also, her sense of morals is faulty not because she was adulterous but because she deceives her lover about the identity of her husband. She does not reveal to Dimmesdale the identity of Roger Chillingworth owing to which the former suffers moral pangs when questioned by Chillingworth.

Hester gives in to passion and accepts the consequences. Her love for Dimmesdale is complete. She accepts ostracism of the society all alone and

makes sure not to reveal the identity of her lover. On the scaffold, when Dimmesdale was near her, she did not leave any scope for the suspicion. Her duties towards Dimmesdale form the core of Hester's morality.

It can be said that the ostracism and the isolation that has been brought upon her by the society has worked over time on her sense of morality. The society had boycotted her to such an extent that even the little children scorned at the sight of her or Pearl. Naturally, therefore, she seeks freedom- right or wrong- and scandalizes society with her freedom. In asking Dimmesdale to flee with her, she is asking him to go against his principles as a man of the church. Therefore, her morality is of a different kind which equates happiness with righteousness.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What kind of woman does Hester Prynne represent?

2. Does Hester want freedom from her life in Boston? How?

3. How does Hester protect Dimmesdale?

6.6 SUMMING UP

Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* exemplifies the free spirited liberated woman. As a woman of the seventeenth century Puritan England, she exerts her freedom within a limited sphere. Her rebellion is expressed in small acts of protest like ornately embroidering the badge of her shame. She is not a woman without morals but her system of morals differs from that of the rest of the Puritan society. For her, everything that would lead her to happiness keeping the reputation of her lover intact is right. She exemplifies freedom that the Puritan society is afraid of. With her needlework, she is able to reach out to people, though limitedly, and is able to break the shackles of ostracism to some extent. Her pursuit of happiness and freedom makes her an embodiment of the American dream.



6.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

- 1) Examine the role of Hester as a heroine in *The Scarlet Letter*.
- 2) Can Hester's act of adultery be called sinful? Analyse in context of modern response to the text.
- 3) How did the Puritan society respond to Hester's sin?
- 4) Compare and contrast the character of Hester in relation to Dimmesdale and Chillingworth.
- 5) Do you see Hester as an Eve like character? Examine.
- 6) Analyse the character of Hester as a modern woman.
- 7) Is Hester guilty of her act? Substantiate your response with valid arguments.
- 8) Analyse the character of Hester in relation to the Puritan society.



6.8. RECOMMENDED READINGS

Milder, Robert. *Hawthorne's Habitations: A Literary Life*. Oxford U P: New York, 2013. Print

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter: An Authoritative Text, Essays in Criticism and Scholarship*. Norton & Company: New York. 1988. Print

Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Guides, Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter*. Chelsea House Publishers: New York, 2004. Print

MODULE IV: FAULKNER: *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*

UNIT 7: THE SOUND AND THE FURY: THE TITLE AND THE FOUR SECTIONS

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Introduction: *The Sound and the Fury*

7.2 Learning Objectives

7.3 William Faulkner

7.3.1 Life and Works

7.4 Title of *The Sound and the Fury*

7.4.1 Source

7.4.2 Significance

7.5 Four Sections

7.5.1. April 7, 1928

7.5.2. June 2, 1910

7.5.3. April 6, 1928

7.5.4. April 8, 1928

7.6 Summing Up

7.7 Assessment Questions

7.8References and Recommended Readings

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The Sound and the Fury is often regarded as one of the classic American novels. This can be attributed to the complexity in style and issues surrounding the novel. The novel focuses on the Compson family and its disintegration in the American South.

7.2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This unit aims at introducing you to William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, a major twentieth century American novel. It would give you a brief

introduction to Faulkner and discuss the title and the four sections into which the novel has been divided.

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Get an insight into Faulkner
- Know the background and context of the novel and its title
- Understand the significance of the four sections into which it has been divided

7.3 WILLIAM FAULKNER

7.3.1 LIFE AND WORKS

William Faulkner (1897-1962) stands as one of the most preeminent American writers of the twentieth century. On September 25, 1897, William Cuthbert Faulkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi. He was the first of four sons of Murry Cuthbert Faulkner and Maud Butler. William was named in honor of his great-grandfather Colonel William Falkner. He had three younger brothers: Murry Charles "Jack" Falkner, author John Falkner and Dean Swift Falkner. His family had accumulated a great deal of wealth before the American Civil War. However, his family like many Southern families had lost all of its financial power during the conflict. His parents would move to Oxford, Mississippi. Faulkner would use Oxford as the basis for the fictional town of Jefferson in Yoknapatawpha County. His family, particularly his mother Maud, his maternal grandmother Lelia Butler, and Caroline Barr (the black woman who raised him from infancy) crucially influenced the development of Faulkner's artistic imagination. Both his mother and grandmother were great readers and also painters and photographers, educating him in visual language. Faulkner's lifelong education by Callie Barr is central to his novels' preoccupations with the politics of sexuality and race.

Although William Faulkner was bright, he felt no passion for his formal education. He dropped out of high school. Faulkner was employed in a bank in

Oxford and began to write. He joined the Canadian, and later the British, Royal Air Force during the First World War, studied for a while at the University of Mississippi, and temporarily worked for a New York bookstore and a New Orleans newspaper. Except for some trips to Europe and Asia, and a few brief stays in Hollywood as a scriptwriter, he worked on his novels and short stories on a farm in Oxford. In his early forays into writing, Faulkner emulated the poetic styling of Edward FitzGerald, A. E. Housman, John Keats, and Algernon Swinburne. Faulkner addressed many of these early poems to a young woman, Estelle Oldham. Oldham's parents disapproved of William Faulkner's courtship. They wanted their daughter to marry someone who had better financial prospects. Estelle's marriage to Franklin fell apart ten years later, and she was divorced in April 1929. In June 1929, Faulkner married Estelle Oldham. Estelle brought with her two children from her previous marriage to Cornell Franklin and Faulkner intended to support his new family as a writer. Faulkner began writing *As I Lay Dying* in 1929 while working night shifts in the University of Mississippi's boiler room. The novel would be published in 1930. Beginning in 1930, Faulkner sent out some of his short stories to various national magazines. Several of his stories were published and this brought him enough income to buy a house in Oxford for his family to live in, which he named "Rowan Oak."

Faulkner served as Writer-in-Residence at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville from February to June 1957 and again in 1958. He suffered serious injuries in a horse-riding accident in 1959, and died from myocardial infarction, at the age of 64 on July 6, 1964 at Wright Sanatorium in Byhalia, Mississippi. He is buried along with his family in St. Peters Cemetery, in Oxford, along with a family friend with his mysterious initials E.T.

7.4 TITLE OF *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*

The title of *The Sound and the Fury* has been taken from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In Act 5 Scene 5 of *Macbeth*, as Macbeth sees the Birnam woods approaching along with his defeat he breaks into a stoic response in the form of a soliloquy signifying the ultimate meaninglessness of life:

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon stage

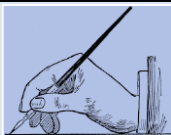
And then is heard no more: it is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.” (Macbeth V: V)

The title thus sets the stage for a saga of familial tragedy. Just the way Shakespeare likens the life of a man to an actor’s performance on stage, Faulkner through this novels tries to bring into focus the futility of the Compson’s lives which ultimately meet tragic ends. The novel narrated through various people in each of its four sections offers varying perspectives on similar events. This makes the narrative nothing but tales.

“The Sound and the Fury” in a way refers to Benjy’s narrative in the novel. The tale of The Sound and the Fury is a tale told by the idiot Benjy. His narrative is incoherent, frequently giving way to breaks and time shifts. Thus apparently, it becomes a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Faulkner problematizes the nature of reality by presenting four narratives, each of which is influenced by the individual’s personal take on the situation.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the name of the fictional town in Faulkner’s writings?

2. Name two novels written by William Faulkner.

3. Where is the title of *The Sound and the Fury* taken from?

7.5 THE FOUR SECTIONS

7.5.1 APRIL SEVENTH, 1928

The First section is narrated by the idiot Benjy. This section takes place when Benjamin is thirty three years old. It is to be noted that this section looks incoherent and fragmented. There are frequent time shifts and multiple time frames and the narrator breaks off in the present to speak of some event in the past. There are multiple time frames in this section. There are many incidents of his childhood and recent past which his mind is frequently travelling to. Benjy's mind in the present associates something to something else in the past and there is a shift in time. Luster, his caretaker leads Benjy to a nearby golf course hoping to get back his lost quarter. It is that then that Benjy hears one of the golfers shouting, "Caddy, caddy" and he starts moaning and howling as the sound of the word caddy reminds him of his sister. He tries to crawl through the fence and snags at a nail. This triggers a similar experience when he was young. He remembers how he and Caddy were sent on an errand by their uncle Maury to deliver a letter to his lover. It is the same day when Caddy looks over the fence to see the pigs dead. It is also Christmas day and Caddy asks Benjamin to keep the hands in his pockets to prevent them from getting cold.

Back in the present in 1928, Luster has found a golf ball and Benjy wants to play with it. This returns Benjy to a series of memories about death. The first is from an evening in 1898 when the children had just finished dinner and walked down to Versh's house. Benjy wants to play with some lightning bugs T.P has captured in a jar. Frony tells the Compson children that a funeral service was going on in the house. Damuddy has died and Mr. and Mrs. Compson have not yet told the children. Benjy recalls the death of the Compson horse, Nancy and the buzzards that circled over the carcass that remained. He thinks briefly of the death of Mr. Compson's death in 1912, then returns to the memory of Damuddy's death in 1898. The children worry that buzzards might pick at

Damuddy's bones. Caddy is not convinced that a funeral is actually taking place, so she decides to spy on the adults through the parlor window. She climbs a tree and all three of her brothers catch a glimpse of her dirty underwear from below. When Benjy sees Caddy's soiled clothes, he begins to cry again.

Benjy recollects a scene from 1905 when he became upset at the smell of Caddy's perfume. In this memory, Jason mocks Caddy for "prissy dress" and claims that she is trying to act older than her age. Caddy washes off her perfume but Benjy remains upset. He repeatedly thinks that Caddy smells like trees. Back in the present, Luster is still standing with Benjy as he plays in the stream. Luster tells Benjy not to approach the nearby swing because Miss Quentin was there with her boyfriend, the man with the red tie. This makes Benjy recall a time years ago when he saw Caddy and Charlie, her first suitor, kissing on the swing. In this memory Benjy begins to cry very loudly when Caddy's suitor approaches. Charlie grows angry at Benjy's intrusion which makes him all the more upset. Caddy takes Benjy up to the house and cries, as she knows Benjy is upset with her for kissing Charlie. Caddy apologizes to Benjy and washes her mouth out with soap.

Another tragic memory of the past triggers Benjy's consciousness when he and Luster walk along a fence and come to a gate where they see some school girls walking by. The gate and the schoolgirls remind Benjy of a day in 1910, when he ran out of the house to look at some girls who were walking by the same gate. In this memory, Benjy manages to open the gate and run through it, scaring the girls. Wanting to tell the girls how much he misses Caddy makes him catch up with one of them. The girls scream in terror. The scene ends up as an unspecified assailant—presumably the father of one of the girls attacks Benjy. Mr. Compson is concerned as to how Benjy got past the gate. He and Benjy mull over the idea of castrating Benjy as a precaution. This painful memory of his castration causes Benjy to weep.

Another crucial memory of the past relating to Caddy's loss of virginity comes to Benjy in the present. Dilsey calls the family to supper. Miss Quentin comes in but she is still furious at Luster for allowing Benjy to sneak up on her when she was with the man with the red tie. Benjy then recalls the evening in 1909

when Caddy went on a date and lost her virginity. In this memory, Caddy comes home from the date and Benjy cries loudly when he sees her. She is ashamed and runs up to her room to avoid Benjy, which makes him very upset.

Benjy's observations cannot pass through an intelligence which is capable of ordering, and hence distorting them. He receives only sense impressions, blending them into a flow of sensory responses. He is a mere spectator of the events which re-reports, and even those in which he participates, with a "camera-like fidelity". His view about Caddy is highly personal, but we infer this view only from the scenes which his 'camera-mind' records. Nowhere does he judge people, but he himself becomes the instrument by which the other characters are judged.

Benjy is an idiot and lives by his senses. He narrates events as they appear to his senses without really understanding the significance of them. Faulkner delves deep into the idiot's psychology and how he would react to events. He offers some kind of help to the readers by including italics which mark a shift in time. Also interesting to note is Benjy's way of sensing things which is different from that of a normal human being. He smells cold, hears the roof, fire, night etc. He finds Caddy smelling like trees and Versh and Maury smelling like rain and so on.

7.5.2 JUNE 2, 1910

This section is narrated by Quentin, Benjy's brother. He is a student at Harvard. This section takes place on the last day of Quentin's life. He is planning to commit suicide and as he walks to his end point, he has several thoughts running in his mind.

He first thinks of his grandfather's watch that his father gave him. He remembers his father telling him how the watch would make him forget time rather than remember it. Throughout the narrative, we find Quentin obsessed with the ticking of clocks. He accidentally breaks his grandfather's watch. He takes it to a shopkeeper who says that it would take time to repair it. He does not

have enough time with him as he is going to commit suicide. So he decides against repairing the watch.

He hears his roommate Shreve who asks him to get up as it is late. His mind travels to thoughts of Caddy. He constantly thinks of her wedding invitation (Mr and Mrs. Jason Richmond Compson announce the marriage of their daughter Candace to Mr Sydney Herbert Head on the twenty fifth of April one thousand nine hundred and ten at Jefferson, Mississippi). Herbert is a banker who had apparently promised Jason a job. From his disjointed thoughts, we learn that Dalton Ames was this guy who had violated Caddy chastity and left her pregnant which is why she decides to marry. Quentin who is obsessed with the protection of Caddy's chastity has a fight with Dalton Ames and decides to lie to his father about incest between him and Caddy so that the matter stays within the family. However, his father does not believe him and Caddy ends up marrying Herbert who abandons her when he gets to know the reality of the child.

Another important thing that he thinks about is how Benjy's pasture was sold off to send him to Harvard. The thought keeps coming back to him as he suffers from the guilt of putting the future of his brothers at stake.

Apart from these, Quentin also thinks of race relations in North. Coming from South where segregation laws are in force, he has qualms sitting beside a black man in a bus, the only vacant seat in a bus. Also, he misses having black servants around, the way he had Dilsey, T.P. and others back home.

From Quentin's thoughts, we get the impression that he is mostly concerned with abstract questions of time, life and death being a Harvard student who is given to contemplation. Like a typical man from the South, the changing race relations in the North are difficult for him to come to terms with and the loss of Caddy's chastity is simply too much for him to bear. His section is more difficult to read than the others, because of a disjointed syntax which is reflective of his disintegrating mind and his philosophical concerns. Also, it is important to remember that he going to commit suicide and having a train of thoughts

running in his mind. His frustration over his helplessness in saving Caddy or financially helping the family drives him crazy and he drowns himself.

7.5.3 APRIL 6, 1928

Jason narrates his events on a Good Friday in April 6, 1928. Jason clearly aims to take revenge on Caddy and his Quentin who, Jason feels, deprived him of his rightful share of the family opportunities. Since Quentin is dead and Caddy is gone, the instrumentality for this revenge becomes the sister's daughter and his dead brother's namesake: Quentin

He thinks back on his family and his personal history. He is mainly tormented by the fact that Caddy's promiscuity made him lose his job offered by Herbert. Herbert offered Jason a job in banking but when he discovered that his wife Caddy was pregnant with another man's child, he not only divorced her but also rescinded the job from Jason. This retraction has left Jason with no choice but to work in the local farm-supply store. The very first sentence of his section sets the tone when Jason says, "Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say." (Faulkner153). He has grown into a sadistic and a bitter man and the form of his narrative reflects his hardened mind. Caddy is disowned by the Compson family but her illegitimate daughter, Miss Quentin is taken in. Jason assumes control of the household after Mr. Compson's death. He threatens and insults Miss Quentin and nearly beats her with his belt until, Dilsey, as always intervenes. Jason is determined to torment and dominate Miss Quentin for there is neither Caddy nor Quentin upon whom he could revenge himself for depriving him of his rights, and making his life a hell. He devises an elaborate scheme to steal the money Caddy sends him to support Miss Quentin's upbringing.

He has stolen nearly fifty thousand dollars from his sister and niece over the course of fifteen years. He uses the extra money to play the cotton market and to pay for a prostitute in Memphis. However, things take a turn when he gets Caddy's letter which contains a money order for Miss. Quentin rather than the customary check. It foils Jason's scheme as the money order has to be signed by Miss Quentin before it can be cashed. Jason vents his anger at and is deeply embarrassed about his idiot brother Benjy. He wants to send Benjy to a mental

hospital in Jackson as soon as possible. Several months later he sees Miss Quentin go by with a man with a red tie. Jason chases after them through the back alleys of Jefferson. He is interrupted by a boy with a telegram, who tells Jason this account in the cotton market is significantly low. Jason angrily goes home and driving back into town is nearly run down by a Ford driven by the man with the red tie. Jason chases the Ford and looks for Miss Quentin and the man in some under bush. He gets out, hoping to catch Miss Quentin red-handed with the man. Jason suddenly hears their car start and blow its horn. He runs back to his car and finds that Miss Quentin and the man have let the air out of one of his tires. The whole section reveals his frustration and anger on Miss Quentin and others. In other words, Jason is bitter to almost everybody in the Compson family and strongly believes that he has been wronged.

Jason's section has been narrated in a pretty straightforward first person narration. Unlike, Benjy who is mentally sick, or Quentin whose frustration is driving him towards his suicide, Jason is more or less a normal person who does not have complex thoughts but is only after revenge and money. Though he comes across as a rather cynical person, it cannot be ignored that he is the sole bread winner in the family who has is financially responsible for his parents, an ailing brother, his niece and also the group of servants

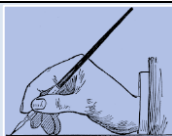
7.5.4. DILSEY

Dilsey's narrative has been narrated not by herself but the narrator. She is a black servant who has been staying with the Compson family for quite some time. It is clear that age and work have taken a toll on her health as the narrator describes her as having a "collapsed face" (Faulkner 225). Mrs Compson orders her to fill her bottle. Dilsey attends to her terrible calls rather

calmly. Again, Mrs, Comson asks her to attend to Benjy. She decides to take Benjy to the church while Frony resists saying that people were discussing taking a white man to a black church. However, Dilsey dismisses this and proceeds to the church with Benjy. Hearing the minister's sermon on redemption, Dilsey suddenly breaks into tears saying that she has seen the good days of the family and now witnessing its disintegration. The narrative also tells us how Jason has

discovered that Quentin has taken both the money sent by her mother as well his savings. Jason then chases after them but loses track after a point. Luster decides to torture Benjy by driving him through a different road after which Benjy howls. As Jason hears this, he slaps Luster and himself drives the carriage. In the scuffle, the flower which Benjy holds in his hands is broken and he looks at it with “empty and blue and serene eyes” (Faulkner 272).

From this narrative we find that Dilsey is a rather servile woman who would not mind breaking her bones looking after the family, though she is not treated well. Her compassion for the family is beyond doubt and the disintegration of the family is unbearable for her. The mention of the black church tells us that segregation laws are in force in the South. she represents the only firm character keeping her sanity when the Compson household is falling apart.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How old is Benjy on April Seventh, 1928?

2. What event does Benjy remember when his shirt is tugged in the nail on the fence of the golf course?

3. How does Benjy react to Caddy's loss of virginity?

4. Where is Quentin studying?

5. Who is Dalton Ames that Quentin remembers?

6. Who promised Jason a job?

7.6 SUMMING UP

So in this unit you got an idea of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, one of the seminal twentieth century novels. The unit thus can be summed up in the following points:

- ✓ William Faulkner was a prominent twentieth century novelist from Southern America. He employed the experimental stream of consciousness style in writing most of his novels
- ✓ The title of *The Sound and the Fury* has been taken from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.
- ✓ The novel has been divided into four sections. Each of the sections are narrated by four different narrators.
- ✓ The novel discusses life in the Compson family from four different perspectives.
- ✓ The novel integrates the fall of the Compson family with the fall of the Old South.

- ✓ Benjy and Quentin's sections employ the stream of consciousness technique. Jason and Dilsey's sections are narrated in a straightforward manner. Benjy, Quentin's and Jason's sections have first person narrator while Dilsey's section has a third person omniscient narrator.



7.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

- 1) What does the title of the novel *The Sound and the Fury* signify?
- 2) Critically examine Benjy's relation with his sister Caddy.
- 3) How would you describe Benjy's understanding of time?
- 4) How does the loss of Caddy's virginity affect Benjy?
- 5) Why does Quentin lie about committing incest?
- 6) Why do you think Jason always remains irritated?
- 7) How is Dilsey presented by the narrator in the novel?



7.8. REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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UNIT 8: THE AMERICAN SOUTH AND *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*

UNIT STRUCTURE

- 8.1. Introduction
- 8.2 Learning Objectives
- 8.3 The American South
 - 8.3.1 History
 - 8.3.2. Myth
- 8.4 Faulkner and the South
- 8.5. *The Sound and the Fury* as a Southern Novel
 - 8.5.1. Declining Fortunes
 - 8.5.2. Race Relations
 - 8.5.3. Chastity
- 8.6 Summing Up
- 8.7. Assessment Questions
- 8.8. References and Recommended Readings

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The Sound and the Fury is set in the post civil war American South, also known as the antebellum South. Faulkner in this novel draws a parallel between the fall of the Compson family and that of the Old South.

8.2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This unit would introduce you to the Southern American culture and the perspectives it offers in the novel. It would also give a brief account of the myth of the Old South which has contributed largely to both the physical and social set up of the region. At the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- Learn about the history of the American South and Civil War
- Know the myth of the Old South

- Know the novel in context of the South

8.3 THE AMERICAN SOUTH

8.3.1 HISTORY

The American South refers to a group of states from the south of America consisting of Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Virginia, Arkansas, Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia. After the Declaration of Independence in 1776, slavery seemed to be inconsistent with the principles of liberty and equality as outlined in the Declaration. This was in part aided by providential fear. The Americans believed that America was the blessed land of God and something as evil as slavery could invoke the wrath of God. They could not let the prosperity of America go to ruins or set a bad example before the rest of the world. Therefore slavery was decided to be abolished in the whole of America. In southern America, however, after the discovery of the hugely profitable cotton crop, the need for slaves was felt more than ever. The south resisted the abolition of slavery of the and in 1861 they decided to secede from the U.S.A. and form what is known as the Confederacy. It gave rise to a war known as Civil War from 1861- 1865 between the Union (the United States of America) and the Confederate States. The war resulted in the victory of the Union and the defeat of the Confederacy. Consequently, slavery was successfully abolished in the whole of U.S.A. and the southern slaves were freed. The southern landowners also lost much of their plantations which were to be taken over by the Democratic government.

LET US STOP AND THINK



Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) is one of the classic American novels with slavery as its central theme. The novel seeks to focus on the importance of Christian faith which brings solace even in a situation of slavery. The eponymous character, Uncle Tom, a slave in this novel, exemplifies Christian love even in the face of unbearable torture and hardship. The novel became instantly famous and also influenced the Abolitionist

movement. It helped throw light on the plight of slaves under their masters and triggered the desire for their emancipation. The Abolitionist leader, Abraham Lincoln was so greatly influenced by the novel that he met Harriet Beecher Stowe and said, “So this is the little lady who started this great war.” The novel also drew criticism from many circles for espousing the notion of a benevolent servant. The epithet “Uncle Tom” is now derogatorily used for any servant who is too subservient to the master.

8.3.2 MYTH

The defeat of the Confederate states came as a huge shock to the Republican army as they were largely confident of their success. Also the landowners who had to lose their slaves and land were hugely traumatised. This led them to create a mythic world of the Old South which they could turn to and draw comfort in the post war scenario. According to this myth, the Old South was an Eden like idyllic world where men could do anything to protect their women, pride and courage were the supreme values, the slave was the family member, and where there was no work and the land took care of the needs of the family. Valour, chastity, pride etc were among the virtues that the Southerners held in high esteem. In this myth, the serpent of northern values led to the corruption of the Southern ones and led to the ultimate loss of the Eden.

LET US STOP AND THINK



Religion and American nation

The Adamic myth forms an important part of the originary accounts of the American culture. The first settlers in America were the Puritans who fled religious persecution in England and settled in America in the early seventeenth century.

These people saw America as an Eden full of possibilities. They saw themselves as Adams who were sent by God to create an Eden out of

this land with their hard work. This belief is known as the myth of the American Adam. The foundations of the American society are thus greatly influenced by theological beliefs. This belief is a driving force behind their movement for independence from England. America is viewed by its inhabitants as a land with providential blessing. The belief in grace and fear of its loss also in part informs the abolition of slavery in America. It is interesting to note that when the Southern American states lost the war, their myth of the Glorious Old South saw the South as an Eden which was corrupted by a serpent from the North.

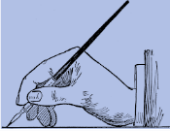
8.4 FAULKNER AND THE SOUTH

Faulkner was greatly influenced by his family history and the history of the South where he lived. He focuses on the American South, placing most of his novels in the fictional county of Yoknapatawpha, in northern Mississippi. His great grandfather, William Clark Falkner had fought in the Civil War and had earned the status of a hero in the family. Therefore his childhood was replete with stories of the heroism of the Confederate forces. Faulkner had spent a major part of his life in Mississippi. It greatly shaped his understanding of race issues in America. Also, his black nanny Callie Barr made him sensitive to the position of blacks in the country. Oxford inspired his tragic depiction of a world desperately clinging to the tatters of its ransacked past. Like much of the Deep South, Oxford had suffered badly in the Civil War, during which it was captured by Union soldiers. Shops, businesses, homes and lives were all lost during the siege.

Most of Faulkner's novels like *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* are set in Yoknapatawpha County which is based in the southern environ of Mississippi.

Faulkner is interested in the portrayal of the Southern values and their subsequent decline. In an attempt to create a saga of his own, Faulkner has invented in the *The Sound and the Fury* a host of characters typical of the historical growth and subsequent decadence of the South. The human drama in

Faulkner's novels is then built on the model of the actual, historical drama extending over almost a century and a half. Each story and each novel contributes to the construction of a whole, which is the imaginary Yoknapatawpha County and its inhabitants. Faulkner had written a historical chronicle of his section of the South covering nearly a century and a half, from the early nineteenth century through the mid twentieth. But Faulkner was not a historical novelist in the sense that he was mainly concerned with historical forces and the significance of great events. . Faulkner's characters may be seen "types" of Southerners. Faulkner shared some of the racial prejudices of whites in his region, but he came to see those prejudices as self-delusional and unjust.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS	
	<p>1. When did the Civil War take place?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>
	<p>2. What was the Civil War about?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>
	<p>3. What is the Myth of the Old South?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>
	<p>4. Which novels of William Faulkner are set in the Yoknapatawpha County?</p> <p>-----</p>

8.5 THE SOUND AND THE FURY AS A SOUTHERN NOVEL

8.5.1 DECLINING FORTUNES

The Sound and the Fury is set for the most part in Jefferson, the county seat of Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi. Yoknapatawpha is a fictional county created by Faulkner. The novel uses for its purpose not just the Southern setting but juxtaposes the fall of the Compson family with that of the fall of the old order of the aristocratic south. The atmosphere of despair and gloom looms large in the text. In the wake of the abolition of slavery after Civil War, the old aristocratic families lost not just their slaves but also their plantations and lands, some of which were taken over by the new democratic government while others were sold off to meet debts. In this novel too, we find the fortune of the Compson family slowly dwindling which leads to the disintegration of the family. Benjy howls looking at a golf course because he used to once play in the same meadow. The field which is now a course was once part of the estate of the Compson family. It had to be sold off to meet the expenses of the family which includes treating Benjy and also financing Quentin's education at Harvard. The family with its constant need of money now represents a decadent Southern American aristocracy

8.5.2 RACE RELATIONS

The South also manifests itself in the text in the form of Dilsey, a black servant. She is one of the thousands of blacks who chose to stay back to serve their "benevolent masters" even after their freedom. She is an Uncle Tom like figure- excessively subservient and okay with the status quo. She tries to hold the family together in midst of its trials and tribulations. Her character furthers the myth of the old south wherein slaves were never slaves but an extension of the family. She considers the Compson family as her own and chooses not to leave them in adverse circumstances. Dilsey is the only character maintaining her reason, sanity and emotions while the people around her are obsessed with one thing or the other and moving towards self-destruction. Through her character, Faulkner presents an interesting contrast. While in the ante bellum south the blacks were heading towards destruction, the situation of Dilsey in

relation to the family shows how there has been a reversal in race situations in post bellum south.

It is interesting to note that Faulkner, by allocating a separate chapter on Dilsey, a black female servant, is trying to come to terms with the changing scenario of race relations in the South. Even in the post bellum South, segregation laws were in effect and the blacks were never given equal rights in the public sphere. The assigning of a complete chapter to Dilsey might be Faulkner's way of compensating on behalf his white ancestors by allowing the black substantial literary space. Again we find that this is the only section where the narrative is not in first person. The third person omniscient narrator intervenes and takes over the narrative of Dilsey. What we get after all is only the perspective of the narrator. Hence we never get to know whether Dilsey was really satisfied with her position or whether the narrator only imagines her to be so. This can also be seen as an instance of subtle racism where the representation of a black character by the narrator might be an indication of the belief that the blacks are still not wise enough to speak for themselves.

The change of power dynamics in post bellum South can also be seen in the blacks characters' reactions to the white imbecile Benjy. All the black characters in the novel except for Dilsey want to get rid of Benjamin. We find people like Versh, Luster and T.P detesting their work of looking after Benjamin. They find ways to torture Benjamin emotionally and physically. Faulkner never seems to take sides or to present one group in a sympathetic light. He is presenting a system of slavery which has now turned itself on the oppressor's head and victimized both groups of people.

References to the racist South in the novel can also be found in the way the characters address the black characters. Uncle Maury addresses Versh as "boy." A derogatory term now, it was used to address the blacks in the South. Also we find in the novel, characters the blacks as "niggers." So deeply entrenched was the idea of the inferiority of the blacks, that they themselves addressed one another within the family as "nigger."

Quentin in the novel is greatly affected by the decay of the Southern world order. As a person from the South residing in North, he cannot come to terms with the black people moving around freely in the North who were his slaves in the South. For example, he hesitates to sit beside a nigger in a crowded bus, which is the only vacant seat in the bus. Also he misses having a lot of servants like Dilsey and Roskus around him.

8.5.3. CHASTITY


The chastity of women held a high place in the Southern American system of values. Men took it upon themselves to protect the chastity of the women in the household and considered it disgraceful if it went otherwise. The novel *The Sound and the Fury* revolves around the character of Caddy, the Compson daughter whose sexuality becomes a matter of concern in the family. The tragedy of the Compsons derives in large part from their inability to come to terms with Caddy's sexuality.

Of all the three brothers, it is Quentin Compson who inherits displays the chivalric qualities of Southern men. He takes it upon himself to protect Caddy's chastity at any cost. Quentin, like any brother goes off to fight Caddy's lover, Dalton Ames who he thinks is a nasty man. His chivalric nature also comes across when he asks T.P to saddle a horse riding which he will meet the lover of his sister. Like a typical Southern man who threatens any person with romantic inclinations towards the women of the family, he threatens Dalton Ames to leave the town before sunset. He asks Dalton Ames if the latter doesn't have a sister to which he says, "No but they're all bitches" (Faulkner 77). This instigates Quentin to fight in which he badly hurts himself.

Things go awry for Quentin when he finds absolutely impossible to accept the fact that his sister has now matured into a sexual being. He keeps nagging Caddy from time to time to tell him whether she actually loves Dalton Ames.

When Caddy elopes with Dalton Ames and becomes pregnant, Quentin becomes obsessed with the idea of securing his sister's reputation. He goes so far as to tell his father that he has committed incest with his sister. His father, however, is not convinced and knows that he is lying. Caddy goes on to marry

Herbert Head who is financially stable and could be a father to her child. Quentin finds him of questionable character and asks Caddy not to marry him. However, Caddy refuses to listen to him and marries Herbert. In reality, Quentin could not stand the idea of his sister being sexually engaged with someone. When Herbert comes to know of the reality of the child, he abandons Caddy. This frustration over the inability to secure Caddy's chastity becomes unbearable for Quentin and he proceeds to his suicide.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS	
	<p>1. Why did the Compson family sell its Benjys pasture?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>
	<p>2. Who are the black characters in <i>The Sound and the Fury</i>?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>
	<p>3. Whose chastity is the concern of the Compson family?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>

8.6 SUMMING UP

In this unit we got an insight into the southern American culture. We learnt how the Southern society is largely shaped by the myth of the Old South which saw the ante bellum or pre-war South as a lost paradise. The geographical south consists of a confederacy of twelve states which fought the rest of America

over slavery. The defeat of the Confederacy was a huge blow to the southern states. So they gave themselves a myth to which they could turn in times of despair. William Faulkner, born and brought up in the South, was hugely influenced by the Civil War stories. Therefore he uses the South as backdrop and motif for most of his novels and stories. *The Sound and the Fury*, centered on the Compson family discusses the disintegration of the family in the light of the disintegration of the old South. The novel with its situations and characters offers important perspectives on race relations and the plight of a white family in the new South. The declining fortunes of the Compson family are an indicator of the changing social scenario wherein the whites might no longer enjoy the privileges they once had. The South in the *The Sound and the Fury* also shows itself in the changing race relations wherein not all servants are benevolent slaves. Above all, it is the obsession with chastity that informs the narratives of the three brothers. Chastity as is highly valued in the South becomes a matter of concern in this novel. The characters find it extremely difficult to gracefully accept Caddy as a sexual being. The inability of this Southern family in accepting the changing reality causes their downfall.



8.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. How does the myth of the Old South relate to the Civil War?
2. How does William Faulkner present the Southern American society in his novels?
3. What according to you are reasons behind the decline of the fortunes in the post-bellum South?
4. What are the indications of changing race relations in the post bellum South in *The Sound and the Fury*?
5. Why do you think is Quentin obsessed with Caddy's sexuality?
6. How in your opinion is Dilsey presented in the novel?



8.8 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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UNIT 9: THE STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS TECHNIQUE IN *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*

UNIT STRUCTURE

- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 Learning Objectives
- 9.3 Stream of Consciousness
 - 9.3.1 About
 - 9.3.2 In literature
- 9.4 Faulkner and Stream of Consciousness
- 9.5 Stream of Consciousness in *The Sound and the Fury*
 - 9.5.1 Benjy's Narrative
 - 9.5.2 Quentin's Narrative
- 9.6 Summing Up
- 9.7 Assessment Questions
- 9.8 References and Recommended Readings

9.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit discusses the stream of consciousness technique and its use in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Faulkner was one of the prominent practitioners of this technique. The stream of consciousness is one the important experimental techniques used in Modernist literature. The novel is one of the landmarks in Modernist American literature.

9.2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This unit is aimed at familiarising you with the stream of consciousness technique and its application in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- Learn about the stream of consciousness technique
- Know the history of this technique in relation to modernist movement

- Know which modernist writers use this in fiction
- Understand how Faulkner uses this technique in his novels
- Learn how it is used in *The Sound and the Fury*

9.3 STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

9.3.1 ABOUT

Stream of consciousness is a technique used in literature to adequately express the train of thoughts, feelings, and emotions in the character's waking mind. The term was first used by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890). This is a narrative mode mostly used in novels. As opposed to the realistic mode of narration, it follows a non-linear pattern and chronology is often violated. There is no third person omniscient narrator reporting the events. Rather the form is that of an interior monologue where a character goes on reminiscing about her/his life. The focus on this kind of narratives, therefore, is on the psychological world of the character rather than his physical world.

This technique was adapted by the writers as part of the Modernist movement in literature which sought after experimental styles in order to faithfully portray the conflict in the mind of modern man. Freud's theory of the subconscious mind had much impact on the modernist movement. People understood that the mental world of a person is more important than the physical world as there is more activity in the mental world. Again, the Modernist movement sought to "defamiliarise" literature in order to shock the reader out of his/ her sterility. Therefore, the modernist writers switched from a linear straightforward narrative to something more complex in style. The faithful representation of a person's flow of thoughts leads to a disjointed narrative, shifted from one thing to another and is often difficult to read.

LET US STOP AND THINK



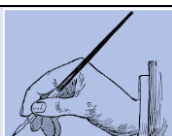
DEFAMILARISE

"Defamiliarisation" is a term used by Russian formalist Victor Shlovsky. In his essay "Art as Technique" Shlovsky delineates the necessity to "defamiliarise" or

“estrangle” what is ordinary in order to make the reader appreciate its beauty. Devices like paradox, metaphor, synecdoche etc enhance the literariness of any ordinary text. Defamiliarisation was also taken by the Modernist writers in Europe. In absurd plays like *Chairs*, playwrights resorted to make the actors speak the description of their characters on stage, hold placards describing the scene, and such other techniques in order to make people realise that what they are watching is only a play and not the reality.

9.3.2 IN LITERATURE

Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner are the writers prominently associated with this technique. Each of these writers has her/his unique style of the application of stream of consciousness. In *Ulysses*, for example, Joyce captures the mind of a man Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom in one single day. There is practically no plot but only thoughts of these two characters. Also, he draws from the myth of Ulysses in this novel. In Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, the section “Time Passes” is narrated by an omniscient narrator while the other two sections have shifting perspectives of different characters. William Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* has three different sections in three different time frames wherein each character looks at the same thing with varying perspectives.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What do you understand by the term “stream of consciousness”?

2. Who used the term “stream of consciousness” for the first time and where?

2. Who are the major practitioners of this technique in literature?

9. 4 FAULKNER AND THE STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

William Faulkner is known for his experimental style. He employs the stream-of-consciousness technique in his novels. Stream of consciousness is a technique whereby the author writes as though inside the minds of the characters. Since the ordinary person's mind jumps from one event to another, stream of consciousness tries to capture this phenomenon.

One of the most effective ways in which Faulkner establishes depth of character and scene is by using long lists of descriptions. Oftentimes, a description of an object will be followed by a description of a character. In this way, the object and character, because they have been similarly described, take on the appearance of each other. For example, at the beginning of "A Rose for Emily", Faulkner describes the Grierson house: "It was a big squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what once had been our most select street." Following this, Faulkner then characterizes Miss Emily and the once "heavily lightsome" style of the house parallels her physical appearance: her skeleton is "small and spare"— "lightsome"—yet because of her slight figure, what would have been merely plumpness in another, is obesity in her—"heavily lightsome". The woman and the house she lived in her entire life are inseparable.

He experimented intelligently with switching different perspectives and voices, including those of children, the outcast, the insane and the illiterate. He is well known for the arrangement of narrative chronology, sometimes by breaking the time frame and re-combining it with the whole new aspect. Faulkner's belief was that style was "the result of a need, of a necessity" (Meriwether and Millgate, 141), and that the work itself demanded its own style (181). His style varies according to the character who is narrating the section.

Faulkner is meticulous in his evaluation of utterance, diction and cadence. His narrative techniques include extended descriptions and details and a complex sentence structure. It is important to remember that Faulkner always has a purpose in choosing which different stylistic techniques to use at which point of his stories and novels. The narrative devices reflect the psychological complexity of the novel's characters and settings.

9.5 STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE SOUND AND THE FURY

9.5.1. OVERALL STRUCTURE

The Sound and the Fury is divided into four different sections with four different narrators. Each of these sections offers the respective narrator's perspective on the same events. The stream of consciousness technique is applied only in Benjy's and Quentin's narrative. The other two narratives- Jason's and Dilsey's have more or less straightforward narrations. This is primarily because Benjy and Quentin respectively have disjointed and complicated ways of thinking while Jason is singlemindedly focused on money. Thus, this section flows along at a rapid pace because he is not troubled with the intricacies of life, and he is not concerned with images or impressions. Thus Faulkner gives a sense of order and simplicity to section so as to suit the single-mindedness of Jason. In case of Dilsey, the narrator is a third person omniscient one whose narrative by dint of his/her omniscient view will be straightforward. And in the light of the other three sections, this section has a strong sense of control and order.

9.5.2 BENJY'S NARRATIVE

The use of stream of consciousness involves the writer's attempt at presenting time in creative ways. Benjy is mentally challenged and lives by his senses, just like an animal. He has no three dimensional sense of time, that is to say, he always lives in the present. According to Harold Bloom, in Benjy's case "the past is continually intruding on the present and the future seems to be beyond his comprehension" (Bloom 64). His mind cannot dissociate something that has happened in the present from something that has happened in the past. This means that the movement of his mind more fluid than the others. Stylistically, Faulkner has created a powerful tour de force by suggesting the functioning of Benjy's mind, but still he has brought enough order to that mind, such as his use of italics so that the reader might understand that it is the present time that is being referred to and follow Benjy's thoughts.

Again unlike normal people whose minds remain engaged with different thoughts, Benjy's mind is pretty fixed on certain things like the fire, Caddy and the golf course. As Caddy has had the maximum influence in his life, his thoughts keep going back to the time he spent with Caddy. The pasture that was once his has now been sold off and turned into a golf course. Images related to these therefore make an appearance an appearance in Benjy's narrative.

There are no difficult words because the vocabulary of Benjy would naturally be simple. Since his mind does not function logically, Faulkner records the thinking in terms of basic images. Thus, when Benjy sees the gate or the barn, he remembers another event that happened at the gate or the barn. Likewise his thought can be interrupted halfway through a thought; sometimes he can return to it and sometimes the thought is lost forever. An example of narrative in Benjy's section is given below. Luster is looking for his lost quarter on the field and asks Benjy to crawl through the fence. Benjy thinks of the situation as follows:

"We went along the fence and came to the garden fence where our shadows were. My shadow was higher than Luster's on the fence. We came to the broken place and came through it."

‘Wait a minute’. Luster said. ‘You snagged on that nail again. Can’t you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail’.

Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through. Uncle Maury said to not let anybody see us, so we better stoop over, Caddy said. Stoop over, Benjy. Like this, see. We stooped over and crossed the garden, where the flowers rasped and rattled against us. The ground was hard. We climbed the fence where the pigs were grunting and snuffing. I expect they’re sorry because one of them got killed today. Caddy said. The ground was hard, churned and knotted.

Keep your hands in your pockets, Caddy said. Or they’ll get froze. You don’t want your hands froze on Christmas, do you.

‘It’s too cold out there.’ Versh said. ‘You don’t want to go outdoors.’

‘What is it now.’ Mother said.

‘He want to go outdoors.’ Versh said.


‘Let him go.’ Uncle Maury said. (Faulkner 2)

In Benjy’s narrative we see that Faulkner makes the use of italics. These italics have been used to indicate time shifts. What is to be remembered is that Benjy quickly shifts from present to past and in order to help the reader keep track of his thoughts, Faulkner uses italics. The narrative that follows that in the italics is in the same time frame as the passage in the italics, and this is maintained until shift is announced by further italicized passages. Faulkner thus makes a brilliant use of narrative technique by creatively trying to convey the train of thoughts in the mind of an idiot.

In his narrative, some event or happening in the present triggers off something that happened in the past. His mind therefore works by an association of ideas. For example, in this passage, the crawling through fence in the field brings to mind a similar event in the past when Caddy was with him. They were carrying a letter from Uncle Maury to be delivered to his lover on the other side of the fence. Uncle Maury had warned them not to let anybody know of this and so they stooping and crawling through the fence. The pigs in the field were

making sounds and Caddy explained that they were sad because one of them had been killed. He also remembers how Caddy asked him to put his hands in his pockets to prevent them from getting cold.

Benjy's narrative consists of his sense impressions. He thinks of things just the way they appear to his senses. His faculty of thinking lacks the judgmental ability and hence he is never seen to think of anything in good or bad terms. Benjy's narrative, therefore is unmitigated by personal prejudices and can be said to be the most objective of the four narratives.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS	
	<p>1. In which novels has Faulkner used the stream of consciousness technique?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>
	<p>2. Into how many sections has the novel <i>The Sound and the Fury</i> been divided? In which of these sections does he use the stream of consciousness technique?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>
	<p>3. What technique does Faulkner use to suggest time shift in Benjy's narrative?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>

9.5.3 QUENTIN'S NARRATIVE

Quentin's mind, unlike Benjy, is that of an intellectual. Being a Harvard student, he is more concerned with philosophical questions and abstract notions

of time, life, death etc. (Bloom 63). Therefore, when Faulkner turns to the complex and intricate mind of Quentin, his style and language undergo major changes.

In Quentin's section, we find long, complex and difficult ideas. Quentin is trying to solve long and complicated moral issues; therefore, his section is more complicated. His thoughts appear more fragmented than Benjy because he thinks many things at one time. Also unlike Benjy whose thoughts are in the form of images, Quentin's thoughts are more abstract.

The following passage shows how Quentin thinks of multiple things at a time. Unlike Benjy, whose mind has limited impressions and whose thoughts are clearly demarcated, Quentin's thoughts are compressed sometimes in one sentence:

If it had been cloudy, I could have looked at the window, thinking what he said about idle habits. Thinking it would be nice for them down at New London if the weather held up like this. Why shouldn't it? The month of brides, the voice that breathed *She ran out of the mirror, out of the banked scent. Roses. Roses. Mr. and Mrs. Jaso Richmond Compson announce the marriage of* Roses. Not virgins like dog wood, milkweed. I said I have committed incest, Father. I said. Roses. Cunning and serene. If you attend Harvard one year, but don't see the boat race, there should be a refund. Let Jason have it. Give Jason a year at Harvard. (Faulkner 64)

It is to be noted that in Quentin's section too Faulkner uses italics to note time shifts, however with a difference. Unlike Benjy, Quentin does not live in the past for a very long. The past keeps intruding his present time and again. Hence the time shift in his case is not complete and not as neatly demarcated as in case of Benjy. So it is in one sentence sometimes that words with and without italics are present.

From this passage we get to see the typicalities of Quentin's thoughts. He is concerned with abstract ideas which shows in the way he thinks of idle habits. The "she" in this section is Caddy, his sister, whose sexuality becomes the prime

object of his thoughts. His thoughts are focused on the different events surrounding Caddy's wedding with Herbert. He also thinks of how he told his father that he had committed incest with his sister, in order to keep the matter within the family. Mention is also made of Jason and Harvard. This indicates a guilt that constantly troubles Quentin- that the fortunes of the family were spent on sending Quentin to Harvard and nothing was left for Jason. That he deprived Jason of a bright future is something that constantly plagues his mind.

Time is an important theme in Quentin's section. The section begins with an elaborate discussion on the grandfather's clock wherein the father says that clocks would paradoxically make him forget time. Throughout the narrative, Quentin is obsessed with stopping time. He finds it difficult to come to terms with the present and dwells mostly in the past. The conflict between past and present is also reflected in the narrative as the time shifts are abrupt and the sentences appear incoherent.

9.6 SUMMING UP

Literature in the modern period had undergone sea changes in terms of subject matter and style. First used by William James in his *Principles of Psychology*, the term came to be used in literature as a means of capturing the mind of a person. With this technique, the train of thoughts, emotions and feelings in the waking mind of a person are presented in the novel. Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner are some novelists who enriched the literary oeuvre using this technique. *The Sound and the Fury*, one of the classic American novels, exemplifies a particularly ingenious use of this technique. The novel has been divided into four sections, each with a different narrator and a narrative style. The sections on Benjy and Quentin have been narrated using this technique. In Benjy's section Faulkner uses italics to announce the shift of time in the narrator's mind. The use of italics in Quentin's section is different from Benjy's in the sense that the shift is not as clearly demarcated as Benjy's. The shifts are sometimes happening in the same sentence. This suggests a much more complicated mind of Quentin as opposed to Benjy who lives by his senses. Faulkner in this varied use of the stream of

consciousness in one single novel has displayed a mastery of this narrative technique.



9.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

- 1) What do you understand by the stream of consciousness technique? Explain with reference to its role in the Modernist movement.
- 2) How does Faulkner use the stream of consciousness technique in his novels?
- 3) Why do you think Faulkner has used the stream of consciousness in only Benjy and Quentin's narratives?
- 4) How is Quentin's mind different from that of Benjy's?
- 5) Comment on the similarities and differences in the use of stream of consciousness technique between Benjy's and Quentin's narrative.



9.8. REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

Bloom, Harold. Ed. *William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury: Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008

Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. Vintage Books: London, 2015. Print

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UNIT 10: THE SOUND AND THE FURY: THE STORY OF THE COMPSON BROTHERS

UNIT STRUCTURE

10.1 Introduction

10.2 Learning Objectives

10.3 *The Sound and the Fury* and the Compson family

10.4 *The Sound and the Fury* and the Compson brothers

10.4.1 The title

10.4.2 The story of the Compson brothers

10.4.2.1 Benjy

10.4.2.1 Quentin

10.4.2.3 Jason

10.4.3 Relationship among the Compson brothers

10.4.4 The Compson brothers and Caddy

10.5 Summing Up

10.6 Assessment Questions

10.7 References and Recommended Readings

10.1 INTRODUCTION

The Sound and the Fury is about the disintegration of the Compson family and the Old Southern order. The story is told from the point of view of the three Compson brothers. As the three brothers differ in character from one another, their style of narration is also different. It is also seen that they respond to their sister Caddy in three different manners.

10.2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This unit aims at reading *The Sound and the Fury* as a story of the Compson brothers: Benjy, Quentin and Jason. By the end of this unit,

you will be able to:

- understand the story of the Compson family
- analyse, compare and contrast the character of the Compson brothers
- know how each of the brothers character responds to Caddy
- examine the differing nature of each of the brother's tragedy

10.3 THE SOUND AND THE FURY AND THE COMPSON FAMILY

The Compson family in *The Sound and the Fury* is part of the Old Southern aristocratic family of the Sartoris. These are people displaying with a sense of pride and valour, displaying values of the old South. They are also passionate people who follow their heart rather than their reason. In this novel, Mr. Compson displays the old Southern gentlemanly qualities. We find him handing the Old Southern tradition to Quentin in the form of Quentin's grandfather's watch. He drinks heavily and is often at odds with Mrs. Compson. His withdrawn attitude to the family problems owes largely to a decline in the family fortune.

Mrs. Quentin, in contrast comes from the Bascomb family, an extension of the Snopes. These were the business class who flourished in the New South. Cynicism is a marked feature of the Snopes. She is always complaining of some problem or the other and always blaming herself for her apparently miserable plight. Like Mr. Compson, she has a withdrawn nature and is often feigning a headache to go upstairs and withdraw from the affairs of the family

This is the reason why Mr and Mrs. Quentin, with different temperaments, are often at loggerheads with each other. A marriage between these two opposing classes signals the tragedy that is to befall the Compsons. The indifference of parents leaves the children to the care of servants. It leads to an incomplete development of their personality which results in the tragedy of each.

10.4.2. THE STORY OF THE COMPSON BROTHERS

The Sound and the Fury follows the lives of the Compson family and more specifically the view points of Benjy, Quentin and Jason. The tragedy in the novel is the tragedy of the Compson brothers. These brothers emerge as

protagonists of a novel wherein all other characters are understood from their perspectives.

10.4.2.1 BENJY

The first narrative is that of Benjy. He is a thirty three year old mentally challenged person whose mind is that of a three year old. Also he cannot speak. This makes his narrative in the novel utterly bizarre. Like an animal, he lacks cognitive power and lives by his senses. Whenever he has to express any emotions he howls. He bellows when he looks at the golf course, when he finds Caddy wet in mud or when he finds Dan, the dog bellowing. His mind frequently goes back to the incidents of his childhood when he played with his sister Caddy or when his “Damuddy” (grandmother) died. As he lives only by his senses, his mind works by associating something in present with some past object or happening. For example, the snagging of Benjy’s shirt in fence triggers off memories of a similar incident in the past while crawling through the fence with Caddy.

Benjy has a different way of sensing things. He is a synesthete, that is to say one who perceives one kind of sense as the other. For example, he does not feel cold but “smells” it. Also, he finds Caddy smelling like trees. Faulkner uses this technique to adequately convey the perception of a three year old trapped in the body of a thirty- three.

Because of his idiocy, he becomes a badge of shame for the family. Nobody except Caddy and Dilsey is particularly fond of him. Therefore we do not find any character other than Caddy exerting a particularly strong influence on his imagination.

While Benjy’s narrative seems to be incoherent, it is through his version that the reader gets the most objective picture of the outer world. Being a mentally handicapped person, he cannot really think but in fact, understands the world through his senses. His mind is that of three year old, untainted by complicacies or bias. What he conveys is his first hand impression of the things and events. While Quentin’s narrative is influenced by his personal obsession

with life, death and time, and Jason's with his frustration, Benjy's narrative gives the reader a clearer picture of the characters. The sound and fury created leads us to a different and a more truthful understanding of events.

LET US STOP AND THINK



Synesthesia

Synesthesia is a sensory disorder wherein one kind of sense stimulates experiences related to another kind of sense. In this case, Benjy seems to smell everything which is not related to the nasal faculty. He can smell cold, and thinks that Caddy sometimes smells like leaves and trees and sometimes doesn't.

10.2.4.2. QUENTIN


The second narrative is that of Quentin Compson, a Harvard student. It is the 2nd of June, 1910 and Quentin is proceeding towards his suicidal act. The narrative thus recounts the storm of feelings and memories that encircle him on the last day of his life. Quentin's narrative seems even more disjointed than as he is bombarded with thoughts, philosophical questions and memories of his past days in the family and at Harvard just before death. To begin with, he finds himself obsessed with time. The ticking of grandfather's clock reminds him of how his father had told him about the paradoxical nature of time- the ticking of the clock will make him forget time. His mind then races back to Caddy's wedding day and to his confession of incest. Whether he had really committed incest or was imagining it is unclear, but the purpose was to save his sister's honour.

Quentin resembles Benjy in his strong sense of smell. He smells honeysuckle and associates this with sadness. He feels the night and the river resembling the scent of honeysuckle.

Quentin possesses the typical chivalric values of the South. He therefore is obsessed with the honour of his sister. He asks T.P to saddle a horse on which

he will find out the man who had wronged her sister. His mind is fixated on Caddy's chastity and he even tells his father that he had committed incest with Caddy. This concern with the chastity of the women is typical of Southern values.

As a student in Harvard, Quentin is deeply philosophical and pallid. He was packed off to Harvard and isolated from the affairs of the family. That he cannot participate and help in solving the problems of the family is a constant source of gloom for him. Also he feels guilty of how Benjy's pasture was sold off to send him to Harvard. Again, his fixation with Caddy, her chastity, wedding and his confession of incest suggest his sexual desire for Caddy which remains unfulfilled. All these combined become the source of his emotional frustration and drives him to his death.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS	
	1. What kind of disorder does Benjy suffer from?
<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	
	2. How does Benjy convey his emotions?
<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	
	2. What kind of a person is Quentin?
<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	

Jason's narrative begins with the line "Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say." This points to his inherent hatred of women, who he thinks are responsible for everything. He particularly hates Quentin, the daughter of Caddy who the latter left to the family's care after her husband had deserted her. He comes across as a misogynist when he makes nasty remarks about the character of his niece or when he twists her hand in order to control her. His mother had always ignored him while his sister Caddy's attentions were focussed on Benjy and Quentin. That is why, he develops a hatred for women.

Jason's mother says that he is more of a Bascomb, that is he has taken after his mother's family. the Bascombs are descendants of the Snopes who are characterised by a money-driven and shrewd mentality, as opposed to the chivalric Sartoris. Jason thinks that despite being a Compson he has to wait on people. (Bloom 103). "I haven't got much pride. I can't afford it with a kitchen full of niggers to feed and robbing the state asylum of it's star freshman. Blood, I say, governors and generals. It's a damn good thing we never had any kigs or presidents; we'd all be down there at Jackson chasing butterflies." His mother is fond of him who she thinks has taken after his uncle Maury in his practical approach to life. Being a Bascomb in spirit, all he can think of is money. He takes away the money sent by Caddy for his daughter, forces Quentin to sign the money order for him and frequently checks on the prices of cotton so that he can get the best price on selling. He is also very miserly. He asks to man to send him telegram messages on cotton prices in one word like "BUY."

One distinguishing trait of his character is his anger. Jason always seems to be angry with and frowning at everyone. He abuses his niece, makes racist remarks on the black servants and is not very fond of any member of his family. Also he gains sadistic pleasure by seeing people in pain. He twists Quentin's hand and burns Luster's tickets. This is because he seems to be wronged by the whole family. Everyone focussed his/her attention towards Benjy for taking care of his needs or at Quentin was to be sent to Harvard and had a promising future. The entire savings of the Compsons were spent on

sending Quentin to Harvard. Caddy never got along with him for his irksome attitude and her husband did not keep his promise of offering him a job. Despite


that it is Jason alone who feeds the family including the servants. He feels that the family is ungrateful for what he does. The kind of behaviour that he metes out to them is according to him, his revenge for the wrongs done to him.

10.4.3 RELATIONSHIP AMONG THE COMPSON BROTHERS

The relationship among the Compson brothers is often overlooked in the critical discussions of the novel. However it is important to understand the relationship of these brothers with one another in order to get a proper understanding of their characters.

Benjy being mentally challenged does not share a special relationship with any other person except for Caddy. Quentin, like, Caddy is quite fond of Benjy. He plays with Benjy sometimes and administers some kind of liquid to him to help him come out of his drunken state. However, it is interesting to see that he does not think too much about his brothers on his last day.

While Quentin, Benjy and Caddy played together, Jason had also been left out. Caddy teases him by calling him a crybaby. He then develops an irritating and complaining nature. He does not like any of his brothers. Again, Jason being a Bascomb in his temperament does not get along with the chivalric Quentin. He thinks that Benjy and Quentin robbed him of the money and love that were due to him. He plans to send Benjy to Jackson asylum to cut down his expenses. He even refuses to go to the Quentin's cemetery.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS	
	<p>1. What is Jason's attitude towards women?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>
	<p>2. In what ways is Jason a Bascomb?</p> <p>-----</p>

3. Was Jason close to his other siblings? Why?

10.4.4 THE COMPSON BROTHERS AND CADDY

Caddy appears to be the central object of all the brothers' thoughts. Since her point of view is not stated, we get to know her only through the Compson brothers. Her role in each of their lives is especially significant, so much so that she eventually directs the courses of their lives.

Caddy, apart from being a sister is a mother figure for Benjy. He is left to the care of Caddy for the most part. Benjy obeys everything Caddy says. If Caddy asks him to hush when he starts bellowing, Benjy would immediately hush. He would always have Caddy as his playmate when everyone else avoids him. As the only woman in his proximity, Caddy becomes the object of Benjy's sexual desires. Being mentally handicapped, he cannot understand his sexual impulses. However, his responses to any kind of actual or symbolic sexual act show how his subconscious mind desires Caddy. Benjy finds Caddy smelling like trees or leaves. However, when he sees Caddy's muddy underpants, he howls. He also howls when Caddy wears a perfume or when after having sex with Charlie, Caddy tries to hug him. He finds her smelling like trees after she takes a bath. All of these refer to an association of trees and leaves with virginity or innocence. As Benjy understands the outside world through smell, he can smell Caddy's innocence or its loss. The muddy underpants of Caddy symbolises the beginning of her menstruation cycle. The perfume Caddy applies is suggestive of loss of innocence and stepping into the world of sexual desires.

Quentin in his narrative seems to be fixated on Caddy's chastity. This is reflective of the Southern mores which value a woman's honour. The news of Caddy getting pregnant puts him to great stress. He tries to fight the man who apparently wronged her. He even tries to make his father believe that he had committed incest with Caddy, in order to keep the matter in the household. Quentin's narrative, like Benjy's, hints at the former's strong sexual desires for his sister. The thought of Caddy's wedding day upsets him greatly. Also his pointing out of a knife, a phallic symbol, to his sister has deep sexual overtones. Apart from his fixation, Quentin shares a close relationship with Caddy. With Benjy being mentally unstable and Jason always complaining, Quentin becomes a kind of confidante to Caddy who shares everything with him.

Of all the brothers, it is Jason who has the least emotional proximity to Caddy. However, even in his hatred, Caddy is the constant object of his thoughts. As a child, he was bullied and teased by Caddy and the other children who called him a cry baby. This becomes the reason for his irritating and complaining nature. After Caddy is abandoned by her husband and leaves her daughter Quentin to the care of the Compsons, it becomes an extra burden for him. That is why, he is always at loggerheads with Quentin and gains sadistic pleasure by irritating her. Caddy's act makes him hate all women. However, psychologically speaking, it is his sexual frustration more than anything else that causes him to behave disagreeably. He shared the sexual desire of his brothers for Caddy. While Benjy and Quentin were at least able to garner Caddy's emotional attention, Jason never really got that. This also explains his especially rude behaviour with Quentin, Caddy's offspring.

10.5 SUMMING UP

The Sound and the Fury is the story of the disintegration of the Compson family. The narratives of the Compson brothers- Benjy, Quentin and Jason offer varying perspectives on this disintegration. Each of these characters is locked up in his own chamber and fails to reach out to the other. Their connecting link is their sister Caddy who becomes the primary object of each of their thoughts. Their fixation on the sister transcends the normal bounds of sibling love or hatred

and borders on incestuous feelings. The inattention of the parents combined with their emotional and sexual frustration lead to their eventual downfall.



10.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Who are the three brothers in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*?
2. How are the three brothers different from one another?
3. What kind of relationship do Benjy, Quentin and Jason share among themselves?
4. How do these brothers meet their tragedy in the novel?
5. What role does Caddy play in each of their lives?
6. Why do you think Quentin commits suicide?
7. How does Benjy's mental disability affect his narrative?
8. Why do think Jason behaves rudely?



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JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

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