Adaptation as Reader-Response to

_The Sound and the Fury_

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ABSTRACT

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Adaptation as Reader-Response to The Sound and the Fury (58 pp.)

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In order to understand the complex relationship between original and the adaptation, the paper uses the influential novel, William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury, and adaptations of that work in different media to explore the creation of an adaptation and some reasons why an artist creates an adaptation as well as what is altered in a work by removing it from its original context. A general investigation process that leads to adaptation will allow for a further exploration of two adaptations for the stage: Erik Ehn’s The Sound and the Fury and the Elevator Repair Service’s The Sound and the Fury (April Seventh, 1928); and a look into Martin Ritt’s The Sound and the Fury as adapted for film will stand as a possible unsuccessful adaptation in order to allow the reader to question what makes an adaptation successful.

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INTRODUCTION

The art of adaptation has a long and difficult history stretching as far back as humankind has been able to tell and retell stories. The tradition has been masterfully engaged by artists from William Shakespeare, who adapted much older tales to create his work such as *King Lear* (Bates 39), to Steven Spielberg whose highly acclaimed film *Schindler’s List* was based on the novel *Schindler’s Ark* by Thomas Keneally. In order to retell old and sometimes familiar tales with a new perspective, but in an age of proliferation and mass production in which any image or thought is as producible as the age it was conjured into existence, the value of these deviations from the “original” are often called into question. The artistic space these creations are often relegated to the realm of “middle brow” at best. But the claim of creating an original work seems audacious, considering an artist’s key source of inspiration is most often other works with which they come in contact. It could be possible to link every work of art back to an original source in an effort to prove the theory of six degrees of separation. But “when we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works” (Hutcheon 6). In fact this relationship is often celebrated, not hidden in the shadows.

For instance, the corporation now known as Marvel Entertainment has recently decided to diversify from comic books and figures into the film industry in order to capitalize on their iconographic character creations such as Spider-Man,
Ironman, and the X-Men instead of depending on the revenue from the comic book series alone (Hamner 1). The relationship of the film to the comic book heroes is necessary publicity to get crowds into theaters to see the film, and the film versions are often highly colorful and action packed renditions recognizing their graphic past. But the benefits of adapting in other situation are not as clear, such as the case of Schindler’s List. Though there is a great deal of scholarship on the process and the results of adaptation, the question still remains unanswered: “Why?”

For Marvel Entertainment, much of the reason is economic. The company wants to make sure that they are getting as much money as they can from these characters by cutting out the middleman, which is, in this case, a larger production company. But for many others, the question of adaptation has nothing to do with the economic value that act of creation might have for the creator. This desire to adapt seems especially poignant in the realm of theatre, as it could be argued that every time a piece of work is mounted in a new location with new sets, costumes, directors, and actors, the resulting work is an adaptation. The reasons for this desire to adapt cannot simply be justified as economics or social gain, as in many situations it would be of greater benefit to the theatre company to leave the original designs well enough alone and approximate the original concepts. However this is not the tradition of theatre, especially in the academic and avant-garde theatre communities. A need to create and view something different
dominates the world of theatrical design. For many of these works, it cannot be argued that the desire for adaptation is a desire to create perfection. It is not likely one will hear a director pronouncing that the reason to relocate William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in World War II France is in order to perfect the original interpretation of the work. And as the art of adaptation is often given a less auspicious place in the hierarchy of creative energies, this cannot also be depended on as an explanation.

Therefore the question remains through these possible explanations. What is the nature of adaptation and why do artists continue to work in this genre? In order to explore possible reasons as to why classic texts are reworked through different artistic mediums and what the nature of this process is, one must look closely at the works themselves. Let us focus on a particular work of classic American literature whose value on its own is generally respected in the academic community and look at adaptations of this work and the effects these adaptations have on the original work and on the audience that experiences them.

Specifically, let us take a closer look at several works in theatre and in film inspired by William Faulkner's highly influential novel *The Sound and the Fury* in order to better understand why an artist feels the need to create an adaptation and what is altered in a work by removing it from its original context. This act of investigation should allow for comparisons within the genre of adaptation in order to understand the way an artist is approaching the adapted work. For this
particular example, it will first be essential to establish Faulkner’s original work in the canon of American literature and the way that Faulkner himself felt about the nature of the literature upon which he built his career and intellectual reputation. A general investigation of the ideology behind the process that leads to adaptation will allow for a further exploration of two adaptations for the stage: Erik Ehn’s *The Sound and the Fury* and the Elevator Repair Service’s (henceforth referred to as ERS) *The Sound and the Fury (April Seventh, 1928)*. With these two examples one can compare the readings of these separate entities in order to understand how a reading may differ, and the ways in which these readings manifest themselves in an interpretive work. Finally a look into Martin Ritt’s *The Sound and the Fury* as adapted for film will stand as a less critically successful adaptation in order to allow the reader to question what makes an adaptation successful.

**A THEORY OF ADAPTATION**

One method that artists use for exploring the legacy of this work is the process of adaptation. In this process, the artist explores and displays his or her understanding of a work (for our purposes, the work being explored is that of William Faulkner) through the way they choose to embody that work in another artistic medium or with an altered perspective. But what is the nature of this new work that is pulled from the old? Does the adaptor create something new, or is the adaptation simply a paraphrase of the original, not to be taken on its own merits? What does the audience/reader respond to in viewing an adaptation in the shadow
of the original text and how does a knowledge of both works alter one is experiencing this new work?

In order to better question this complex relationship between original text and the adaptation, one must first understand how the original piece is created and read. One must first answer the question “What is the original?” before these other daunting questions can be addressed. The genre of the novel is considered by critical and scholarly thinkers to be stable and unchangeable entity, as though the novel’s words form some pillar of literary completeness on which the inconstant reader must stand in order to survey the emotional and intellectual bounty which the novel supplies. In his essay “Some Thoughts on Playwriting,” Thornton Wilder states that:

Novels are written in the past tense. The characters in them, it is true, are represented as living moment by moment their present time, but the constant running commentary of the novelist (“Tess slowly descended into the valley”; “Anna Karenina laughed”) inevitably conveys to the reader the fact that these events are long since past over. (Wilder 892)

The implication is that the novel has a static presence and once the copyright has been stamped inside the front cover it is a finished work incapable of alteration.

Critical schools such as New Criticism have encouraged scholars to look at the work intellectually by endorsing theories and discussing how the work is participating within or outside a certain academic school of thought. For example
there is no shortage of critical compilations endeavoring to explain Faulkner’s female characters, Faulkner’s use of Greek tragedy, and Faulkner’s perspectives on race through detailed essays quoting fellow scholars and Faulkner himself. Meanwhile the more ephemeral receptions of a reader expressed physically through tears, sighs, laughter, and stress are generally disregarded as incalculable and therefore unworthy of scholarly study. Critical theorist W.K. Wimsatt comments:

The report of some reader...that a poem or story induces in them vivid images, intense feelings, or heightened consciousness, is neither anything which can be refuted nor anything which it is possible for the objective critic to take into account. The purely affective report is either too physiological or it is too vague (Wimsatt 32).

Instead of allowing a communal or critical venue for discovering the potential of these more ephemeral expressions of analysis and the possibility of sharing visceral reactions because they are outside the realm of typical articulation, the original text is asked to stand still and be analyzed by this set of individuals through essays filled with academic jargon. Though scholars have often disregarded the more physical and imagistic form of critique as intangible, others see this gap as an opportunity. The adaptor is one such individual. This critical thinker fills in the gap between the text and the emotional response of the reader through careful,
conscientious reading in order to better illuminate the text and the
conversations surrounding it.

The role of the adaptor is first and foremost that of a reader. The process of
adaptation always begins in the same place: with a reading. Without this initial
act, there is no possibility for an adaptation. The length at which this individual
reader (or in some cases) group of readers familiarize themselves with the original
work is subject to change, but adaptation must begin with this external stimulant
of creativity. The method with which the adaptor chooses to respond to a text
differs from that of the scholarly critic, though it is just as legitimate. Instead of
maintaining a dialogue with fellow scholars surrounding the immobile text that is
being discussed, the adaptor uses the work set before him or her in order to aid in
the exploration by placing the intellectual and visceral reaction to the original
work of art alongside each other. In addition to this act of internal exploration,
the reader/adaptor shares that response of images and styles with a larger set of
readers. In the theatre, this is called the audience. Instead of tackling the work
and structuring well formed arguments by building on the work of previous
scholars, the adaptor structures images using wood, paint, bodies, and artistic
tradition to explore a work. The adaptor seeks an expression of emotive qualities
to better understand and often question the emotive qualities of the original to the
new reader, the audience.
This new reader has a number of options as to the way they would prefer to experience their reading. This “generation” has the opportunity to gain knowledge of the original text (for this example, to have read Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*) and the adaptation. This would enable this reader to observe and respond to both texts simultaneously in order to develop their own response to the work. It is also possible to view the work of an adaptation on its own, however it is difficult to deduce the reader’s understanding of the work on levels that are created here and labeling the work as an adaptation if that individual has no knowledge of the original seems questionable from the perspective of the reader.

In order to maintain clarity, the categorization of these two sets of readers must be distinguished. The reader of the original work on its own who can choose to create an adaptation or simply internalize a reaction to a reading is what will be referred to as a “first-generation reader.” The individual that has access to both the original work and the adaptive work so that both works can simultaneously inform the reading will be referred to as a “second-generation reader.” This distinction, however, should be critically questioned as adaptive groups such as ERS have claimed the influence of other adaptations. In addition it is difficult to separate a first-generation reader from the influence of Faulkner’s legacy or his body of work, which could lead to an indirect influence upon the reader similar to one achieved by the second generation reader. The separation of these groups is,
therefore, a matter of clarity and convenience, rather than the building of impenetrable theoretical walls.

For an understanding of the interpretation and investigation of adaptation being posited here, the orientation around the reader is essential for destabilizing the position of the text in order to assign new value to the process of adaptation. According to critic Elizabeth Freund, an orientation around the reader challenges the privileged position of the work of art and seeks to undermine its priority and authority not only by displacing the work from the centre and substituting the reader in its place, but by putting in doubt the autonomy of the work, and, in certain cases, even causing the work to ‘vanish’ altogether (Freund 11).

This paper does not provide a method for categorization or judgments of quality. It is simply an inquiry into the nature of creating an adaptation in relationship with the reader’s response and a glimpse into the kind of critical work being accomplished through this process. Whether the adaptor claims to be making a work of fidelity, deconstruction, or parody, they all share a common origin. All adaptations require an initial read of the work being responded to. The essence of adaptation is alteration. The very act of keeping certain lines/characters/situations at the expense of others is a call of judgment on the part of the adaptor. In this way the adaptor has no choice but to comment on the text by placing value judgments on the sections.
Through these techniques, the process of adaptation questions Thornton Wilder’s assumptions of the stability of the novel. The adaptor is taking situations, themes, and characters from their original places in the novel and recasting them in a different light. This mobility destabilizes the traditional perspectives of the state of the novel or any other form of prose or poetry as it becomes difficult to separate the work of fiction from its themes, characters, and plot. The “liveness” of the novel comes through the reader’s ability to respond and alter the original version.

**WILLIAM FAULKNER’S THE SOUND AND THE FURY**

William Faulkner’s sphere of artistic and academic influence on those who read or know his work has spread wide for nearly a hundred years. Major American authors from Ernest Hemingway to Ernest Gaines have acknowledged his influence on their works, and undergraduate students across the United States have read his novels and short fiction. The mythical status of Faulkner’s writings is mingled within the collective creative imagination of the public and phrases such as “well, it’s true, I’m no Faulkner” bring to mind a specific set of images and understanding to the speaker and the listener. This status in the public discourse connects his legacy with a certain style and level of communal understanding.

The persistence of Faulkner’s novels (most notably *The Sound and the Fury*) to appear in the popular and the academic media labeled as “classics” reinforces this conception of Faulkner’s importance. Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize
in 1949, permanently placing him on a short list of literary artists. The contemporary respect for his novels has only grown in the past sixty years, with groups such as the Library of America offering six different volumes of Faulkner’s work (The Library of America). In Time Magazine’s recent list of the 100 greatest novels since 1923, The Sound and the Fury is among them. The Guardian, a newsgroup from the U.K., has also listed The Sound and the Fury in a comprehensive list including novels from 54 countries. In the publishing world, Random House listed The Sound and the Fury as sixth on their list of Modern Novels as chosen by their board. Even the famous American personality Oprah has chosen three of Faulkner’s novels for her influential book club.

Beyond the status of these works in popular culture, Faulkner’s writing has also attained a rank of status in the academic circles. The development and academic recognition of the Faulkner Journal dedicated to publishing scholarly articles on the subject of his writing and the dedication of the University of Mississippi (Oxford) to the study of Faulkner’s work, including their internationally attended Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference that occurs yearly.

In order to better understand and codify the legacy of Faulkner’s work, writers have desired to pay their respects to Faulkner’s influence through their own work in poetry, prose, on film and in theatre. This major member of the
literary canon of the United States crosses boundaries of artistic medium with his influence, as readers turn into creative interpreters, or adaptors, of his work.

**FAULKNER AND ADAPTATION**

The slippery slope towards the destabilization of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* as a text begins with the process and format through which Faulkner himself chose to write. He moves the novel toward Freud’s “vanishing lines” by refusing to see the worlds that he created as complete or unchanging. He continually re-imagined some of his most memorable characters and writings. Many theatre theorists tend to dismiss the written forms into the realm of the intellectual past and do not allow for its changeable nature as it moves from interpretation to interpretation. The perception of the novel as constant after its publication in a narrow one, and one that Faulkner works to deconstruct. At a lecture, Faulkner once said

> The fact that I have moved my characters around in time successfully, at least in my own estimation, proves to me my own theory that time is a fluid condition which as no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people. There is no such thing as "was"-- only "is". If "was" existed, there would be no grief or sorrow. (Walter 183)

Through this reading of Faulkner’s perspective on the “liveness” of literature that we often prescribe strictly to the theatre and its spatial experience it only seems the logical next step for other creative artists to take up the work he began in his mythical
Yoknapatapha County and recast his characters for the stage and screen. This act of adaptation serves as a creative critique of the work of Faulkner while simultaneously destabilizing its position in the past tense which theorists such as Thornton Wilder cast the novel into.

The task of enumerating the complex movements of Faulkner’s characters or cataloguing the diversity of his influence on future artists would be too great an undertaking for the task at hand, but there are some clear examples of the influence of a particular work that is still being reimagined today. Among his stories, Faulkner had a favorite. His 1929 novel *The Sound and the Fury* is the story of the Compson family struggling in Mississippi at the turn of the twentieth century. Jason and Caroline have three sons: Quinten, Jason, and Benjy, along with one daughter: Caddy. The brothers are all, in their own way, obsessed with two things: their sister Caddy, and maintaining the world as they see fit. None of the brothers can handle the change that, in many ways, Caddy represents as the free-spirited sibling who explores her sexual desires. For Jason, Quinten, and even Benjy, there is control and power in the stationary existence, and anything that threatens that existence is a threat to their very being, just as many scholars see the destabilization of the canon as a threat to literary excellence.

Faulkner once commented that the plot of *The Sound and the Fury* was essentially the story of little girl who got her drawers dirty. The story that surrounds this episode is obviously much more complex than that, but it is
important that Faulkner felt at ease with condensing this monumental work of fiction into one small and seemingly insignificant event in a child's life. The exposition surrounding this momentary event is the substance of this larger work.

The novel itself is written in four sections outside of a chronological order and often repeating situations from a different perspective. Faulkner first wrote the section narrated by Benjy, the mentally disabled brother, who freely moves between his present and the past without distinction because he is incapable of separating the memories weaving through his mind from the reality he faces. This episode finds its reality in 1928, but Benjy frequently passes into the realm of memory as he recalls his childhood and the experiences of his life as though he were living them in the present. Dissatisfied with this version, Faulkner adapted Benjy’s thoughts to his highly intellectual brother. Quinten also dwells heavily on the past and wrestles consciously with the issues of “honor” and sexual “deviance” he is forced to face through the loss of his sister’s virginity. Even though he is more intellectually advanced than his brother Benjy, he also flows in and out of the present easily, and the inability to escape this past is what drives him to his suicide at his first year at Harvard. Still sensing the work as incomplete, Faulkner retold the story again through the eyes of the third brother, Jason. Jason struggles with taking responsibility for his own life, and though more rooted mentally in the present, cannot forgive the past and therefore allows his past grievances to rule his existence. Faulkner then wrote this same story a fourth time in the third person, in an attempt to round out this complex story of
intermingled time and space. This last section focuses on the story and perspective of Dilsey, the black servant who takes care of the family and keeps it from falling apart, and she is one of the more positively portrayed figures in the novel. At a seminar on American literature held in Japan, Faulkner discussed the process of writing *The Sound and the Fury*:

> [It] began as a short story, it was a story without plot, of some children being sent away from the house during the grandmother’s funeral... I told the idiot’s experience of that day, and it was incomprehensible...so I had to write another chapter. Then I decided to let Quentin tell his version of that same day...Then there had to be the counterpoint, which was the other brother, Jason. By that time it was completely confusing. I knew that it was not anywhere near finished and then I had to write another section from the outside with an outsider...And that’s how that book grew. (Jelliffe 103-105)

Throughout his life Faulkner continued to make changes to this text and its characters even after its initial publication.

This structure creates a sense of incompleteness that permeates and unsettles every aspect of Faulkner's writing. The words of his characters fall like pebbles on a pond, rippling on the surface and hinting at the depth of the water, but leaving no trace of where they might land. Not only is the process of writing of *The Sound and the Fury* historically difficult to pin down, but the style and tone with which Faulkner expresses his stories are equally ambiguous. Instead of telling
a simple tale in the lives of “everyday” people in a somewhat similarly “unremarkable” community, Faulkner imbues the historical and personal significance of this small place and time in history with epic importance through the voices with which his characters and narrators speak. The proliferating qualities of the novel encourage new voices and readings to take shape and add to the voices that Faulkner has already imagined.

The narrators of Faulkner’s vision have a difficult time distinguishing the past from the present and allow the deep history of the community and their lives to co-mingle and impact one another. This presence of the importance of “legacy” gives ethical authority to any artist who chooses to re-envision the past through the perspective of the present. The past pushes toward certain conclusions about the present and the present impresses value and judgment on the past. The inability of Faulkner’s characters to settle on an agreed or occasionally even believable version of the story leaves the reader with no ground on which to stand. However the part of human nature that requires that stability demands that the reader become an active part of the production of artistic meaning in the piece, as the readers must fill in the gaps with their own set of knowledge or understanding. Since there is not a great deal of authority given to many of the narrators in Faulkner’s reading, as there is a kind of open admission that many of the characters are revising the past as they go along, the reader is given by the author equal footing in the world he has created. This instability gives a sense that the
past continues to alter and influence the creation of the present, as the reader/adaptor is reassigning meaning to the past (which in this case is the creation of the original *The Sound and the Fury*) through the interpretation of the present. Faulkner’s original text is structured in a way that adaptation and interpretation are not only permissible, but essential.

Faulkner writes characters that create stories and personal mythologies by reflecting on a more idealistic past. Quentin does this in one of Faulkner’s later novels, *Absalom, Absalom!* which was published in 1936. In this novel Quentin tells his Harvard roommate Shreve the story of Thomas Sutpen which he pieces it together from versions of the story passed down to him. The story becomes a kind of mythical allegory of his experiences and the experiences of “the South” as an ideal as well as a region. In contrast to Wilder’s theories of the novel, the story comes alive because of its application to the living, in this case to Quentin, as an allegory.

Another technique Faulkner employs to destabilized constancy and authority in his writing is by the characters reinventing the past to suit their purposes such as Doc Hines in *Light in August*, who justifies the killing of his daughter’s lover by determining his race as black after Hines had killed him (Faulkner A376). Characters like Quinten appear in other works that Faulkner has written, as in the example of *Absalom, Absalom!* and Dilsey appears in the short story “That Evening Sun.” The mobility and inconsistency of these characters from
plot to plot exemplify the changeable nature of Faulkner’s writing and the ability to take characters out of their original settings and place them in new and different situations. The world of Yoknapatapha County is as living for Faulkner as it is for the adaptors who take his works and re-envision them through different mediums.

This stylistic choice continues very evidently in *The Sound and the Fury* as the four narrators are recounting the same family history. The differences found from one account to the next reveals the inconstancy of the perspective and the ability to rewrite history in order to make it “truth.” For instance, Quinten focuses a great deal on the words and presence of his father, while in Benjy’s section the character of old Jason Compson could have never existed for all of the impact he has on Benjy’s version of the family history of the past thirty years. The difference in perspective of two characters, who grew up so close together, emphasizes how vulnerable the concept of truth is within these texts. In Quinten’s section, he admits to his father that he has committed incest with Caddy, his sister. However no other narrator mentions this encounter, Quinten’s father seems to find the confession unconvincing, and Quinten admits on the same page that he is a virgin (Faulkner *Sound* 90). The reader is left to decide whether Quinten is correct, and if so then in what context and on what levels is he correct.

On the morning before his suicide, Quinten purposefully breaks the face of his father’s watch, which he views as a symbol of his connection to this world and
the difficult decisions and understandings that come with it. He visits a watch
shop and stops to look in the window. He speculates on the possibility of having
contradictory objects existing simultaneously, like the voices in Faulkner’s tales.
Quinten openly recognizes the inconstancy that Faulkner creates in his stories:

There were about a dozen watches in the window, a dozen different hours
each with the same assertive and contradictory assurance that mine had,
without any hands at all. Contradicting one another. I could hear mine
ticking away inside my pocket, even though nobody could see it, even
though it could tell nothing if anyone could. (Faulkner Sound 96).
This example of inconsistency exemplifies a sense of uncertainty that falls like a
fog over the text, requiring the reader to feel around for answers and the existence
of a reality. The reaction of creating a new set of possibilities and realities, as an
adaptor is keen to do, is the next natural step in investigating this disorientation
that Faulkner explores.

The tone that this stylistic choice creates is a constant tension between the
ambiguous fog that the restructuring of events evokes and the harsh reality of the
events of these stories. Often the stories are told with a sense of folklore that
many critics have compared to the sensation of having wandered into a
conversation between two old men on a front porch. Faulkner works hard to copy
the speech patterns of this kind of conversation, often meandering from one
moment and topic to another with ease. The slow plod toward the point and the
avoidance of crassly laying out the actual event once the point is arrived upon simulates the experience of the culture of the South, not just an expression of a sequence of events, giving the reader a secret knowledge of sorts regarding this world to which they have gained access. The ability of an individual to decipher what ideas are actually communicated gives the reader a kind of agency and a desire to respond, as conversation often has a way of producing. For this reason, Faulkner’s work is often associated with a larger portrait of the “Southern” experience in the first half of the twentieth century (Minter 114). The inability to separate the past from the present leads to an inability to distinguish all events from one another, and so they begin to run concurrently. This effect could lead to a reader understanding the conversational tone of Faulkner’s work as running alongside their own ideas, instead of in front of them, upsetting the “naturally assumed” order of lineage between the art and its reader.

In the Sound and the Fury, a kind of distance from the subject matter is created through the use of these stylistic and tonal techniques. The reader is always required to do more interpretive work than passive reception. Throughout the sections, the reader is kept at a distance through different techniques. In Benjy’s section, the descriptions are straightforward without commentary, however they are difficult to follow because Benjy is unable to separate events in his mind and the reader must be constantly aware of what world and time he currently inhabits. In Quinten’s section, his constant wanderings into
philosophical and intellectual discourse with himself keep the reader a step back from the text. In Jason’s section, one could argue, the distance is derived mostly from the sheer distaste of Jason’s character; and in the final section, Faulkner maintains the melodic flow of the previous sections that fades into the distance without a chance for complete resolution.

The result of maintaining this tone and style is the push of The Sound and the Fury’s thematic elements to the forefront. The characters become springboards for greater thematic development, in addition to their personality traits. There is a constant sense that the work that is being produced is just that: a work. Instead of disappearing inside, the reader fights to stay on top. The search for thematic structure in the place of an easily-traceable plot structure creates a constant dialogue between the text and the reader.

In Stanley Fish’s Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost, the argument is made that in Milton’s piece of classic literature, the reader must evaluate their position in the text as they are placed between the world of the rational and the world of faith (Freund 90). This could be interpreted as the world that one can visibly see and the world that one already knows through intuition or a more ephemeral experience, such as the experiences that lead to understanding the reputation of a certain work of literature or a certain author and this new and different creature set before them called an adaptation. The adaptor uses this philosophy to disperse the importance of the original text by placing them between the original and the adapted
interpretation Faulkner masterfully achieves this level of destabilization in his own work of *The Sound and the Fury*, but this has not stopped other creative artists from trying their hand at creating works around Faulkner’s memorable characters and situations. Indeed if anything, *The Sound and the Fury* has encouraged such brave adventurers.

**THE VOCABULARY OF THE THEATRE**

Theatrical artists have especially taken to using adaptation as a form of critical analysis with such twentieth century plays as Christopher Durang’s *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls* (derived from *The Glass Menagerie*), *Hamletmachine* by Heinrich Müller (derived from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*), and Eugene Ionesco’s *Macbett* (from the source of *Macbeth*) to name a few. Though these adaptations often appear to be at odds with the original text from which they are derived, with an almost Oedipal hostility to the text (Hutcheon 8) or, conversely, absorbed in a kind of hero-worship, they are all engaged in the act of creative criticism. In this way the work of art is constantly in flux through these adaptations. In the theatre, this destabilization is taken even further as every performance differs slightly from the one before it. Therefore theatre as a form of art is always involved in the process of adaptation. However the challenge of adapting *The Sound and the Fury* is unlike the adaptations cited above, as they are examples of plays re-imagined for the stage. Faulkner, however, wrote a novel. In order to understand the further complexities of this task of
adaptation, it is important to understand how vastly the simple act of changing artistic medium alters the work.

The medium of theatre brings with it a distinct and unique set of tools with which to explore the responses of an adaptor. The theatrical space, unlike the novelistic space, allows for the character to be bodied within an actor or set of actors or possibly an object under the control of a performer (such as a puppet). It allows for an expansion of the vocabulary through which the action can be expressed through the use and objectification of the body and the act of observation the audience is engaged in. It also allows for the observation of these bodies in response to each other in a three-dimensional space. They can be placed into actual physical distance of one another in order to visually portray relationships.

The theatre also has the advantage of the opportunity to surround these characters within an actual world. Sets, costumes, sounds, props, and lights are all called upon to aid the narrative in its artistic and thematic endeavors, further dimensionalizing the levels on which the reader is responding to the text, using all of the five senses in the physical reality instead of mentally. In the theoretical realm, the audience/reader is changing one set of semiotic signs for another. They are also given the opportunity to discuss and respond as a community as theatre in its formal, traditional sense is often performed for several people who act in the role of audience.

The theatre, while opening certain explorative doors, also closes others within the creative imagination. The character, which can change shape in the imagination
while reading a novel, is often restricted to a certain physical body (the actor) who performs the role. The space in which these characters exist is defined by the imaginary barriers that define the edges of the stage, so the new reader is forced to deal with these solid realities while creating their own reaction to the characters and circumstances depicted. Also the intimacy of the literary experience is lost because the theatre space is a communal space meant for a group of active observers.

The first generation adaptive reader also experiences these confines due to the physicality that must be recognized when creating a stage play. The character is bodied and the set is painted, and the changeable nature of the creative mind must be confined to these physical barriers. In addition to this new development in interpretation the adaptive reader’s perspective of the play comes to the audience through the filter of a series of individual second generation readers, commonly called the creative team. These individuals cannot fully embody the reading of the single first generation adaptor is working to express in its original untainted state, but instead bring their own interpretive voices to the production. Though in some ways it is difficult to find the first generation reader response, this cacophony of responses coexisting brings its own value to the audience’s experience. In an effort to understand and experience an individual first generation theatre artist’s response as a reader to Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, one must turn to the script before it finds the capable hands of the rest of the creative team. One example of such a work is *The Sound and the Fury* adapted by Erik Ehn.
In 1998, playwright and theatre scholar Erik Ehn took up the challenge of adapting one of Faulkner’s works for the theatre, and for this ambitious endeavor, he chose *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner’s fantasia of adaptation. Erik Ehn currently serves as the dean of theater at the California Institute of Arts and serves as the artistic director for Tenderloin Opera Company and artistic associate for Theatre of Yugen, both based in San Francisco (“Erik Ehn”). The national theatre community has recognized his contributions to the field by giving him the Whiting Writers Award in 1997 and the Alpert Award in the Arts in 2002. Ehn appears to have a great interest in adapting fictional works as he has also written a play based on the short fiction of Edgar Allan Poe and a play derived from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (Wren 19).

His adaptation was first produced by the Undermain Theatre in Dallas, Texas, as a part of their 1998 season. The theatre was founded in 1984 and is dedicated to producing new and experimental plays by playwrights like John O’Keefe, Lenora Champagne, and Suzan Lori-Parks. According to the theatre website in 2007 they have produced *Appeal* by Young Jean Lee, and *Shining City* by Conor McPherson among others. Ehn’s adaptation was also produced at the Perishable Theatre in Providence Rhode Island in 2001.

Ehn’s choice to adapt Faulkner stems from his connection to the stylistic voice of Faulkner’s work (Weeks 44). He, too, is known for a melodic and non-linear voice that gives the impression of folklore or distant legends. The worlds of these
characters are often without the borders of time or space where the past meanders into the present and the distinction between what is spoken in public and what is privately contemplated is not clear. In an article on Ehn’s body of work, American Theatre described his writing: “…explosively imaginative plays tend toward concentrated, almost symbolist poeticism; hallucinatory imagery anchored to a religious sensibility; an emphasis on transformation; and a certain elusiveness” (Wren 18). In his play Two Altars, Ten Funerals (All Souls) two young girls exchange letters as pen pals without response to the passage of time. Other characters exist in the space around them but it isn’t terribly clear which characters are alive during the play and which are dead or if the distinction between the world of the living and the dead is really that important (Marranca 186). This aesthetic of allegory and the distance of a poetically mystical voice along with a non-realistic view of the theatre space seep deeply into The Sound and the Fury as Ehn envisions it. He maintains the four sections in the order that Faulkner printed them. Ehn responds and utilizes the full vocabulary available to him as an artist of the theatre, and uses visual elements to create a new vision of the piece.

As much as Ehn might identify with Faulkner’s stylistic voice, the process of adaptation is always fraught with challenges. The first challenge in “translating” this story to the stage is that much of the novel is written in first person close to the high modernist stream of consciousness found in the work of artists like James Joyce. This perspective narrows the field of vision to the perspective of a single individual and
allows for the junction of non-linear concepts to intertwine in the abstract space of the mind. The theatre, however, is a communal space that allows for the embodiment of all the characters mentioned by the first person narrator. The choice must be made whether this perspective is integral enough to the piece to be maintained in the new adaptation. In short, a critical choice must be made of the importance and usefulness of this technique in expressing the adaptation. The adaptor must ask what the best method for expressing his or her reader response might be. In this particular adaptation, the reader (Ehn) placed importance on this narrative style by attempting to maintain that interior voice through a series of theatrical devices.

In the original version, Benjy is the narrator of the first section, as previously noted. The interesting challenge in this section is that Faulkner’s Benjy is unable or unwilling to speak, and is only capable of moaning. Ehn tackles this challenge by giving Benjy (whom he refers to as Ben) the elevated position of narrator in the theatrical tradition. He is the character given the power to speak directly to the audience. In the depiction of the children’s scene in which Quinten and Caddy get into a fight in the water, which Faulkner considered as the pivotal and thematically symbolic scene, Ben is the character that describes the scene for the audience: “She was wet. We were playing in the brand and Caddy squatted down and got her dress wet” (Ehn 2). The rest of the characters involved in this memory-scene play out their parts as Ben describes them, giving him the authority over the perspective evoked and
elevating his dialogue over the others. In other scenes within the first section
Ben speaks the lines of other characters.

Figure 1 Quentin (Jeffrey Schmidt) talks to his father in the Undermain Theatre’s production of Erik Ehn’s
The Sound and the Fury.

When he encounters a group of schoolgirls, he speaks their lines while
manipulating puppets representing those individuals. The chaos and fear this large
man without evident control over himself ignites in these schoolgirls leads to his
ciastration as ordered by his brother Jason.
This trend of narration continues throughout the first act, which includes the first two sections of the novel. In Quinten’s section, the co-existence of “real-time” versus “memory-time” is more pronounced, and Quinten is involved in the business of the day leading up to his suicide interspersed with memories and voices from his past that drive him to this end. Unlike in Benjy’s section, these monotonous daily events seem to have a greater impact on his thought process beyond the function of “trigger,” as is the case for Benjy. In the novel, Faulkner uses italics and paragraph structure to denote changes from the external world to the internal world, but the theatre does not allow for the use of this technique. Ehn must come up with his own devices. He allows the characters around Quinten to be double-cast as other entities to destabilize them as memories instead of solid and finite individuals. Characters (such as Caddy, Dalton Ames, and Quinten’s father) exist consciously alongside the actual events of the day, giving them a weight of importance on his contemporary reality.

For Benjy, the audience understands what is important to his character by what he does not remember. If it never crosses through his stream of consciousness, it simply wasn’t important enough to stick in his mind. He dwells heavily on his childhood and on Caddy, which implies the importance of these events on a stream of consciousness without a guiding discernment. However, Quinten reveals what is important to him by what he is remembering. He is highly conscious of the effect that
time and memory have on his present reality and the manipulation of that history to suit and reconstruct his needs and desires.

In the section originating from Quinten, Ehn uses a well-known and accepted theatrical device to emphasize the confusion in and frustration in his mind. Lines from characters in the past are often given to an offstage voice, though the lines do not seem to be originating from an outside voice. In the novel, these lines seem to be coming from Quinten’s thoughts, but here they are disembodied and scattered. The effect of disorientation that came so easily in Benjy’s section is amplified to embrace Quinten’s disturbed state that leads to his suicide.

In Jason’s section, Ehn chose to remove most of the narration from Jason’s dialogue in order to highlight Jason’s state of mind that focuses on the present. In the novel, he often comments on the situation at hand and references the past in that way, but the present dominates. By cutting out that commentary and moving his descriptions into the realm of action, Ehn makes a critical decision about the value of those thoughts. In some instances those descriptions are validated by performance, but at the same time many of the descriptions are pushed aside. Jason’s feelings about a certain situation are not validated because they are not spoken. Through this act of critical omission shows that the act of criticism comes not only from what is brought to the forefront, but what is deleted.

Similarly the content of the anachronistic experiences of the “narrator” figure change in the “Jason” section. When Jason receives a letter from his sister (Caddy)
about her daughter (Quinten II), Caddy appears onstage and speaks the content of the letter while it is being read. This changes the use of the juxtaposition of these scenes from the way it has previously been used. He is not experiencing a memory, but imagining the way a particular text that he is reading would be spoken by his sister. Whether this line is the way he imagines it would have been read or the way it was actually read by Caddy is entirely left up to the actress to dictate. This and many other instances of interpretive ambiguity throughout the text allows for the intermediate reader of the creative team to dictate a new dimension to the reading of the text by the audience.

Faulkner’s fourth section is a departure from the other three in that it is written in third person. Scholars have tracked the sections as a progression from a completely confounding stream of consciousness in Benjy to the distance of the third person voice in the final section, focused mostly on Dilsey. In this aspect, Ehn has diverged from the original text and revealed a reading that maintains this distantly poetic and abstract voice throughout. Though the reading becomes easier to understand as it travels forward, it is more a result of the amount of information the audience is exposed to than a change in style. Ehn maintains the perspective style that he developed in the previous three sections by keeping close to Dilsey throughout the section. Through this simple act, Ehn has revealed how the reader does not always have to remain “faithful” to the text in order to create an effective adaptation.
This leaves room for further investigation by other creative entities. As a result, the possibility for creative critical response to Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* continues to inspire theatre artists today. Ehn’s reading received a warm but local and limited critical response. Other adaptations have had a slightly higher profile in the artistic communities of the United States. While some, like Ehn, chose to ground their adaptation in an individual response first before moving into the larger area of the stage, some artists choose to begin in the larger body of creative artists and develop a reaction as a group.

**THE ADAPTATION OF ERS**

*Figure 2* The company members of Elevator Repair Service circle Suzy Sokol (Benjy) in their adaptation, *The Sound and the Fury* (April Seventh, 1928).

More recently the Elevator Repair Service theatre group has mounted an adaptation of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, focusing on Benjy’s section. The
avant-garde theatre group, founded in 1991, has built their reputation on reworking pieces from other artistic mediums into theatre. Most famously the group mounted a theatrical interpretation of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* titled *Gatz* (Elevator 1). ERS is currently receiving funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council for the Arts, among others (Elevator 1). Their adaptation of The *Sound and the Fury, April Seventh, 1928* opened at the New York Theatre Workshop on April 29th of 2008 and plans to run through May 18th. The Workshop, like the Undermain, has a reputation for encouraging new and experimental works, which theatre critics of New York seem to agree, is a category this production falls in to. Though the critical response has been largely positive, some have criticized it for lack of accessibility and for confusing dialogue.

In this production, the role of the reader/adaptor is complicated because ERS uses extensive group collaborations with a high level of involvement from the entire creative team in developing the adaptation. The actors of ERS have a first generation relationship to the work, because the work is not filtered through another entity, such as a playwright or a translator. The novel itself is being read or quoted aloud onstage, so the novel is the script. This gives the group extensive control over the way those words are interpreted through bodies and space, as there is not a defined mediating script on which to rely.

In order to create the desired response to the text, the material from which this adaptation derives was condensed. The Elevator Repair Service decided to look
specifically at the first section viewed through the perspective of Benjy instead of looking at the four sections as a collective whole. The choice restricts the reading on some levels, but allows for an expansion on others. The exploration of the entire body of Benjy’s section is more feasible within the time and spatial restraints of the physical theatre and allows for a more thorough investigation of this smaller section. At the same time this choice cuts off the other voices of interpretation that Faulkner imagined and restricts the interpretation to one perspective. Due to this decision, ERS had to decide how the perspective would be rendered. The individual from whose perspective the story is told does not have the power of speech, and therefore an interpretive act must be made in order to render this story to the next generation of readers.

ERS chose to explore a great deal of the common theatrical vocabulary in order to tell the story of Benjy, who could not speak for himself. In an article about the production printed in the *New York Times*, the director, John Collins described his ranging use of theatrical conventions in order to push the audience toward the reading he desires. “Mr. Collins said he wanted to amplify the disorienting effect of reading the novel by mixing up the casting configurations, projecting lines from the book on the walls of the set and throwing in dance numbers” (Bergman 7). Instead of making that individual the traditional narrator, ERS chose to have that character be the only one who did not speak, therefore reversing the role from explicator to observer. Through this tactic Benjy’s perspective gains a certain sense of validity. If
the perspective is more directly revealed to be in his head through narration and a sense that Benjy is internalizing his surroundings through the dialog, then the actual events that are transpiring are slightly more ambiguous. Since the events appear to take place outside of Benjy’s center of control and internalization and look to be quite alien to the actress portraying Benjy, the action is given a sense of “reality” not tapped into by the original text. This alteration could be taken as positive or negative advancement toward the understanding of the adaptation. The perspective from which he contemplates his surroundings is not necessarily correct because it is never validated by an outside source in this section of the novel. It is all in his head. However here the action is bodied exactly how he recalls the events unfolding. Though this does not necessarily imply that these events are truthfully recollected any more than a third person narrator ensures that the characters are being accurately described on the page, it does lend itself in the imagination to a privileged position. In order to undermine this decision, ERS chose to cast actors in multiple roles, often at the same time, bringing an element of fantasy to the retelling of the story.

Because of the change in format, ERS not only made some interesting decisions about who was speaking, but also about the nature of those words. As previously mentioned, the company decided to keep the language exactly as it is in the novel. In rehearsal, the actors would refer to the copy of the novel kept onstage as “the script,” recategorizing the novel itself not by its content, but by its use. The change in function of the piece led to a new name for the object, but the question becomes if
this process of renaming and recategorization ultimately changes the entity itself. By carrying the novel onstage it is cast into the role of “prop” and ERS is acknowledging the purity of the influence of this arbitrary collection of paper bound in a glossy cover on the creative energies being set forth on the stage. The act of carrying around the novel onstage gives a new and living identity in the world that is created. In many ways its influence of the action and promotes the image of the text as “living” in the same way as the adaptation itself does.

The choice of setting also blurs the lines of the meta-commentary of the performance in the performance. The chosen set for this production is a nondescript living room with access to the front door and with different areas of the indoor living experience onstage. The setting is roughly 1928, though the costume and the set do not seem to ascribe to one decade in particular. The action itself seems out of sync with the setting, as much of the description read and quoted from the pages of the novel take place outdoors. ERS juxtaposes these realities against each other, destabilizing the audience’s understanding of the location and demanding a consciousness of priorities. While the setting is a perfectly logical place to be reading the novel, it is not a logical place for men to be, for example, playing golf. The world in which the novel belongs is performed through the greater subtlety of the inanimate surroundings while the action depicted in the text dominates the movement of the piece.
In addition to the world itself, the unrealistic manipulation of that world also alters the reading of the text. ERS works to elevate the text to a living performance through the use of theatrical devices such as projections. Certain sections of the text are projected on the wall without express commentary by the actors. Instead the action onstage is still, allowing the audience a beat to interpret the performance of the projection and to experience a communal interpretation of the language. While each individual reader is allowed to participate in this new generation of readers through their own reading, they are also experiencing a communal interpretation as the sections projected are often also spoken by actors onstage. Therefore the audience is given a new set of texts with which to cross-read. They now have the benefit of possibly reading the novel, hearing the novel read aloud, seeing the novel performed, and viewing the novel as a part of the aesthetic surroundings. The complexity of interpretation does not diminish with each added reading, but instead multiplies exponentially and the work of destabilizing the original only serves to question the existence of an original text and therefore add to its changeability and “liveness.” The work of ERS is textural and multilayered in the smorgasbord of theatrical techniques it speaks through.

**EHN VERSUS ERS**

In the long and arduous journey from reader to adaptor for the benefit of other readers, the work of Ehn and ERS have taken some similar paths, but still maintain striking divergences, but even so these diversions led to some of the same conclusions.
The diversions and similarities in the interpretation of these two reader/adaptors to the exact same text deserve some attention, as they reveal the complexity of the act of adaptation and the difficulty of the position of a first generation reader attempting to express that reading to others.

The first divergence is in the number of first-generation readers. Ehn’s response to *The Sound and the Fury* as it is expressed in the creation of the play script was an individual or at least an independent response. The actors and other creative artists involved in Ehn’s adaptation are responding as the second-generation readers of work as they must first view the play on its own merits, but all the while they are informed of the original work in order to use both in their creations. Even though this generation is involved in creating their own adaptation of the text for the viewing of the audience/reader, this generation is still responding to dual influences. They are readers of Ehn just as much as they are readers of Faulkner. ERS made two decisions that altered the course of their interpretive process from this more traditional route. The artistic team was given a greater amount of control over the stage production and the work from which they interpret is the original words of Faulkner without another active filter. Because they are using the actual words of Faulkner as the script instead of writing one out, the artistic team of ERS is in the same first-generation of readers as Ehn. The difference is in the method, or medium, of that adaptation. One is writing with an eye toward production and one is the constant act of production itself. The production, not the words, is the essence of the first-generation interpretation. In one
sense the work of ERS is a communal interpretation of one perspective (since they chose to focus on Benjy), while Ehn is an individual interpretation on several perspectives (since he explores all for sections).

Although both Ehn and ERS chose to use the technique of double-casting, the sheer cacophony of voices with which ERS has chosen to speak intensifies the disorientation of the text. The technique of double-casting alone does not specify the effect this reading will have on the audience. The effect is also found in the way it is used. The decision to change the source of the narration, among others, distinguishes this reading even further from that of Ehn. This disorientation coincides with the reading that Collins was working to convey (as stated in his interviews) while this point of interpretation was not as directly explored by Ehn and therefore cast further into the background of his adaptation. Ehn’s double-casting comes from a desire to explore the world of the narrator, not the effect of that outside world upon the narrator.

Though the double-casting of the characters by ERS could be seen as supporting Benjy’s dependability, other elements of the performance work to subvert too much alliance of Benjy with “absolute truth.” Benjy, in the adaptation by ERS, appears on stage as the world sees him. He does not speak and is played in such a manner as to physically manifest his mental disabilities. Ehn allows Benjy to remain in the position of mental authority in the world he has created by maintaining his
position as traditional narrator. ERS and Ehn draw a line between them through the use of diegetics or the lack thereof.

The interpretive directions the two adaptive entities create by using the exact same language in slightly different manners alter the reading of the entire text. The similarities and differences of these readings, though they make use of a great deal of the same language, order, and dialogue, gives credit to the diversity of the creative critical imagination of these two interpretive entities and expresses the vast amount of disparity between two justifiably valid readings of the same work and even different methods for driving home to the audience the same point. In this example, the eventual point was the underscoring of the narrative importance of Benjy. One perspective read this as voice, and one as silence.

However some non-realistic choices in the productions encourage a similar reaction by the reader/audience. Both productions have many items described in the dialogue are not represented by their correlating objects. Instead a more representational set of props and situations are used. For example, ERS does not use a literal fence to play out scenes in which Benjy gets snagged trying to crawl through it, and Ehn uses an actress onstage to quote from one of the letters Jason reads and allows for characters from other scenes to loom over the action of the play.

These dynamic uses of the entire vocabulary of signification allotted to the theatre give the adaptations a vitality that allows the creative works to stand on their own, but also link the plays in a symbiotic relationship with the source material.
During the original production of Ehn’s adaptation, newspaper critic Jimmy Fowler of the *Dallas Observer* commented that in order to better appreciate the performance at the Undermain Theater, one would benefit from browsing the CliffsNotes of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* before entering the performance space. Similarly, Dan Bacalzo of *TheaterMania* warned New York audiences that “If you’ve never read William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, you probably won’t get much out of Elevator Repair Service’s *The Sound and the Fury (April Seventh, 1928)*, now at New York Theatre Workshop” (Bacalzo). Though the experience might be somewhat more enriching that Bacalzo implies, the close ties between the novel and the adaptation are apparent. The deep relationship between the adaptation and the original work is closely knit in the readership of the audience, as the adaptations both shamelessly refer back to the initial reading and expose the open conversation between the works that the adaptors experienced.

**THE ADAPTATION OF MARTIN RITT**

Not all adaptations, however, experience the diverse and rich interpretive life of the two adaptations previously discussed, and other artists have not been as critically successful as these experimental interpretive entities. The process of adaptation changes from medium to medium. While in the theatre, the reading is often portrayed through actors on a stage with a live audience in view of the action, other artistic media use other tactics to elaborate the reader’s interpretation. One such medium is film, which pulls from its arsenal the use of lighting, techniques such
as fading, instantaneous changes in scene, changes in camera angle and visual perspective among others. In 1959 Martin Ritt directed a version of the Sound and the Fury adapted by Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank Jr. (a husband and wife screenwriting team) and starring Yul Brenner. The film was a critical failure that was never released in a format for home viewing after its initial run in theaters. By all accounts, the creative abilities of Martin Ritt (who would go on to direct The Great White Hope), Yul Brenner, and Joanne Woodard should have spelled success, but the manipulation of the original text so altered greatly the thematic constructions of Faulkner’s original that the piece, in the opinion of the academic and popular critical communities, was stripped of its power.

The Ravetches changed the story as told by Faulkner in major ways, but for the purposes of this inquisition only a few will be explored. One such altered element was the simplification of the element of time. The movie remained decidedly in 1928, not allowing for flashbacks of any kind. Faulkner’s novel also begins in 1928 with a glimpse into the mind of Benjy on his 33rd birthday. Benjy’s birthday is the section that ERS reads aloud and interprets through their performance. In that performance, as in the novel, Benjy never physically leaves 1928, but the section uses stream of consciousness to travel far back into Benjy’s childhood and touch on many events in between in a way that it is sometimes difficult to tell when and where he is. The effect of this representation of time emphasizes the continuing influence the past has upon Benjy’s mental perception of the way then world truly is.
The Ravetches chose to remove this element from the script instead of reaching into their arsenal of traditional artistic tools in order to explore the possibilities of this interpretation on film. In order to keep the character of Quinten, who has drowned himself at Harvard years before 1928, he is recast as the uncle (Phillips 158). This is an example of what at first seems like a simple and manageable interpretation causing repercussive changes to the remainder of the work. The concept of the fluidity of time and the constant impact of the past on the activities and ideologies of the present are some of the major themes in *The Sound and the Fury*, if not in the entire body of Faulkner’s work. The brothers’ inability to leave the past behind is demonstrated not through the plot itself, but through the way the story is told. Therefore to strip the text of this device robs the piece of its backbone. For example, in the novel and the two stage adaptations, Quinten cannot release his childhood impressions of Caddy and her virginity. If that same character is recast as the drunken uncle, his entire motivation as a character has altered. He is no longer even a shadow of the Quinten that Faulkner imagined.

The effect of these changes is a deep stylistic cut into the fabric of the piece. The choice to imagine the film in the realm of realism makes a move that neither of the other adaptors were willing to challenge. This reading shows a great deal of courage, in that respect, since the writing of Faulkner is so highly associated with this style of stream of consciousness. The move to realism reveals a great deal about the original work and its dependence upon the stylistic format of Faulkner for the
structure of its content. It is not until the piece is removed from its original context that the depth of those alterations can be fully realized. The need to recast Quinten as a different family member alongside the inability of the audience to read Benjy’s motivation through his own articulation are examples of that. In this respect, the Ravetches venture into the unknown the farthest in this aspect of the novel, and as a result ever other part of the novel must alter in order to fit this new stylistic vision. After all, the talent of these two writers is reinforced by two joint Academy Award nominations (one for Hud in 1963 and one for Norma Rae in 1979) and their efforts cannot be easily dismissed due to a dismal critical response (Metz 21). While this challenge could have lead to a successful discovery of new insights, that is not necessarily the result achieved.

Ehn and ERS carefully respond to the structural choices that Faulkner made in their readings, weighing the importance and impact of this element on the general understanding of the text and reacting accordingly. However, Ritt chose not to use such techniques as first-person camera perspective in order to maintain the continuity. If this element is generally ignored, what does that imply about the adaptation? If the writers were attempting to simplify the reading for the benefit and consumption of the audience that would be receiving it, then does the film now drift into the realm of synopsis? The question becomes if the piece that Martin Ritt directed falls into the realm of adaptation simply because it holds the same title as the novel or if the thematic and structural qualities are the unalterable elements of an
adaptation. If an artist removes Faulkner’s interpretations of time, then the artist(s) must decide if the piece still be related back to the original with such close ties as the label of adaptation suggests.

It is not the Ravechtestes’ lack of adherence to Faulkner’s original themes that the critics rail against (in fact one could read lack of thematic and structural adherence as a credit to an adventurous spirit); it is the lack of the replacement with anything else of substance. Indeed in one unflattering New York Times review of the film, Bosley Crowther describes the film as:

...a formless, spongy script and Martin Ritt has directed with an eye to the dazzle in the scenes...and little feel for the texture of the whole. Indeed, the production lacks texture. It’s like Alex North’s jazzy musical score—sentiment-dappled and synthetic. Big-screened and colored, but no content. That’s all. (Crowther 11)

Instead, of developing new ideas to fill in the spaces left behind once the stylistic elements are removed, there is a dependence on the idea of the canonical novel to carry the work on its own name without any new creative energies being infused into the piece. The careful work of adaptation is the art of balancing the legacy and work of a piece while still remaining true to a new artistic vision that allows invention. The Sound and the Fury cannot be depended upon to “read” itself. The adaptor must be willing to take up the challenge and not depend on the reputation of the original work to bear the weight of a one-dimensional adaptation. Through a process of
examination, Ehn, ERS, and others can take the works of Faulkner and critically analyze them through the lens of creation. For example by Erik Ehn sieving out certain sections of the novel, he is by default making value judgments on which sections are the most essential to the telling of the story that Faulkner first created. In some ways, it could be argued that by choosing the medium of the theatre through which to explore Faulkner’s favorite themes of time and the past’s ever-present influence over the live of an individual, the characters that Faulkner describes as existing simultaneously through modernist language are viewed standing next to each other in an immediate physical space in Ehn’s version.

**CONCLUSION**

The reasons behind the adaptation of a popular and well-respected work such as William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* can not be pinned down to one source. It is possible that the first generation reader/adaptor sees unexplored potential in the piece and desires to improve on the original, but the respect that these three adaptors have for the original work discourages this potential reading. Ehn’s admiration for Faulkner’s prose and ERS’s diligent faithfulness to Faulkner’s exact words breaks down any assertions that people constantly create and recreate in order to further or improve on the previous creation. Even Martin Ritt’s version acknowledges a great respect for the original work and a belief that the film will not be an improvement upon it. Instead of the constant desire for improvement and to make the process of creation bigger and better, these works engage in a process of exploration. When
these familiar situations and characters are removed from their original environments and media, what kinds of creatures will rise to the surface? And in turn, what kind of effect will these new creatures have on an audience who may or may not be familiar with the original, and what will the difference in that knowledge bring to the second-generational reading?

Since these complex motivations are difficult to pin down, the critical thinker must observe the process itself in the hopes these motivations will reveal themselves through the resulting productions. The differences and surprising similarities between the two stage versions give hints into the relationship between the adaptor and the original work, and allows for a dialogue between these two works of art, instead of assuming a simple hierarchy from one to the other with no resulting living relationship. As we have seen, Faulkner himself would have encouraged this kind of open relationship and recognized the shifting nature of his characters from medium to medium. After all, some of the characters he developed in his prose he eventually posited on the stage in his play *Requiem for a Nun*.

With the inability to depend on the constancy of medium, the inconstancy of public opinion, and the nonexistence of a truly unbiased method for evaluating the quality or success of a work, perhaps it is impossible to determine the relative success of an adaptation. One cannot call an adaptation successful because it is faithful or unfaithful or satirical or deconstructive. But in the creation of an adaptation, perhaps there is one standard to which an adaptation must be held. It must be read. If the
second-generation reader (such as the audience or, in some cases, a *New York Times* critic could be considered) cannot read it or finds nothing remarkably worth reading in the adaptation in its comparison to the original work, then perhaps then the adaptation is unsuccessful. After all, what is the point of writing a critical essay if no one can read it and if no one finds any substance in it? In the same way one might judge critical theorists like Brecht or Butler on their ability to read and extract meaning from a text in order to illuminate an understanding of art, it should be possible to take an adaptation and make some kind of illuminated response based on the juxtaposition of the works. If this task of investigation seems to render no intellectual fruit, then perhaps this would be the litmus test of a successful adaptation. If this is true, then the adaptation of Martin Ritt could be categorized as an “unsuccessful” adaptation.

The relationship between the original work, the first-generation reader, and the second-generation reader is in constant flux, but the symbiotic relationship that results calls into question the priority of any single work or any single interpretation, and replaces the process of interpretation and reading as the priority. After all, what is a work of art such as Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* if no one reads it and contemplates the meaning of the words on the pages? Is it still the powerful piece of work that has come to be so respected in the popular and academic American imagination, or is it just a doorstop? The need for a work to be living and moving through the human imagination is necessary for the perpetuation of its status as art,
and the process of adaptation is another tangible example of the dialogue that exists between the work, the reader, and the community of readers in which these independent entities exist.
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