

Kathryn Skopec (2019)

“‘If It Wasn’t Anything, What Was I’: The Paradoxical Identity of Quentin Compson”

“‘If It Wasn’t Anything, What Was I’: The Paradoxical Identity of Quentin Compson” explores the social and historical implications of Quentin's Compson's identity in the novel *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner. The question that this paper explores is what both Quentin's identity paradoxes and his resulting suicide mean on a philosophical level. I posit his identity crisis as a response to the rise of modernism and nihilism at the turn of the twentieth century in the South. I argue that Quentin's self-contradictions are a result of humanity's sudden change of self-conception, which shifted from being rooted in community, local culture, and labor, into something more intrinsic and self-important. Society's new emphasis on this intrinsic self-conception, coupled with the loss of the Old South's culture after the loss of the Civil War, spurs Quentin into experiencing an identity crisis of many self-contradictions, which include a conflicting treatment of women, queerness, and femininity. As a result, he finds the modern world to be immoral and meaningless compared to the culture of the Old South. Thus, he resolves his identity crisis by constructing a poetic narrative that is heavily fixated on his sister's sexual freedom. The italicized memories of his narrative, which I term to be a “poetic dreamworld,” are a meaning system for Quentin. The thesis concludes that Quentin’s suicide foreshadows the philosophical movement of existentialism as a response to modernism's narcissist, nihilistic influence on society, and becomes a way for him to preserve his art and keep it suspended in time.