The Mausoleum of All Hope and Desire

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is not a story in the traditional sense of the word. It is not just the tale of a Southern aristocratic family fallen from grace, but a chronicle of humanity railing at the inadequacy of language, the unfairness of fate, and trying to come to terms with the disparity between life as it is and life as it should be. Benjy, Quentin, and Jason are trapped by their unfulfilled desires, like insects in amber, unable to move forward. They are stuck in the past and the permanent state of their unrealized wishes contributes to the ultimate self-destruction of the Compson family.

All the Compson sons want is for things to go back the way they were, before Caddy's pregnancy and disappearance. Benjy spends all of his time looking for Caddy, only he lacks the words to express himself. Instead, he is reduced to "trying to say...trying to say...tr[y]ing to cry" (53). Benjy's inability to communicate makes him unable to be an active agent in shaping his future. He has no power over his fate; for him, the 'present' is rendered obsolete because he cannot influence it. Instead, he is stuck, unable to realize his wishes, in a state of limbo.

Quentin, though he does not suffer from the same brand of inability to act as Benjy does, is consumed with guilt for not being able to protect his sister from the consequences of her promiscuity. He dwells primarily in the past, and everything he
sees is inextricably tied in some way to Caddy. Quentin's helping the lost young girl is an attempt to make up for his failure to help Caddy when she needed it. He repeatedly calls the little girl "sister", and tries to help her find her way safely home, only to discover that in this instance, this little girl has a brother, who is looking out for her and protects her in the way that Quentin could not protect Caddy. Quentin sees that a young immigrant boy succeeds where the son of an old aristocratic family has failed, and "[his throat] wouldn't quit trying to laugh, like retching after your stomach is empty" (140). Though Quentin does have the ability to influence his future, his thoughts are mired in his past failures, which colors his perception of the world. He is unable to change the past and cannot look beyond it, and so he "spends all [his] breath trying to conquer [time]" instead, which culminates in his suicide (76).

Jason is perhaps the most functional and well-adjusted of the Compson sons, but he, too lives in the past in the form of being fixated on the future he could have had. He resents the breakup of Caddy's marriage and it is the basis of his mistrust of people, because "[he] believed folks when they said they'd do things. [He's] learned better since" (206). Jason has been made bitter by disappointed hopes, and so never trusts people again. He takes the wellbeing of the family upon himself, but destroys any semblance of family solidarity the Compsons have left by alienating Miss Quentin and deceiving his mother.

Thus, the wishes of the Compson sons for a whole family come to nothing. They are the next generation of Compsons, and helpless before the test of time.
Quentin is dead, Benjy does not have the means to change the situation, and Jason keeps the family going, but as a shadow of what it once was. Such a pessimistic conclusion, however, seems at odds with the peaceful, resigned tone of the novel’s end, where everything once again falls in its ordered place. If the Compson men are powerless to realize their desires, then what is left?

The sole redeeming thread in the narrative of the downfall of the Compsons is Miss Quentin's escape from the Compson house. The failed hopes of the Compsons and the stifling, restrictive atmosphere of the house is not an environment that is conducive to the flourishing of life. The three Compson sons are trapped in a state of existing, but they do not have the means to progress beyond. They are stuck in the past, and so is the family as a whole. Miss Quentin is the one to break free from the family, and escape to the modern world, where the present is not beholden to the past. In doing so, she creates a sliver of hope in an otherwise bleak situation. Despite all the hopelessness, she has escaped the place where she never truly belonged. The Compsons will continue to carry on living in the past, and she is free to live out her future.