

The Hero With a Thousand Foibles: Quentin and Narrative Circularity

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Every story is a circle. The hero sets off from the ordinary world on a quest, sacrifices something to achieve their goal, and returns back to their old life, prize in hand. This is the ur-story, the blueprint from which all other narratives are built: stasis, loss, gain, stasis. *The Sound and The Fury*, for all its nonlinear modernist trappings, cannot escape the revolving nature of stories. The chapter of the novel from Quentin's perspective begins with "I put on my new suit" (81). It finishes with "I put my vest on [...] I put my coat on" (178). Despite the madness and excitement of the intervening pages, Quentin ends the chapter exactly as he started, somberly dressing himself in his dorm. Indeed, Quentin's segment is characterized by a painful circularity. He wanders like Odysseus through Cambridge, retracing traumatic memories over and over in his head. Each encounter he has along the way causes Quentin to relive some moment from his past. However, rather than receiving closure from these encounters, Quentin is foiled each time, always finding himself in the same torturous place where he began. Ultimately, the circularity of the narrative does not just control Quentin, it afflicts him as well.

The first time we see this pattern play out is when Quentin begins conversing with Deacon, an African-American man who is a local celebrity around Harvard. Looking at Deacon, Quentin is reminded of "Roskus watching [him] from behind all his whitefolks' claptrap of uniforms and politics" (99). Amid all the pressure and hierarchy of Harvard, Quentin remembers Roskus, the servant who took care of him when he was young. To Quentin, Roskus represents the fonder aspects of his old life in the South. His presence, both as a caretaker and servant, connote a level of stability and prestige that Quentin sorely misses in college. However, as quickly as Quentin imagines seeing Roskus, "he was gone" (99). In the end, Quentin does not receive the comfort he might have gotten from Roskus. Instead, he leaves his own suicide note in Deacon's hands and wanders off to his next mishap.

Quentin's next attempt at the reliving sore spots of his past comes when he takes it upon himself to help a little Italian girl find her way home. Throughout their time together, Quentin refers to the girl as "sister," immediately connecting her to Quentin's actual sister, Caddy. In helping the little girl, Quentin tries to do-over his relationship with Caddy. Though Quentin was not able to stop Caddy from being "despoiled" by the various men in her life, his virtuous actions towards the little girl offer a chance to reclaim the position of protective older brother that he lost with Caddy. Thus, it's more than a little ironic when he himself is mistaken for a despoiler by the little girl's actual brother, who beats Quentin and has him arrested. Both times Quentin tries to be his sister's keeper he is shown just how lacking he is for the role. As he lies on the ground, beaten and humiliated, Quentin comes full circle from the last time he attempted to protect his sister.

Quentin relives a traumatic moment from his past for the final time when he loses a fight with Gerald, another Harvard student. This fight echoes a previous brawl he had with one of his sister's suitors, which he also lost. After the fight, Quentin's acquaintance, Spode, asks him if he knew Gerald was taking boxing lessons and thus could easily beat him -- to which Quentin replies "I guess so. Yes" (166). Here we have the first indication that Quentin is in some way

consciously reenacting moments from his past. By picking a fight he knows he will lose, Quentin again draws himself back to his previous fistfight. Rather than attempting to avoid the conflict, Quentin throws himself headlong into it, embracing his beating. Like a Christian penitent of old, Quentin mortifies his flesh by way of Gerald's fists. The pain and humiliations of the past have hollowed him out to the point that he no longer tries to change the outcome from the last time. Quentin is not a passive victim of the narrative circle's repetition. Rather, he uses it as a tool for his own self-destruction. It makes sense then that, following the fight with Gerald, Quentin returns to his room and prepares to repeat his walk down to the river.

What separates Quentin's narrative from others is that in all his wanderings, he never truly learns or gains anything. As each encounter results in the same outcome as before, Quentin sinks further and further into anger and depression. In this way, the Quentin's story becomes one of constant loss with no gain -- the Hero's Journey as psychological torture device. Ultimately, the reader comes to understand that the terrible emotional turmoil which afflicts Quentin does not come from his transition from the South to Harvard but from his profound emotional stagnation. Constantly circling around the same emotional issues from his past, Quentin chooses to end his suffering once and for all.