

“It Takes Two People To Make You”:  
Understanding Sibling Relationships through the Intersection of Loss and Language in  
William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*

by  
Josephine Adams

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To my mom, “but, looking for a phrase, I found none to stand beside your name.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf dedicated her novel *Night and Day* to her sister, Vanessa Bell, using this phrase. Words fail me just as they did her.

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## Abstract

*The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* are two of William Faulkner's most celebrated achievements. In both novels—each a short-term glimpse into the misfortunes of a Southern family—Faulkner grants the reader access to the consciousnesses of multiple characters and, in doing so, deconstructs the foundation of narrative truth. That is, by telling these two stories from multiple angles—angles that are, in a lot of cases, convoluted, difficult to follow, and, most importantly, unreliable—he creates an atmosphere of interpretive freedom and instability.

The purpose of this thesis is to exploit Faulkner's stream-of-consciousness technique in order to excavate and interpret the nature of two sibling relationships: Caddy and Benjy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* and Vardaman and Darl Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*. By focusing specifically on Benjy and Vardaman's sections, I work to understand how they try and fail to use words in order to recreate their now-absent siblings. The result of studying the intersection of loss and language is the illumination of Faulkner's subtle but unique understanding of the way in which sibling relationships—as opposed to parent-child relationships—can have a profound effect on the younger child's psychological development.

These two chapters—the first on Benjy; the second on Vardaman—are connected not only through the root of sibling relationships, but also as a result of Faulkner's peculiar devotion to and command of the volatility of time. Because he compressed and blended past, present, and future in both novels, Faulkner unknowingly revealed the nature of his fictional Yoknapatawpha County as founded in the notion of Derrida's *différance*. Therefore, the current running beneath this work is a combination of psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theory, which reveals a new understanding of the way in which Faulkner constructed and understood sibling relationships and, on a broader level, the way in which the organization of his fictional worlds subtly mirrors the instability of reality.

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Short Titles

*AILD*: Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying: The Corrected Text*. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.

*SF*: Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury: The Corrected Text*. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.

## Introduction

*"You've got your Caddy. Haven't you got your Caddy" (SF, 9).  
"Darl is my brother. My brother is Darl" (AILD, 246).*

Tragedy is the keystone of William Faulkner's work. He had the peculiar ability to describe the human condition and, therefore, his novels are permeated with an inescapable, authentic pain. It could be argued—indeed, it should be argued—that all of Faulkner's characters are produced in suffering. This is especially the case for the individuals in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. These novels, two of Faulkner's most celebrated works, revolve around loss: in the first, Caddy Compson's marriage and departure from the home leaves her family—particularly Benjy and Quentin—struggling to manage her absence and the disgrace she brought upon them; and, in the second, Addie Bundren's children and husband are forced to cope with her death as they carry her decaying body to Jefferson to be buried. *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* are stories of lack, of want.

This thesis, then, is an examination of loss—more specifically, the intersection of loss and language, as I work to understand how characters use their words to grieve—but only insofar as those losses reveal the nature of sibling relationships. I home in on two of Faulkner's queerest characters, Benjy Compson and Vardaman Bundren, in order to understand and interpret the ways in which they come to terms with the absences of Caddy and Darl. In doing so, I move away from the Freudian and Lacanian template in which the child-parent relationship is the most formative, pushing, instead, to claim that Benjy and Vardaman construct their identities around their siblings. The angle of my argument is slightly serpentine: I employ both Freudian and Lacanian theories, but, in

doing so, I demonstrate that their preoccupation with the parent-child relationship leads to a limited understanding of childhood development. I work to demonstrate that, in familial situations in which one or more parent is absent—either negligent, in the case of Caroline Compson, or deceased, as with Addie Bundren—the younger siblings come to build their selfhoods around their older siblings.

Faulkner was certainly preoccupied with the notion of family turmoil. Many of his works involve parentless children: *Light in August's* Joe Christmas, for example, is an orphan, and Thomas Sutpen abandons his son, Charles Bon, in *Absalom, Absalom!*. The psychoanalytic push to place the highest level of importance on the parent-child relationship, then, should be revised in terms of Faulkner, as his work gives us access to a new, influential bond in a child's life. Benjy and Vardaman allow me to make that claim. By creating and shaping their identities *with* and *in terms of* their siblings, these two characters become the products of interaction, inseparable from Caddy and Darl.

There has, of course, been criticism focused on relationships between siblings in Faulkner's work. In fact, Benjy and Caddy receive a fair amount, most of which stems from Caddy's appropriation of the role of Benjy's mother. Darl and Vardaman, too, have been examined, but, generally, those examinations are shallow and work to illuminate Darl's consciousness, drawing in Vardaman as a prop. Take, for example, William H. Rueckert's *Faulkner from Within: Destructive and Generative Being in the Novels of William Faulkner*. He explains of *The Sound and the Fury*: "the nature of brother-sister relationships changes, of course: in Benjy's case it is a passionate, asexual love; Caddy is his mother, she loves him and comforts him" (Rueckert, 35); and of *As I Lay Dying*: "[Vardaman] is the sufferer...from inadvertently betraying and then losing his brother

Darl—the one who, naturally, understands him the best, ministers to his grief” (Rueckert, 58). Rueckert acts, in this case, as a demonstration of the ways in which these relationships are typically examined: Benjy has come to view Caddy as his surrogate mother, and Vardaman is the victim of others, an aspect of the narration to be used as a tool with which to read other characters, rather than as a character to read. This is, of course, just one example, but it demonstrates the way in which I seek to differentiate myself from the current critical conversation:<sup>2</sup> by revealing the similarities between the ways in which Vardaman and Benjy grieve, I demonstrate that Faulkner had a specific understanding sibling relationships—and the effects of those relationships—that form as the result of an absent parent.

My method to understanding these relationships revolves around language. By revealing how Vardaman and Benjy futilely use their words to recreate their lost siblings, I illuminate the root of the original bonds and, thus, the ways in which those bonds affect the younger boys' development. In order to do so, I employ poststructuralist theory: Benjy and Vardaman are, unknowingly, caught in the plaintive web of Derrida's *différance*. Much of the originality of my interpretation, then, stems from poststructuralism—more specifically, from *différance*. From a literary-theory standpoint, Derrida's work promotes deconstruction; after all, he is the mind behind “il n'y a pas de hors-texte,” or, “nothing exists outside the text”. However, in my study of Faulkner's work, I wish to employ Derrida's *différance* not by taking a deconstructionist standpoint on the novels as a reader, but, rather, by using it as a way in which I can explain the spirit

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<sup>2</sup> For those seeking further reading on Caddy and Benjy's mother-son relationship, I recommend: Benjamin West's *Crowded Violence in American Modernist Fiction: Lynchings, Riots, and the Individual Under Assault* and Doreen Fowler's “‘Little Sister Death’: *The Sound and the Fury* and the Denied Unconscious”; for those seeking further reading on familial relationships in *As I Lay Dying*, I recommend John Earl Bassett's “‘As I Lay Dying’: Family Conflict and Verbal Fictions”.

of the characters' realities. That is, *différance* explains not only the nature of Benjy and Vardaman's language, but also the organization of the worlds around them, as well as the organization of their monologues. Based on Derrida's notion of absolute presence and absolute absence, I seek to interrogate these characters attempt to fill voids that cannot ever be filled due to the fact that they are neither entirely empty nor entirely stable. Each character seeks to reestablish a sense of perceived unity, but, because of *différance* and the volatile organization of their worlds, their attempts are, inevitably, fruitless.

The first question is how do we read? Because Faulkner experimented so heavily with stream of consciousness, his works come across as immensely internal. We are pushed into the spaces of his characters' minds, left to wade our way through sentences that seem to dissolve on the page and voices stripped of coherency and sophistication. We must acknowledge, therefore, that Benjy and Vardaman—and the rest of the characters in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*—are not speaking to us. These chapters are not pieces of transcription; rather, Faulkner gives us access to their thoughts, to the recesses of their minds. He quite expertly employs the method of interior monologue, "which by-passes the spoken word and purports to set up communication directly with the uncharted and mysterious consciousness, [and] opens the necessary channel" (Cecil, 33). This technique is more important for Benjy than for Vardaman, of course, simply because he cannot communicate in life. In using interior monologues, Faulkner bypassed Benjy's mental handicap and allowed the reader to view the world in a previously inaccessible way. Nonetheless, it is integral for understanding Vardaman as well, as the interior monologue allows us access to the innermost desires of the youngest Bundren.

If we agree to take these sections as interior monologues—as accurate representations of Benjy's existence and Vardaman's existence—we must fully embrace the mind and mouth from which they stem. In an interview in Japan in 1955, Faulkner said, "My characters, luckily for me, name themselves. I never have to hunt for their names. Suddenly they tell me who they are...When he doesn't name himself, I never do" (Faulkner). Here, Faulkner admits to a gap between his own consciousness and the consciousnesses of his characters. In other words, despite the fact that his characters are *of* him, he grants them a certain level of autonomy. Faulkner took a step back from his own work even as he wrote it. He held the pen behind the words, but, somewhere between the first pages and the last, he discarded his role as author and let the characters create for themselves. He breathed life into them; they, then, breathed.

This paradoxical union and separation of Faulkner and his characters is extremely important, for the conclusions I reach surrounding the nature of childhood development must, certainly, stem from the author himself—a philosopher in his own right—as well as from Benjy and Vardaman. This thesis is split into two chapters: the first is on Benjy and Caddy's relationship in *The Sound and the Fury*, and the second is on Vardaman and Darl's in *As I Lay Dying*. In each, I explore how the language of the younger sibling is a means by which he attempts to recover the lost older sibling and, in doing so, I illuminate the source of the pain: the original bond.

In Chapter One, I study the intricacies of Benjy's grammar and vocabulary in order to evaluate his lack of ability to communicate and the way in which that struggle manifests itself when he turns to words to bring Caddy back. As a result, I uncover the root of their relationship and the reason behind the true tragedy of Caddy's departure:

why is her absence so acutely painful for Benjy? What is it about their relationship that sends him into a spiral of agony and pushes him to engage with a language over which he has little control? These questions are also presented and answered in Chapter Two, as I work with all ten of Vardaman's monologues in order to demonstrate that much of his grief, though certainly grounded in Addie's death, stems from the loss of his brother Darl.

The similarities between the two characters and their monologues become clear, as the foundation of both my arguments revolves around two distinct and shared aspects of the works: first, Faulkner employed specific narrative techniques and infused his pages with certain thematic elements in order to create a defined—and very problematic—preoccupation between the reader and time. His unique dedication to the movement of time—movement that is warped and abstruse—allows him to pound Vardaman and Benjy with the ever-strong current of change, leading to their striking linguistic coping mechanisms as they struggle to understand the emerging and established voids in their lives. Second, in both novels, Faulkner uses italic font, but not in any systematic—or, at least, discernibly systematic—fashion. It is the very lack of guidance surrounding how to interpret his italics that led me to my understanding of their presence in Benjy's section of *The Sound and the Fury* and Vardaman's monologues in *As I Lay Dying*: the italicized words are the very words both characters are using in order to recover their lost siblings. These two features, then—the warped time and the italicized font—are the links between the two worlds: Benjy and Vardaman comprehend and experience sibling relationships and loss in very similar ways.

This thesis is, oddly enough, born of a mother: Addie Bundren. Her eight-page monologue, hovering in the middle of *As I Lay Dying* as a bizarre insight into the mind of

the woman whose death spurred the other fifty-eight monologues, intrigued me in its paradoxical complex simplicity. Far more than any other character in the novel—and, indeed, any character in *The Sound and the Fury*—Addie does not shy away from the task of communicating her own existence. That is, she, both openly and convolutedly, tells the story of her life, from start to finish. I was struck by her stark rejection of language, by her peculiar position of a wordsmith and a hater of words: "That was when I learned that words are not good; that words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at" (*AILD*, 171). Here was a character narrating from her grave, spurning the very language that was, in and of itself, providing her the tools with which to spurn it. In fact, now moving beyond the level of the narrative, Faulkner is drawing attention to the way in which words are second to experience—merely masks we live behind—and, yet, his *own* life was made of, and dedicated to, the use of language. So, I set out to understand Addie, to figure out just what Faulkner was trying to say by placing, right in the middle of the book he called his *tour de force*, a posthumous narration that revolved around a single woman's struggle with the inevitable futility of words. What I found was a manifestation of that very struggle in the minds of Vardaman and Benjy: in trying to recreate their siblings with words, they represent—indeed, they live within—the hopelessness of language.

Slowly but surely, as I worked my way through language and loss, this project turned into a testament to unity by way of fragmentation. I sought to expose the ever-present voids in both *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* and demonstrate the true futility of attempting to fill those voids. I did that: I uncovered and dissected the intense losses that Vardaman and Benjy experience, but in doing so, I discovered

something else, something that is simultaneously beautiful and harrowing. It was only through the study of the way in which Benjy and Vardaman react to and cope with the losses of their siblings that I discovered the true intensity of their relationships. That is, if it hadn't been for the pain and the fragmentation—indeed, if it hadn't been for the inevitable futility of reestablishing unity—I wouldn't have uncovered the depth of their original bonds. In examining absence, I discovered presence.

### **Chapter One: Benjy Compson**

*"Benjy wasn't rational enough even to be selfish. He was an animal. He recognized tenderness and love though he could not have named them, and it was the threat to*

*tenderness and love that caused him to bellow when he felt the change in Caddy. He no longer had Caddy; being an idiot he was not even aware that Caddy was missing. He knew only that something was wrong, which left a vacuum in which he grieved. He tried to fill that vacuum.*" – William Faulkner, 1965.

The first section of *The Sound and the Fury* is a tale told by an "idiot".<sup>3</sup> In 1928, the novel's present, Benjy Compson is a grown man with the mental capabilities of a young child, and it is through those eyes that we are launched into one of Faulkner's most powerful stories. Despite the fact that Benjy's section receives a great deal of attention from readers and critics—mostly due to the character's peculiar narration style—Faulkner himself had little to say about Benjy:

The only thing I can feel about him personally is concern as to whether he is believable as I created him. He was a prologue, like the gravedigger in the Elizabethan dramas. He serves his purpose and is gone. Benjy is incapable of good and evil because he had no knowledge of good and evil. (Faulkner)

The idea of Benjy as a "prologue" stems from Faulkner's original intentions: he set out to write a story about Caddy, Benjy's older sister and, arguably, the Compson family's biggest disgrace. Indeed, the novel arose from just a single image of her: "It began with a mental picture...of the muddy seat of a little girl's drawers in a pear tree" (Faulkner). For Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* was about Caddy. Benjy, Quentin, and Jason, as well as the third-person, omniscient narrator who takes over the last section of the novel, were merely tools with which he tried—for, according to him, he did not succeed—to tell her story.<sup>4</sup> But in telling that story, Faulkner unintentionally breathed life into his narrators,

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<sup>3</sup> The term "idiot" originally comes from Act V, Scene V of Shakespeare's *MacBeth* ("It is a story/told by an idiot, full of sound and fury"); Faulkner appropriated the term and the phrase; I use "idiot," then, as he does.

<sup>4</sup> "I couldn't think of any better way to tell about Benjy. I was trying to tell a story. I tried that way. That wasn't enough. I tried with Quentin. That wasn't enough. I tried with Jason. That still wasn't enough. And then I tried Faulkner and that still wasn't enough" (Faulkner).

creating histories and experiences that were simultaneously—and paradoxically—distinct from and wholly dependent on Caddy.

Despite Benjy's beginning as a prologue, he should not be seen as just one step in Faulkner's attempt to tell Caddy's story; his existence should not merely be a way in which we more fully understand his sister, the character who never narrates. Rather, by creating Benjy, Faulkner created a distinct brother-sister relationship, which means that Caddy—Faulkner's "heart's darling," "the beautiful one" (Faulkner)—cannot be separated from her brother: her existence depends on his. The siblings are intertwined by Benjy's words and Caddy's silence. In fact, by reading *The Sound and the Fury* through the lens of narratologist Mikhail Bakhtin, we can understand that his theory of heteroglossia does not merely allow Faulkner to use a variety of narrators; it also demands that heteroglossia live *within* the world of the novel, as well as within Benjy. Everything Bakhtin suggests about man's relationship to language in the real world can be—and must be—applied to fictional characters as well, implying a sense of autonomy. Bakhtin explains:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. (Bakhtin, 677)

Benjy's seventy-odd pages of text are divided into language that has, essentially, been appropriated by him, and language—in this case, direct quotations—that belongs to others:

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In reading Benjy's monologue one soon discovers the fact that not one but two distinct levels of language are employed side by side throughout. One of these levels is made up of Benjy's own impressions of events which flow willy-nilly through his consciousness... Interspersed throughout, making up in volume more than half his monologue, are pertinent bits of dialogue that Benjy remembers as having been spoken by one or another of the principal characters in the novel. (Cecil, 35)

And while it could be argued that Benjy cannot be placed as an agent in Bakhtin's theory due to his inability to speak and, therefore, his inability to "choose" a language, Bakhtin addresses the unlikelihood of such an experience:

Only by remaining in a closed environment, one without writing or thought, completely off the maps of socio-ideological becoming, could a man fail to sense this activity of selecting a language and rest assured in the inviolability of his own language, the conviction that his language is redetermined. (Bakhtin, 677)

Benjy exists in a limited environment, certainly, but his ability to think keeps such an environment from being entirely "closed" and, therefore, allows Benjy to appropriate a language—a limited language, to be sure, but a language nonetheless. The words Benjy chooses, though narrow in scope and variety, are, in fact, products of his decisions, demonstrating a certain strength of mind that most critics tend to overlook. As readers, we receive a personalized view of his world and, while convoluted, such a view is nonetheless Benjy's truth. In fact, Benjy's mental handicap prevents him from distinguishing between truth and lies and, therefore, prevents him from lying at all. Just as Stacy Burton, who led a similar endeavor to understand Faulkner's work through heteroglossia, claims: "[A Bakhtinian reading] fractures conventional critical assumptions by confirming that the Benjy section is anything but a tale 'signifying nothing'" ("Coherence," 209). Indeed, Benjy's section, as the commencing narration of the novel, is the birth of everything.

Because Benjy's section revolves fully around Caddy, this chapter works to unpack and interpret the nature of their relationship before her departure and the way in which Benjy coped with Caddy's absence after she leaves the Compson house behind. I am not rejecting Caddy's prominence as the root of the novel; rather, I am rejecting her presence as separate from her brothers. Because they tell her story, she exists only through their eyes, and, therefore, we first witness her as the root of Benjy's misery. After all, despite—or, perhaps, due to—his mental handicap, Benjy Compson feels an incredible amount of emotion. His section is a painfully intense manifestation of what it means to lose something and the desperate futility of filling the void that something left behind. But this has been said before: Benjy's relationship to Caddy has been the subject of critics' ponderings for decades. What I've come to discover, however, is a gap in those ponderings when it comes to the relationship between Benjy's words and his ability to grieve. By arguing that Benjy and Caddy's separation marks the fragmentation of his sense of self-unity—a fragmentation that is realized when he hears her name on the golf course—and, therefore, his entrance into the symbolic order—which is the commencement of his narration—I move away from the widely acknowledged brother-sister relationship, illuminating a far deeper and more linguistic connection between the siblings and, therefore, revealing the way in which Benjy's relationship to language is not merely defamiliarized narration. Indeed, once Benjy enters the symbolic order—once his narration begins—he desperately tries to recreate his sister with his words, but, ensnared in a never-ending spiral of memories between which he cannot differentiate and having access to only a limited vocabulary, the “idiot” is perpetually trapped in a crumbling, fragmented world.

### Section One: The Illusion of Unity

In order to fully understand Benjy's struggle to bring Caddy back after she has gone, we must first recognize the source of that struggle. That is, why is Benjy attached to his sister to the extent that he is so desperate to recreate her presence? Linda Wagner suggests that by losing Caddy, Benjy lost the one link he had to language and, therefore, to power. Wagner explains that it is that aspect of their relationship that makes Caddy's absence so difficult for Benjy. But it is far too simplistic to say that Caddy's role is tied exclusively to language: Wagner's evidence cannot fully support her claims because of Benjy's inability to interpret. Wagner explains:

A more important function for Caddy in the scenes with Benjy is her attempting to bring him to speech. She gives him definitions...she uses repetition of and emphasis on key words, always encouraging context. She expects Benjy to learn how to speak. (Wagner, 51)

Through her own word choice, Wagner devalues her founding argument:

Caddy *expects* Benjy to speak; she does not *teach* him, for that feat is, woefully, impossible: Benjy cannot learn. While Caddy does everything in her small, girl-sized power to teach Benjy how to talk, such attempts are entirely in vain due to the barriers within Benjy's mind. Thus, while she spends her time attempting to lead Benjy into the world of language, the fruitlessness of the situation is apparent: Benjy will never learn to speak, and he will never come to know or appreciate what Caddy is trying to do for him. Their interactions, though infused with a kind of transcendental, innate connection, are all demonstrations of the way in which language fails them:

“You want to carry the letter.” Caddy said. “You can carry it.” She took the letter out of her pocket and put it in mine. (*SF*, 13)

And, later:

“You wait here.” Caddy said. “Wait right here, now. I’ll be back in a minute. Give me the letter.” She took the letter out of my pocket. (*SF*, 13)

Clearly, Caddy is attempting to communicate with Benjy as though he can understand her, and, perhaps, she truly believes he can. But Benjy is hearing her speak the words and then watching her take the letter; he is not, by any means, recognizing the role he is supposed to play in the interaction. In the world of speech, Benjy is reduced to a spectator.

This idea isn’t just isolated to his relationship with Caddy, however. Although he can record and convey dialogue perfectly, Benjy’s understanding of words and their meanings is fiercely limited, which is most obviously illuminated in his recording of questions:

“It’s too cold to go out there.” Versh said. “You don’t want to go out doors.”  
 “What is it now.” Mother said.  
 “He want to go out doors.” Versh said. (*SF*, 5)

Benjy obeys all the other elements of a grammatically correct transcription: he uses quotation marks and attributes the dialogue to the appropriate characters. The exclusion of question marks, however, is noticeable. Many critics have discussed the importance of the absence of suitable punctuation, each arriving—and I with them—at the same conclusion: although Benjy can record the dialogue accurately, he does not understand or interpret the words; he does not pick up on speaker intention because he cannot register voice intonation. Therefore, Wagner’s claim that Caddy’s absence is so emotionally intense for Benjy due to the way in which she gave him “hope” in relation to speech falls

flat when it comes into contact with specific scenes that demonstrate the tedium of their language-drive interactions. There is no denying that Caddy and Benjy are intertwined in an obscure, intense relationship, but the root of that connection is not Caddy's decision to treat Benjy, or even teach him to be, like a functioning adult.

In fact, Benjy does not place value in the mere sound of Caddy's voice. He may subconsciously register the warmth or emotion in her voice during their one-on-one interactions, but he does not hear her speak and know she is the one speaking—something that is clearly illustrated when Benjy narrates in the dark:

We went out and Versh closed the door black. I could smell Versh and feel him. You all be quiet, now. We're not going up stairs yet. Mr. Jason said for you to come right up stairs. He said to mind me. I'm not going to mind you. But he said for all of us to. Didn't he, Quentin. I could feel Versh's head. I could hear us. Didn't he, Versh. Yes, that's right. Then I say for us to go out doors a while. Come on. Versh opened the door and we went out. (*SF*, 27)

For Benjy, the connection between object and word stems not from his knowledge of how language works, but, rather, from the primitive link between what he sees and what he can name. While Benjy continues to relay the speech of other characters word-for-word in this scene, the quotation marks and the names of the speakers disappear, demonstrating Benjy's attachment of names to faces. Therefore, much of his ability to relay events to the reader relies on his associations: he knows who is speaking because he watches specific mouths move; he does not absorb or interpret what they are saying. We are pushed into Benjy's world of blackness with him after Versh closes the door and can infer who is saying what only from the context Benjy has given us prior to the passage. Most important, however, is what this concept illuminates about Benjy's relationship to Caddy: despite their intense connection, Benjy cannot recognize her voice in the

darkness, suggesting the inadequacy of Wagner's claims. Caddy attempts to bring Benjy to language, yes, but, due to his handicap, he can neither learn nor consciously place power in her voice. Therefore, it is not Caddy's role as language-giver that brought Benjy a sense of omnipotence. Rather, I argue it his subconscious unification his self and her self, amalgamated through the way in which she granted him, by means of her affection and understanding, with an unparalleled sense of agency. Indeed, Benjy lived through her, believing he was living with her.

In Benjy's life, there are small, fleeting absences, marked by everyday comings and goings of people and objects, and there is the overarching absence of Caddy, which comes to define his present-day existence not just because of their love, but also because of the way in which Benjy came to view Caddy's presence as a completeness of self. This idea takes shape in 1900, when Benjy's identity is simultaneously destroyed and established. "The Name-Changing," as George Stewart and Joseph Backus have aptly named this memory, is a pivotal moment in Benjy's development:<sup>5</sup> "As often in Faulkner, the name change suggests the loss of identity, the more so as it is linked to Benjy's repudiation by Mrs. Compson" (Bleikasten, 76). Thus, in 1900, when Caddy leans down to Benjy and says to him, "Your name is Benjy...do you hear. Benjy. Benjy" (*SF*, 61), she is marking for the reader, and for Benjy—though he does not register it consciously—that this moment is the birth of a new identity and the loss of an old one. The pieces of the scene in which this poignant shift occurs, therefore, must be looked at carefully, as they come together to form the time in which Benjy's sense of self was created: "We could hear the roof. I could see the fire in the mirror too. Caddy lifted me again" (*SF*, 62). We

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<sup>5</sup> Stewart and Backus isolated each narrated moment in Benjy's history, locating the events temporally and naming them appropriately.

do not receive an image of a mirror in any memory other than this one. (Quite poignantly, however, we come to understand that the dark spot on the wall in later scenes is the absence of that mirror.) This appearance links Benjy's development with Lacanian psychoanalysis and, in doing so, demonstrates the way in which Benjy's idea of selfhood came into being and was, many years later, shattered.<sup>6</sup> The mirror stage, according to Lacan, is an integral part of a child's development, as it not only marks the beginning of the division of self but also the beginning of the child's—and, later, the adult's—never-ending desire to achieve the unity that was thus divided:

This development is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the formation of the individual into history. The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopedic—and, lastly, to the assumption of the armor of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development. (“Mirror Stage,” 444)

Lacan is describing the self-shattering moment of a child realizing that the image he had seen in the mirror, which he had originally believed to be his unified self, or the "Ideal-I," is, in fact, "the other". This moment arrives when a child has acquired language. Indeed, it is that very acquisition that leads to the realization of division and the subsequent, futile attempts to achieve the original wholeness of the "Ideal-I". The formation of Benjy's identity as “Benjy” comes at a time when he is, judging from what Caddy says to Benjy (“You can look at the fire and the mirror and the cushion too” [*SF*, 66]), fascinated by mirrors. The key to using Lacan's mirror stage as a lens through which to view Benjy's sense of self is two-fold: first, we must acknowledge that Benjy is not coming into

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, it must be noted that Faulkner did not have Lacan in mind when he wrote *The Sound and the Fury*; but, as I said, Benjy's existence, though sprung from Faulkner's pen, must be interpreted as independent from its author.

language at this point; he is instead coming into a *name*, and, therefore, is not experiencing the moment of life-changing recognition, but, rather, coming to rest on the "Ideal-I" that is Benjy Compson, not Maury Compson. Second, Benjy is not seeing himself in the mirror. Instead, he is witnessing projected objects—the fire, Caddy, Father, and Jason—which come to demonstrate how Benjy's sense of identity differs from normal childhood development due to his unity with his sister.

Specifically because Benjy does not come into language in this moment, which is necessary for Lacan's hypothesis of the division of self, Benjy is not realizing "the other"; instead, he is forming a new image of the "Ideal-I". The "fire" that Benjy sees in the mirror becomes the manifestation of this whole identity, but only insofar as it connects Benjy to Caddy:

I could hear the clock, and I could hear Caddy standing behind me, and I could hear the roof. It's still raining, Caddy said. I hate rain. I hate everything. And then her head came into my lap and she was crying, holding me, and I began to cry. Then I looked at the fire again and the bright, smooth shapes went again. I could hear the clock and the roof and Caddy. (*SF*, 57)

Despite the fragmented nature of "The Name-Changing" memory, this moment occurs just after Caddy leans down and tells Benjy that he is no longer Maury. Benjy first sees the fire in the mirror—"I could see the fire in the mirror" (*SF*, 62)—and *then* sees it in reality; its image is thereafter tainted with its first appearance. In other words, the fire is, in Benjy's mind, *originally* in the mirror, in the same way as the "Ideal-I" for other children is originally realized in the mirror. When he sees it later, as Caddy is holding him and they are both crying, it is still the manifestation of the "Ideal-I"; and, because Benjy is united to Caddy so intimately in this moment—her head is in his lap; she is holding him while he is, for the first and only time, holding her; and they are

simultaneously crying, his tears born out of a kind of emotional union—the manifestation of his whole identity is uniquely attached to her. She does, quite simply, complete him.

Past critics have commented on the symbolism of the fire in *The Sound and the Fury*, including John T. Matthews, who claims, "Caddy's association with fire in Benjy's naive memory connotes her passion and affection...Benjy unthinkingly preserves the substance that has helped him to describe (or draw) her body for him" (Matthews, 67). The "passion and affection" stems from the same moment I've drawn upon, but Matthews simplifies the nature of the fire, clumping it with the Caddy's smell of trees. The smell is crucial in its associations to Caddy, but the fire must stand on its own not only due to its role as the source of Benjy Compson's self, but also because it creates, in Benjy's mind, a self that is complete only with Caddy. The agony that Benjy feels, the very anguish that creates the spiral of memories in his interior monologue, is the result of the fragmentation he feels now that Caddy is gone: her absence is the absence of a piece of his self, a piece of his identity. Thus, the void that Benjy is trying to fill throughout the first section of *The Sound and the Fury* is not a result of Caddy's physical absence from the Compson property, but, rather, the product of a divided self-image. He cannot be whole without her; and, yet, as Lacan noted, the "Ideal-I" is just that: ideal. The sense of completeness that Benjy felt with Caddy after he was renamed was merely an illusion, and his attempts to gain it back are inevitably in vain. Benjy is doomed to failure because his unity of self never existed in the first place.

### **Section Two: Living in Melancholy**

The "The Name-Changing" provides us with the foundation upon which we can begin to interpret how Benjy comprehends and copes with the loss of his sister and,

therefore, the loss of a piece of himself. His unique condition leads him directly, inevitably, and painfully into a state of what Freud would call “melancholia”. Freud classifies the difference between melancholy and mourning in terms of the way in which the agent came to view his relationship with the love-object:

The patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to the melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him. This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious. (“Mourning,” 245)

Indeed, the source of Benjy’s intense anguish is such that to call it anything else but melancholy would be reductive. Because Benjy subconsciously saw Caddy as a completion of his self rather than as a distinct object of love, his grief bypasses the categorization of mourning and falls directly under that of melancholy. Does Benjy know, then, what he has lost? Does he understand both the empty space in his life that was once occupied by Caddy and the space in his being that was filled with an imaginary sense of wholeness? According to Freud, Benjy would recognize the loss of Caddy, but he would only subconsciously be aware of his now-split self. But Freud’s work did not stem from studying the mentally handicapped. Indeed, Benjy’s inability to fully recognize Caddy’s physical absence does not make him insusceptible to melancholy; rather, the lifelong struggles in his mind push him further into such a state because he does not have the strength to come to terms with his own emotion. The symptoms of melancholy that Freud outlines, though surely alive within Benjy, are not successfully communicated to the reader because Benjy cannot name them:

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree

that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. (“Mourning,” 244)

Benjy’s “painful dejection” is the root of his bellows, his cries of anguish. We are surely witness to profound sadness. But what about the “cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of self-regarding feelings”? It is difficult to locate the appearance of such symptoms because there is nothing to compare them to: we do not know Benjy before his melancholy. While we are witness to his past, we are nonetheless trapped within his present-day mind. Because everything in the first section of *The Sound and the Fury* is marked by “painful dejection,” the following indications of melancholy could be the pieces of Benjy that we have come to define him by: Benjy’s incapacity to stay within the present could be a manifestation of his “cessation of interest in the outside world”; his inability to dress and feed himself could be the “inhibition of all activity”; and his constant need to find pieces of Caddy in his mind could be his own, personal form of punishment: in an attempt to bring her back—or, perhaps, in an attempt to fully realize that she is gone—Benjy forces himself, though unintentionally, to remember her. And every time he does so, he reopens the wounds, plummeting further into the state of melancholy. Benjy, unable to organize even his own memories, does not have the capabilities to misremember, forget, or break free from the past and, therefore, his melancholy is inevitable. His narcissistic love for Caddy and his inability to avoid melancholy are both products of his mental handicap; despite his entrance into the symbolic order, the space he occupies is so limited that he is still doomed to a life void of maturation and control.

Many of the obstacles in Benjy's life, including his simultaneous inability to recognize Caddy as fully distinct from himself and to understand that lack of recognition, stems from his mental handicap and his perpetual infancy:

On the one hand, a strong fixation to the loved object must have been present; on the other hand, in contradiction to this, the object-cathexis must have had little power of resistance...this contradiction seems to imply that the object-choice has been effected on a narcissistic basis, so that the object-cathexis, when obstacles come in its way, can regress to narcissism. ("Mourning," 249)

The narcissism, in Benjy's case, is a product of his lack of maturation; a child is, naturally, the original narcissist and fully unable to repress that narcissism. Benjy, therefore, does not have the ability to understand Caddy as separate from himself. Indeed, because Benjy is forever a child—"You mean, he been three years old thirty years" (*SF*, 17)—wrapped in the innocence of his inability to communicate verbally and his defamiliarized view of the world, the love that he feels for Caddy was a product of both the creation of his new identity as "Benjy" and his role as a "primary narcissist". He subconsciously created his new identity as a union of his own self with Caddy's when he was still a biological infant ("The Name-Change" takes place when Benjy is just five), and, due to the fact that he ceases to mature beyond that point—in fact, before that point—he does not emerge out of the "primary narcissist" stage that would allow him to recognize the distinction between himself and Caddy.

### **Section Three: The *Fort/Da* Game**

While Benjy does not understand why he struggles with melancholy, he nonetheless does everything in his power to rectify the situation, tragically unaware of the

inevitable futility of his attempts. Many critics have stressed Benjy's dependence on certain objects—i.e. the slipper, the jimson weed, etc—as particular coping mechanisms for the loss of his sister, drawing the reader's attention to the way in which the presence of said objects brings Benjy temporary tranquility. Matthews explains:

Discussion of *The Sound and the Fury* has well established that Benjy primitively stabilizes his world by hoarding relics of Caddy after she leaves. Olga Vickery refers to the process of 'mechanical identification' that designates the slipper, the spot where the mirror once hung, the smell of trees, the jimson weed in the bottle, and so on as things whose presence partially fills the void left by Caddy. (Matthews, 65)

While both Matthews and Olga Vickery, whom he quotes, draw attention to the shortcomings of these objects (as evidenced in this quotation by the adverbs “primitively” and “partially”), the root of Benjy's reliance on them is overlooked. Rather than viewing these objects as space-fillers—whether successful or not—and temporary solutions to Caddy's absence, we must understand them as Benjy's infantile attempt to *control* loss rather than reverse it. That is, he is not trying to achieve the unity of self by hoarding them; he is, instead, playing an unsuccessful version of what Freud calls the *fort/da* game, in which a child recreates his mother's departure with objects. This process, on the part of the child, is performed subconsciously to the extent that he does not know why the game is comforting, only that it is.

[The child] compensated himself for [his mother's departure], as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach... her departure had to be enacted as a necessary preliminary to her joyful return, and that it was in the latter that lay the true purpose of the game. (“Pleasure Principle,” 14)

While Caddy's usurpation of the role of mother could be mapped onto Benjy's personal *fort/da* game, the root of the loss is not his familial relationship with his sister, but rather a bizarre combination of the void in his self and the void of Caddy in the world. He does,

therefore, place a certain amount of value in objects. But, unlike the children Freud studied, Benjy has no control over his own game, sending him further into the never-ending spiral of futility. Indeed, much of Freud's observations led to the conclusion that the *fort/da* game was about the child coming to terms with his own agency: "At the outset, he was in a passive situation—he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took an active part" ("Pleasure Principle," 15). Benjy, though certainly dependent on objects as a small form of comfort—they are space-fillers to a certain extent, but their lack of success at bringing peace demonstrates the futility of looking at them as such—cannot take "an active part" in the *fort/da* game as other children can because he is always an object, never a subject. Due to his mental handicap, that is, Benjy is constantly under the control of another person: "Luster picked [the flowers] up, and they went away. I began to cry...the flowers came back...'Hush' Luster said. 'Here they is. Look. It's fixed back just like it was at first. Hush now'" (*SF*, 55). Benjy can find comfort in these objects only insofar as he has control of them; and because he is constantly under the control of another person, his ability to play the game is extremely limited—if not altogether ineffective. Instead of translating omnipotence into empowerment, Benjy indirectly reinforces the loss by allowing—or simply not being able to prevent—Luster from taking his objects. When they "went away," the absence of Caddy and the fragmentation of his self are triggered over again. Perhaps what is most prominent in Benjy's failure to control the objects himself, however, is the fact that he is therefore unable to *play* the game. In a child's life, creativity—the capability to play—becomes power. Benjy, though mentally a child, does not have the agency required for creativity, thus leaving him powerless in all senses of

the word, signaling the root of the issue surrounding his relationship with language. Indeed, Benjy's struggle with objects can be seen as a metaphor for his struggle with language: rigidity becomes Benjy's crux.

Up until Benjy's entrance into the symbolic order, however—that is, up until the narration begins—the objects were his anchors to innocence; they, in a way, prevented the fragmentation of his self simply by temporarily replacing Caddy. Her absence was not profound enough until her name was spoken on the golf course, at which point Benjy suddenly found himself in a world of language, desperately searching for ways to bring her back.

Thus, Freud and Lacan demonstrate how we can conceptualize the foundation and magnitude of Benjy's grief: he is not mourning the loss of his sister so much as he is nursing the wound of a fragmented self image. Such a conclusion, of course, requires exhaustive unpacking of the way in which he grieves: trapped in a failing language and a warped sense of time.

#### **Section Four: Language and Time**

L. Moffitt Cecil, who was responsible for illuminating the two levels of Benjy's appropriated language, did much of the spadework when it comes to Benjy's words, as he took the time to focus on the different parts of speech that appear in Benjy's section. His collected evidence is crucial for further understanding:

Benjy's nouns are names of the people, places, and things which exist in the restricted sphere he inhabits. Among them are his familiar names for members of the Compson household...the prominent features of the natural world...the Compson property...the rooms...the parts of the body...the objects which are related to his daily routine. (Cecil, 38)

Here, Cecil has taken the entirety of Benjy's vocabulary—which, he determines, is about 500 words—separating it into distinct categories that can be interpreted by the reader. Cecil goes on to elaborate on distinct aspects of Benjy's nouns: “It becomes apparent immediately that all of Benjy's nouns are concrete. Each one names an object or condition which exists in the real world and makes an appeal to one or more of the five senses” (Cecil, 38-39). Names, for example, are key in Benjy's vocabulary: he knows the names of everyone on the Compson property because of the connection between word and face, which is demonstrated by the absence of speakers' names when Benjy narrates conversation from the dark. This is not a novel concept—Benjy, like the rest of the world, attaches a signifier to a signified—but its *rigidity* is. As Cecil points out, these “object[s],” in this case people, must “exist in the real world”. That is, Benjy must comprehend the actual presence of the object in order to communicate, which is especially revealing when considering the two different Quentins in the Compson family. They do not coexist: the older Quentin dies just before the younger Quentin is born—Caddy's wedding, which is necessary because she is pregnant, is on April 25, 1910; Quentin commits suicide in June of that year—and, therefore, Benjy has never known

them together. Not once does Benjy make the distinction between the two characters—except through his use of shifting pronouns—which produces a great deal of confusion. It is almost as if he does not know the difference. This is not to say, of course, that he does not recognize the two Quentins as separate people. Rather, he does not recognize that the same name is used twice. Because he lives in a world in which names and faces are tied exclusively to each other, he does not have the ability to apply the same name to two different people within the same timeframe, suggesting that the past, then, is, essentially, the present for Benjy; he cannot distinguish between the two. The jumps in time we experience through reading are not apparent to Benjy; the shifts in his mind are so seamless that he cannot draw a line between memory and reality. Caddy's wedding day in 1910, for example, is just as much *now* as the hunt for Luster's quarter in 1928. Indeed, this idea was mentioned by Faulkner himself: "To that idiot, time was not a continuation, it was an instant, there was no yesterday and no tomorrow, it all is this moment" (Faulkner). Benjy's understanding of the two Quentins is a marker of his relationship with time: he does not know there are two of them because he does not recognize the gaps between past, present, and future. When the male Quentin dies, he ceases to exist for Benjy because he is no longer physically present—which, of course, further exemplifies his attachment to Caddy, for her absence is exceptional to him—and the new Quentin takes his name. The past, then—the time in which his brother still lived—exists in his mind as he experiences his memories. He does not think of his brother Quentin as gone in those moments, just as he does not think of the girl Quentin as not-yet-existing.

It should be acknowledged, however, that Benjy does understand chronological movement of time to a certain extent. Burton points out, “Significantly, among the words Benjy himself uses frequently in recounting his experiences are ‘then,’ ‘back,’ ‘again,’ and others indicating degrees of temporal consciousness” (“Coherence,” 211). Because Benjy uses time-related words, it becomes clear that he understands temporal movement on a small scale. While chronology is discarded as Benjy’s mind explores an array of memories, dating back to 1898 and Damuddy’s death, time moves quite linearly *within* those very memories—not in the entirety of their units, but, rather, in the pieces that come one-by-one. Above all, this points to the depth of Benjy’s mind. He functions on two distinct levels: one moves chronologically; the other, to us, moves erratically, but, to Benjy, it does not move at all.

Burton continues, claiming, “Essentially, past and future are the same for Benjy to the degree that each differs from the present” (“Coherence,” 212). Because Benjy does not narrate linearly within overarching time—the chronological movement between his birth and the present—it is clear that he does not have the ability to grasp the notions of past, present, and future. But the idea that this lack of discernment stems from a blurring of past and future solely because of their difference from the present implies—or, rather, demands—that Benjy understands what the present is—something he does not, and cannot, do. That is, the present, for Benjy, is whatever memory he is in. When he narrates Damuddy’s death, for example, that is his present: he does not realize that it is a memory and, therefore, it is not the past.

### **Section Five: The Importance of Smell**

Not only does Benjy's dependency on concrete nouns illuminate the nature of his personal construction of time, but it also reveals that his language acquisition came to a halt at the stage of development in which object and word are linked exclusively to each other through a series of distinct, unwavering attributes. This relationship between object and word is most easily excavated by seeking insight into the way in which Benjy understands the people around him. Many of his concrete nouns are, in fact, proper names—and each proper name appeals to “one or more of the five senses”. Although Benjy does not provide physical descriptions of the characters—we do not receive any until the third-person narrator emerges in the final section of the novel—he nonetheless attributes sensual qualities to them and, therefore, to their names. Indeed, it becomes very apparent that Benjy inadvertently—he does not know why he does it, only that he does—infuses smells with an immense amount of power. In some sense, smell is the very cause of Benjy's irrevocably fragmented self, due to the way in which he attached the scent of trees to both Caddy the person and “Caddy” the name.

Although Caddy is the only character in Benjy's section to whom he attributes a specific smell, the way in which he recognizes and distinguishes among smells of other members of the household lends itself to the understanding of the power of scent in terms of the organization of Benjy's life: “Dilsey finished putting me to bed. The bed smelled like T.P. I liked it” (*SF*, 29). Although T.P. does not appear in front of Benjy in this moment, he still has the ability to recall him in his mind because of the firm link between smell and person. By claiming that the bed smells like T.P., Benjy is demonstrating the way in which he has come to associate a specific quality with a specific name and, therefore, a specific person. Benjy does the same thing with Versh: “We went down to

Versh's house. I liked to smell Versh's house" (*SF*, 28) and "I could smell Versh and feel him" (*SF*, 27). Benjy attributes a kind of firmness to scent: he can easily recognize the specific scents of the characters to whom he feels a connection. He does not, for example, comment on the smell of his mother, Jason, or either Quentin. Scent, it seems, is reserved for those whom he loves.

Therefore, there are three levels of smells for Benjy, and each is reserved for a specific type of relationship: first is the absence of smell; Benjy does not describe the scents of those to whom he feels no love. Second is the presence of nonspecific smell; Benjy recognizes the distinct scents of T.P. and Versh, but does not name them. Last, and most important, is Caddy's smell: Caddy smells like trees. Within his interior monologue, Benjy mentions Caddy's smell twelve times. While that may seem unsurprising due to Benjy's repetitive narration, the scenes in which this sensory attachment emerges demonstrates the power not only behind the association of smell and physical being, but also between smell and essence.

The true power of Caddy's scent isn't recognized until halfway through the narrative when Caddy, starting to mature, uses perfume for the first time:

"Hush, Benjy." Caddy said. "You'll disturb Mother. Hush."  
But I didn't hush and when she went away I followed and she stopped on the stairs and waited and I stopped too. (*SF*, 41)

At this point, both Caddy and the reader are unclear of what plagues Benjy. The trigger for this specific memory is the smell of Caddy's perfume on her wedding day ("Caddy put her arms around me, and her shining veil, and I couldn't smell trees anymore and I began to cry" [*SF*, 40]), but this does not become apparent until later, when Caddy gives

Dilsey her perfume after realizing it was the cause of Benjy's crying. That very moment is significant:

I could hear the water, and Caddy opened the door.  
 "Why, Benjy." she said. She looked at me and I went and she put her arms around me.  
 "Did you find Caddy again." she said. "Did you think Caddy had run away."  
 Caddy smelled like trees. (*SF*, 41)

At first, Caddy assumes that Benjy's crying is brought on by her brief absence; when he finds her in the bathroom, he hushes, and Caddy draws what she believes to be a logical conclusion. She is, of course, incorrect, as Benjy once again begins to cry:

"Why, Benjy. What is it." she said. "You mustn't cry. Caddy's not going away. See here." she said. She took up the bottle and took the stopper out and held it to my nose... I went away and I didn't hush and she held the bottle in her hand, looking at me.  
 "Oh." she said... "So that was it." (*SF*, 42).

Caddy's fleeting misinterpretation of Benjy's needs is important for two reasons: first, it suggests that the temporary absence of Caddy's physical body is less important than the associations—in this case, her smell—with the *presence* of her physical body. Second, Caddy's deep caring for Benjy appears to stem, almost paradoxically, from a kind of narcissism. Caddy assumes that Benjy's crying is born of something she has said or done that implies her leaving—an assumption she makes more than once:

"I'll run away and never come back." Caddy said. I began to cry... Caddy was all wet and muddy behind, and I started to cry and she came and squatted in the water.  
 "Hush now." she said. "I'm not going to run away." So I hushed. Caddy smelled like trees in the rain. (*SF*, 19)

Because Benjy uses "so" after Caddy tells him that she's not going to run away, it would be easy, perhaps, to assume that Benjy is accurately interpreting her sentences and they quell his fears. But this is one of three times Benjy uses "so"; each time Benjy uses the

adverbial conjunction he is responding to a command. Therefore, we can assume that Benjy is hushing not because Caddy told him she isn't going to run away, but, rather, because he is merely reacting to her command. Indeed, his pain in this instance stems from the change in her appearance: She "was all wet and muddy behind," challenging Benjy's firm associations. To be Caddy, she must be pure, and she must smell like trees. The power Benjy places on the connection between Caddy and these qualities is similar to Foucault's demonstration of the power of an author:

If I discover that Shakespeare was not born in the house that we visit today, this is a modification, which, obviously, will not alter the functioning of the author's name. But if we proved that Shakespeare did not write those sonnets which pass for his, that would constitute a significant change and affect the manner in which the author's name functions. (Foucault, 146).

For most people, the scent and the cleanliness of a person in their lives would not determine existence. But, for Benjy, due to his understanding of concrete nouns and a real-world culmination of their attributes, these qualities *are* the person. Caddy is the smell of trees. Therefore, when this scent disappears—or, in this most recent case, when her clothes are dirty—she vanishes—not physically, but emotionally; he recognizes a difference in her; she changes in front of his eyes, sending him into a state of panic.

## **Section Six: The Symbolic Order**

The idea that Caddy's physical presence is less important than the scent of her physical presence is, perhaps, one of the biggest keys to understanding the extent to which Benjy is affected by her absence. The entirety of Benjy's narration is backlash against one name, one word:

“Here, caddie.” He hit. They went away across the pasture. I held to the fence and watched them go away.  
 “Listen at you, now.” Luster said. “Aint you something, thirty three years old, going on that way.” (*SF*, 3)

Although a first-time reader would not have the context to understand Benjy's first bellow—“Listen at you, now”—the association between the golfer's caddie and Caddy nonetheless becomes apparent within the first few pages—and with a fair amount of reflection. Caddy's name is the spark with which the sequence of memories begins. When Benjy hears her name, he does not recognize the absence of her being—her body—but rather the absence of the smell of trees. Because Caddy fulfilled Benjy's illusion of a whole self, the smell of trees was, in fact, a part of Benjy. And because he hears her name and cannot smell her, he is forced to recognize his fragmentation. This moment is Benjy's entrance into the symbolic order: we must take into account that his interior monologue, though not verbal, is a form of communication in and of itself and, therefore, marks his first encounter with language. And while objections may arise in the form of questioning how someone who cannot speak or interpret language can “think,” the work of Ferdinand de Saussure provides a simple, yet appropriate solution by illuminating the gap between language and speech: “Language is not a function of the speaker; it is the product that is passively assimilated by the individual...speaking, on the

contrary, is an individual act. It is willful and intellectual” (Saussure, 59). By separating language from speech—which he does in order to illuminate the nature of the linguistic sign that exists in the former—Saussure provides a linguistic explanation of Benjy’s peculiar abilities. Faulkner’s choice to employ the interior monologue, then, was probably a deliberate one, as it produced a level of plausibility and allowed him to tell the story he sought to tell from the very beginning.

Benjy recognizes the absence of Caddy and, therefore, the fragmentation of his self at the sound of her name and the absence of the qualities he was accustomed to associating with it. And because the shattering of the “Ideal-I”—which, for Benjy, was his unity with Caddy—is marked as the entrance into the symbolic order, we can conclude that the beginning of Benjy’s interior monologue is his foray into language. I cannot claim, however, that Benjy had not heard Caddy’s name up until this point. She had been absent from the Compson property for almost eighteen years, and Dilsey knows that her name affects him

“Saying a name.” Frony said. “He don’t know nobody’s name.”  
 “You just say it and see if he dont.” Dilsey said. “You say it to him while he sleeping and I bet he hear you”. (*SF*, 31)

Dilsey understands Benjy: she knows that Caddy’s absence is a prominent hole in his life and understands, therefore, that just the sound of her name, stripped of its object, is profound. But the idea to focus on is the narration: the words on the page are Benjy’s—they are words he hadn’t had access to up until the moment he hears ‘caddie’ on the golf course. Indeed, this moment, the present, is the final straw: her name, coupled with the profound distance—both in time and space—between Benjy and his sister, gives birth to his language, as it is his final, desperate attempt to recover her.

Indeed, Benjy's entrance into the symbolic is born of loss. His words, however, are not only the product of the space between speech and writing; they are also the tools with which he tries to fill the absence of Caddy and, at the very same time, the triggers behind the emergence of new voids. As Matthews explains:

To begin to write, to mark the page, *produces* the mood of bereavement, as if the use of language creates the atmosphere of mourning. Writing does not respond to loss, it initiates it; writing itself is as much a kind of loss as it is a kind of compensation. (Matthews, 19)

And while Matthews is discussing Faulkner's own connection to Caddy in this instance, the spirit is nonetheless the same for Benjy: his first use of language—in a way, he is “mark[ing] the page”—produces his sense of loss. Benjy is, then, from the very commencement of the novel, a survivor of the loss of his sister, but his rough transition into the world of words demonstrates that, stuck in his infantile and innocent mind, he cannot avoid melancholy as others can. Thus, as we read the very first word of *The Sound and the Fury*, we are not merely entering a story; we are at once witnessing the death of a sense of self and the birth of melancholy, which are fused together—indeed, simultaneously initiated—by the word “caddie,” the trigger that pushes Benjy remorselessly into the cruel—and, in his case, limited—world of language.

## **Section Seven: The Failure of Language**

Finding himself, quite suddenly, in the realm of words, Benjy tries and fails to bend them to his will, to use them as tools with which he can recover his lost sister. The way in which Benjy attempts to communicate Caddy, to create her for the reader with his language, is done in the only way he knows: by relaying her smell and, in doing so, trying to relay her being. This is not to say that Benjy is merely trying to tell us of Caddy's physical presence; if that were the case, simply the use of her name would be enough (and Benjy says her name with frequency throughout the memories). Rather, Benjy draws upon her smell due to its connection to the essence of Caddy and, therefore, though he does not know it, to a piece of himself. In three different instances, Benjy's recollection—or, to him, his experience—of Caddy's smell sends him spiraling back into the present as he begins to bellow.

“Did you come to meet Caddy,” she said, rubbing my hands. “What is it. What are you trying to tell Caddy.”

Caddy smelled like trees and when she says we were asleep  
*What are you moaning about, Luster said. (SF, 6)*

Caddy knelt and put her arms around me and her cold bright face against mine. She smelled like trees.

“You're not a poor baby. Are you. Are you. You've got your Caddy. Haven't you got your Caddy.”

*Cant you shut up that moaning and slobbering, Luster said. (SF, 9)*

“Hush now.” she said. “I'm not going to run away.” So I hushed. Caddy smelled like trees in the rain.

*What is the matter with you, Luster said. Cant you get done with that moaning and play in the branch like folks. (SF, 19)*

Each instance of “moaning” is triggered by a particularly poignant moment of connection with Caddy, stemming, most primitively, from her smell. Because he does not know how to communicate the unity he feels with her through sophisticated language, Benjy must use his own sense of words to do so. However, what these instances suggest is that

Benjy's world—from his language to his sense of time—is a manifestation of the poststructuralist understanding of language:

The essentially bereft condition of the speaking subject points, for de Man, to a fundamental double bind that defines the linguistic conditions: language, and in particular the topological resources of language, is used to heal wounds that language never ceases to open up. (Santner, 14)

Thus, Benjy struggles to conform language to his will—to draw Caddy into being by communicating her essence through smell—yet, in doing so, he continues his process of fragmentation. The bellows in the present are simultaneously the wounds emerging out of the language of his memories and the desperate thundering of frustration at the futility of his attempts. Benjy seeks wholeness through language, through the series of memories, but that very language is, in and of itself, creating new voids he must then attempt to fill by circling back in time once again. There is no science, no method, to the way in which Benjy's mind functions: each jump in time is the product of a word within the interior monologue, the signifier of an object that Benjy has come to define through its association. Indeed, while Caddy's smell becomes one of the most important triggers, many of them hold little meaning:

*We passed the carriage house, where the carriage was. It had a new wheel. "Git in, now, and set still until your maw come." Dilsey said. She shoved me into the carriage. (SF, 9)*

The carriage, in this case, is the source of the shift in time, but only insofar as Benjy is able to generate a word for it as a product of its attributes. The carriage, as a word, pushes Benjy's mind into a new temporal space—though his mind does not comprehend the jump—creating a new void simply out of its rapidly deteriorating presence, compounding his sense of loss. Benjy's memory is in and of language—a temporal product of Derrida's *différance*. The link between Benjy's interior monologue and poststructuralism, then, is

two-fold: his words in and of themselves reaffirm—or, perhaps, give birth to—the way in which poststructuralists understand language; and, at the very same time, the organization of his mind and his world are real-world manifestations of the instability of language.

Not only do his words demonstrate his failure to differentiate among memories and, therefore, time—as evidenced by his ability to attach the name Quentin to two separate people—but they also generate and maintain the volatility of his shifts in time, creating a unique representation of *différance*: “*Différance* will thus be the movement of play that ‘produces...these differences, these effects of difference...*Différance* is the nonfull, nonsimple ‘origin’” (Derrida, 286). Derrida qualifies his description of *différance* as an “origin” with the terms “nonfull” and “nonsimple” in order to communicate that he is not suggesting that *différance* is the archia, the absolute center, which cannot exist because of the play of differences: That is, each sign must contain “traces” of what it does not mean: A sign cannot exist wholly, positively, because of its dependence on the other, or what it is not. These traces are “a way out of the closure imposed by this system” (Derrida, 286). And while Derrida’s explanation of *différance* is limited to the organization of language, the concepts nonetheless emerge in Benjy’s narration: Benjy plays into and transcends poststructuralism as he simultaneously demonstrates its theory of language and, in some ways, experiences it in the world *outside* of language. If we think about Benjy’s world as stemming from this *différance*, from instability, the way in which he experiences life becomes its temporal expression cocooned in language: there is certainly no binary of presence and absence for Benjy, neither in terms of Caddy, nor in terms of time. The present is not the opposite of the past or the future, but, rather, each memory is, in and of itself, a series of traces, both different

from the previous memory and a deferring of the next and, paradoxically, of itself, as each recollection is never complete. The process is heartbreakingly ongoing, and it seems as though Benjy is uniquely doomed to misery simply because he cannot embrace play—neither with objects, nor with words. His limited access to language is not necessarily just a small vocabulary or simple grammatical construction; it is also a barrier between his mind and the understanding of the very nature of language. The structure of his interior monologue is a representation of the way in which language simultaneously creates and destroys; the shifting memories, the traces that appear throughout the pages, linking together moments in his mind, are, together, a seventy-odd-page demonstration of the futility of words to heal wounds. Benjy’s monologue, a human being’s first dance with words, is, from start to finish, a failure.

"My prose is really poetry," said Faulkner said in a 1947 interview in Mississippi (Faulkner). "Poetry" is what Benjy cannot achieve due to his inability to comprehend and, therefore manipulate, words. Benjy is not a demonstration of Faulkner’s frustration with words; rather, he becomes a warning against those who exploit language without play, those who strip words of their malleability. Though he can create beauty by uniting reality with language in an unfamiliar way due to his innocence, Benjy cannot bend words to his will—he cannot play with structure, voice, meaning, or vocabulary, and, therefore, he cannot embrace the natural failure of language. Interestingly, Matthews agrees with a sense of pleasure tied to words’ futility, but his explanation transforms Benjy’s narrative from one of hopelessness into one of peace:

I wish to argue...that a conflicting urgency fills out what is for Faulkner a paradox of the word: the inability of language fully to embody the absolute, the lost, origin, becomes the happy resource for the prolonged life of

speech... Benjy's inescapable muteness confers a kind of tranquility and order that a novelist might dream about and then forswear to write. (Matthews, 71-72).

Benjy's words never cease to open up new holes, and they never cease to fail at filling those holes; but what is truly tragic is not language alone, but, rather, Benjy's infantile inability to understand it. The "inescapable muteness" Matthews describes makes a nod toward Paul Lilly, who claimed that Faulkner sought to achieve the impossibility of an "impeccable language" that is, in and of itself, wordless:

But the notion of an impeccable language, that pure silence at the peak of the pyramid of words, was so attractive to him that he marshaled his own words—hundreds of thousands of them—to render the illusion that language is most alive when it can thrust itself beyond words, when it can create... 'chanting measures beyond the need of words'. (Lilly, 173)

But the idea to focus on is not Faulkner's authorial, impossible dream of going beyond words; instead, we must understand the importance of Benjy's despondency: "The only emotion I can have for Benjy is grief and pity for all mankind," Faulkner said (Faulkner). Indeed, the "tranquility" Matthews mentions is not tranquility at all, for Benjy is not without language, he is merely without a voice. He still, fully and completely, lives within the symbolic order. He is "all of mankind," the universal trapped within the individual, a terrible expression of what it means not to have language fail, but to fail language.

## **Chapter Two: Vardaman Bundren**

*“The child don't even know that it doesn't see something that the adult sees. And what the child sees is closer to the verities, the important things. I think that's—the most interesting thing to write about is the child as it learns to cope with the adult world which it didn't create, that it's got to learn to—to live with in order to—to endure, to get along, to have enough to eat, and how it makes those adjustments, how it gradually comes to believe that—that—that lies are truths.” — William Faulkner, 1958*

Addie Bundren's death gave birth to *As I Lay Dying*; even the title is a reflection of her centrality, of her position as the core of the fifty-nine interior monologues. The story revolves around loss, around absence—a piecing together of coping mechanisms and the ramifications of death. It would make sense, then, that much of the criticism on what Faulkner called his “*tour de force*” focuses on the way in which the Bundren children recognize, comprehend, and confront the loss of their mother. But Addie's death, while the foundation of the novel, is not necessarily the foundation of each character's narration. Indeed, I'd argue that the youngest Bundren's interior monologues, while still depictions of the burial journey, are, subtly, a series of desperate attempts in which he subconsciously strives to fill the void of his now-institutionalized older brother:

Vardaman is futilely attempting to recreate Darl's presence with words.

Vardaman's relationship with Darl delicately mirrors Benjy's relationship with Caddy in that both younger siblings develop abnormally intense connections to—and dependencies on—their older siblings. But the depth of the connection between Vardaman and Darl is less obvious than that between Benjy and Caddy because the relationship doesn't define the novel. The first section of *The Sound and the Fury* is, essentially, an ode to Caddy, filtered through the lens of a mentally handicapped man. *As I Lay Dying* is not ostensibly an ode to Darl, and Vardaman's obsession is, therefore, far less perceptible. Nonetheless, the similarities are undeniable: Faulkner propels us into the

minds of two children—if we count Benjy as a child in terms of intellect—and, in doing so, gives us access to the way in which an unsophisticated mind grapples with an intense loss. Benjy and Vardaman come together in language, absence, and poststructuralism. Therefore, the evidence for my argument in this chapter is rooted in my discoveries from *The Sound and the Fury*: Faulkner's exploration and experimentation with time in *As I Lay Dying* and his sporadic, unsystematic use of italics in Vardaman's sections illuminate the buried desire of the youngest Bundren and the way in which *différance* manifests itself temporally and linguistically in the fictional world of Yoknapatawpha country.

### **Section One: The Flexibility of Time**

Time and its fluidity in Faulkner's work is central to my understanding of Vardaman and his connection to Darl as it allows me to argue that the monologues, though many of them are narrated in the present tense, are actually being communicated after the fact. That is, by the time we read the first word, Addie has been buried, Darl has been sent to Jackson, and Anse has taken a new wife. Faulkner disregards time, shifting his tenses, sporadically, from the past to the present to the future. It seems there is no true method to his temporal jumps, but their existence allows for chronology to be discarded. My understanding of time in *As I Lay Dying* stems from Stephen Ross, who made a point to draw readers' attention to Faulkner's ambiguous and frequent tense changes and the way in which they function not as markers for the ordering of events, but, rather, as markers for understanding the consciousnesses of the characters:

Instead of asking how the verb tense orders events, we should ask what the tense has to do with portraying inner experience: what psychological implications does tense carry that Faulkner might be trying to capitalize on, or to create, as he records the thoughts and emotions of his characters? (“Shapes,” 725)

Ross's interpretation is a product of the disarray of the novel: because there is no system to Faulkner's changes in tense—no discernible system, at least—the claim that they piece the story together in chronological order is moot. Much of Ross's work revolves around tense shifts in Tull's monologues—he claims that Tull uses the present when he is “both physically and psychically present” with the Bundren family, for example (“Shapes,” 726)—but the idea resonates with all characters. Each of them experiences time uniquely as they narrate, employing different tenses to signal different shifts, but, nonetheless, they all use it to demonstrate psychological changes rather than temporal ones:

Present-tense narration suggests that events are experienced and felt by the narrator at the same instant they are told to the reader, while past tense places a buffer of time between events and the narrator's description of them. (“Shapes,” 725)

This concept resonates with Benjy's conceptualization of time in *The Sound and the Fury*: just as he does not understand where he is in time—he lives within a single moment, not comprehending the difference between past and present—the characters of *As I Lay Dying* narrate from their minds, experiencing the past as the present and the present as the past. Indeed, Ross furthers his argument by quoting Faulkner: “I agree pretty much, [Faulkner] told Lou Bouvard, ‘with Bergson's theory of the fluidity of time. There is only the present moment, in which I include both the past and the future, and that is eternity’” (“Shapes,” 730). Time, for Faulkner, is not split into the present, the past, and the future, but, rather, exists as synthesis of the three. Therefore, each moment in these monologues is a collection of what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen.

While the use of the present tense by each character would suggest the narratives are occurring in real time—and, logically, the intrusion of the past would then represent events that had happened previously—Darl's supposed clairvoyance demonstrates the point from which these stories stem. His fifth monologue, for example, revolves around the death of his mother; he narrates the individual reactions of his family members even as he is miles away, watching Jewel change a tire: "From behind pa's leg Vardaman peers, his mouth full open and all color draining from his face into his mouth, as though he has by some means fleshed his own teeth in himself, sucking" (*AILD*, 49). Past critics have commented on Darl's apparent clairvoyance; he is the only narrator who can describe events that are happening elsewhere but simultaneously. These critics, however, disagree over the root of Darl's abilities: is he blessed with a paranormal sense, or, alternatively, is he merely exceedingly observant? Charles Palliser rejects—quite firmly—the supernatural quality of the novel's dominating narrator, and he attributes Darl's peculiar ability to a heightened sense of understanding of the world and the people around him: "Most of these 'prophecies' are forecasts of the behavior of other members of his family and are simply based on his knowledge of their past behavior" (Palliser, 623). Palliser draws attention to Darl's uncanny capacity to understand the people in his life, an idea that is represented quite thoroughly throughout the novel as the reader comes to terms with Darl's knowledge of otherwise-hidden aspects of his siblings and parents. In fact, his family members are privy to—and resentful of—his probing eyes and his keen understanding: he recognizes immediately, for example, Dewey Dell's pregnancy and, before Addie's death, he learns that she was unfaithful to Anse and gave birth to Jewel as a result. But neither of these interpretations seems sufficient: there are no clear indicators

that Darl, though decidedly unstable by the end of the novel, has any sort of supernatural ability aside from these narrations; and the exceptional details of the passage indicate that the events he narrates are not assumptions. Rather, Darl can narrate these events with such accuracy because they have already happened. While he wasn't present, there is little doubt that he and Jewel would have been told of their mother's death. And his use of the present tense—"from behind pa's leg Vardaman peers"—reaffirms Ross's understanding of time: as Darl narrates the event, he is *feeling* the death of his mother, experiencing it with the reader and with Vardaman.

Therefore, at the point of Darl's first monologue, he has already gone to Jackson; and, just as Benjy knows that Caddy is gone even while he experiences a moment in which she is present, Vardaman knows that his older brother has left—but he is not necessarily experiencing that absence actively. Ross explains, "Vardaman seeks the impossible security of an eternal present, since he is unable to accept change and the passage of time" ("Shapes," 731). Because he does not "accept change," Vardaman buries the death of his mother and the absence of his brother deep within him so that his grief emerges subconsciously in the form of metaphor—"my mother is a fish"—and the harsh intrusion of italicized language. Vardaman's depiction of the family's journey to bury Addie, then, is merely a guiding force: the narrative arc allows the reader to grasp something, but, in each narrator's case, the burial is just the first layer of consciousness.

The disintegration of temporal order is a tool with which we can dig beneath the surface of the monologues, revealing the root of each character's pain. In Vardaman's case, it is the loss of Darl, which becomes clear only by understanding the way in which these two brothers came together, quite peculiarly, in grief.

## Section Two: Bonded in Grief and Metaphor

The root of Vardaman's obsession and connection with Darl is, simply put, Addie: in death, she brings them together as they both attempt to cope with loss through language. More specifically, Darl provides Vardaman with a kind of understanding. The weight of Addie's death—though it will, inevitably, return when Vardaman ages—is lessened by Darl because he allows Vardaman to cope in an abstract fashion—that is, through language. Indeed, Judith Lockyer goes as far as to suggest that the two brothers are using their words and their narrations in order to actualize the death of their mother:

Vardaman and Darl engage in the most overt attempt to connect themselves to other people and to make death real through language, but the comprehension of reality through metaphor is also a community endeavor. (Lockyer, 77-78)

I'd argue, however, that while the two brothers are attempting to use language to connect to other people—to each other and, most importantly, to Addie—they are doing so not to make death real but, rather, to keep it at bay.

Vardaman, in fact, progressively rejects the loss of his mother. In other words, he understands her death when it happens—though he incorrectly places the blame on Peabody—but, as time goes on, his grief prevents him from coming to terms with her absence, pushing him instead into the unsteady realm of metaphor: Addie becomes a fish. Although the connection is quite clearly a metaphor—Vardaman connects the fish and his mother in his mind simply due to their somewhat simultaneous deaths—the young boy's struggle to cope with the loss of Addie manifests itself in a bizarre, metonymic

sentence: "My mother is a fish" (AILD, 84). The fish does not become a substitute for his mother; the fish becomes his mother and his mother becomes the fish. While the connection is made mentally and between two real-world objects, the root of Vardaman's coping mechanism can best be understood through the structure of his language. By claiming that Addie "is a fish," Vardaman is unintentionally creating metaphor out of metonymy, illustrating the way in which Roman Jakobson's two aspects of language can exist simultaneously *outside* and within that language. In his discussion of metaphor and metonymy, Jakobson explains the way in which the gap between the two aspects of language manifests itself most clearly:

In a well-known psychological test, children are confronted with some noun and told to utter the first verbal response that comes into their heads. In this experiment two opposite linguistic predilections are invariably exhibited: the response is intended either as a substitute for, or as a complement to the stimulus. (Jakobson, 76)

Metaphor, then, would be the substitute, while metonymy would be the complement. Vardaman's five-word monologue, however, rejects the exclusivity of each aspect: he conjoins the complement and the substitute, both in language and in life. That is, by thinking, "my mother is a fish," Vardaman is subconsciously substituting the fish for his mother, but consciously using said fish as a complement. The combination of metonymy and metaphor results in an extension of confusion and, therefore, a postponement of grief and understanding. He is unaware that he is using metaphor; in his conscious mind, the fish is not a substitute for his mother but *is* his mother, and the only way he can communicate such a concept—both to his family and to himself—is by constructing a metonymic sentence. The formation of that five-word monologue, then, demonstrates that Vardaman is not consciously living in metaphor; instead, he is perpetuating his mother's

existence by allowing her to take a complement. Vardaman successfully employs language in order to cope with his mother's loss. The term "successfully," however, is relative: he does not fill the void that Addie left behind in death; rather, he involuntarily rejects the existence of said void.

What Darl does, then, is provide Vardaman with a kind of confirmation, allowing the youngest Bundren to maintain the illusion of his mother's continued existence. On the simplest level, Darl's age—and the same goes for Cash, Jewel, and Dewey Dell—is what provides him with the means to fully comprehend Addie's death from the beginning. In fact, he goes as far as to cruelly separate Jewel from Addie, knowing that she will pass away in the few days they are gone ("Jewel, I say, she is dead, Jewel. Addie Bundren is dead" [*AILD*, 52]). This act, decidedly abominable, allows us to understand that Darl's actions are calculated and steeped in understanding and in grief. He distinguishes himself from his siblings by playing into Vardaman's bizarre, metaphorical understanding of Addie's absence. Darl's conversations with Vardaman are his attempts not to "make death real through language," but, rather, to construct a type of linguistic and mental barrier between death and life.

Vardaman, therefore, comes to depend on his brother as a source of understanding, which is best illuminated through Vardaman's failed efforts to extract meaning from Cash:

When they get it finished they are going to put her in it and then for a long time I couldn't say it. I saw the dark stand up and go whirling away and I said 'Are you going to nail her up in it, Cash? Cash? Cash?'...I said 'Are you going to nail it shut, Cash? Nail it? *Nail it?*' (*AILD*, 65)

Vardaman, still struggling to understand Addie's death—his five-word monologue doesn't appear for another twenty pages—finally gains the courage to ask Cash about the coffin.

Vardaman does not register the finality of death, as he is worried about Addie's fate should she be nailed in. Finally able to express his terror in words, Vardaman asks Cash if his fears, his assumptions, are correct: "I said 'Are you going to nail it shut, Cash? Nail it? *Nail it?*'" (*AILD*, 65). Vardaman's overwhelming desperation is demonstrated in two subtle ways: the first is Faulkner's choice to employ the conventional use of italics—this is, markedly, one of the only times Faulkner applies the standard nature of italics—which illustrates the emphasis Vardaman is placing on "nail". The question, then, is highlighted—not because, like throughout much of Vardaman's narration, the whole passage is in italics, but, rather, because just one word is. Vardaman is fully preoccupied with the nail because it determines his mother's non-existence. The second demonstration of desperation resides in the repetition: Vardaman speaks Cash's name four times in the span of the two questions, begging Cash to answer him, to help him understand what has happened to his mother. Cash does not answer; Vardaman is, heartbreakingly—though temporarily—left to cope on his own, terrified by the idea that his mother will not be able to breathe in the box Cash has created for her. Cash's influence on Vardaman in this situation is simultaneously tragic and hidden: he is the creator of the coffin—which, in Vardaman's eyes, means that he created that which has the potential to kill his not-yet-dead mother—and he is the silence after the question, the space in which Vardaman must build his own understanding:

And so if Cash nails the box up, she is not a rabbit. And so if she is not a rabbit I couldn't breathe in the crib and Cash is going to nail it up. And so if she lets him it is not her. I know. I was there. I saw when it did not be her. I saw. They think it is and Cash is going to nail it up. (*AILD*, 66)

By watching Cash work, Vardaman comes to terms with the fact that the coffin will be nailed; but what Cash could have done—and, perhaps, should have done, though his

muteness is what creates his existence in the novel—is walk Vardaman through the process. Cash accepts his mother's death with resoluteness; he is fully aware that she is gone and is never coming back, and he mourns through the process of building her coffin: "The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel" (*AILD*, 83). In his very first monologue—which differs quite sharply from the rest of the characters' as it is narrated in list form—Cash expresses to the reader both his clear understanding of Addie's death and his logicity. Therefore, he has the ability to help Vardaman, to translate his grief into a healthy state of mourning. Instead, Cash's distance—his isolation not only from Vardaman, but also from the rest of his family—leads Vardaman to seek answers elsewhere: within himself—"my mother is a fish" is his next monologue, demonstrating the leap he makes after Cash leaves him answerless—and, eventually, through Darl. Therefore, ultimately, the gap between Cash and language becomes the gap between Vardaman and understanding, eventually giving birth to the young boy's fixation on Darl, who comes to create a reality for Vardaman not out of Addie's passing, but, rather, out of her metaphorical rebirth.

The contrast between Darl and Cash becomes clear in Vardaman's fourth monologue when we witness a slightly unsettling conversation:

"You leave that horse here," Pa says. "We'll all go in the wagon with ma, like she wanted."

But my mother is a fish. Vernon seen it. He was there.

*"Jewel's mother is a horse," Darl said.*

*"Then mine can be a fish, cant it, Darl?" I said.*

*Jewel is my brother.*

*"Then mine will have to be a horse, too," I said.*

*"Why?" Darl said. "If pa is your pa, why does your ma have to be a horse just because Jewel's is?"*

*"Why does it?" I said. "Why does it, Darl?"*

*Darl is my brother.*

*"Then what is your ma, Darl?" I said...Cash is carrying his tool box. Pa looks at him" (AILD, 101; emphasis added).*

I use 'unsettling' because the way in which Darl interacts with Vardaman is quite unexpected to a first-time reader. That is, because he plays into both metaphors—he turns Jewel's mother into a horse and allows Vardaman to believe his mother is a fish—he blurs the idea of reality, leaving the reader wondering whether or not the conversation really took place, or even questioning Darl's sanity. But neither of these is true: the conversation does occur, and Darl is not yet insane; he is merely bringing Vardaman under his linguistic wing, warping the truth of the situation into something abstract and, therefore, something gentler and less painful for his younger brother. Simply put, metaphor brings them together, which is something Lockyer has already drawn attention to in terms of the whole novel:

The common metaphor unifies and validates their perceptions. Further, the metaphor becomes the understood, concrete reality. But the language each uses to form the metaphor is also different, underscoring the relational nature of language, its dependence on the other. (Lockyer, 78)

Lockyer is referring to the reused metaphors throughout the book, such as the comparison of the sound of Cash's sawing to the sound of snoring, or Addie's eyes to candlelight. But these links, while creating a linguistic community in the sense that the reader understands that there exist certain, subtle connections among the distinct characters, are perceived by only an outsider. Darl and Peabody, for example, separated geographically at the time of Addie's death, are unaware that their descriptions of the event are eerily similar.<sup>7</sup> Lockyer is right in suggesting that these metaphors "declare language as a possible link among otherwise isolated consciousnesses," but what she fails to realize is that this "possible"

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<sup>7</sup> Peabody: "Her eyes look like lamps blaring up just before the oil is gone" (*AILD*, 45); Darl: "Her eyes, the life in them, rushing suddenly upon them; the two flames glare up for a steady instant" (*AILD*, 48).

link has manifested itself fully in the relationship between Vardaman and Darl: the two knowingly unite within metaphor—or, at least, Darl unites with Vardaman within a metaphor; Vardaman believes said metaphor to be a reality—demonstrating that language can be a centripetal force, bringing together two brothers coming to terms with death.

On multiple occasions, Darl connects Addie and Vardaman in a peaceful manner by constructing a barrier between Vardaman and the absoluteness of death, but, at the same time, he does so in such a way that Vardaman is prepared for the inevitable: the end of the metaphor—the end of Addie.

She was under the apple tree and Darl and I go across the moon and the cat jumps down and runs and we can hear her inside the wood.

'Hear?' Darl says. 'Put your ear close.'

I put my ear close and I can hear her. Only I cant tell what she is saying.

'What is she saying, Darl?' I say. 'Who is she talking to?'

'She's talking to God,' Darl says. 'She is calling on Him to help her.'

'What does she want Him to do?' I say.

'She wants Him to hide her away from the sight of man,' Darl says.

'Why does she want to hide her away from the sight of man, Darl?'

'So she can lay down her life,' Darl says.

'Why does she want to lay down her life, Darl?'

'Listen,' Darl says. We hear her. We hear her turn over on her side. 'Listen,' Darl says.

'She's turned over,' I say. 'She's looking at me through the wood.'

'Yes,' Darl says. (*AILD*, 215)

Darl recreates Addie's presence for Vardaman to the extent that the connection between mother and son can be maintained. That is, he transforms death into something active, something that Addie *chooses*: "she wants Him to hide her away from the sight of man." Darl is, unbeknownst to Vardaman, attempting to shelter his younger brother. Because he has such a gift for poetics, for weaving words together in order to convey or transform reality, Darl has the potential to save Vardaman from the harshness of death—and, lovingly, he acts on that potential.

### Section Three: Merging Narrations

The root of Vardaman's connection with Darl, then, is in and of language: Darl finds solace in metaphor; Vardaman finds solace in Darl. But the extent of that linguistic bond is deeper and subtler than just conversation: the two brothers become so woven together they slip into each other's monologues. At certain points in the novel, Darl's voice intrudes on Vardaman's narration, and Vardaman's intrudes on Darl's. The rest of the characters' narration styles—from Tull's to Peabody's to Dewey Dell's—while not necessarily fitting for their economic or social situations, are nonetheless consistent.<sup>8</sup> Vardaman and Darl become anomalies; not only does Faulkner play around with their tenses and shifts to italic font—these two changes occur throughout the rest of the monologues as well, though perhaps less obviously and frequently—but he also makes a point to play with the brothers' styles.

Within Vardaman's first section, the reader becomes comfortable with the youngest Bundren's child-like view of the world. That is, while his words are hard to follow in that the logic is not fully developed and jumps, quite quickly, through Vardaman's thought processes, the style is nonetheless a clear indicator of the character's age and, therefore, the reader is inclined to accept it: "The top of the barn comes swooping up out of the twilight. If I jump I can go through it like the pink lady in the circus, into the warm smelling, without having to wait" (*AILD*, 54). Like Benjy and his

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<sup>8</sup> "In spite of the apparent 'directness' of the monologues, some characters/narrators in *As I Lay Dying* use a level of language absolutely incompatible with their plausible linguistic skills" (Delville, 61).

simple, beautiful narration, Vardaman weaves together the strange and the familiar, filtering the world around him through his childish mind and transforming the mundane into the complicated. The barn, which "comes swooping out of the twilight," is not, of course, moving, but Vardaman does not take the time to comprehend the logic of his words; rather, he allows what he sees—and how he sees it—to fall into language both clumsily and poignantly. Within pages, the reader becomes used to the style of narration, using it as a way in which to identify the disposition of Faulkner's youngest character.

But, with Vardaman, Faulkner chooses to shake the foundation upon which the reader had begun to build an understanding. Up until Vardaman's section, the styles of narration throughout—which include all family members aside from Cash and Addie—are dependable in their consistency. Then, suddenly, Vardaman develops a voice that rivals Darl's in its intensity and sophistication, leaving the reader slightly dazed:

It is as though the dark were resolving around him out of his integrity, into an unrelated scattering of components—snuffings and stampings; smells of cooling flesh and ammoniac hair; an illusion of a coordinated whole of splotched hide and strong bones within which, detached and secret and familiar, an *is* different from my *is*. I see him dissolve—legs, a rolling eye, a gaudy splotching like cold flames—and float upon the dark in fading solution; all one yet neither yet none. I can see haring coil toward him, caressing, shaping his hard shape—fetlock, hip, shoulder and head; smell and sound. I am not afraid. (*AILD*, 56-57)

Without warning, Vardaman has access to language that should be denied to him: his sentence structure and vocabulary surpass the knowledge not only of a young boy, but also of many educated men. Indeed, if it weren't for Darl's already established, well-articulated prose, these words would seem to stem from the implied author. The concepts in the passage—the way in which Vardaman sees and comprehends the horse and its splintering wholeness—are in-line with the rest of the section; his uncanny deconstruction of the horse's entirety does not seem unfitting given the odd themes of his

monologue, but the sentences are noticeably elegant. Vardaman should not, for example, have access to words such as "ammoniac" or "haring". He should not be able to articulate the concept of "an illusion of a coordinated whole". He should not comprehend, let alone communicate, the phrase, "resolving around him out of his integrity". But he does—and we, as readers, must choose whether to accept it or not.

This passage is far more than just an anomaly in Vardaman's narrative style. The similarity between this language and Darl's language is such that the two seem to merge: Vardaman, in a way, absorbs Darl's narrative abilities, channeling, effortlessly, his older brother's command of words. In fact, he also channels Darl's preoccupations with being, wholeness, and existence. Later in the novel, Darl narrates:

Beyond the unlamped wall I can hear the rain shaping the wagon that is ours, the load that is no longer theirs that felled and sawed it nor yet theirs that bought it and which is not ours either, lie on our wagon though it does, since only the wind and the rain shape it only to Jewel and me, that are not asleep. And since sleep is is-not and rain and wind are *was*, it is not. (*AILD*, 80).

The passage captures two of Darl's main narrative attributes: his language is poetic, sophisticated—"the rain shaping the wagon"—and he is noticeably fixated on ontological questions. He questions the presence of everything: rain, wind, sleep—even himself and his brother Jewel. He struggles to understand the relationship between sleep and life, between what is and what was, viewing his own world through the lens of death. That is, Addie's absence leads him to question the nature of his being, which resonates firmly with Vardaman's out-of-place passage previously: "an illusion of a coordinated whole of splotched hide and strong bones within which, detached and secret and familiar, an *is* different from my *is*" (*AILD*, 56). The same ideas are present in both passages: they revolve around existence, around the meaning behind fragmentation—both in terms of

the horse's "integrity" and in terms of the being before and during sleep—suggesting even further that Vardaman has appropriated his brother into his monologue. This becomes, then, the subtlest, yet most poignant connection between Vardaman and Darl and provides the reader with a glimpse into the complexity of Vardaman's sense of loss. Indeed, this is the first moment in which we have the potential to recognize Vardaman's intense and subconscious desire to fill the void of his gone-crazy, gone-to-Jackson brother.

Vardaman's brief appropriation of Darl's ability to play with words is perhaps most startling because it appears right after Vardaman empties himself *of* himself: "I am not crying now. I am not anything. Dewey Dell comes to the hill and calls me. Vardaman. I am not anything. I am quiet. You, Vardaman. I can cry quiet now, feeling and hearing my tears" (*AILD*, 56). Vardaman's silence is the space in which his being disappears. Because he is not speaking or crying, the wordlessness around him allows his essence to dissolve—much like the wholeness of the horse he next describes—and he is "not anything". It is quite similar, in fact, to the way in which Addie felt before marrying Anse:

In the afternoon when school was out and the last one had left with his little dirty snuffling nose, instead of going home I would go down the hill to the spring where I could be quiet and hate them. It would be quiet there then, with the water bubbling up and away and the sun slanting quiet in the trees and the quiet smelling of damp and rotting leaves. (*AILD*, 169)

As Constance Pierce explains, in this moment, "[Addie] sees the spring as a refuge from her selfish students and from the lie of words. There she is 'quiet,' absorbed in her hate, out of language, out of thought. She is her hate" (Pierce, 296). In the same way, Vardaman is out of language in this moment as he is consumed with his hatred for

Peabody and his overwhelming grief. For Vardaman, however, this out-of-body, out-of-mind experience results in the emptying of his *being* Vardaman. He becomes a shell, able, unlike Addie, to reject presence all together.

It is in that vacuum, then, that he absorbs Darl's narration, suggesting that he hasn't merely appropriated Darl's language; he has, in a sense, appropriated Darl, subsumed his brother into the empty space within himself. Vardaman empties himself and then, in a rare narrative function, Faulkner allows Vardaman to relay his own voice, but stripped of standard qualifiers and context: "Then hit want. Hit hadn't happened then. Hit was a-layin right there on the ground. And now she's gittin ready to cook hit" (*AILD*, 56). The dead fish and Addie begin to merge in Vardaman's mind, though subtly; we do not realize, in this moment, what the connection is between the fish "right there on the ground" and Addie in Vardaman's mind as he subconsciously links the two deaths. More important, however, is the progression of narration in this moment: the shift from emptiness, to recorded dialogue, to what seems to be Darl's voice. This specific quotation is just that: a quotation. It hovers on the page, deprived of the name of a speaker or any context. As a result, we do not witness the scene *around* the dialogue—which is hardly ever the case in Faulkner, even with Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*—but, rather, we witness merely the words—Vardaman's words. Faulkner's decision to allow Vardaman to record his own dialogue, stripped of a named speaker or frame of reference, demonstrates the depth of his emptiness: Vardaman is "not anything" and, therefore, he is not himself, which permits him to record his own voice as if it were separate from himself. The piece of dialogue is suspended on the page; it is as though Vardaman is witnessing himself talk; it is an external moment.

Darl then slips into Vardaman's narration as an indication of their unity: they have the uncanny ability to connect, to merge, through language. The power of such a moment—the power of the amalgamation of two narrators—is emphasized when we consider Ross's understanding of the relationship between a narrator's voice and existence:

Although Vardaman is represented as a *character* in his and others' narrative sections, as a *narrator* he is his voice and nothing more...When we try to describe or to judge Vardaman as a narrator, we are inescapably caught in the paradox...we can rephrase as 'this isn't the voice of Vardaman; this voice *is* Vardaman, all there is of him'. (“Voice,” 303)

Indeed, Vardaman does not exist as a narrator outside his own interior monologues and, therefore, he exists in and because of his voice—a concept that is, of course, applicable to all the novel's narrators. But what this suggests is the profoundness of his usurpation of Darl's voice: Vardaman is appropriating Darl's language after he empties himself and, therefore, Darl and Vardaman inextricably—though certainly subconsciously—unite. Because each narrator is isolated due to the organization of Faulkner's work—they are nothing but their voices and, therefore, nothing to each other as narrators—the idea that Darl can slip into Vardaman's interior monologue seemingly without effort suggests that their connection is far deeper than that between any other two characters. Vardaman's appropriation of Darl's narrative technique is a symptom of his pain and the location at which we can pinpoint the manifestation of the feeling of loss surrounding his brother. Faulkner provides us with an early-on demonstration of how we should read Vardaman's narrative: he is still dealing with the death of his mother, of course—and we witness the progression of this understanding throughout—but the true root of his agony is Darl's absence.

#### Section Four: The Intrusion of Italics

The grief and pain in Vardaman's interior monologues stem from two aspects of loss: the death of his mother and the absence of his brother. The latter, however, is the key to reading Vardaman's words. Faulkner subtly indicates, through the use of italics, that while Vardaman is consciously telling the story of the burial journey, he is subconsciously using that language as a means by which he can try—and, inevitably, fail—to fill the void of, and therefore reproduce, Darl. It should be noted that Faulkner does not standardize his italics; they serve different functions for different narrators, which explains, at least partially, why critics have struggled to understand their presence and purpose. Italics in each section act in accordance with the style of the narrator: Tull's italics are far steadier than Dewey Dell's or Vardaman's because he is not experiencing grief like the Bundrens are, and, therefore, the italics, though still markings of a shifting narration, are not the abrupt and tormented signals that they are elsewhere.

Take, for example, Darl's italics. As Elizabeth Hayes points out:

Most of the italicized passages concerning Jewel occur in Darl's sections, where they invariably shift the focus of the monologue to Jewel and underline the tension between the two brothers. (Hayes, 54)

The preoccupations in Darl's mind emerge in the form of italics. He is consumed, in this case, with the death of his mother and, therefore, with the jealousy he feels toward Jewel due to Addie's favoritism; these emotions push themselves to the surface of his

monologues. In a similar way, Vardaman's italics are substantiations of his fixation on the loss of his brother; they are subconscious, linguistic attempts to recreate Darl.

The first intrusion of italics marks the point at which Vardaman's uncontrolled agony surrounding Darl becomes manifest. They emerge in his fifth section—the halfway point of his monologues—in which Cash, Darl, and Jewel are struggling to bring Addie's body across the river:

*Then he comes up out of the water. He comes a long way up and slow before his hands do but he's got to have her got to so I can bear it. Then his hands come up and all of him above the water. I cant stop. I have not got time to try. I will try to when I can but his hands came empty out of the water emptying away*  
'Where is ma, Darl?' I said. 'You never got her. You know she is a fish but you let her get away'. (AILD, 151)

The shift at this point is two-fold: first the tense switches from past to present; second, of course, the font switches to italics. Faulkner actively marks the paragraph, then; its importance becomes visible. If we take Ross's conception of time to be true—that is, if we understand tense shifts as a product of a narrator's consciousness and not as a way in which we can order events—then this piece of narration is occurring within Vardaman's mind as we read it. There is no barrier constructed between the reader and the character and, therefore, the content of the passage is far more raw than the words surrounding it. Because Vardaman switches from past to present, the intrusion of the latter demonstrates a shift in the way he is thinking: he is experiencing the piece of the story much more vividly than that which is surrounding it, meaning that, as Vardaman narrates, he is experiencing the event as though he is there. When the tense shifts back to the past, he is less consumed with his own words; he takes a step back from the memory. The question, of course, is why? Why does Vardaman suddenly mark with italics and the present tense? Why does he, subconsciously, stress its importance to the reader?

Vardaman's intense desire to bring Darl back from Jackson—to recreate his older brother with his words—is finally rearing its head:

According to Lacan, the disappearance of the object of desire, creates 'holes' in the real which are at once the locus of the disappearance of the subject (whose sense of him/herself depend on his/her relationship to the lost object) and the gaps through which a new subjectivity may reemerge through the process of mourning. ("Vardaman's Fish," 86)

While Vardaman is undoubtedly suffering due to the death of his mother—after all, "the one unbearable dimension of possible human experience is...the death of another" ("Desire," 37)—Vardaman's sense of self after his mother's death was born of his relationship with Darl. Because Darl gave Vardaman the means by which to cope with his horrendous grief and with his warped comprehension of death, Vardaman is creating a new self that is founded and nurtured by his brother. Therefore, while Lacan's analysis stems from absolute absence—i.e. death—the gaps he refers to manifest themselves in Vardaman's life after he loses Darl. Paradoxically, when Darl is committed, Vardaman views his absence as more complete than Addie's because it is *less* complete. That is, Vardaman understands that Darl went crazy and went to Jackson—"[Darl] went to Jackson. He went crazy and went to Jackson both" (*AILD*, 251)—and, therefore, understands that he is gone; he does not, however, comprehend the absoluteness of his mother's absence because the grief was such that he gave her life again in his mind.

We must remember, however, that the root of Vardaman's obsession with Darl is Addie. It makes sense, then, that the first appearance of italics in Vardaman's sections revolves around his mother and comes at a point in time at which Vardaman has already morphed her, metaphorically, into a fish in his mind. When "[Darl's] hands came empty out of the water emptying away," Vardaman loses his mother. She does not die—she still

exists, and that is what still prevents Vardaman from realizing the all-consuming grief he originally felt when he struck Peabody's horses—but she is nonetheless gone—and Darl lost her. This moment, then, is the merging of loss: Vardaman narrates the loss of his mother the fish and, in doing so, he begins to narrate the loss of his brother by remembering his now-gone presence. The meshing of the two versions of absence is the shift to the italics: the moment Darl loses Vardaman's mother and the moment Vardaman loses Darl become one, tied together through the familiarity of agony. The rest of his italics, therefore, revolve around Darl or Darl and Addie.<sup>9</sup>

But it is not until Vardaman's final section that we fully witness the terrible and inevitable power of language: the agony of loss reaches its apex as Vardaman remembers—indeed, experiences over again—Darl's departure for Jackson. Language and loss collide as Vardaman desperately attempts to recover his brother even while he comes to terms with his brother's permanent absence. That is, the italics throughout this last section are simultaneously acts of comprehension and pain:

The moon is not dark too. Not very dark. *Darl he went to Jackson is my brother Darl is my brother* Only it was over that way, shining on the tack. (AILD, 249)

'You'll have to wait till then, when he brings it back.' *Darl went to Jackson. Lots of people didn't go to Jackson. Darl is my brother. My brother is going to Jackson.* (AILD, 250)

They have all gone home to bed except me and Dewey Dell. *Going on the train to Jackson. My brother.* (AILD, 250)

Dewey Dell goes in. *Darl is my brother. Darl went crazy.* (AILD, 250)

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<sup>9</sup> Vardaman has a total of ten interior monologues; the first set of italics appears in his fifth monologue. Counting that passage, there are twenty intrusions, eleven of which are in his final monologue. The eight in between—the eight that are not analyzed in this work—revolve around Darl. In his sixth monologue, Vardaman uses the italics to further understand Darl's metaphor of Jewel's mother the horse; in his eighth and ninth, the italics are his account of seeing Darl set the barn on fire and Dewey Dell's subsequent warning not to tell anyone. The preoccupation is apparent.

Vardaman's tenses shift sporadically throughout the italics: they begin with a mix of past and present ("*he went to Jackson...Darl is my brother*") as Vardaman remembers Darl's absence (the past) and connects himself to Darl (the present). But, soon enough, Vardaman switches to the future—something he hasn't yet used: "*My brother is going to Jackson.*" The sudden shift demonstrates, once again, that these events are not occurring in real time, nor are they fully in the past: instead, they live and breathe within Vardaman's mind, and as he conjures up the image of his brother with words, he is begging, painfully, to understand what is happening, to realize and accept the nature of his life without Darl. At the same time, however, he is so consumed just by the void Darl left behind—the void that he has been trying to fill throughout his ten interior monologues—that his words become illustrations of his futile struggles. They are simultaneously the way in which Vardaman attempts to communicate Darl's presence so as to bring him back and the reason behind the continuation of his sense of loss: "The movement of differing and deferring establishes a perpetual series of surpluses, detours, and fillings: a chain of supplements" (Matthews, 26). This "differing and deferring," though referring, in this quotation, to the words within a sentence—each is different from those around it and a deferral of the next—is applicable to the relationship between Vardaman's language and the void of his brother. The "chain of supplements" is a sentence for Matthews—language, on a larger scale—but it is also Vardaman's narration as it relates to his world: his words are this very "movement," the signifiers that are meant to represent and recreate Darl that are constantly "differing and deferring". Each "Darl" contains traces of Vardaman's lost brother, yet pushes forward into a new space, into a new void in which Darl is terribly absent. Indeed, the small fragments of italics

littered throughout Vardaman's sections are the "perpetual series of...fillings." When Vardaman's monologues come to a close, then, he is left not with resolution, but with a tragic fragment of his brother: "'Why won't it work?' I say. *He had to get on the train to go to Jackson. I have not been on the train, but Darl has been on the train. Darl. Darl is my brother. Darl. Darl!*" (*AILD*, 252). His last monologue ends with Darl; the word is italicized and left hovering on the page, stripped of a concluding period. It is, tragically, the perpetual deferral of Darl. Vardaman cannot, and will not, bring him back.

Vardaman's series of interior monologues, then—and especially his final section—is, in a lot of ways, a manifestation not only of the way in which language simultaneously creates and tries to heal wounds; it is also a distressing demonstration of Addie's opinions of language. Indeed, Vardaman's failed attempt to fill Darl's void with words directly mirrors his mother's disdain for them: Addie recognized the way in which language is simultaneously the reason for the death of her being—though she does not know, of course, that this being she so desperately strives for is, in fact, an illusion, or what Lacan would call the Real—and the only way in which she can, though fruitlessly, attempt to gain that whole being back. That is, Addie moves within language in order to be without language; the process is, of course, distressingly hollow: "I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came you wouldn't need a word for that anymore than for pride or fear" (*AILD*, 172). Addie, fragmented like the rest of the world, is unique in that she, to a certain extent, conceptualizes her fragmentation; she does not understand that the unity she believes to exist is an illusion—though her interior monologue progresses toward this idea, as she struggles to comprehend why she is so miserable in life—but she does understand the

failure of language to *achieve* that unity. Words, for her, are "shape[s] to fill a lack," merely ways in which she can attempt to fill the never-ending voids that permeate her existence. Addie is, therefore, the manifestation of what it means to understand the symbolic order as Lacan understood it—that is, she feels as though language fragments her but is the only way in which she could attempt to reestablish the wholeness—but because she does not know *what* she understands—and, perhaps more importantly, that what she understands cannot lead her to happiness—she struggles throughout her life to fix something that cannot be fixed. Vardaman, of course, lacks this understanding—as do, I would argue, the rest of the novel's characters—but his interior monologues demonstrate its accuracy: the word "Darl," in this case, is "just a shape to fill a lack"—a young boy's desperate attempt to fill a hole he does not know how to fill.

### **Section Five: Alternating Voices and Remembrance**

But Vardaman's narration is merely a piece of the novel's whole—or lack thereof. As Matthews explains, "all modes of representation, whether 'internal' to the consciousness or 'external' as expression, are structured like language" (Matthews, 30). In

that vein, I'd argue that the entirety of *As I Lay Dying* is "structured like language," but in two very distinct ways: first, the novel is a series of supplements; each interior monologue is defined by its differences from those around it and, at the very same time, is a deferral to its own continuation. Therefore, when Vardaman's narration comes to an end—when he fails to bring Darl back with words—his monologue is, simply in its existence, defining those around it and providing the space in which the next one can appear. It is no surprise, then, that Darl's last monologue comes directly after Vardaman's—nor is it a surprise that it begins in the very same way: "Darl has gone to Jackson" (*AILD*, 253). While Vardaman's words have come to an end, the chain of monologues has not. In a poignantly circular fashion, Darl and Vardaman's relationship ends just as it had begun: with Darl slipping into the empty space that Vardaman creates. Just as Vardaman emptied himself in his very first section, allowing Darl and Darl's narration to enter into that momentary void, he completes his last section with emptiness, with yet another space for Darl to occupy. This is, perhaps, the moment Addie once longed for: "the right time" in which "you wouldn't need a word." The union of the brothers, though born out of language in the sense of *différance* and in the metaphors that originally brought them together, exists in a temporal space: the moment just before their words come together, the very space that Vardaman once occupied and Darl will come to occupy. Darl and Vardaman harness a sense of fragmentation, using one another to partially fill the inevitable spaces of *différance*—a duet of alternating voices.

Thus, while Vardaman's voids—the perpetual absence of Darl—will never be filled, Faulkner nonetheless illustrates, though agonizingly, the strength of their bond by bringing them together one last time. This last moment of unity is a mirror image of their

first moment of unity: just as Vardaman had once opened himself up to Darl's voice, Darl's last section is, though subtly, an appropriation of Vardaman's voice: "Darl is our bother, our brother Darl. Our brother Darl in a cage in Jackson where, his grimed hands lying light in the quiet interstices, looking out as he foams" (*AILD*, 254). The merging is as close to complete as it will ever be: Vardaman's voice yearns for Darl, opens up the space for him, and Darl uses that very voice in his last monologue. If, as previously suggested by Ross, Vardaman's voice *is* Vardaman, then, by extension, Darl's voice *is* Darl. In his last section, therefore, Darl is Vardaman and Vardaman is Darl. They are fused together; for a brief moment, they are one. And then Darl's monologue comes to a close: "Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes" (*AILD*, 254). It is an answer to the questions: "Why do you laugh? I said. Is it because you hate the sound of laughing?...Is that why are you are laughing, Darl?" (*AILD*, 254). The "I" is the union; it is both Vardaman and Darl. The answer, however—the repeated affirmatives—is without a speaker, suggesting, paradoxically, the simultaneous wholeness and disintegration of their unity. That is, the monologue is a fusion of Vardaman and Darl, but the last line is both *of* them and *without* them: it is a series of identical words pushed together—Vardaman's final attempt to harbor his brother. Just as Vardaman emptied himself in his first monologue so that Darl could slip into his narration—he removed himself to the extent that he could narrate his own dialogue, as though he were watching himself speak—he once again takes a step back: the affirmatives are stripped of a speaker, suggesting yet another external moment. Vardaman separates himself from the monologue and from the words, hoping that, by retreating, he can open a space up for Darl to occupy. The monologue is, in its entirety, a

brief union of the brothers, but they cannot coexist beyond its pages. The space Vardaman opens for his brother is, and forever will be, vacant.

"There is no such thing as was—only is," Faulkner said in his 1956 interview with *The Paris Review* (Faulkner). Vardaman and Darl's bond and Darl's absence coexist in time—in the alloy of past, present, and future—and, therefore, are always "is," always moving, always present. Indeed, because Darl still exists in the world—because his absence is more real than Addie's in that Vardaman does not cope through metaphor—Vardaman is continually aware of the loss and will go on struggling with the futility of language. And, eventually, as Vardaman grows older and the reality of the situation sinks in, he will be forced to not only suffer the institutionalization of his brother, but also finally come to terms with and grieve the death of Addie. Vardaman's anguish, then, will never cease, as absence is born out of presence: the remembrance of Darl perpetuates the very void he left behind.

### **Conclusion**

*"The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life. Since man is mortal, the only immortality possible for him is to leave something behind him that is immortal since it will always move." — William Faulkner, 1956*

In studying some of Faulkner's greatest works, I've come to realize that perhaps his most impressive accomplishment is his ability to make the internal external. Throughout *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, we are viewing the world through individual lenses, and, yet, we become painfully aware of how relationships permanently mark the nature of a character's existence—and human existence in general. Faulkner gives us access to the human psyche, to the mind, and, in doing so, opens up the doors for us so that we might understand connection. This is, of course, one of the reasons that studying Faulkner can be so challenging: because he is so dedicated to and adept at communicating human nature—because his words have the potential to resonate so firmly with his readers—it is difficult to interact with his work and not be drawn into its sheer magnitude, its power. But this project has been an attempt to break down that grandness, to pick apart the universality so that its components are revealed.

So, while this thesis revolves around concepts that extend far beyond the clutches of a single person—time, loss, language—it is nonetheless a demonstration of the way in which those very concepts shape and influence individuals. Benjy Compson and Vardaman Bundren are not the only characters who experience loss—each voice in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* is a product of some form of abandonment—but they are representative of a certain way in which we grieve: with words. But even that claim is too wide for the project: these arguments revolve around specific narrative techniques that tie Faulkner to poststructuralism, which is, certainly, only one way to read the monologues. Indeed, I should acknowledge that Faulkner certainly did not have Derrida in mind when he penned these two great works: he wrote *The Sound and the Fury* in 1928 and *As I Lay Dying* in 1929, and Derrida didn't coin the term *différance*

until 1963. But the point was not to reveal Faulkner's intentional conversation with philosophers, linguists, and psychoanalysts; rather, it was to use his stylistic choices and his narrative decisions in order to reveal the nature of Benjy and Vardaman's anguish, and, therefore, to reveal the nature of Faulkner's understanding of how language and consciousness intersect. And because Faulkner was so adept at communicating the genuine human experience—because the struggles of Benjy and Vardaman are so lifelike—he demonstrated how *différance* manifests itself in literature naturally, subconsciously, simply because it manifests itself in life.

Due to his stream-of-consciousness method, Faulkner managed to access the inner workings of the human psyche and, therefore, crack the door to the root of pain. He created loss so that he could move backward in time and illuminate the wholeness that preceded that loss: in this case, the wholeness of an intense sibling bond. Through this project, then, I aimed to demonstrate the benefits of moving away from the belief that the parent-child relationship is the most important aspect of an individual's development. Faulkner—who claimed he had never read Freud—pushes against this theory, not in order to disprove it, but, rather, to demonstrate the possibility of an alternative: sibling relationships can be just as influential—if not more so. Briefly, I'd like to point out that Faulkner makes the conscious decision in *As I Lay Dying* to push Vardaman toward Darl instead of toward Dewey Dell. In other words, he does not provide Vardaman with a new mother figure. Instead, he gives him brotherhood—something with which Faulkner himself was quite familiar, having been the eldest of four brothers. For Faulkner, then, sibling relationships were quite distinct from parent-child relationships, though, certainly, the intensity of the bonds I explore stems from the void caused by a negligent or absent

parent. Due to its limited scope, this project is merely a foundation for further study. By drawing attention to the way in which Faulkner accentuated and focused on the connections between siblings in broken families, I hope to have laid a framework for similar endeavors in other novels.

In his Nobel Prize speech in 1950, Faulkner said, “I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance” (Faulkner). Despite the tragedy of Faulkner’s work—despite the pain and anguish that saturate the lives of his characters and, indeed, despite the cruelty of many of them, including Jason Compson and Anse Bundren—he made a point to publicize his belief in mankind. The realization that Benjy and Vardaman, though creations of the mind, have souls and “spirit[s] capable of compassion” does, perhaps, make the conclusions of this project seem even more heartbreaking—for the more real Vardaman and Benjy become, the more real their losses become—but it is the endurance that we must acknowledge and understand. Benjy and Vardaman lose those they care most about: Caddy, disgraced, leaves the Compson property; Darl, insane, is sent to Jackson. And while Benjy and Vardaman’s efforts to understand and heal these raw wounds with words are undoubtedly futile, they nonetheless continue to *struggle*, continue to wade through Faulkner’s mysterious, convoluted world. They, like the rest of mankind, endure.

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