**About the Author**

**Ann Brennan** is receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with a minor in Religious Studies. After her graduation, she plans to attend graduate school to further her studies in English. The Honors Program has provided Ann with an opportunity to work closely with faculty and to broaden her boundaries of interpretation. This thesis would not exist were it not for the dedication and encouragement of Dr. William Conlogue. He carefully read Ann’s argument and offered insights that pushed her thoughts to a level that she never thought possible. Throughout the research and writing process, he made suggestions that allowed Ann to see not only her topic, but also herself from a new perspective. For all this, and for putting up with her for the past year, Ann is extremely grateful to Dr. Conlogue. Sr. Gail Cabral read the entire thesis and provided vital advice and important ideas for further study. Her suggestions stimulated new ideas and encouraged Ann to look deeper into her sub-topic of the connection between religion and meaning, for this Sr. Gail deserves a huge thank you. Ann is thankful to Dr. Ann Bush for her guidance from day one. Ann would like to thank Christina Elvidge, who offered constant support throughout this process, even on the day of the thesis deadline, when Ann was still without a title! She is also indebted to the sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary who have educated her for the past seventeen years and molded the firm foundation on which Ann stands today. Most importantly, Ann thanks her parents, Ann and Tom and her siblings, Tommy, Erin, and Joey, without whom none of this would have been possible.
Learning to Read and Searching for Meaning with William Faulkner

Ann Brennan

Introduction

Literature Review

“I don’t read reviews. I’m not interested. I really couldn’t care what other people say about me. It wouldn’t affect me anyway. I should still write. Writing is my particular cup of tea” (Lion 277).

Although the first publication of The Sound and the Fury (1929) was a financial disaster, William Faulkner never doubted it was “the greatest book [he would] ever write” (222)\(^1\). At the close of World War II, critics revisited Faulkner’s “finest failure,” and most tend to agree with his assessment of the work (Lion 146). Faulkner stressed that “the artist doesn’t have time to listen to the critics…[because] the artist is a cut above the critic, for the artist is writing something which will move the critic. The critic is writing something which will move everybody but the artist” (Lion 252). For one who studies Faulkner, these critical evaluations stimulate ideas and offer new interpretations of the world Faulkner creates. Due to the overabundance of responses to The Sound and the Fury, the following literature review will focus on the major interpretations of the novel, in which I place my argument.

In 1947 existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wrote an invaluable critique of representations of time in The Sound and the Fury. In his analysis he argues that “Faulkner’s metaphysics is a metaphysics of time,” that, the characters in the novel have no futures, only pasts (265). Sartre observes that “nothing happens; the story does not unfold; [instead] we discover it under each word” (265). The reader is caught in the web of Faulkner’s language and, like Faulkner’s characters, cannot see the blurry present, but only the past; therefore, they are helpless. Sartre describes Faulkner’s characters as looking through the back of a forward moving car. Quentin Compson’s death “is an immovable wall,” because at no point does he, or can he,

\(^1\) Citations are from The Sound and the Fury (Ed. David Minter. 2\(^{nd}\) edition. New York: Norton, 1994), unless otherwise indicated.
consider the “possibility of not killing himself” (269). Sartre argues convincingly that for Faulkner, “the past is never lost, unfortunately; it is always there, it is an obsession” (268). For Faulkner, and for the reader to understand Faulkner, however, “time must be forgotten,” as seen in Benjy, “who does not know how to tell time,” and in Quentin, whose “gesture of breaking his watch…gives us access to a time without clocks” (268, 266).

Other critics who discuss the meaning of time in The Sound and the Fury tie their arguments back to Sartre’s analysis. Cleanth Brooks, for example, agrees with Sartre in regard to Quentin Compson, but claims that Sartre’s argument “does not apply to many of Faulkner’s characters and it is certainly not to be attributed to Faulkner himself” (291). Instead, the characters’ relation to time dictates their “status as human beings” (291). Brooks and fellow critic Olga Vickery agree that Benjy lives in a “timeless present,” hence he “is outside of time” (291, 283). Quentin’s obsession with the past, for Brooks, “is in fact a repudiation of the future” (291). Jason, on the other hand, sees time as money; thus he is “incapable of any real living” (291). For Brooks and Vickery, Jason constructs his life around practical matters and “reacts logically” (286). Dilsey, Brooks argues, introduces the idea of eternity, or time as no time. Vickery suggests that Dilsey “survives” because she “create[s] order out of disorder” and remains in the present (287, 288).

Critics debate the structure of the novel as often as they do the issue of time. Nearly every critic agrees, however, that Caddy Compson holds the novel together; she is the key to the entire story. Donald Kartiganer argues that the book in a sense “grows’ as if possessing a life of its own” (326). From the near mindlessness of Benjy to the third-person narrative of the final section, the novel represents a “progression from murkiness to increasing enlightenment” (290). The theme, argues Vickery, “as revealed by the structure, is the relation between the act and man’s apprehension of the act, between the event and the interpretation” (280). Thus, the four individual sections provide gradual clarity while each remains distinct.

The characters within The Sound and the Fury, like the separate chapters, are unique, yet interwoven. Brooks, for example, describes the impact Mr. Compson has on Quentin and the results of Mrs. Compson’s absence. Most critics note that the Compson parents influence their children and that Mr. Compson’s presence is significant. Whether or not he thinks Quentin will commit suicide, however, remains debated. While some critics place an incredible amount of
blame on Mrs. Compson, such as John Irwin in his Freudian interpretation of Faulkner; others, like Philip Weinstein, defend her and fault the system of language for the family’s fall.

Doreen Fowler projects the theories of Jacques Lacan onto *The Sound and the Fury*. She asserts that throughout the novel, “women appear to be identified with a preoedipal imaginary unity that was banished to create identity” (43). Benjy, Fowler argues, violates the Law of Father and is thus castrated. She agrees with André Bleikasten that, in Benjy’s narrative, “there is no central I through whose agency his speech might be ordered and made meaningful…[therefore] there is no sense of identity to make his experience his” (34). Fowler points out that Jason and Quentin “strive…to maintain divisions that, by exclusion, establish difference and define the self” (35). For example, Quentin tries to keep Caddy from having sex with Dalton Ames. At the same time Quentin wants to have sex with Caddy, but must repress those desires so as not to meet the same fate as Benjy. Fowler argues that Quentin eventually finds wholeness by drowning himself and returning to the womb. Jason is also extremely concerned about his masculinity and “haunted by feelings of phallic lack” (37). His loss of money succeeds in representing his “symbolic castration” (37).

André Bleikasten equates the Compson brothers’ search for Caddy to the mythological story of Eurydice and Orpheus. In this myth, Eurydice dies, but the gods of the underworld allow her to return to the land of the living, but only if Orpheus walks in front of her and never turns to look at her. The moment Orpheus breaks his promise, however, Eurydice vanishes. Caddy, Bleikasten argues, “remains [Faulkner’s] ever-elusive Eurydice” (423). Caddy’s name is “little more than a blank counter, an empty signifier, a name itself devoid of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning” (423). Bleikasten argues that Caddy lures Faulkner into hell, but never fully reveals herself to him.

Building from Bleikasten’s argument, Minrose Gwin successfully argues that Caddy Compson is not silent, because her voice can be heard “float[ing] up to us muted but articulate out of the feminine space of *The Sound and the Fury*” (405). She disagrees with Bleikasten when she asserts that Caddy is not “a ‘blank counter’ or an ‘empty center’” (406). Gwin reads the text through the feminist psychoanalytic lens of Julia Kristeva. Asserting that Caddy is beyond language, Gwin argues that Caddy “is *something more* than we can say, yet her presence is crucial to the development of language” (406). In Benjy’s chapter, the reader enters into “the womb-like darkness of maternal interconnection through which the boundaries between self and
other are blurred” (409). To hear Caddy in Quentin’s section, the reader must listen to Caddy as she listens to Benjy, “beyond sound and syntax, between the lines” (412).

Numerous critics have touched on the final chapter of the novel. While there is not much debate that Dilsey was spiritually moved during Reverend Shegog’s sermon, exactly what moved her remains in dispute. The entire Easter service scene, in fact, remains under debate. Many critics argue it is meaningless because the novel does not end with Dilsey at church. Others say it is vitally important because it is the only glimmer of hope in an otherwise fatalistic novel. John Matthews describes Shegog’s sermon as an analogy for the entire novel. Melvin Backman, on the other hand, explores the significance of Christianity itself on The Sound and the Fury. He argues that Benjy’s innocence and Dilsey’s compassion make the novel “not a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing [but rather] a tragedy that renders suffering into life and celebrates love” (Backman 40).

Bill the farmer, William the writer

“I’m not a literary man; I’m just a farmer” (Lion 216).

William Faulkner was a private man who created fictions to guard his personal identity. In 1949, he wrote to his friend and critic Malcolm Cowley:

It is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished and voided from history, leaving it markless, no refuse save the printed books; I wish I had had enough sense to see ahead thirty years ago and, like some of the Elizabethans, not signed them. It is my aim, and every effort bend, that the sum and history of my life, which in the same sentence is my obit and epitaph too, shall be them both: He made the books and he died (Selected Letters 276).

Incredibly reluctant to offer any personal information that was not absolutely necessary, Faulkner lied whenever he had an opportunity. By masquerading and filling various roles, Faulkner, like many of his characters, split his identity. He had a keen knack for humorously avoiding any personal revelations. In a 1931 interview, for example, he offered this autobiographical sketch, “I was born in 1826 of a Negro slave and an alligator – both named Gladys Rock. I have two brothers…[I] quit school after five years in seventh grade. Got job in grandfather’s bank and learned medicinal value of his liquor” (Lion 7).
Oftentimes, Faulkner became consumed with his lies and lived within his own fictions, exaggerating them with each retelling. One such example is his recollections of his battles in World War I. It is true that Faulkner tried to enlist, but was rejected for service in the United States Army. In July of 1918 he traveled to Toronto, Canada, to join the Royal Air Force. The war, however, ended in November of the same year; he was discharged without ever flying. During his journey home to Mississippi, he acquired two legendary war wounds, one to his leg, the other to his head. Although he was discharged as a cadet, he returned wearing an officer’s uniform and told of his triumphant experiences in the war to all who would listen. As the years passed, the tale grew that “he had crashed two planes during the war…[and] he had been dragged out more dead than alive from the wreck of his plane with not one but both legs broken” (Gray 5).

Faulkner’s most elaborate fiction is his creation of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. He founded this county is his novel *Sartoris*, when he “discovered that [his] own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that [he] would never live long enough to exhaust it” (*Lion* 255). He provides the reader with a map of the county and gives specific details about the population. An inscription on the endpaper map Faulkner drew reads:

Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha Co., Mississippi
Area, 2400 Sq. Mi.
Population, Whites 6298; Negroes 9313
William Faulkner,
Sole Owner & Proprietor

On several occasions he returned to Yoknapatawpha to increase its population or to further develop its characters. In a sense, all his novels set in Yoknapatawpha were rewrites of the same story. His constant return there suggests he could never fully convey the story and meaning, so he went back to rediscover it by imagining the story again.

As Faulkner’s biography hints, our fictions often hide our true identity. Like Faulkner, the characters in Yoknapatawpha create fictions and struggle to understand and maintain their identity. And as with Faulkner, they do so using language. As Judith Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* notes:

[Y]ou are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them…having to, move your arms and legs with strings…[that] are hitched to all the
other arms and legs and the others all trying and they dont know why either …the strings are all in one another’s way like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug; and it cant matter…and yet it must matter because you keep on trying…and then all of a sudden it’s all over (Absalom, Absalom! 100-101).  

In this quote Judith explains the desire of every person to make his mark and to avoid being sewn over by others.  As we attempt to weave our own identity, however, we are subject to the influences of those around us and those who have come before us, because everyone uses the same loom.

The loom is a metaphor for language, the instrument through which man attempts to leave his “mark.”  Language is the tool, flawed or not, that the individual uses to piece together an identity.  But, as Judith notes, after “it’s all over” only a block with scratches remains and people “dont even remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell, and it doesn’t matter” (AA 101).  In her incredibly pessimistic way, she describes the existence of man as ultimately meaningless; life is just a puppet show in which the individual vainly searches for an identity, unaware that, in the end, even his story will not survive.  When “it’s all over” it will not matter that someone left the scratch on the wall “Kilroy was here,” because nobody will know Kilroy and that he was “here” will make no difference (Lion 227).

Faulkner did not keep journals or notes, but he did provide the world with his “scratch on the wall,” his several novels and short stories.  In agreement with Judith, Faulkner’s work explores our struggle to weave identity and our desire to leave a mark.  When describing the compilation of The Sound and the Fury, for example, he said, “I never could tell it right, though I tried hard and would like to try again, though I’d probably fail again” (233).  In contrast to Judith’s perspective, however, Faulkner demonstrates that the struggle and the eventual mark are far from meaningless; rather, they may be the only things that do matter.  In 1961, for example, he wrote a tribute to fellow author Albert Camus in which he said, “when the door shut for him, he had written on the side of it that which every artist…is hoping to do: I was here” (Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters 114).  These three words describe a profound revelation because they suggest that the subject has discovered his “I” and is acutely aware that his “I” belongs

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2 Citations are Absalom, Absalom! (New York: Vintage, 1986) which, from this point forward, will be referred to as AA.
“here:” in other words, his “I,” although private and individual, belongs to the interconnected web of humanity. Similarly, the characters within Yoknapatawpha County search for their “I” so that they, too, may scratch, “I was here” on the door to oblivion.

When Faulkner finished a text, he became part of its audience and issued his opinions about it not as the author, but as an informed reader. When asked, for example, if Charles Bon in Absalom, Absalom! was ever suspicious of who his father was, Faulkner replied not as author, but as a reader saying, “I think he knew. I don’t know whether he – his mother probably told him. I think he knew” (University 79). In describing his characters, he said that they are people he invents, but after that his job is to “run along and put down what they say and do” (University 141). Hearing their voices, he first felt what they were saying and then translated their speech into written form. As a critical reader of his own work, Faulkner, in effect, converses with his unconscious, provided we accept the psychoanalytic assertion that the text is the writer’s dream. The reader, in turn, participates in this dialogue by experiencing the myth Faulkner creates. In reading the story and agreeing and arguing with the characters, the reader brings the text to life. Thus, in the act of reading, the living language that separates us succeeds in bringing us together.

In 1890, psychologist William James coined the term “stream-of-consciousness” to describe the flow of inner experiences that Faulkner uses to give the reader a front-row seat to each character’s turmoil (The Principles of Psychology 245). This technique brings to the foreground the unspoken thoughts and emotions of a character. This radical shift away from the realists’ narrative structure marked a revolution in the modern novel. Using stream of consciousness, Faulkner, in The Sound and the Fury, negotiates between a character’s mental state and the structure of his prose. In linking language and character by allowing the character’s mental state to change the style of the narrative, Faulkner leads the reader to see that language and self are mutually creative of each other. In essence, Faulkner shows us how language bridges the gap between loss and fulfillment.

In his first introduction to The Sound and the Fury, written four years after the novel’s original publication, Faulkner pens, “I wrote this book and learned to read” (225). The text challenges its reader to experience various ways of reading, in essence to learn how to read again. A traditional linear reading of the novel will not suffice, because the cycles within it must be followed and the jarring shifts back and forth through time must be felt for the reader to fully comprehend the psychological trauma faced by each Compson. The reader’s efforts to make
sense of the novel are analogous to the Compsons’ search for wholeness. The novel contrasts the separation from others that words can cause with the unity experienced by those who go beyond language in turning to belief to order their world.

**Absalom, Absalom!**

“We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales…we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting…performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable” (*Absalom, Absalom!* 80).

Seven years after Faulkner wrote *The Sound and the Fury* he returned to the story of Quentin Compson in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). This text sheds more light on the Compson tragedy, but more importantly it provides a blueprint for the reader of *The Sound and the Fury* by positioning Quentin in a similar situation to the reader of the earlier text. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin serves as audience and narrator, shaping the story of Thomas Sutpen, who, in turn, has shaped Quentin. The stream of consciousness technique in both novels challenges the reader to take an active role in telling the story.

The present action within *Absalom, Absalom!* takes place in the summer of 1909, ten months prior to Quentin’s suicide in Massachusetts. In their dorm room, Quentin and Shreve attempt to piece together the fragmented story of Thomas Sutpen, a man who moves to Jefferson and is first befriended by Quentin’s grandfather, General Compson. Prior to leaving for Harvard, Quentin is summoned by Rosa Coldfield, who recounts for him the misfortunes that soon befell Sutpen. Her reason for retelling the story is because Quentin is “going to attend the college at Harvard…[and] maybe [he] will enter the literary profession as so many Southern gentlemen and gentle women too are doing now and maybe some day [he] will remember [the story] and write about it” (*AA* 5). Throughout the novel, Quentin hears contradictions and half-truths from Ms. Coldfield and his father, Mr. Compson, with “each spinning his version of the legend out of his own psyche” (Lind 287). Re-constructing the story creates another story; the story is of Sutpen, but it is also “the story of Quentin Compson” (*University* 71).

The story Quentin builds describes the tragedy of the Sutpens. Thomas Sutpen’s hardship is similar to Quentin’s experiences in *The Sound and the Fury*. Sutpen is born in Virginia, but leaves the family plantation for the frontier after seeing the difference between
white men who owned property and white men who did not. He flees to Haiti and while working on a farm fathers a child, Charles Bon. When Sutpen realizes Charles is an octoroon, he repudiates him. In Jefferson, Sutpen, hard at work, erects a mansion on Sutpen’s Hundred. His “design” was to “acquire money, a house, a plantation, slaves, and family – incidentally of course, a wife” (AA 212). While working, Sutpen does not converse with many of the townspeople; therefore his story is based on the speculation of others. General Compson tells Sutpen’s experiences to his son, Jason, who retells them to Quentin. Rosa, on the other hand, knows Sutpen’s story because he marries her sister, Ellen, and together they have two children, Henry and Judith. The recollections get more complicated when Henry attends the University of Mississippi and brings his new friend, Charles Bon, home for dinner. Charles and Judith eventually get engaged and when Sutpen recognizes the son he disowned, he talks with Henry behind closed doors. In this discussion, it appears that Sutpen tells Henry that Charles is his half-brother, making any relationship he has with Judith incestuous. The theme of incest, by the way, carries through to The Sound and the Fury.

Henry believes his father only when Sutpen sheds more light on the situation. This occurs, the reader conjectures, when Sutpen tells Henry of the “impurity” of Charles’ blood. Soon after, at the front gate of his house, Henry shoots and kills Charles Bon and then flees. Sutpen, returning from the Civil War, realizes he does not have a male heir to inherit Sutpen’s Hundred. In an attempt to create an heir, he has sex with a fifteen-year-old virgin, Milly Jones. When they have a daughter, he renounces Milly and the infant. Milly’s father, Wash Jones, overhears their conversation and with a rusted scythe kills Milly, Sutpen, and the baby.

Rosa has a premonition that something is hiding at Sutpen’s Hundred, so she enlists Quentin to travel with her to see what they can find. When they arrive, they discover Henry has come back to Sutpen’s Hundred to die. Clytie, a daughter to Sutpen and a slave, sees them coming and is afraid they are going to kill Henry. As a preemptive strike she lights a pre-arranged fire-stack and the entire house burns, thus killing Clytie and Henry and turning to ashes the great Sutpen “design.” Quentin describes standing “before the rotting portico” of Sutpen’s mansion before it burns down. The corrosion of the Sutpens is similar to the decay of the Compsons as described when Dilsey and Benjy “looked up the drive at the square, paintless house with its rotting portico” (185).
As he retells his story to Shreve and they attempt to reconstruct it, Quentin struggles between expression and suppression. His reconstruction is dependent upon language, “that meagre and fragile thread” that leads him to the truth, but at the same time carries him away from it (AA 202). As they pull the pieces together, they create “between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what were…shades too” (AA 243). The story Quentin and Shreve construct, however, is only another way of looking at the truth. As Faulkner describes, “no one individual can look at truth [because] it blinds you” (University 273). Although Rosa, Mr. Compson, and Quentin see different variations of the truth, all together “the truth is what they saw though nobody saw the truth intact” (University 273). Truth for the reader, however, is possible when she gathers the various perspectives and creates for herself a new way of seeing the story. Through the interconnectedness of the narrators of the story, the individual identity of all disintegrates to become part of the fabric of the story. When Shreve asks him why he hates the South Quentin replies, “I dont hate it…I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!” (AA 303). His denial is hardly believable, however, because it “describes a state of mind that cannot admit that it loves what it hates or that it hates what it loves” (Polk Faulkner). This negotiation between love and hate, past and present, presence and absence, self and other lies at the heart of The Sound and the Fury.
Lacan and Language

“I don’t know what I am. I don’t know if I am or not” (As I Lay Dying 80).

The Sound and the Fury describes the fall of the once prominent Compson family. Through the mythical undertones throughout the text and the repetition of passages, the reader inhabits briefly and partially the individual world of each Compson. The chapters within the text “force the reader to participate in the novel, to become in a way the narrator” (Blanchard 129). Therefore, the reader must gather the various strings and weave together a reality. As she reconstructs the story it, in turn, remakes her.

Within The Sound and the Fury each Compson struggles with his loss of innocence and strives to find wholeness, but is hindered by the necessity to use language to discover his self. Each narrative describes the individual journey within to peel back layers of uncertainty to find the truth that creates his character. The novel depicts each Compson’s psychological struggle to find fullness. By “traversing the same territory in circling movements” the reader experiences the same suffocating entrapment that each character confronts (Brooks 290).

Loss abounds within the Sound and the Fury, from the opening passage when Luster searches for his lost quarter, to the death of Damuddy, to the sale of the pasture. The most significant loss, however, is the metaphorical death of Caddy, the mother figure who is physically separated from her brothers. John T. Irwin, in his critical analysis Doubling and Incest, Repetition and Revenge, reveals that Caddy’s name is derived from the Latin word, cadere, to fall. Caddy represents a “fallen woman,” but she also represents the fall that occurred in the primeval Garden of Eden (138). Her loss of virginity, her original sin, results in her physical expulsion from the Compson house. Caddy’s separation from her brothers results in their fall into the world of language. Through language, they arduously search to discover who they are and to construct for themselves individual identities.

While Faulkner imagines this psychological struggle through his fiction, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan explores the same losses in his theoretical arguments. In a 1955 interview Faulkner declared that he had heard about Freud, but had never read him. He is quick to mention that neither “Shakespeare…[nor] Melville…[nor] Moby Dick” read Freud either (Lion 251). Faulkner may not have been familiar with Freud and almost certainly was not aware of his
successor Lacan, but reading *The Sound and the Fury* through a Lacanian lens results in fascinating discoveries.

Jacques Lacan explored the construction of knowledge and language’s creation of an individual’s psyche. According to Lacan, the infant is born into the imaginary order. In this time before language, the self does not see itself as different from his surroundings, rather he is a part of everything else, in particular his mother. The infant’s primary concern is the location of his mother. He perceives that she and he are one; therefore, they are joined in a union that the person discovers later can never again be experienced. Although the infant experiences perfect wholeness, he does not have a self (*Language* 174-175).

The recognition of self slowly begins in Lacan’s mirror stage. In this event, the infant, while still blurred with the mother, sees himself in a mirror. This marks the initial moment that one begins constructing his “I,” an ongoing process that will last throughout the individual’s lifetime. The infant simultaneously hates and loves what he sees in the mirror. He hates the image because he perceives it to be more perfect than he, but loves it because it is his first role model, the perfect being whom he wants to become. This ideal version of the self reflects the primary development of narcissism that will influence the individual throughout his lifetime (*Language* 9-12).

As the child begins to comprehend separation, another player enters the child’s awareness, the father. He represents the child’s entrance into the symbolic order, in which the child learns language. Lacan agrees with linguist Ferdinand de Saussure that language is a closed system that makes sense only because it is based on difference. The child, therefore, must comprehend difference in order to construct a sense of self. For Lacan, the father stands between the child and the mother, thus preventing the child’s desired union with the mother. The father is the opposite of the mother and represents the power of Lacan’s transcendental signified, the phallus. To reach for selfhood, the boy must deny his sexual desires towards his mother and accept the dictates of his father, who represents society’s rules and regulations. The social structures the boy learns to accept include law and education: these guide his future actions and direct his understanding of gender differences. The male lacks more than the female, because she was never castrated, but, at the same time, he is more complete, because she can never fully access the phallus (*Language* 270-284).
Mother Figures

Mrs. Compson
“…the mother that had four bad children, that she would have been better off if they all had been eliminated, but she couldn’t relinquish any of them” (Lion 147).

Caroline Compson’s emotional absence is the genesis for her children’s fall. Although every member of a family is important, the mother, who nurtures and cares for others, is irreplaceable. A Southern mother especially is the “mistress of the plantation…the lady bountiful, caring for the wants and needs of her family” (King 253). Caroline Compson, however, deliberately blinds herself to reality, thus separating herself from her children. Quentin best describes his mother’s physical presence as a spiritual absence when he recalls himself as a young child stumbling in darkness to try to see a family photograph. As he studies the photo he finds in it that “the dungeon was Mother herself…and [he and his siblings were] lost somewhere below [Mrs. Compson] without even a ray of light” (109-110). She traps her children, as evidenced in her “huge bunch of rusted keys” that she carries “on an iron ring like a medieval jailer’s” (175). By renaming Maury Benjy, Mrs. Compson recalls the biblical story of Benjamin, who “was held hostage for Joseph” (University 18). Mrs. Compson suffocates her children, and although she constantly reminds them that “[she will] be gone soon,” she has already emotionally left them to fend for themselves (40).

Caroline wishes to return to her past, thereby making her present nothing more than a distortion of her past. Self-absorbed, she is more concerned about herself than the well-being of her children. For example, when Dilsey returns home from her Easter service, Caroline asks her, “did you find [the suicide note]?” (186). She arrogantly declares that her granddaughter should “at least…have enough consideration to leave a note [because] even Quentin did that” (186). Obviously missing the important problem that people are dead, Mrs. Compson is more concerned here with the formalities of how she perceives one should go about conducting one’s suicide. She goes on to say, “I’m a lady. You might not believe that from my offspring, but I am” (186). Her understanding of language, however, requires her to either be a lady or a mother, as when she says, “when I was a girl I was…taught that there is no halfway ground that a woman is either a lady or not” (66). Mrs. Compson is tragically stuck negotiating between a past and
present understanding of the definition of the proper woman. Unfortunately, her definition of lady requires that she still be a virgin. Clearly she is not, but she uses language to thrust herself backwards to the time before she was a mother. By metaphorically killing each of her children, she becomes a figurative virgin once more. As Quentin astutely observes, he and his siblings were, “Done in Mother's mind...Finished. Finished. Then we were all poisoned” (65). Mrs. Compson sees no other answer but to separate herself from her children to maintain the identity she desires.

Remaining a virgin is important to Mrs. Compson because it suggests to her that she remains in the past and has never become anything other than a Bascomb. Quentin’s thoughts about his mother’s poisonous effects on his siblings and him are juxtaposed to Mr. Compson’s comparison of morality and sin. Mr. Compson points out that Quentin is “confusing sin and morality [but] women dont do that your mother is thinking of morality [and] whether [Caddy’s loss of virginity] be sin or not has not occurred to her” (65). In describing the arbitrary categories of morality and sin constructed to fit similarly slippery words such as virginity, Mr. Compson suggests that all of the categories and sub-categories created by language are constructed, not natural. Mrs. Compson, however, is dependent upon language; in this regard she takes on Lacan’s role of the father because she speaks as a male in the symbolic order. She does so by supporting the arbitrary traditional roles of society, which is apparent in her argument that a “lady” cannot be a mother; therefore a “lady” must metaphorically castrate herself.

Mrs. Compson systematically distances herself from her family. Her desire to return to her past virgin state severs any mother-child connection her children might have had. Rarely is she seen in this novel with her husband, demonstrating that she has also separated herself from him. She does not have a healthy relationship with any of her children and the love she has for Jason is not because he is her son; rather because she can use language to manipulate his existence and to see him as a brother. She relates to Jason differently than she does to the others, because Jason is “a Bascomb, despite [his] name” (114). Giving him the Bascomb name “assures her that he is hers alone: no Compson seed in him, she is still a virgin” (Weinstein 437). She metaphorically kills her son Maury when, at the age of five, she changes his name, which is what society uses to define and identify an individual. The coincidental rainfall, “It's still raining,” on the night of his re-naming suggests he is re-baptized and purified of his link to her (37). Versh, through his mother, Dilsey, realizes Mrs. Compson’s intentions in changing Benjy’s
name and observes, “[Benjy’s] mamma too proud for [him]” (45). As we will later see, Quentin, too, feels no emotional attachment to his mother and recalls her bitterly on the day of his suicide. Lastly, Mrs. Compson silences the name of her only daughter, the one who reminds Caroline of the childbearing path she took, but would like to forget. Mrs. Compson tells her husband and Dilsey that baby Quentin “must never know. She must never even learn [Caddy’s] name… I forbid you ever to speak that name in [Quentin’s] hearing. If [Quentin] could grow up never to know that she had a mother, I would thank God” (125). In negating Quentin’s mother, Caroline suppresses her past and frees herself from being a mother and a grandmother.

Unfortunately for her, Caroline cannot escape thinking about sex. When she hears the name Quentin she is reminded of her son and her daughter and the incorrect but horrifying thought that they had committed incest. This fear is apparent when Jason sarcastically says he does not need anybody’s help “let alone a woman that can’t name the father of her own child” (164). Mrs. Compson shockingly replies, “if I believed that were possible, after all my suffering…I hope that at least is spared me” (164). Jason continues, “[Quentin’s] too much like both of them to doubt that” (164). Mrs. Compson “couldn’t bear that” her son Quentin was Quentin’s father, so Jason tells her to “quit thinking about it” (164).

Metaphorically, Caroline Compson is dead to her children. They notice on several occasions that “mother’s sick again” (46). Throughout the novel, the individual described as “sick” is dead, figuratively or literally. For example, on the night of their grandmother’s death Caddy says, “Damuddy was sick” (17). Again, when Benjy divines that his father has died he thinks, “Father was sick there” (22). Caddy, too, describes herself as sick, a figuratively dead virgin, when Quentin questions her as to why she needs to get married. For Caroline Compson, her “lack of responsibility is defined by her absence: she is ‘sick’” (Kartiganer 332). The Compson children are forced to look elsewhere to find a surrogate mother.

Caddy

“To me she was the beautiful one, she was my heart’s darling” (University 6).

The Compson brothers turn to their sister, Caddy, to fill the mother role vacated by Mrs. Compson. Although it is Caddy to whom they long to return, she herself is without definition. In a novel concerned with the search for identity and the hunt for wholeness, it is interesting that
the most important character is undefinable. Caddy, after all, is Faulkner’s “heart’s darling,” the one whose story he “wrote five separate times trying to…rid [him]self of the dream which would continue to anguish [him] until [he] did” (236, 232). He “used the tools which seemed to [him] the proper tools to try to tell, try to draw the picture of Caddy” (236). The tools that he depended upon, however, were words, which can never fully “match the dream” of the writer’s imagination (237).

Caddy’s voice is never directly heard in the novel. We hear her voice as it is recalled by others; what we do not get is Caddy telling her own version of what is happening. She is simultaneously meaningful and meaningless, present and absent, alive and dead, child and mother, language and silence, is and was. The unifying force of the novel is Caddy’s perceived sin, which the “muddy bottom of her drawers” symbolizes; the sin is the initial loss that each brother struggles to understand and organize (25). At the conclusion of his first introduction, Faulkner describes the loss upon which *The Sound and the Fury* is based. In discussing his initial ideas for the text, he writes, “I who had never had a sister and was fated to lose my daughter in infancy, set out to make myself a beautiful and tragic little girl” (228). Faulkner creates a fiction to compensate for his lost opportunity to have a sister. Since he never had a sister, Caddy remains outside of his reach and he creates what he perceives a sister is. Caddy, therefore, is not an individual character, but a projection of other characters’ interpretations. In this regard she is similar to her daughter Quentin who declares that “whatever I do, it’s [Jason’s] fault…if I’m bad, it’s because I had to be. [Jason] made me” (162). She negates her individuality by making herself a pawn of Jason.

Just as *The Sound and the Fury* requires its reader to learn how to read again, it also challenges the traditional understanding of how a reader knows a character. The novel is Faulkner’s attempt to know Caddy, and he offers multiple perspectives from which to see her. In essence, the reader meets three distinct Caddys: Benjy’s, Quentin’s, and Jason’s. In *The Return of the Repressed* Doreen Fowler reproduces a telling segment of an early draft of Faulkner’s original introduction. Faulkner writes that:

I could be in it, the brother and father both. But one brother could not contain all that I could feel toward [Caddy]. I gave her three: Quentin who loved her as a lover would, Jason who loved her with the same hatred of jealous and outraged pride of a father, and Benjy who loved her with the complete mindlessness of a child (46).
Caddy means something different to Faulkner and each Compson, but she is meaningless because they only see her in their imagination. Each of their connections to Caddy can be described as the same relationship to her that Faulkner gives to Benjy, who “himself didn’t know what he was seeing…the only thing that held him into any sort of reality…was the trust he had for his sister…she was the world to him, and [her love and defense of him] were flashes that were reflected on her as in a mirror. He didn’t know what they meant” (236). Faulkner defends Caddy’s silence by saying she “was still…too beautiful to reduce her to telling what was going on” (235). Caddy, however, could not speak, because Faulkner could not find her; therefore, he did not know what she would say.

Faulkner searched for Caddy through writing *The Sound and the Fury*. In describing the emotion he felt while composing the novel, Faulkner writes that it was an emotion “definite and physical and yet nebulous to describe: that ecstasy, that eager and joyous faith and anticipation of surprise which the yet unmarred sheet beneath my hand held inviolate and unfailing, waiting for release” (226). Caddy herself is too “nebulous to describe” and the reader remains waiting for her release, but never sees her.

Caddy is a word waiting to be filled with meaning. In the early twentieth century, linguist Ferdinand de Saussure redefines a word as a sign that is made up of a signifier, “a written or spoken mark,” and a signified, “a concept” (Bressler 107). He argues that an arbitrary relationship exists between signifiers and signifieds. Signs, therefore, “can have meaning only within their own langue,” the rules that construct language (Bressler 107). As Lacan puts it, “the world of words…creates the world of things” (Écrits 65). Words, for Lacan, can be understood only through their relation to other words. The meaning of words is thus not guaranteed, and identity, which is found through language, is ambiguous.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Caddy is an example of the arbitrary nature of words. Various interpretations of her are apparent in the opening passage of the novel. Benjy hears the shouts of “caddie,” but, at this point, the reader does not think of a lost sister, rather she begins to understand that Benjy is looking at a golf course (3). The homophonic reference is no doubt intentional and immediately suggests the ambiguity of language. At this moment, “caddie” means something different to Benjy and the reader; the moment establishes a pattern for the various definitions of Caddy that the novel subsequently explores. André Bleikasten notes, “words are an inexhaustible source of ambiguities and confusions, so that the communication
they permit is always liable to misapprehensions” (424). Caddy, then, who is known solely through the words of others, is liable to be falsely comprehended.

In *The Sound and the Fury* Caddy is described in association with natural images. She rarely appears without some reference to water. The most obvious example is on the night of Damuddy’s wake when she wets her dress while splashing with her brothers in the branch. Water restores her purity when Benjy ushers her to the sink to stifle her sexual maturation; the waters of life purify her so that she once again “smelled like trees” (31). It is at the branch where she and Quentin contemplate their suicide-homicide pact. After Caddy loses her virginity, Quentin confronts Dalton Ames on the bridge above the running water of the local stream. As the “little sister” follows Quentin around near the Charles River, he is aware of the “water mute and unseen” (86). This description simultaneously describes Caddy. While she is everywhere, she is nowhere.

As the reader attempts to make sense of Caddy, the reader sees Caddy described through sensory language. Benjy feels Caddy’s warmth through fire. While Quentin sees Caddy in water, Benjy finds her in the bright flickering flames of the Compson fireplace. The flames calm Benjy and allow him to relive peaceful moments with Caddy. He often returns to the image of fire, for example, that he saw on the night his name was changed. On that particular evening he “could hear Caddy standing behind” him as he looks at the fire “the bright, smooth shapes went again” (37). Benjy associates the image of fire with sleep when he says, “the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes, like it always does, even when Caddy says that I have been asleep” (48). His sleep echoes the fire in which he finds Caddy; therefore, she is never far from Benjy.

Whereas Benjy describes Caddy as smelling like “trees” and “leaves,” Quentin remembers her in the overpowering scent of honeysuckle (5). The *suckle* in honeysuckle describes the child’s dependence upon his mother for nutrient rich milk. Quentin, however, associates it with Caddy’s loss of virginity. In his narrative the word honeysuckle is mentioned twenty-eight times. The pages that describe their evening on the branch drip with honeysuckle; the word is mentioned a disproportionate sixteen times in the section that describes their meeting at the branch after Quentin learns of Caddy’s loss of virginity. Its poignant smell nearly suffocates Quentin and requires him “to pant to get any air at all out of that thick gray honeysuckle” (95).
Each narrative within *The Sound and the Fury* is another attempt to know Caddy, but she manages to elude Faulkner, her brothers, and the reader. She represents a time to which we cannot return, an irrevocable loss. Wearing different masks and filling various roles, Caddy can never be fully understood. Ironically, she falls into experience through the silence of others. There would have been no need for her to climb the pear tree had her parents told her about Damuddy’s wake. Through silence, however, she manages to leave her “mark” and acts as the cohesive force in the novel. Although she is built with language, she transcends it.
“Benjy…must never grow up to where the grief of bereavement could be leavened with understanding and hence the alleviation of rage as in the case of Jason, and of oblivion as in the case of Quentin” (An Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury* 230).

Caddy Compson relishes the motherly role that Caroline detests. Her maternal instincts are evident as early as the night of Benjy’s name change. She gently carries him despite Caroline saying she “don’t want him carried” (41). On Christmas day, when Benjy is five years old, Caddy demonstrates her concern for him by reminding him to “keep [his] hands in [his] pockets…or they’ll get froze” (4). She protects Benjy and defends him when Jason cut up his dolls “just for meanness” (42). Caddy represents the care and warmth that Caroline refuses to give her children. Caddy “herself is love, the one who can quiet Benjy down with the touch of her hand” (Kartiganer 332). Her awareness of Benjy’s needs and her ability to connect with him on a personal basis make her the perfect surrogate mother for him. Although she, like Caroline, is absent, she remains alive and is heard through the remembrances of her brothers, Benjy’s in particular.

A student of Lacan, feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva describes a semiotic language, which occurs before the introduction of the language of the symbolic order and is prior to the infant’s comprehension of gender. This “maternal language” represents the pre-lingual communication between the infant and his mother (Kristeva 195). The mother is the child’s “pure signifier” and symbolizes all that the child desires (Kristeva 195). In this state, the child is in union with his mother and his discourse occurs in the female space. This language does not conform to the traditional structures created by patriarchal society; rather, it is a language of movement that occurs within the chora, a place of “continuous flow of fluidity or rhythm” (Bressler 336).

This “maternal language” is most apparent in Benjy’s narrative, because his section represents the semiotic language of the infant. Although the section is written with words, the words are merely convenient conveyors of the flow of images that Benjy sees. This language of imagery is apparent in the opening passage of Benjy’s chapter:
Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting...I went along the fence. Luster came away from the flower tree and we went along the fence and [the golfer’s] stopped and we stopped and I looked through the fence while Luster was hunting in the grass.

As the reader progresses through Benjy’s section, she realizes she is viewing the Compson world from a completely unbiased perspective, because “Benjy...cannot lie” (Kartiganer 329). Unaware of difference, Benjy offers a clear window through which the reader looks. It is through his thoughts and stream of images that the reader encounters a continuous flow and best hears the echo of Caddy’s voice.

Benjy Compson is incapable of maturing beyond the imaginary order. His narrative is an endless flow, which is difficult for the reader, who is separated from her experience with the chora, to comprehend. Benjy’s mental capacity is frozen in childhood and his child-like attributes are described throughout his account. He is recognized by Dalton Ames as “the natural,” meaning he is untouched by the constrictions of society (101). On the day of his narrative, Benjy celebrates his thirty-third birthday, but as Luster’s friend describes, “he been three years old thirty years” (11). His name, Ben, is a homophone for been, the past participle of the verb “to be,” and describes Benjy as a perfected action, the previously existed “is.” Fittingly, for him each moment is a revival of the completed action re-born into the present. He lives the past in a timeless present and survives by “being outside of time” (Vickery 283). In essence, what Benjy was is what Benjy remains to be.

Although Caddy’s physical presence is gone, she, whom Benjy constructs meaning around, remains with him; therefore, he does not experience the lack that consumes Jason and Quentin. Benjy does not desire Caddy in a sexual way; rather he needs her as a child needs his mother to achieve wholeness. Her placement in the tree on the night of Damuddy’s funeral serves as a metaphor for her ability to be the tree of life for him. In a disruption of linear time, “Caddy the child becomes Caddy the mother. [And] Benjy the man is Benjy the child” (Gwin 408). In Caddy’s loss of virginity and subsequent banishment from the Compson house, Jason and Quentin discover lack, but Caddy remains Benjy’s lifeline. She keeps the promise she made to him on that fateful night at the branch when initially she said, “I’ll run away and never come
back” (12). In response, Benjy screams, suggesting his innate need to remain with her. So she retracts her statement and, to soothe his fear, she tells him, “[she is] not going to run away” (12). Indeed, she does not abandon him, because she continues to speak to him through his present resurrections of the past.

On several occasions Benjy is seen “bellowing” out against Caddy’s sexuality because it threatens to separate her from him (109). He serves as her moral arbiter and continuously ushers her to water to wash away any taint of sex she may have encountered. The evening she wears perfume, for example, Benjy cries until he “could hear water” and Caddy once more “smelled like trees” (27). Again, when she kisses Charlie, Benjy cries “louder and pulled at Caddy’s dress” causing her to clean “her mouth at the sink” (31). When Caddy returns home after losing her virginity to Dalton Ames, Benjy “pulled at her dress and [they] went to the bathroom and she stood against the door” unable to wash away her sin (44). Although she could not wash away her sin, thus remaining impure, Benjy maintains his ability to see her as pure. In the present, as he stands with her dingy wedding slipper, he thinks, “She smelled like trees” (46). By seeing her as both pure and impure he completely disrupts the binaries upon which language rests. His family can only see “bifurcations of ‘A and not-A,’” but Benjy sees a unified vision of “A and not-A,” pure and impure, present and absent (Waldington 362). In describing that she “smelled” like trees but in seeing her in the present, Benjy succeeds in uniting past and present.

Benjy recalls Caddy as he paces the fence that separates him from his favorite pasture. The pasture, which was sold “so that Quentin may go to Harvard,” serves as a metaphor for the loss that each Compson feels (60). The sale of the pasture shrinks the Compson land, but also describes the trade of the past for a fruitless future. Benjy, however, is able to bring the past into the future by seeing Caddy when the golfer calls for his “caddie” (3). For Benjy, this word signifies his sister; to the golfers the term describes a helper. Ironically, Caddy is Benjy’s helper. The call of “caddie” and the recollection it provides Benjy marks the fact that she is present to him, even though she is physically absent. His thoughts move immediately to fond memories of climbing through the fence with her to help deliver Uncle Maury’s letter.

The Sound and the Fury is a compilation of words attempting to express and “match the dream,” the ideal rendering of reality that Faulkner tried to achieve (237). It is, however, dependent upon language; therefore, the best it can do is point to the dream. Benjy’s narrative describes the ludicrousness of depending completely upon words to convey the passion one
experiences. He is outside of language and outside of time, which is “above all, that which separates” (Sartre 268). Aware of Benjy’s ability to sense events that others cannot, Roskus, Dilsey’s husband, observes that Benjy “know lot more than folks thinks…if he could talk” he would be able to convey his knowledge to others (20).

Benjy’s section, however, refutes Roskus’s assertion by describing Benjy’s ability to communicate to Caddy without words. Although he cannot realize his thoughts, he responds to sensations and bellows when his order is disrupted. Caddy’s comprehension of his needs is best apparent on the night she wears perfume. This act reflects Caddy’s maturing sexuality and her desire to attract boys. The introduction of sexual partners, however, will separate Benjy from his union with Caddy. Recognizing his fear, Caddy washes away the smell, saying to Benjy, “so that was it… you were trying to tell Caddy” (27). When Benjy hands Dilsey the perfume, Caddy declares, “we dont like perfume ourselves” (27). By describing she and Benjy as “we,” she suggests they are one. Unlike Benjy, Quentin and Jason are totally dependent upon the words of the symbolic order; therefore, they struggle to find the unity Benjy experiences.
Quentin

“…his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn, back-looking ghosts…” (*Absalom, Absalom!* 7).

Mr. Compson’s critical attitude towards words stands in contrast to both Benjy’s world without words and Mrs. Compson’s total dependence upon the arbitrary significance that she attaches to words. Words, as Kristeva argues, are linguistic signs that serve to articulate the absence of an object, thus they are a bridge between the imaginary order of Benjy and the symbolic order of society. A word, as described by Addie Bundren in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, is “just a shape to fill a lack” (172). The lack, however, can only be experienced when one enters the symbolic order and leaves behind his pre-lingual union with the mother. Language, therefore, is what society uses to “fill the lack,” to order life, and to attempt to construct meaning. Addie, a former grade schools teacher, is intuitively aware of the arbitrary relationships of Saussure’s signifiers and signifieds. For her, words mean nothing if they are not accompanied by action. She describes her death as the time when, “I would be I” (*As I Lay Dying* 174).

Like Addie, Mr. Compson has a nihilistic perspective. He fails to comfort his son Quentin when he tells him he will realize the uselessness of language and life when he comes “to realise that tragedy is second-hand” (74). He describes how language can succeed only in pointing to the past. Nothing is ever new, “its not even time until it was” (113). Mr. Compson and Addie diverge in their opinions regarding whether action brings meaning to words. While Mr. Compson drinks away his life, Quentin follows the path of Addie in attempting to find meaning and to become meaningful. As he struggles to come to terms with his loss of Caddy, Quentin longs for the moment when he can say, “I would be I.” As his monologue begins, however, he is not yet sure what his “I” is. He is alone “with his…secret and selfish thought” and must find his definition for the sign “I” (170).

From the silent sleep of Benjy the novel awakens to Quentin’s day, which is tortured with language. While Benjy struggles in “trying to say,” Quentin spends his day trying not to say (33). Quentin’s meditative narrative describes his difficulty in comprehending and organizing his
experience with Caddy. He views the relationship between Benjy and the virginal Caddy as the symbol of the wholeness he has lost, the time to which he yearns to return. Benjy represents the pure innocence and timelessness of childhood that Quentin once experienced. This innocence, however, is lost when Caddy climbs up the “thrashing” tree to see inside the house; her husk of innocence is removed, thus exposing her to experience, i.e. sex and death (25). The phonetic similarities between “muddy” and “Damuddy” are crucial in understanding Quentin’s comprehension of this scene (25, 24 italics added). Caddy climbs up the tree; therefore, she has a different perspective than her brothers. She looks in at death as they look at her stain of sexual experience. Thus, the muddy drawers simultaneously symbolize sex, what her brothers see, and death, what Caddy sees. To Benjy, Caddy is the tree of life, but to Quentin her placement in the tree equates her to “the fatal tree of knowledge” described in the Judeo-Christian tradition in the Garden of Eden (Backman 19).

Quentin cannot derive meaning from his family because he is separated from them emotionally and geographically. Moments before his death he laments, “If I could say Mother. Mother,” describing the feelings of abandonment with which he wrestles (60). The empty space within the text itself suggests the lack he feels, “Mother. ______ Mother” (60 emphasis added). He turns to Caddy to fill the void left by his mother, but she cannot satisfy his lack. Caddy best describes her separation from him when Quentin asks her if she loved her lovers, and she replies, “when they touched me I died” (94). Love, then, an emotion that strives to connect, becomes synonymous with death, the ultimate separation. Like love, language is another structure used to bridge the gap between individuals, but Mr. Compson smothers any hope Quentin may see in the benefits of words. Mr. Compson describes the uselessness of valuing language by declaring that language is just words that “men invented” (50). Quentin, a foreigner in the New England night, eventually comes to the realization that he is a foreigner to himself.

Lacan argued that the image an infant sees in the mirror represents his ideal-I, meaning his reflection is an ideal image with which the subject continuously tries to correspond and connect. Caddy is Quentin’s ideal-I. On the night of Caddy’s wedding, Quentin sees her in the mirror and then, “she ran right out of the mirror” (49). Within Quentin’s monologue, Caddy’s wedding is juxtaposed to Shreve’s sarcastic question, “Is it a wedding or a wake?” (52). Ironically, for Quentin, it is both. It is the night Caddy will sleep with Herbert and sex, for
Quentin, equates to death. Caddy herself describes sex as death when she says, “I would die for
[Ames] I've already died for him I die for him over and over again everytime” (95).

As a consequence of his desire for Caddy, his mother figure, Quentin is consumed by his repulsion to females who have lost their virginity. Caddy and all mothers, however, have lost their virginity; therefore, Quentin is caught in a contradiction; he searches for a woman who is by definition not a virgin. Unlike Benjy, Quentin is unable to simultaneously see “A and not-A.” He remembers his father’s words and is disgusted by the “delicate equilibrium of periodical filth,” that symbolizes the female (81). His obsessive cleanliness separates him completely from the “dirty girl[s]” he encounters (85). His impeccable personal hygiene is demonstrated in his final acts when he conducts his cleansing ritual by washing his face and hands and brushing his teeth and hair. These undertakings reflect his purity, which is in direct contrast to the impurity he sees in females. The female with whom he directly associates impurity is Caddy, whom he will always see with “drawers [that] were muddy” (96).

Quentin sees Caddy in the “sister” that he meets at the bakery (82). Caddy is his actual “sister,” but the Italian girl reminds Quentin of the lost young Caddy. The little sister represents a parallel to Caddy because she, like Caddy, is “dirty” (83). Quentin tries to protect both females and return them home. As with Caddy, however, he eventually loses the little girl to another man, in this case the sister’s biological brother Julio. The connection is further explored in Quentin’s simultaneous desires to elude the little girl. Quentin is annoyed that “she just follows” him, yet he encourages her to do so by saying, “come on, sister” (82). She moves along “just under [Quentin’s] elbow” (84). Quentin tells her “goodbye” and then he “ran fast, not looking back” (84). Moments before the road curved away, however, he looked back and she continued to stare at him. He continues running to the end of the road, onto a grassy path and over a few fences. Although he thinks he “tricked” his shadow, he looks up only to see the little girl staring at him, “holding the loaf against her dress” (85). She reminds him that he can never escape his desire to return to Caddy.

The little girl, like Caddy, is a metaphor for the preoedipal union of the child to his mother. As they walk together by the water, Quentin comments that he “thought [they] jumped back in time,” suggesting that being with the little girl reminds him of a past time (87). When Quentin brings the girl to the swimming hole, where the young boys are swimming naked, they tell Quentin to “take that girl away” (87). The words of the boys suggest that they intend, unlike
Quentin, to suppress their desires to return to the mother. Ironically, however, they are swimming in the water, which is another symbol for maternal space. Quentin tells the boys that “she won't hurt” them, but that they “just want to watch [the boys] for a while” (87). His desire to “watch” the naked boys swimming is odd and hints at Quentin’s sexual uncertainty.

A primary issue Quentin encounters on his journey to discover his identity is that he does not feel comfortable with the traditional male’s role within society. In his conversations with Herbert Head and Dalton Ames, symbols of masculinity, Quentin’s own impotency becomes incredibly obvious. When Quentin first meets Herbert Head, Herbert asks him on two occasions if he would like to “have a cigar,” but Quentin replies both times, “I don’t smoke” (68). This scene describes a symbolic father asking his metaphorical son to partake in the privileges of manhood, but Quentin resists. Thus, he remains unable to penetrate a woman and will continue to fumble his sexuality, resulting in awkward moments, as when he says, “it's my knife I dropped it” (96). In his meeting with Ames at the bridge, Ames shoots some tree bark floating in the water. His ability to penetrate a female space, the river, with his pistol, a phallic symbol, describes his sexual potency. Ames then offers Quentin his pistol saying, “you'll need it… I'm giving you this one because you've seen what it'll do,” but Quentin again declines, responding, he “won't try to beat that” (102).

Quentin can only imagine wielding the amount of power Ames and Head possess. Head tries to console Quentin and tells him he recently experienced a situation similar to Quentin’s, “but now [he is] getting married and all” (70). These words do not succeed in comforting Quentin, however, and he continues to think, “Dalton Ames…Quentin has shot” (67). Moment later he thinks, “Quentin has shot Herbert Head he shot his voice through the floor” (67). The verb “shot” describes the propelling of an object, here, a bullet. Symbolically, Quentin takes a phallic symbol and ejaculates himself through the societal symbols of whom he is supposed to be. In shooting Head’s voice through the floor, Quentin silences Head’s voice, which utters nothing but the same language that traps Quentin.

Quentin fails in constructing his sexual identity because he is unsuccessful in his attempts to find meaning through language, or through what language constructs him to be. He experiences haunting images in his final hours. When he replays his day in his mind, he thinks, “I couldn’t stop [laughing] and then I knew that if I tried too hard to stop it I’d be crying and I thought about how I’d thought about I couldn’t be a virgin…if it was that simple to do it
wouldn’t be anything and if it wasn’t anything what was I…” (93). If females are all around and he remains constantly frustrated by them then, “he is just plain queer: and he cannot be that – or, as it turns out, anything else” (Polk How Shreve). Queer, meaning differing from the normal, is the definition of Quentin in that he fails in his attempts to discover his “I.” Fifteen minutes prior to his death he describes, “the peacefullest words. Non fui. Sum. Fui. Non sum…Mississippi or Massachusetts. I was. I am not” (110). His horrifying revelation describes his acceptance that he is nothing.

Water plays an important role throughout Quentin’s narrative because his day takes place alongside the rushing waters of the Charles River. When he recalls meeting Dalton Ames on the bridge in Jefferson, he describes Ames as one who has “crossed all the oceans all around the world” (95). Quentin, on the other hand, goes out “for a swim at night without knowing how to swim” (123). As he and the young boys on the bridge in Boston converse, Quentin inquires about the trout they were discussing. They tell Quentin that people have been trying to catch him for “twenty-five years” and that there is an offer of “a twenty-five dollar fishing rod to anybody that can catch him” (74). As Quentin begins to leave, he wishes the boys luck, but tells them “don’t catch that old fellow down there [because] he deserves to be let alone” (76). The trout, in a sense, represents Quentin, who would like to have been left alone and allowed to remain in his imaginary union with his mother.

Quentin’s suicide is another disruption of linear time, because it is a regression back to the womb. That Quentin conducts his suicide by drowning himself is crucial, because the Charles recalls the branch where he and his siblings idly played as children. By entering this maternal space, he regresses to the mother-child union of the imaginary order. This return is apparent at the close of his narrative where the structure of his language disappears and his adult “I” becomes a baby “i” reflecting his separation from the symbolic order’s language. The text here loses punctuation and its syntax gets muddled. By returning to the womb, Quentin succeeds in “making of unreality a possibility, then a probability, then an incontrovertible fact, as people will when their desires become words” (75). He thus succeeds in carrying out his prior false-confession of incest. In defeating the laws of the symbolic order, he defies the law of the father and has sex with his mother. As Addie says, there are “the words [that] are the deeds, and the other words that are not deeds” (As I Lay Dying 175). Quentin succeeds in making words
meaningful because he does the deed. Quentin’s deed allows him to impose himself on the consciousness of his family, thus bringing him meaning.

Quentin cannot, however, fully escape time and language. He succeeds in becoming part of the consciousness of his family, but through their remembrances he will remain constrained in the language of their psyches and within the pages of this book. When Caddy names her child Quentin, she resurrects her brother as a female; his name will be spoken for another generation. Through his name, memories of him will be recalled and those who knew him will continue to construct his identity in their own minds. He never will experience a time when “I would be I,” because he will only ever be what others perceive and define him to be. Wholeness, for Quentin, is not possible.
Jason

“…to him all the rest of the town and the world and the human race too except himself were Compsons, inexplicable yet quite predictable in that they were in no sense whatever to be trusted” (Appendix 212).

Jason Compson’s loud narrative stands in contrast to the meditative fall from language apparent at the close of Quentin’s chapter. Jason’s section overflows with short, declarative sentences that describe him and “what [he] say[s]” as the law within the Compson house (113). Although Benjy’s identity is linked directly to Caddy and Quentin is unable to find his identity, Jason is comfortable flaunting his “I.” But Jason is far more complicated than this first glance suggests. He uses language to control others and to mask the chaos of his life. While his narrative is easier to follow than his brothers’, his unconscious thoughts reveal a troubled mind trapped by a society from which his brothers, for mental or physical reasons, are absent. Jason represents the last chance to salvage the Compson name, a name that once represented the power and wealth that he desires, but it is also a name that his mother has stripped from him by calling him a Bascomb. Just as Benjy and Quentin search for their selves, so, too, does Jason. He, however, must do so under the scrupulous watch of society.

Jason, like Quentin, searches for wholeness to compensate for the loss of his mother. On the night of his grandmother’s funeral, he suffers the loss of his mother figure, Damuddy, whom he mourns, “every night since [she] was sick and he cant sleep with her” (17). His isolation is evident when his siblings playfully splash one another with water, but Jason remains “by himself further down the branch” (12). Soon after, when Roskus calls the children for dinner, Jason “ran up the walk [with] his hands in his pockets and he fell down” (15). At this moment, when he loses his grandmother, he figuratively falls into a world based on loss and begins his scramble to construct and order his life. He immediately demonstrates his intentions to control others through language when he tells his father that “Caddy and Quentin threw water on each other,” to which Mr. Compson dismissively responds, “they did” (15). He disregards Jason’s tattle and tells his children to “mind Caddy” for the rest of the night (16). Jason retorts that he “wont mind” her (16). It is, however, she and the loss she represents that haunt him throughout his narrative, because she is always on his mind.
Many critics feel compassion for Benjy and sympathy for Quentin, but rarely is Jason received in a similar regard. Cleanth Brooks, for example, describes Jason as a “brutal and cold-hearted man…rarely at a loss…and so self-righteous in his bitterness” (294). Jason, however, is the Compson the reader should feel the most pity for. He, like his brothers, suffers loss and struggles to find his identity. But unlike them he bears the heavy burden of knowing he has lost what he never had the opportunity to experience. Jason “never had time to be…never had time to go to Harvard or drink [him]self into the ground. [Instead he] had to work” (114). He mourns what he never had: his mother, Caddy, and the family wealth. Certainly Jason is harsher than he needs to be and is the cause for his niece’s escape, but his thoughts reveal the ongoing trauma within his mind. While Quentin resolves his inner turmoil by plunging into the Charles River, Jason remains living, constantly looking for restitution, searching for “an even chance to get [his] money back” (165).

Bitter that the family wealth was depleted before he could enjoy it, Jason hoards money to make up for his losses. On the night of Damuddy’s funeral, Versh observes that “Jason going to be rich man…[because] he holding his money all the time” (23). In an attempt to suppress the pain of the losses he experiences, Jason fills his pockets with money. He thinks he can control his currency to regain some of “the Compson [money that] gave out before it got” to him (124). Ironically, Jason is incapable of managing his present and uselessly searches for something that does not belong to him, because “he takes after [the Bascombs, but] the other [children] are all Compson” (60). While he had an opportunity for reimbursement when Herbert Head offers to “take Jason into his bank when Jason finishes high school,” the untimely birth of Caddy’s daughter negates Head’s offer (60). Therefore, Jason blames Caddy for his past and future losses, because she “deprive[d him] of a job that was promised” to him (129). With his hands in his pocket, Jason protects whatever he has but his “greediness and grasping, selfishness” is not enough to allow him to hold onto Caddy, or anything else that is meaningful.

Similar to Quentin, Jason experiences impotency. To strengthen his feeling of masculinity, Jason turns to the tangibility of money. He directly links money and potency in his argument with Dilsey regarding Caddy’s visit to the house. Dilsey calls him “a cold man” for denying Benjy an opportunity to see his sister, but Jason snaps, “at least I’m man enough to keep that flour barrel full” (130). While Quentin denies accepting money in his meeting with Herbert Head by saying, “you’d better stick [the money] to Jason he’d suit you better than I would.”
Jason spends his whole life chasing it (70). Unfortunately he suffers from terrible “headache[s]” which allude to his psychological anguish (149). These headaches echo Herbert Head’s name and the job that Jason never had, which he spends his whole life trying to compensate himself for. His headaches are literally caused by the gasoline from his car, the “delicate machinery” that gives him his masculine power, but ironically he is incapable of driving and has to hire someone in Mottson “to drive [him] to Jefferson right away” (148, 194). Although Jason declares that he does not “need any man’s help to stand” on his own two feet, he constantly falls (164).

Lorraine is one example of the chaos within Jason’s life and his struggle to understand gender relationships. To Jason, she is daughter, mother, and lover. For example, in her letter she writes, “Dear daddy…No good parties when daddys out of town I miss my sweet daddy” (122). But Jason does not solely fill the role of father, he also inhabits the position of child, as demonstrated when he “thought about Lorraine. He imagined himself in bed with her, only he was just lying beside her, pleading with her to help him” (191). Through his relationship with his “good honest whore,” Jason’s masculine ego is increased, but she also serves as a substitute protective mother figure for him (146). With her, Jason thinks he can buy what he lacks. In acquiring his prostitute, Lorraine, he buys and sells sex without suffering any emotional loss because it is strictly a business move; therefore, love is beside the point.

Jason is entrapped and strives to trap others; therefore, Lacan’s theory of entrapment is a basis from which to examine Jason’s troubled existence. The reader sees not only the reality Jason perceives, but also the reality that is constructed around him. For example, Mrs. Compson tells Quentin that Jason “is the nearest thing to a father [she has] ever had” (162). He is not, however, literally Quentin’s father, but must fill that role. He is not a Compson, because his mother tells him “you are a Bascomb, despite your name” (114). These two situations alone metaphorically make him Caroline’s brother and Quentin’s father; therefore, he is Caddy’s husband. Jason’s precarious situation explains why he constructs another reality, which he can control, because obviously he has no control over the reality Caroline creates, which, it is obvious, controls him.

Jason controls the family’s cash, but he also censors a different kind of paper, letters. When Lorraine sends him letters from Memphis he burns them because he “make[s] it a rule never to keep a scrap of paper bearing a woman's hand, and [he] never write[s] them at all”
Jason, then, is afraid of the power of words, because written language strives to bring meaning to an event or a person, such as his relationship with Lorraine. If this relationship really means something to him, then Jason opens himself to the possibility of feeling loss. By burning her notes, he creates an absence, which figuratively destroys meaning. In suppressing language, Jason desires to live in a world of lack; as long as he is the one who controls what he thinks is lost.

Jacques Lacan describes the fear of loss that Jason experiences in his theory of the Gaze. While Jason manipulates language, he remains paranoid about the watchful eye of those around him. By burning Lorraine’s letters, he turns them into ashes, thus eliminating any opportunity for others to read her words. Lacan describes the eerie feeling one experiences when she senses that the object of her eye’s glance is looking back at her of its own will. Lacan uses Hans Holbein’s The Ambassadors as an example. In this oil painting of two frozen men, the viewer initially thinks she has control over her look, and therefore, is in control of the canvas. Soon after, however, she realizes there is a large mass in the foreground of the picture. As she looks at the picture from various angles, the viewer is startled to see the mark is really a skull staring back at her. This experience reminds her of her own lack of control. Lacan describes the picture as “simply what any picture is, a trap for the gaze” (Four Fundamentals 89).

Lacan’s theory of the Gaze is similar to reading, and Jason’s narrative is an example of how the manipulation of words can hide a reality. For example, Jason’s section conforms to the reader’s traditional expectations of a novel. His thoughts move in a linear pattern and his day is full of dialogue; however, much uncertainty lurks beneath the surface. This is Faulkner’s way of demonstrating the power of language, because the reader thinks he has control of the text, but the text actually controls the reader. With each new thought the characters think, the reader sees that “it opens up to reveal behind it other episodes, all the episodes” (Sartre 265). In a sense, the reader becomes trapped within the text, just as Jason is trapped within society.

Jason carefully shields himself by mouthing clichés that hide who he is. His words have little meaning because they do not relate to his actions. For example, he contradicts himself when he describes money as having “no value; it's just the way you spend it. It dont belong to anybody, so why try to hoard it. It just belongs to the man that can get it and keep it” (122). Money, like words, means nothing until it’s spent. The way the Jason spends money, however, is as useless as if it were locked away and never used. The reader can deduce that Jason lost
nearly forty-seven thousand dollars in the stock market, a number determined by examining two instances in which Jason specifically mentions amounts of money. The first moment is when his mother contemplates cashing Caddy’s check. Jason quickly reminds her that “if [she would] begin to take them now, [she would] have lost fifty thousand dollars” (138). Jason, of course, has cashed the checks, so he has gained fifty thousand dollars. On Easter Sunday, when Jason registers his complaint at the sheriff’s office, the sheriff asks him “what were you doing with three thousand dollars hid in the house?” (189). Jason’s money, like his words, prove useless.

Jason clearly hoards money and the way he describes money reveals him to be a person for whom words are just an echo; they do not have to mean anything because their purpose is solely to fill space in order to drown out any other voices that may remind him of the pain he desperately tries to suppress. In places, he keeps his thoughts to himself, thus isolating his reality from those around him. Even at certain points when it appears that he is discoursing with another, he offsets it by saying, “only what would be the use in saying it aloud” (164). His loss of language is further apparent when he goes to the police station and repeats “his story, harshly recapitulatant, seeming to get an actual pleasure out of his outrage and impotence. The sheriff did not appear to be listening at all” (189).

Jason is aware of the ambiguity of language, but he is also conscious of ways in which he can manipulate language to control others. Mr. Compson acknowledges the arbitrary way words create categories that appear to be stable and natural, such as virginity, tragedy, and sanity. For him language is ultimately meaningless, because definitions are created, not natural. His feelings towards language are apparent in his indifferent response to Jason’s tattle on Caddy and Quentin. Jason, however, thinks he is a “different breed of cat from [his] Father” and for Jason words and the attempt at control they imply are of the utmost importance. He uses language to his benefit when he uses it to restrict the perspective of those around him. At the store, for example, he goes “back to the desk and fixed the check” that Caddy sent (136). He comments on how fortunate he is that his mother’s “eyes are giving out”; because of her poor vision she does not see that he has doctored the check (136). Earlier Quentin confronts Jason about where the checks her mother sends are, to which he responds, “Ask your grandmother…Ask her what became of those checks. You saw her burn one of them” (118). Of course the checks that Mrs. Compson burns are fraudulent, but she and Quentin are unaware of that. By fabricating a burning-ritual, Jason succeeds in shielding them from the truth and keeps them in their subservient positions.
Throughout the day, as Jason watches Quentin, he is aware of the careful gaze of society on him. His attempts to control Quentin are really attempts to turn the eyes of society away from him. He fails, however, because he makes such a scene that he does nothing but draw attention to himself. His boss at the store, Earl, in particular, is aware of the dubious reality Jason tries to hide. For example, after Jason has Quentin sign the money order Caddy sent, he tells Earl he is going home for dinner. He is in fact not going home; rather, he is going to find a blank check so that Mrs. Compson will be able to burn a check as usual. As he leaves the store, however, he is aware that Earl will stay right where he is “watching the door like a hawk until [Jason] came through it again” (135). By describing Earl as a bird of prey, Jason suggests the fear he has of the gaze of others, because they are ready to swoop down and expose him, revealing the double life he tries to balance. Earl, indeed, does know about Jason’s manipulations of his mother’s money. When he confronts Jason, Jason asks him when he is “going to spread the news that [he] stole [money] from his mother?” (143). Earl responds he is not going to tell anyone, but requests that Jason “be a little more careful after this” (143).

In Jason’s section, the primary example of the Lacanian Gaze is Quentin, who bears the name of Jason’s brother and contains the blood of his sister. While Quentin and Caddy have an incredibly close, nearly incestuous relationship, and Benjy sleeps with Caddy, Jason does not experience any closeness with his sister. He is reminded of his separation when Mrs. Compson says, “it was always [Caddy] and Quentin. They were always conspiring against me. Against you too…They always looked on you and me as outsiders” (163). Haunted by the image of his past that he sees staring at him through Quentin, Jason forcefully tries to control her.

Jason pays special attention to Quentin and offers visual language to describe her, because her appearance threatens how others in society perceive him. While eating breakfast with his mother, for example, Jason thinks of Quentin who is “in her room, gobbing paint on her face” (113). After their discussion of Quentin’s tendency to skip school and run around the town with various boys, Jason goes into the other room and confronts her. When he sees her he says, “I reckon that’s your school costume, is it?” (115). An altercation erupts and when Jason grabs her he notices her “kimono came unfastened…[and she was] dam near naked” (116). Seeing Quentin nearly naked is a reminder of Damuddy’s funeral when Caddy took off her dress and was also close to naked. Soon, Quentin stops fighting and while Jason continues to threaten her he sees “her eyes getting wide and black” (116). When Dilsey intervenes, Jason declares he will
“take [Quentin] to school and…see that she stays there” (117). Later, Jason tells Quentin that she should appreciate what he and his mother do for her; she “dont look all the way naked,” because of the clothes they buy her (118). Quentin, enraged at the thought that her clothing came from Jason or Mrs. Compson, says, “if I thought your money or hers either bought one cent of this…I’d tear it right off and throw it into the street” (118). When she gestures towards tearing off her dress, Jason notes the “dozen people looking” at him and admits that “for a minute it kind of blinded” him (118).

In an attempt to protect his name in town, Jason begins his suffocating watch of Quentin. She represents his lineage in society; therefore, he needs to keep her under surveillance because she is disrespectful and will “make her name and [his] name and [his] Mother's name a byword in the town” (146). Jason’s watch over Quentin is most apparent when he sees her walking by the farm supply store with a man in a “red tie,” forty-five minutes before school dismisses (145). Infuriated that Quentin “would walk right past the store, daring [Jason] not to see her,” he moves into the street and follows them (145). Note that he emphasizes the man’s “red tie,” which symbolizes a tongue, which is used for articulation. It also links to Jason’s loss of money, i.e. potency, because on Easter morning, he emerges from his room “carrying a sawn section of tongue-and-groove planking” that was cut from his metal safe (176). When Quentin steals the money, which is rightfully hers, and disappears with the red tie, she castrates Jason: she takes from him the things that give him his confidence, money and language.

On Easter Sunday, when he loses his money, Jason also loses his sense of identity. Money is a material object that Jason controls and that increases his self-perceived potency. It is through disbursing money that Jason engages in any sexual encounter, for example, with Lorraine. With his money gone and Quentin, on whom he blames all his problems, also gone, Jason is left with nothing. As he chases his money and his niece to Mottson, he thinks “of himself, his file of soldiers…dragging Omnipotence down from his throne” (190). The unlimited authority of society, however, succeeds in overtaking Jason. He is incapable of stopping Quentin and she will remain in the public eye, for all to see and judge. Jason, too, is exposed to the watch of society that he fears most. Unsuccessful in his attempts to restore the family name or its wealth, he squabbles with a circus man regarding the location of Quentin.

When the man releases him, Jason looks up to see “a sign in electric lights: Keep your ☛ on Mottson, the gap filled by a human eye with an electric pupil” (193). Jason, however, cannot
keep his eye on Quentin, thus the “whole world [will] know that he, Jason Compson, had been robbed by Quentin, his niece, a bitch” (192). He is forced to live under the watch of society, uncomfortable and uncertain of his “I.”
Dilsey

“Dilsey…had taken care of a family who were decaying, going to pieces before her eyes. She held the whole thing together…because she loved” (Lion 126).

The fourth section of The Sound and the Fury is conveyed through a more traditional narrative than the previous three sections. The reader moves from the suffocating minds of the Compson brothers to a panoramic view of the Compson family. The narration here revolves around descriptive pictures of each brother with whom the reader momentarily shared a mind in the prior sections. In addition, the fourth section pays particular attention to Dilsey, the Compsons’ servant. Although the narrator offers an apparently unbiased interpretation of the Compson world, uncertainties and ambiguities remain. Ironically, as the text conforms to our traditional understanding of reading, full comprehension remains as difficult as in the prior chapters. The narrator is “neither ‘omniscient’ nor ‘objective’ but, rather, an extremely acute and articulate observer” (Blanchard 556). Once again, the reader must gather fragments of information and attempt to piece together a whole.

The final section of the novel takes place on Easter Sunday, the holiest day of the Christian liturgical calendar. As Dilsey walks with her family to Easter services, the reader is reminded that the backdrop for three-quarters of the novel is the death and Resurrection of Christ. For a family that has lost its faith, it is significant that the novel takes place on this particular weekend. Dilsey’s church experience and Reverend Shegog’s sermon, which are situated in the center of the section, provide a glimmer of hope, in contrast to the overwhelming depression manifest throughout the previous three sections. As discussed, the Compsons fail in their search for internal and external wholeness through language. Dilsey, on the other hand, experiences wholeness through her holiness and her steadfast belief in a different type of Word.

The Easter Resurrection signifies the forgiveness of the original sins of Adam and Eve and the promise of salvation after death. Death, as an end of human time, is inevitable. How one understands one’s mortality shapes how one constructs meaning. To find meaning and to understand that one’s earthly time ends is an ongoing struggle that each generation relives. On the night of Damuddy’s funeral, when Caddy climbs the tree, both she and her brothers are awakened to death. Dilsey’s removal of Caddy from the tree of knowledge underscores the
children’s loss of innocence. Their banishment forces them to wander the earth in search of meaning. Each sibling is unique; therefore, each must find meaning for himself. Each searches arduously to understand why he has to die. As one way to cope with human mortality, Christianity answers these questions by asserting that death is really a gateway to everlasting life.

The Compson children have difficulty turning to faith to find meaning because they are raised in a home that looks elsewhere for structure. Their loss of faith originates with their parents’ lack of belief. In her concern for earthly status and societal recognition, Mrs. Compson expends all her energy nurturing her earthly life instead of cultivating her interior in anticipation of eternal life. She does not form meaning through faith and she “never resurrected Christ” (174). Instead of radiating the “light” of the Resurrection, Caroline sits with “the shades…drawn, the room in halflight” (186). The darkness she chooses to shroud herself in prevents her from seeing the redemptive powers of the Resurrection, because “women who stay shut up like [she does] have no idea what goes on” (162). When Dilsey volunteers to raise the shade to let in the light, Mrs. Compson declines saying, “let them alone” (187). She is, after all, “not like most people” and has no desire to see the truth (162). Her inability and unwillingness to see not only severs her connection with her children, but also with her religion. Soon after her granddaughter runs away, for example, Mrs. Compson asks for her Bible, but Dilsey warns her she “cant see to read” (187). Although belief must be experienced and felt personally by the individual, reading the Word can be a first step to salvation. Mrs. Compson, however, shields herself from this opportunity. In doing so, she closes off any chance to see the wholeness that belief would provide her and leaves her children with “eyes unseeing” any glimpse of faith (110).

The Compson children must also overcome the nihilistic perspective of Mr. Compson. He perceives himself to be too smart to be conned by the illusions of Christianity. While Mrs. Compson finds meaning through the arbitrary significance of her maiden name and Jason chases money to fill his lack, the alcoholic Mr. Compson looks to spirits and coolly discourses about the “reducto absurdo of all human experience” (48). In his mind, humans are unable to escape the stranglehold of time. He declares that man, who is “conceived by accident and whose every breath is a fresh cast dice already loaded against him…realize[s] that even the despair or remorse or bereavement is not particularly important to the dark diceman” (112). Therefore, he completely denies that action brings meaning to life, because in the end, the “diceman” does not
care. He warns Quentin to “not spend all [his] breath trying to conquer [time]. Because no battle is ever won…they are not even fought” (48). The “victory” over time, i.e. the Resurrection, is nothing more than an “illusion of philosophers and fools” (48).

Throughout his final day, Quentin struggles to accept his father’s words and is haunted by the possibility that Mr. Compson’s interpretation of time and life is correct. He recalls his father describing humans as “just accumulations, dolls, stuffed with sawdust, swept from the trash-heaps where all the previous dolls have been thrown away” (111). To Mr. Compson, Jesus’ death and Resurrection signify nothing; they do not change the past, because “Christ was not crucified: he was worn away by a minute clicking of little wheels” (49). Quentin wrestles with whether Jesus transcended death, or if He is just like Quentin, a marionette whose strings are arbitrarily pulled by time. His shaky conclusion appears to come moments before his death when he describes the Passion as “sawdust flowing from what wound in what side that not for me died not” (111). By taking on Caddy’s sin and then committing his own sin of suicide, Quentin cuts himself off from Christ’s promise of life after death. Quentin believes that Christ died and rose from the dead, but not for him.

Although Quentin looks to faith to imagine transcendence, he does not foresee heaven; instead, he desires to live in hell with Caddy. As he places his flat-irons under the bridge he thinks, “if it were just hell…Nobody else there but her and me. If we could just have done something so dreadful that they would have fled hell except us” (50-51). His thoughts then move to his false confession of incest, an act “so dreadful,” that he would be cast into hell with Caddy. Later, as he stands on the bridge contemplating his impending death, he thinks, “If it could just be a hell beyond that: the clean flame the two of us more than dead. Then you will have only me then only me then the two of us amid the pointing and the horror beyond the clean flame” (74). The “clean flame” Quentin describes suggests a flame of purification, one that will burn away Caddy’s sin and allow Quentin to protect her innocence for eternity. By living in this imaginary hell, Quentin will not be subject to time or to the absurdity of life.

In this novel, a collection of words that describes the world through the tangled language of the Compson brothers’ consciousness, Dilsey finds wholeness through her belief in “The Word,” the absolute preexistent (John 1:1). On Good Friday she prepares the church for the celebration of Easter Sunday. She trusts in the Resurrection and is aware that life must be endured for the soul to be lifted into eternity. While the Compsons desire to return to an
unreachable past, Dilsey lives completely in the present. Her ability to do so is apparent when the broken clock, whose time is three hours in the past, “struck five times. ‘Eight o’clock,’ Dilsey said” (171). The Compsons are consumed by human time, “mechanical hands on an arbitrary dial,” but Dilsey is conscious of a different time, eternity, which is really time as no time, and she is able to negotiate between the two (49).

In rising from the dead, Jesus conquers time and defeats death. The Compsons, however, are oblivious to any time other than human time. For example, when the children come in from the branch on the night of Damuddy’s wake, Dilsey quiets them by saying they will know what is occurring in the other room, “in the Lawd’s own time” (16). She is accurate in her response because they will indeed know death in accordance to the Lord’s time. Caddy naively questions, “when is the Lawd’s own time,” to which Quentin responds “Sunday” (16). He is correct that many Christian religions hold Sunday as their day of worship and that Sunday is a significant day in the structure of *The Sound and the Fury*, but the “Lawd’s own time” is far more than one day, it is eternity; therefore, it is every single moment.

Dilsey finds order where the Compsons create chaos because she remains in the present. On Easter morning, for example, Luster wanders in the basement, Benjy moans, and Jason becomes infuriated over his lost money, but Dilsey calmly prepares the firewood, makes breakfast, and quiets the irritating Caroline Compson. As she tends to her daily task of holding together the Compson family, she calmly sings, “without particular tune or words, repetitive, mournful and plaintive, austere” (168). She lives her present in peace because she is confident in the promised eternal life and aware that she will “be in the Book…writ out” (38). The Book to which she refers is the Book of Life that will be read from at the time of the apocalypse, the Book that will separate those who will ascend to heaven from those who will descend to hell. In contrast to the terror with which the Compsons perceive the future, Dilsey eagerly awaits her future. She believes that Jesus was “kilt [so] dat ye shall live again; [He] died dat dem whut sees en believes shall never die” (185). Dilsey knows each present moment she lives ushers her closer to the promised everlasting life that she will enjoy with God.

Dilsey’s beliefs allow her to understand her life as an aspect of her eternal, but it also means she is a member of a magnificently large family of faith. *The Sound and the Fury* describes the fall of the Compson family and discusses how each individual handles his/her demise and public image. Dilsey, however, has none of these problems because she sees her
family, the Gibsons, as only a fraction of the larger faith community to which she belongs. Although some Gibsons may be overly concerned with societal pressures, Dilsey does not allow how others perceive her to affect her daily life. For example, Frony’s embarrassment over Benjy, a white man, attending mass with them at an all-black parish prompts her to tell her mother, “I wish you wouldn’t keep bringing him to church, mammy…[because] folks talking” (181). Dilsey, however, responds, “tell um de good Lawd don’t keer whether he bright er not” (181). Dilsey believes that her Lord offers redemption to all, but Benjy is the only Compson open to such salvation. As Luster, Benjy, and Dilsey make their weekly trip to the cemetery, Dilsey calms Benjy by reminding him that he is “de Lawd’s child anyway. En I be His’n too” (197). Through her faith, Dilsey experiences a parent-child relationship with God and finds unity with the “bredden en sistuhn” with whom she is in communion. These relationships allow her to find what the Compsons cannot, an individual identity.

Benjy, like Dilsey, finds wholeness at the Easter Sunday service. Although he cannot comprehend the language of Shegog’s speech, Benjy becomes an archetypal character of innocence. Similarly, Dilsey represents survival. Benjy’s perspective is similar to the ultimate innocence, Jesus. In his sermon Shegog tells his audience they should strive to maintain an aspect of the innocence and unwavering beliefs of a child. The belief of a child is critical to Christianity, because many of its foundational teachings, such as the Resurrection, cannot be explained. Shegog describes the innocence of Jesus and directly links him to Benjy by saying, “look at dem little chillen settin dar. Jesus wus like dat once” (184). He sees Mary “settin in de do wid Jesus on her lap, de little Jesus” (184). By offering Benjy as a mythical image, the story of the Resurrection comes alive in the present. The child Benjy represents the innocence lost by the Compsons; he “never lost his childhood, but that world vanished forever for Quentin, except in his anguished memory” (Backman 35).

During Shegog’s Easter Sermon, the separated and fragmented congregation is unified in the story of the Resurrection. Time stands still and the worshippers become part of the mythical account of the life and death of Jesus. Since the parishioners are fully aware of the story that Shegog relates, he initially struggles to show it to them from a new perspective. He orates his speech once, but it does not invoke the response he desires, so he speaks again, in a voice that “was as different as day and dark from his former tone” (183). When he speaks the second time, it is not the voice of a reverend, the “undersized…small, aged monkey,” rather it is Shegog
embodying a vessel through which the story relives, “he was nothing and they were nothing and there was not even a voice but instead their hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the need for words” (182, 183). The past comes alive in the present as Shegog “sees de light en [he] sees de word” (184). In a sermon in which he freely moves between Old Testament and New, Shegog also unites the past with the present. The traditional structure of language disintegrates as the congregation responds to his vision with utterances, such as “Mmmmmmmmmmmmm,” that resemble Benjy’s non-language of grunts and bellows (184). The new language of the Resurrection breaks down the barriers that separate the congregation and they unite in the communal image the story evokes. The churchgoers, like Shegog, are able to joyously declare, “I sees, O Jesus!” (184). The image they see is one beyond the flesh and time of life; it is a promise of a redemptive rebirth through death.

Shegog’s sermon resonates with Dilsey and Benjy, but neither can articulate the image they see. As Shegog concludes, Dilsey “sat bold and upright…crying rigidly and quietly” while “Ben sat, rapt in his sweet blue gaze” (185). As they exit the church and Dilsey cries, Frony, again concerned with her public image, says, “whyn’t you quit dat, mammy? [because] all dese people looking” (185). Dilsey, however, does not wipe away her tears and ambiguously responds, “I’ve seed de fist en de last” (185). Her Easter celebration allows her to see the beginning and the end, birth and death, but it also suggests the beginning and the end of the Compson house. When Frony asks “first en last whut?” Dilsey responds, “Never you mind” (185). What Dilsey has seen cannot be spoken, because words are incapable of relaying the totality of her experience. The promise of the Resurrection, which is what moves Dilsey, must be seen by the individual. Dilsey is able to see beyond the words, but as Addie Bundren describes, for those, such as the Compsons, who cannot see more than words, “to them salvation is just words” (176). In seeing beyond words, Dilsey shows us how the Word becomes deed.

Despite the triumph experienced within the walls of Dilsey’s church, she and Benjy must return home. As they stand in the driveway looking up “at the square, paintless house with its rotting portico,” they are reminded of the corruption that has overcome the once honorable Compson family (185). Benjy whimper and Dilsey prepares to return to her duties of holding the Compsons together. She is able to do so with ease, however, because she is still aware of her present as an aspect of her eternal, “the clock above the cupboard struck ten times. ‘one oclock,’ she said aloud” (187). Her consciousness of the present allows her to divine the future when she
says, “y’all come on en eat…Jason aint comin to dinner” (187). Her ability to know that Jason is not coming home is similar to her ability to know her destination after life. Although one can never test one’s beliefs regarding the afterlife, Dilsey is incredibly confident in her faith, which allows her to remain in the present, and to know her future.

The description of the Confederate soldier monument in the closing passages of the text describes the Compson family. The statue represents a house divided and the lost Civil War. The Compson family is stuck “living in the attitudes of 1859 or ’60” (University 18). The landscape of the South, however, has changed, and so, too, have the Compsons. They, like the statue, “gazed with empty eyes,” unable to see the present, and incapable of finding their identities (199). The Compson family narcissistically wages wars on one another, as each searches for meaning. Dilsey, however, “sees” with eyes of faith and is temporarily able to cobble together the Compson family (185). Her eyes “could and did penetrate” beyond language to her belief in the Word (168). Although she “raised all of them,” they see the world through spiritual emptiness, are unable to experience salvation, and are incapable of seeing Dilsey as the mother figure that they all lack (20). Appropriately, at the novel’s very end, Jason breaks Benjy’s narcissus, because each character’s vanity contributes to the crumbling Compson lineage.
Conclusion

“…if that were all of it. Finished. If things just finished themselves” (The Sound and The Fury 50).

By employing the stream of consciousness technique in The Sound and the Fury, Faulkner traps his reader in the mind of each character so that the reader fully appreciates the character’s psychological trauma. This suffocating entrapment succeeds in making the story more than just the Compson tragedy, because it becomes the story of the reader. As the reader pieces together the fragments, she creates a new story, which, in turn, reconstructs the reader. While the reader watches each Compson searching for his identity, the reader loses hers by becoming part of the fabric of the story. Thus, the text demonstrates that we are not the sole creators of our identity; rather it is shaped by our interpretations of and reactions to others.

Faulkner dealt with the pain of never having a sister by creating one. Each of his characters represents a different way of dealing with the metaphorical and physical loss of their sister Caddy. Benjy reacts with the pureness and innocence of the timeless child. He is content in the present, because he does not know anything else. For him there is no past or future, only the present. He relives the past in the present as though it is happening for the first time. He finds wholeness, but still sees himself in union with Caddy; therefore he has no self. Quentin is reliant upon dignity and honor. His values stem from traditional definitions of southern gentlemen and southern ladies. Although Caddy does not conform to his definition, he takes on her sin to restore the grandeur of the family name. By simultaneously seeing Caddy as a lover and a mother figure, Quentin reveals his desires to violate the Law of the Father and unite once more with his mother. Jason, unlike his brothers, interprets Caddy’s loss as it affects him in the present. He does not long to return to her, because she represents emotional and monetary loss. Instead, he tries to manipulate the present to make up for what he feels he lacks. Terrified of what others think of him, Jason forcefully controls Quentin, in whom he sees his biggest loss, Caddy. Benjy is incapable of forming a self and Quentin enters the world of language, thereby surrendering his identity to be molded by others. Jason, on the other hand, creates a false world to protect his true self, but he is never in control because he is totally dependent upon his interpretation of how others see him.
Dilsey Gibson’s wholeness stands in contrast to the Compson boys’ separation. The reader is never trapped within Dilsey’s mind, because Dilsey is never trapped within her own mind. She lives in the present, and through her belief in the Word, she sees her present as an aspect of her eternal. While Frony is concerned with the perceptions of others, Dilsey is happy to bring Benjy to church, because he is included in the promised eternal life. In Dilsey’s Easter service, the congregation moves outside of language and is united in the story of the death and resurrection of Christ. Shegog’s words, like Faulkner’s, are in language, but also transcend it by allowing the listener to become a part of the story. Just as Dilsey becomes a part of the Passion story, so too does the reader become part of the myth that Faulkner creates. Therefore, *The Sound and the Fury* succeeds in demonstrating the separation that language can cause, but also the unity experienced by those who go beyond language to order their world.
Works Cited


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