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BENJAMIN COMPSON: CONSCIOUSNESS, RHETORIC, AND THE 'FICTIVE ART'

BY

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I. BENJAMIN COMPSON AND THE PROBLEMS OF ANALYSIS

A study of consciousness in the first section of The Sound and the Fury clarifies both the novel's technique and its rendering of human truth. My reading of this monologue is based on the premise that the way Benjamin Compson views the world and the way in which his mind arranges those views enhances our understanding of the novel's other brother-narrators, Quentin and Jason. As limited and distorted as Benjy's perceptions may be, they provide a model by which the perceptions of Quentin and Jason gain clarity and meaning. Benjy's monologue begins the novel and provides the reader's entrance into the novel's fictional world. Indeed, Benjy's perception of reality ends the novel as well, for the fourth and final section ends with a description of the world through Benjy's serene and empty eyes.

Analysis of consciousness and perception is lacking in the criticism written on the first section of The Sound and the Fury. Although the section purports to record the streaming of Benjy's consciousness, critics have failed to treat him as a "consciousness at work in the world."[1] Instead, the critical slant has been indirect and oblique, and while superficially accurate, ultimately shallow. Critics emphasize only Benjy's functionary role. He is, they say, thoroughly objective. He records everything, indiscriminately and without bias.[2] Furthermore, the way other characters respond

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[1] Wayne C. Booth, "Distance and Point-of-View: An Essay in Classification," in The Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Robert Murray Davis (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 186.

[2] Elaborations of this point may be found in the following: Irving Howe, "The Passing of a World," in Twentieth-Century Interpretations of The Sound and the Fury, ed. Michael H. Cowan (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. 35-35; John W. Hunt, William Faulkner: Art in Theological Tension (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1964), p. 37; Michael Millgate, The Achievement of William Faulkner (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 91.

to Benjy reflects their own humanity.[3] Such emphasis stems, I suspect, from the unique qualities of the narrator. Benjy is retarded, and according to an unnamed character in the novel, he has been "three years old thirty years."[4] I suspect that either critics assume that Benjy is not and could not be a "consciousness at work in the world," or that the writer could not possibly create, with any integrity, the consciousness of a mentally disabled character. Still others may assume that the consciousness of one who is retarded is unfathomable by those of normal intelligence. In any case, Faulkner's creation of Benjy has been granted a stay of investigation.

I do not hold with any of these critical approaches or assumptions. The thesis of this essay is based, instead, on my belief that, although Benjy is limited, his consciousness is at work in the world. Furthermore, the way his consciousness works is fathomable. His very mental limitations and perceptual abnormalities determine the kind of language and structure employed in his monologue; and the language and structure, in turn, reflect the dimensions of his consciousness. A demonstration of this premise leads, ultimately, to a clearer and more cohesive reading of the novel.

Since Benjy's mental limitations have obviated, for many critics, the task of direct character analysis, the problems such limitations present

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[3]Elaborations of this point may be found in the following: Melvin Backman, Faulkner, The Major Years: A Critical Study (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 17: Millgate, p. 91; Peter Swiggart, The Sound and the Fury (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), pp. 88-89.

[4]William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (New York: Vintage Books, Alfred A. Knopf and Random House, 1946), p. 19. The text of the above edition of The Sound and the Fury is reproduced photographically from a copy of the first printing. Hereafter all quotations from The Sound and the Fury will be taken from this edition and will be immediately followed in the text by a page reference.

must provide a starting point for our description of Benjy's consciousness. Those problems are, broadly, problems of credibility intrinsic to any rendering of a limited intelligence. More specifically, The Sound and the Fury presents the reader and the critic with the mind-wanderings of a retarded adult who seems to tell his own story in the first person, but who has never in his fictional life spoken a single word. It is no wonder that critics have avoided considering his "words" as indices of his mind when his mind is incapable of forming his "words."

In approaching these problems we must begin, in Arnold Weinstein's words, with the "onslaught the book makes against the reader."[5] The first sentence of Benjy's section carries the weight of the problem and suggests the magnitude of the authorial intention. "Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting." (1) The sentence announces the perceptual stance of Benjamin Compson and invites us to share his narrow vision.[6] Following the phrases "through the fence" and "between the curling flower spaces," in which the focus is narrowed and clarified by a description of its tangible boundaries, the "I" can see or perceive the "hitting" that is going on beyond the fence. While the image of visual focusing requires our critical concern with Benjy's point of view, the context of that point of view suggests its precise but idiosyncratic nature. "Curling flower spaces"

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[5]Arnold L. Weinstein, Vision and Response in Modern Fiction (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 111.

[6]Weinstein, pp. 111-14. Mr. Weinstein begins with a similar premise--that the reader must perceive the story with the kind of "vision" that the beginning of the monologue describes. His argument moves in a different direction, however, for he concentrates on the "enigmatic, and unnamed" emotion that must be perceived.

is an anomalous expression in which tangible shapes are described as spaces. Beyond this strange perceptual peephole, the motions of an ordinary golf game and the search which Benjy's attendant, Luster, makes for a missing quarter display a perplexing quality of aimless activity.

> They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. Then they went on, and I went along the fence. Luster came away from the flower tree and we went along the fence and they stopped and we stopped and I looked through the fence while Luster was hunting in the grass. (1)

The fence with its curling flower spaces provides, as does Alice in Wonderland's tunnel, the only literal and metaphorical corridor through which the reader may enter a private and eccentric world. The world is Benjy's consciousness and, even in the first paragraph of the novel, the strangeness of it is explicit. As though the challenge of entering this world were not great enough, Faulkner follows it several pages later with the disclosure of Benjy's muteness. Though he may moan or bellow in response to unpleasant circumstances, Benjy is incapable of any more sophisticated articulation. By means of the sequence of these critical challenges, the reader has been tricked, as it were, into assuming a difficult point of view only to discover that the consciousness from whose perspective reality is perceived cannot possibly form, even with fictional license, the words that are written on the page.

Such apparent technical absurdity makes consideration of point of view a serious critical problem and raises related questions concerning the integrity of the creative consciousness. If the words cannot be Benjy's, how can they presume to represent his consciousness? Do they, in fact, form the

rhetoric of another consciousness--the author's perhaps? Or does the language fail to produce a rhetoric consistent with any single, organic consciousness despite the consistent use of the first person singular narrator? If the line between fictional and authorial consciousness is indistinct or non-existent, are "vision and technique . . . in complete harmony" in the novel and does Faulkner keep "within his aesthetic means" as Irving Howe so positively asserts?[7] Is the first section of The Sound and the Fury an integral part of "an indubitable masterpiece of what James loved to call the 'fictive art'"?[8]

In the essay which follows I hope to substantiate my belief that Faulkner does, in fact, keep within his aesthetic means, that his vision of portraying Benjy's point of view is accomplished by means of an innovative and sophisticated stream-of-consciousness technique. Faulkner neither interprets the flux of Benjy's consciousness nor does he refine himself out of existence. Rather, he is present in Benjy's "narrative" in a highly specialized sense, as translator of his character's thoughts and perceptions into words so apt and consistent with what we learn of Benjy's mental abilities and inabilities that they might indeed be Benjy's words, could he form them. The words on the page serve as exact perceptual indicators that parallel the otherwise silent and unknown realities of Benjy's consciousness.

If words presume to parallel the silent realities of consciousness, consistency is the criterion for technical virtuosity. Each word must prove

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[7] Howe, p. 39.

[8] Conrad Aiken, "William Faulkner: The Novel as Form," in Three Decades of Criticism, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963), p. 141.

consistent with what we learn of Benjy's abilities and inabilities; his perceptions must, in turn, prove consistent with each other and representative of an organic consciousness. In Norman Friedman's words, "consistency signifies that the parts have been adjusted to the whole, the means to the end, and hence that the maximum effect has been rendered."[9] The parts of Benjy's consciousness must be adjusted to the whole of his being, and Faulkner's structural and linguistic means of suggesting consciousness must be consistent with the larger themes and structure of the novel. Only then may the novel be said to render a unified effect. With this criterion of consistency in mind, I will examine the characterization of Benjamin Compson, first through the language by which Faulkner indicates a latent rhetoric, and secondly through the pattern his consciousness displays as we follow the wanderings of his mind on April 7, 1928. I will conclude by placing the themes and methodology of section one in the context of the larger structure of the novel.

II. PERCEPTION AND LANGUAGE

The structure and perceptual attributes of Benjy's consciousness originate in his ignorance of the cause-effect relationship.[10] Indications of

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[9] Norman Friedman, "Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept," in The Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Robert Murray Davis (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 166.

[10] Cleanth Brooks, "Primitivism in The Sound and the Fury," in English Institute Essays 1952, ed. Alan S. Downer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), pp. 9-10. Mr. Brooks does not relate Benjy's ignorance of cause-effect relationships to rhetorical uses.

this stringent limitation of intellect pervade the language of section one of The Sound and the Fury and account for Benjy's fragmented and unconnected observations of the external world. To Benjy, ice is a "piece of water," and for him darkness simply comes and goes at random. He cannot relate the coming of the "dark spot" in his cereal bowl to his consumption of its contents. Even when he burns his hand in the wood-stove fire, Benjy makes no mental equation between fire and pain, nor does he know why "My voice went louder then and my hand tried to go back in my mouth." (72) That coldness produces ice, that eating produces an empty bowl, that fire burns--all of these relationships of cause and effect are totally omitted or hopelessly muddled in Benjy's mind.

Such a disabling limitation of intellect prescribes and sets limits upon the kind of critical treatment Benjy and his monologue require. If Benjy cannot understand a simple causal action, he cannot begin to understand motive and intent, or to distinguish between a morally responsible or irresponsible act. By virtue of his ignorance, he is a living model of prelapsarian innocence.[11] Unlike the other characters who populate The Sound and the Fury, Benjy may not be placed in an ethical context. Because we are unencumbered by the difficulties of making moral judgments, we are especially obliged to study the perceptual attributes of Benjy's consciousness and discover what an inaccurate or incomplete perception of causal action does to inner and outer reality.

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[11]Hyatt H. Waggoner, William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), p. 40.

The rhetorical effects of Benjy's causal ignorance are two-fold. Most obviously, the language which Faulkner uses to indicate perception displays the kind of simple confusion that we have already noticed. The confusion which attends causal ignorance accounts for some of the poetic expressions in section one. Faulkner uses the poetic effect, particularly that of synesthesia, to express the chaos of Benjy's observations. Benjy feels the "bright cold" (4) and he smells the sickness that is a "cloth folded on Mother's head." (75) He is ignorant of the operations of the universe, the assignment of a certain activity or property to a corresponding subject. He is equally, if not more intensely, confused by the properties of his own being, the correspondence of one sensation to a certain part of his own body.

> I couldn't see it, but my hands saw it, and I could hear it getting night and my hands saw the slipper but I couldn't see myself, but my hands could see the slipper. . . . (88)

To Benjy experiences are so fragmented and disorderly that he cannot perceive them in any but a fragmented and chaotic way.

These examples of synesthesia appropriately represent the limitations of Benjy's intellect, but they do not tell the whole story of his consciousness. Those same mental limitations account not only for his moments of confusion but also for other rhetorical instances of active, though unconscious, efforts to transform reality into manageable, even pleasurable, experiences. In other occurrences of synesthesia, Benjy seems to flaunt confusion, transcend the mental void that results from causal ignorance, and ascend to a level of reality that is, for him, sublime. The following example is a case in point:

> I could smell the clothes flapping and the smoke blowing blue across the branch. I sat down on the

> bank, where they were washing, and the smoke blowing blue. (15)

We know from Benjy's description of the flapping flag in the first paragraph of the novel that he understands the visual significance of "flapping." We may also infer from his reference to Versh smelling like dogs that he knows something about the properties of "smelling." We must recall, however, that watching the servant washing clothes in the branch is a pleasant experience attended by happy associations with childhood merry-making at the same branch. Furthermore, the language suggests, through the internal alliteration and repetition within the two sentences, a dream-like, transcendent state of consciousness. Words ending in "--ing" are used four times; "blowing" is repeated in the second sentence. The "--sm" sound is repeated three times, the "--b" sound, five times. The lyricism of the sentences produces a soothing effect. Although Benjy cannot form the words, the almost hypnotic sound effects bespeak the perceptual operations of Benjy's mind as he sits watching the "smoke blowing blue." The qualities of smelling and flapping and blowing easily merge in a way that appeals to all of Benjy's senses and grants serenity to his often-troubled mind.

In other rather complex yet pleasurable synesthetic experiences the use and arrangement of words reveals that Benjy actually enjoys the absence of clarity in certain relationships. In one such example of synesthesia, unrelated descriptive words refer to only one verb, to only one single motion. "[The] . . . buzzards ate Nancy, flapping black and slow, and heavy out of the ditch." (42) The proper description of the scene would be arranged as follows: The heavy, black, buzzards flapped slowly out of the ditch. The phrase "flapping black" indicates that the reality of the buzzards' existence

is lost or transcended by Benjy's connecting color with movement.

Similarly, the repeated description of the "coming" of the "bright smooth shapes" suggest another serene, visionary quality of experience. Whatever the situation that elicits the shapes, whether the flowing of shadows during the carriage-ride, or the descent into sleep, or the flickering of the fire, the description remains constant and is expressed synesthetically.

> I could hear Queenie's feet and the bright shapes went smooth and steady on both sides, the shadows of them flowing across Queenie's back . . . . The ones on the other side began again, bright and fast and smooth, like when Caddy says that we are going to sleep. [the carriage-ride] (11, 13)

> Then the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes, like it always does, even when Caddy says that I have been asleep. (92)

> Then I looked at the fire again and the bright, smooth shapes went again. (69)

Neither shadows, which suggest the shapes in one case, nor sleep, in another, is bright. Nor can shapes or shadows be felt as the word "smooth" might suggest. The "beginning again" motion of the shapes cannot include the adverb "fast" along with the adjectives "bright and smooth." We know, however, that this merging of sense impressions provides Benjy's most pleasurable experience. He unconsciously makes use of his perceptual chaos, adjusting it to his own need for wholeness and escape from an exterior world within which he is helpless.

The recurrence of Benjy's real or imagined vision of smooth shapes is as important to the reader's understanding of Benjy as to Benjy's inner peace. The shapes become a symbol of Benjy's being, a summary of his needs, and, in the synesthetic mode of their expression, an indication of his perceptual

traits. One wonders about the origin of the mysterious vision. I do not think we are given sufficient evidence in the text to determine exactly how and when the shapes first began to assume importance, but their inexorable connection with Benjy's devotion to his sister Caddy is obvious. She is explicitly related to the measured flow of shapes and their shadows during the carriage-ride. "The ones on the other side [of the street] began again, bright and fast and smooth, like when Caddy says that we are going to sleep." (13) When she is not explicitly included in a reference to the shapes, her presence is implicit, for the description of the shapes is constant. "Then I looked at the fire again and the bright, smooth shapes went again." (69) All descriptions of the shapes echo the central one that ends Benjy's narrative on April 7, 1928. "Then the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes, like it always does, even when Caddy says that I have been asleep." (92) We cannot determine the precise origin of the shapes. Did Caddy's gentle, warm, unaltering childhood affection for Benjy grant the kind of pleasure that he then related to other pleasurable experiences? Or does Benjy's intrinsic need for changelessness, predictability, and causeless motion account for his connecting Caddy with experiences of serenity and ritual? Whatever the order of his needs and pleasures, Caddy is eminently, if not preeminently, important; for she enlivens, either in actuality or memory, Benjy's perceptually satisfying experiences with the warmth and gentleness that only human affection may grant. The shapes remain an experience of fusion, an example of the way human beings, even very limited human beings, relate their needs to the pleasure and balm that the real world, however sparsely, makes available.

The description of the shapes tells us that Benjy enjoys the changelessness

inherent in their self-perpetuating motion and in their duplicative occurrences. It is natural that Benjy should abhor change and value changelessness. If he cannot understand the relationship of cause and effect, he cannot understand change in its most insignificant form. Furthermore, Benjy agonized and, on April 7, 1928, continues to agonize over the changes in his life. His memories of Caddy's use of perfume, her loss of virginity, her wedding, his drunkenness and his castration,are painful, even hysterical. Benjy possesses the mental tools to perceive change and the contrast suggested therein. But he cannot begin to understand or reverse those changes.

Although change is the most threatening force in his life, Benjy unwittingly participates in change by altering much of the material that filters through his aberrant mind. Such alterations of reality inform Faulkner's linguistic translation of Benjy's thoughts and perceptions in scrupulously apt details of idiom and diction. Such alterations are complex indications of the functioning of a perceptual faculty which seems both to pursue satisfaction and to manipulate phenomena. Language reflects Benjy's unconscious effort to accommodate reality to his limited means of perceiving it, reflecting upon it, and responding to it. What results is a linguistic recasting of reality in terms of Benjy's narrow prescription for it.

Perhaps the most pivotal of these linguistic uses is the puzzling and seemingly inconsistent use of the verb and the verbal. Given his ignorance of cause, Benjy does not understand the relationship of motion to an object receiving the motion. Verbs, therefore, are not used in proper relation to an object. "The men hit," Quentin "chunks" into the shadows, Luster "threw," the steam "tickled into my mouth," the cow "chewed at us," and Dan "scuffled

into the moonlight." Though the verb itself may be used acceptably, it lacks a necessary direct object and is often accompanied by a multitude of prepositional phrases. Because he cannot understand cause-effect actions, Benjy seeks to establish everything about a verbal experience except its verbal action. Place, setting, time of an action are obsessively important. Even in the first paragraph of the Benjy section, a peculiar use of verbs occurs simultaneously with an overuse of prepositional phrases and adverbs which tell of time and place but not of action specifically.

> Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. When they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. (1)

The kind of language used above indicates that two factors are at work in the way Benjy's mind perceives and reflects upon reality. We see that he is most insistent upon specifying and recording experience as a sequence of actions that partakes of the same measured, sequential quality as the "coming" of the shapes. He necessarily avoids specifying the cause-effect nature of the action involved. Benjy never reaches the conceptualization that the men hit a ball, much less that they play golf. The action is circumscribed and circumvented in layers of virtually irrelevant detail.

Benjy's use of the verbal is a natural consequence of his misuse of the verb and his ignorance of cause-effect relationships. The word choice in verbal usage is precise and specialized, derived from such verbs as "scuffle," "chunk," "rasp," "nuzzle," and "tumble." Benjy notices the "rattling and rustling leaves," the ground that is "hard, churned, and knotted," and the

hole in the barn roof that seems to be "full of spinning yellow." These verbals are deeply and narrowly descriptive, their use is sophisticated and reflects a correspondingly sophisticated faculty of observation. Equally significant, however, is the way in which such verbal emphasis alters that experience or phenomenon that Benjy is considering. The descriptive verbal changes the nature of motion from process to effect. Just as the heavy use of prepositional phrases places extreme emphasis upon place and direction, so the equally heavy use of the participle represents only that segment of motion and process that involves the completed and descriptive effect. Motion is, thereby, contained in the verbal and not shown in relation to an object that is acted upon by a verb. Benjy does not and cannot understand the process by which the ground becomes churned and knotted, yet he perceives the finished effect in all of its multifariousness.

Balancing one handicap with an opposing strength, Benjy attempts to constrain motion, and this tendency is mirrored in the sparse use of the simile as well as the excessive use of the verbal. Here again an aberrant perceptual faculty alters the reality it perceives. The following simile is a case in point: "They [the shapes] went on like the bright tops of wheels." (11) Here, the nature of a wheel's cyclical motion is transformed into the linear, sequential motion of bright, smooth shapes. It is as though the image lops off the lower half of the spinning wheel and captures, aberrantly, the repetitive motion of one wheel-top perpetually following the other. The nature of the wheel's motion which allows the shapes to move on, is recycled into a kind of static, self-perpetuating, linear motion. The principle is the same with the motion of fire. To Benjy its reality lies not in its burning or

destructiveness but in its repetitive self-duplication.

> Then I looked at the fire again and the bright, smooth shapes went again. (69)

> There was a fire. It was rising and falling on the walls. There was another fire in the mirror. (75)

Rather than serving as a symbol of destruction, the fire is a stable symbol of contained, subdued vitality.

A second simile treats motion in a different way but with the same kind of result. The context of the metaphor is the aftermath of Caddy's wedding when she rushes toward Benjy, no longer smelling of "trees in the rain." "Then I saw Caddy, with flowers in her hair, and a long veil like shining wind." (47) Again the language tells us that in the act of perceiving and reflecting upon reality Benjy seeks to stabilize and set limits upon motion which is inherently unstable and illimitable. The comparison of Caddy's veil to "shining wind" distorts the qualities of motion and forces an unconventional definition upon it. Wind, which is a kind of motion, assumes the qualities of a tangible effect possessing both surface and boundary, for it is not only likened to a veil but it is also said to shine. Placing the simile within its dramatic context also helps to reveal its significance. The wedding veil horrifies Benjy because it signifies change. Caddy does not ordinarily wear a veil, and so he responds to this change just as he did to her earlier use of perfume. It is as though Caddy were no longer Caddy.[12] The comparison he makes between the wind and the veil removes him temporarily from the disconcerting moment, for his mind considers something which represents instability

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[12] Olga W. Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), p. 35.

(the wind) and converts it, metaphorically, into a captured state. In this way Benjy forestalls the pain of change and, in so doing, perverts the nature of motion.

The eccentric uses of language that serve as precise indications of Benjy's perceptual tendencies suggest that he avoids discomfort, compensates for his mental handicap, and attempts to establish, perceptually, a private inviolate world in which he is comfortable and in control. Benjy does not always successfully avoid frustration, and he possesses enough self-knowledge and awareness of his deficiencies so that his frustration becomes not only obvious but also, at times, manifestly violent. He reveals, on rare occasions, frustration with his inability to complete an act that is begun. In his confrontation with the Burgess girl, he "tries to say," to express through the motion of clumsy embrace the feelings that are inside him.

> I opened the gate and they stopped, turning. I was trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say and trying . . . . (64)

Later in the same scene Benjy is again unable to complete an act and he is agonizingly aware of this inability.

> . . . I tried to cry. But when I breathed in, I couldn't breathe out again to cry, . . . (64)

Moreover, the consistent use of "could" with an attendant verb when involving a personal act is tellingly juxtaposed to a consistent use of the simple past when actions of other characters are considered. Examples may be chosen at random as is the following: "Caddy gave me the cushion and I could look at the cushion and the mirror and the fire." (88) The juxtaposition indicates some effort to delineate the range of his own abilities, to declare his own

capabilities, and to reassure himself that he does possess the capacity to affect the world around him. The need for such reassurance, coupled with the frustrations of attempt and failure, reveals not only Benjy's awareness of the threatening nature of action and motion but also his awareness of a personal deficiency. Through Benjy's dim and pathetic awareness of his limitations and his failures, the reader may infer that he is conscious of his own being, that he is, at least intuitively, assured of his "I-ness." The passage below crystallizes the kind of self-awareness Benjy possesses.

> I squatted there, holding the slipper. I couldn't see it, but my hands saw it, and I could hear it getting night, and my hands saw the slipper but I couldn't see myself, but my hand could see the slipper, and I squatted there, hearing it getting dark. (88)

In his confusion about himself and the relationship of his body to himself, we may see that Benjy is aware of his own consciousness and that he possesses some primordial realization that his consciousness is both distinct and "at work in the world."

III. CONSCIOUSNESS AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

In providing Benjy a latent rhetoric, Faulkner shows that Benjy lacks the mental tools to understand the cause-effect relationship that is so intrinsic to real world experiences. Lacking such a faculty, Benjy may at times appear confused and even hysterical. At other times, however, he manages to transcend his confusion and pain and find an order and stability in his perceptual distortions of the world about him. His life is a series of painful experiences and serene but fleeting moments of escape and pleasure. A study

of the arrangement of narrative segments in section one corroborates these characteristics of Benjy's consciousness. An order, adjusted to these characteristics of consciousness, inheres in the sequential arrangement of present and past time scenes and episodes.

Although Benjy can make no intellectual distinction between experiences which occur in the present and those which occurred in the past, his mind does make choices in the material it chooses to consider and in the sequence of those considerations. The associative faculty which Benjy possesses does not in itself account for the arrangement of episodes and scenes (either recollected or immediate), for one experience may provide a number of possible associations and his mind must ultimately choose which association to enlarge upon. The following narrative segment, which records the flow of Benjy's mind upon entering the barn with Luster on April 7, 1928, shows that Benjy not only makes associations but that he also chooses among several possible associations. The mental and narrative shift occurs when Benjy abandons attention to the barn, its roof, the slanting hole, and Luster's admonitions and focuses instead on a past day when Caddy walks with him through that same barn.

> <u>The floor was dry and dusty. The roof was falling. The slanting holes were full of spinning yellow. What do you want to go that way for. You want to get your head knocked off with one of them balls</u>. [April 7, 1928. The present.]
>
> "Keep your hands in your pockets." Caddy said, "Or they'll be froze. You don't want your hands froze on Christmas, do you." [Dec. 23 between 1900 and 1905.]
>
> We went around the barn. The big cow and the little one were standing in the door, and we could hear Prince and Queenie and Fancy stomping inside the barn. "If it wasn't so cold, we'd ride Fancy." Caddy said, "But it's too cold to hold on today." [still Dec. 23.] (13)

The associative clues are obvious. One tour of the barn reminds Benjy of

another; one admonition reminds him of an earlier one. Other associative clues could have led Benjy just as easily to other recollections--of the day of Caddy's wedding, for example, when he also noticed the hole of "spinning yellow." Luster's admonition could have drawn his attention to any number of admonitions from other earlier attendants. The question that we must seek to find answers for involves the precise course Benjy's mind follows on April 7, 1928. Why does his mind turn to certain recollections, favor certain associations over other equally available ones? If criteria can be found, what do they tell us about the consciousness we are seeking to understand?

These questions may not be answered without clarifying the nature of consciousness and the definition of stream-of-consciousness technique on which this essay is based. Benjy's speechlessness confuses the critical issues because it is impossible to distinguish between the usual levels of consciousness--"speech level" and "pre-speech level." Robert Humphrey defines consciousness as

> . . . the entire area of mental attention, from pre-consciousness on through the levels of the mind up to and including the highest one of rational, communicable awareness.[13]

He adds that most stream-of-consciousness fiction places emphasis upon "exploration of the pre-speech levels of consciousness for the purpose, primarily, of revealing the psychic being of characters."[14] The levels of Benjy's

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[13]Robert Humphrey, Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), p. 2.

[14]Humphrey, p. 4.

consciousness must be distinguished by different qualities since he has no discernible speech level. Analogous distinctions may be made concerning Benjy's consciousness by determining the kind of mental attention Benjy exerts at different stages of the narration. We may characterize the kinds of mental activity in three ways. At the beginning of the narrative and for a space of several pages, Benjy's mind functions at the height of his mental awareness. It functions analytically, seeking maximum meaning in the discrete episodes it reviews. As the narrative progresses, we notice a gradual reduction of mental activity; for the analytic habit of mind yields to a synthetic habit of mind by which Benjy seeks sameness and declines to make distinctions among differing circumstances. Finally, toward the end of the narrative and before Benjy is readied for bed, his consciousness withdraws from meaningful intellection and seeks the hypnotic pleasure of arranging recollections and present observations in meaningless but repetitive order. This day-long flowing of his mind explains the narrative structure of section one.

When we first meet Benjy, it is during the day of April 7, 1928. The shadows are long, and Luster is desperately looking for the lost quarter that will buy him a seat at the evening traveling show. Luster directs his charge to follow him on the search, and Benjy does so with careful initial attention to his immediate surroundings, for he is looking through a fence at the puzzling motions of a golf game. His attention to every movement and every utterance is scrupulously detailed. "I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. The men took the flag out, and they were hitting." (1) Benjy's observation of the immediate and the visible continues in this way. Then he records bits of dialogue that he hears and places them and himself in proper spatial relation to the motions he observes.

> "Here, caddie." He hit. They went away across the pasture. I held to the fence and watched them going away.
> "Listen at you, now." Luster said. "Ain't you something, thirty-three years old, going on that way. After I done went all the way to town to buy you that cake. Hush up that moaning. Ain't you going to help me find that quarter so I can go to the show tonight."
> They were hitting little, across the pasture. I went back along the fence to where the flag was. It flapped on the bright trees and grass. (1, 2)

Although Benjy can have no speech-level of consciousness, I believe that in the beginning of the first section his mind is at the height of its "rational, communicable awareness." Although he cannot communicate his thoughts, they are at their most rational and communicable level. The words by which the writer seeks to parallel Benjy's thoughts bespeak a sense of the immediacy of reality, an awareness of spatial and temporal relationships that form the physical scenery of Benjy's present being.

As the narrator continues, the arrangement of scenes continues to reveal the dominance of the analytic capacities of Benjy's mind. Because Benjy lapses into recollections that he intersperses with scenes from an impinging present-time, the reader might infer that he is less conscious of reality and farther removed from a state of rational awareness than he was at the beginning of the monologue. Such is not the case, however, for upon close scrutiny one finds that Benjy exercises, for a space of several pages, considerable insight into his own situation.

An analysis of the character and function of Luster is crucial to a revelation of Benjy's equivalent of the speech-level of consciousness. Critics have correctly viewed Luster as a useful if callous connection with the real world of time and factuality, but they have failed to illumine his role fully. Of more subtle significance is the use of Luster as an inverse assessor of

Benjy's state of mind. If one trusts Luster's interpretation of Benjy, dangerously inaccurate conclusions may follow; and I will take the liberty of digressing a bit in order to demonstrate such critical pitfalls. Emily Kaluza, the only linguistic critic of The Sound and the Fury whom I could find, begins her discussion of the first section with the statement that Benjy is congenitally deaf. The only support she calls upon for her conclusion is a statement Luster makes to Quentin's lover concerning Benjy's abnormality.

> "He can't tell what you saying." Luster said. "He deef and dumb."
> "Is." he [Quentin's lover] said. "How long's he been that way."
> "Been that way thirty-three years today." Luster said. "Born looney . . . . " (60)

Luster's assessment is both ignorant and characteristically flippant. We learn early in the narrative that, though he is definitely mute, Benjy is certainly not deaf. He hears bugs buzz though he thinks it is grass; he hears the rain falling on the roof; and he perceptually records conversation and even Latin phrases. Based in large part upon Luster's unreliable assessment of Benjy's problems, Kaluza arrives at the equally unreliable conclusion that the only "operation that Benjy's mind can perform is that of mechanical identification."[15]

If the reader is observant, he will avoid this kind of oversimplification and will begin to question from the very start the reliability of Luster's interpretations. Such observation clarifies the kind of mental operation that Benjy's mind can and does perform. As we become gradually more cognizant of

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[15] Irena Kaluza, The Functioning of Sentence Structure in the Stream-of-Consciousness Technique of William Faulkner's 'The Sound and the Fury': A Study in Linguistic Stylistics (Krakow: Jagellonian University, 1967), p. 50.

Luster's own faulty insights, we become surer of Benjy's rational awareness. Luster's commentary begins on the second page of the novel. Directly following Benjy's opening observation of men hitting and moving flags, he hears them cry out "Here, caddie." (1) Benjy begins to cry and Luster's interpretation follows immediately.

> "Listen at you, now." Luster said. "Ain't you something, thirty-three years old, going on that way. After I done went all the way to town to buy you that cake. Hush up that moaning." (1, 2)
>
> "Shut up that moaning." Luster said. "I can't make them come if they ain't coming, can I." (2)

At this point the reader accepts Luster's suggestion that Benjy is crying because the golfers have moved on. On the next page, however, the reader realizes that Benjy himself makes some kind of association between a person named "Caddy" and the cry of the golfers. As Benjy and Luster crawl through a broken place in the fence and Benjy snags himself on a nail, his mind floats quickly back to a childhood experience in which "Caddy" "uncaught" him from that same fence. With the mention of Caddy, we wonder whether the reason for Benjy's crying might not be related to Benjy's association of the two sounds.

This possibility becomes substantiated as the narrative progresses. Benjy remembers an earlier scene from that same day, December twenty-third, between 1900 and 1905, when Versh, a former attendant, says that Benjy wants to go into the bitter cold outdoors. As they stand at the gate, Versh tells Benjy to put his cold hands in his pocket and asks the following, complaining question: "Whyn't you wait for them in the house." (4) We learn that Benjy is awaiting Caddy, who smells like leaves and "like when she says that we are asleep." Immediately following this revery (by which we also learn that

Benjy may anticipate events) Luster intrudes with another interpretation of the moaning and crying that must have just taken place. "What are you moaning about," (5) he asks rhetorically, and answers characteristically: "You can watch them again when we get to the branch." (5) Again we infer that Benjy has reacted to a reference, his own mental reference, to Caddy and the warmth and intimacy which she represented. The reader suspects that Luster cannot be trusted, that Benjy is not crying because the golfers have left but rather because of the distinction he makes between his immediate circumstance and another different circumstance. It is the disappearance of Caddy, not the golfers, which prompts Benjy's discontent.

This pattern will be repeated consecutively several times. Each time that Benjy is reminded of Caddy, Luster reprimands him for crying or moaning. Since nothing interrupts this direct shift from Caddy to the sadness that attends such association, we must conclude that Benjy makes a willing comparison between the immediate world from which Caddy is absent and other circumstances in which she is present. In the passage quoted below Benjy is continuing to relive December twenty-third. Caddy has taken Benjy up to see their mother who has called Benjy her "poor baby." Then she tells Caddy and Versh to take him out. After Caddy dismisses Versh,

> . . . we stopped in the hall and 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. You've got your Caddy. Haven't you got your Caddy." (8)

Benjy must begin to cry at precisely this point, for he immediately records Luster's editorial comment.

> Can't you shut up that moaning and slobbering, Luster said. Ain't you shamed of yourself, making all this

> racket. We passed the carriage house, where the carriage was. (8)

Benjy makes a willing but unhappy distinction between a distant world in which Caddy was present and the immediate world in which she is unavailable. The inherent contrast is painful and disconcerting.

Focusing his attention upon the immediate physical scene, Benjy comments in the passage above on the carriage and lapses into another satisfying memory, this time of the ritualistic carriage ride that he, his mother, and Dilsey take when they visit the ever more populous graveyard. It is the soothing, bright, smooth shapes, the interplay of motion and shadow and, most importantly, their connection with Caddy that ends this revery of the past. The pattern of rational distinction and emotional reaction is repeated again in the following excerpt:

> "Hum up, Queenie." T.P. said. The shapes flowed on. The ones on the other side began again, bright and fast and smooth, like when Caddy says we are going to sleep. (12, 13) [emphasis mine]

> Cry baby, Luster said. Ain't you shamed . . . . What do you want to go that way for. You want to get your head knocked off with one of them balls. (13)

Not only does Benjy react to the loss of Caddy, but he also attempts to find her again by heading in the opposite direction, walking toward the fence and gate. Luster is sure that Benjy wants to see the golfers again, but the reader knows that he is looking for Caddy. Luster diverts Benjy's new course and heads him toward the barn. He cannot divert his thoughts, however, for Benjy lapses into recollection once again, picks up the story of December twenty-third where he had left off, and soothes himself once more with a reconstructed world in which Caddy, not Luster, is his guide.

Benjy demonstrates his painful awareness of the absence of Caddy one more time during this initial sequence of scenes and episodes. Luster is still looking for his quarter and his search now takes place by the branch. As Luster talks to another Negro, Benjy hears the sounds of the golf game.

> The man said "Caddie" up the hill. The boy got out of the water and went up the hill.
> "Now, just listen at you." Luster said. "Hush up."
> "What he moaning about now." [said the other Negro]
> "Lawd knows." Luster said. "He just starts like that. He been at it all morning. Cause it his birthday, I reckon." (18)

The pattern of rational distinction and emotional reaction is repeated once again. This time, however, Benjy's crying is related to the golfer's calling for their "caddie." The details of this scene recall the details of the first scene of the narrative. By repeating essentially the same scene, Faulkner leaves no doubt that Benjy has associated the golf "caddie" with his sister "Caddy" and that we are correct in concluding that Benjy realizes that she is absent from the physically immediate world. The structural unity of this pattern of Benjy's distinctions and emotional reactions provides one way that Faulkner compliments the reader who is able to see "through the fence" and "between the curling flower spaces." Luster and the unperceptive reader are not granted such vision.

The ability to make distinctions, to perceive differences between one circumstance and another, is consistent with Benjy's ability to reflect upon differences in observable phenomena. He says on one occasion that "my shadow was higher than Luster's" and, on another, that "the flower tree by the window wasn't dark but the thick trees were." He distinguishes both similarity and difference in relationships when he notices that the long mirror

in the parlor "was like a door only it wasn't a door" and that "my hands saw the slipper but I couldn't see myself."

One of Benjy's perceptual strengths, therefore, is his ability to contrast two sets of circumstances or two phenomena. Benjy is not capable of more complex intellections and so making distinctions represents the greatest degree of his rational awareness. I believe that the seemingly chaotic portions of experience that filter through Benjy's mind at the beginning of April 7, 1928, reveal the highest degree of rationality of which Benjy's mind is capable. We notice, however, that, as the day wears on, two things happen to the pattern his flowing mind produces. First, the nature of the present changes, for it is, in the segment of recollections reviewed above, more a part of his consciousness than it will become. The opening paragraph, for example, demonstrates more interested and reflective attention to immediate, physical details than any other single, present-time passage in the first section of the novel. After the second appearance of the golfers and their calling for "caddie," Benjy continues to record the conversation and the moving scenes of his immediate surroundings, but the nature of the immediate changes; for distinctions between the immediate and the recollected are (with two significant exceptions) not made. As immediacy is relinquished to a kind of introspective enlargement of self and diminution of the physically external world, Benjy's mind notes similarities but not differences. Caddy is still at the heart of his recollections but no longer does Benjy surface willingly to distinguish between her presence then and her absence now.

As the day wears on and as the narrative continues, the arrangement of material in his mind is determined by decreasing mental exertion. No longer

are the scene shifts triggered by a distinction made between the immediate and the distant, but rather by the less meaningful search Benjy's mind makes for similarities. His mind integrates the stories of Damuddy's death and the events of her funeral day with the deaths and funerals of Quentin (the brother), Mr. Compson, and Roskus. Benjy refers frequently to his ability to "smell it," that is, to smell death. Here the perceptual faculty seeks sameness and Luster's immediate intrusions about the traveling show and the lost quarter, although recorded, are not reacted to and do not fit into the perceptual pattern Benjy's mind temporarily forms.

After the episodes that reflect generalizations on death, the criteria for scene shifts reflect even less rational awareness, for here Benjy's mind seeks sameness only in meaningless associations. His mind oscillates first, between the events of the day of Damuddy's death and the events of Caddy's wedding day, and second, between the present (with Quentin II in the swing) and a more distant time in the past when he confronted Caddy in that same swing. Benjy never draws any distinctions between the sets of experiences, but he integrates them in exact temporal order. He doesn't even react to Quentin's replacement of Caddy in the swing. Only the most superficial associations combine with the serenity of temporal order to provide impetus for the oscillation. The following excerpt is a case in point:

> Go on and watch him, Dilsey said. Keep him out the house now.
> Yessum, T.P. said. Is they started yet.
> You go on and keep that boy out of sight, Dilsey said. I got all I can tend to. [Caddy's wedding]
> A snake crawled out from under the house. Jason said he wasn't afraid of snakes and Caddy said he was but she wasn't, and Versh said they both were and Caddy said to be quiet, like father said. [Damuddy's death]

> You ain't got to start bellowing now, T.P. said. You want some this sassprilluh.
> It tickled my nose and eyes.
> If you ain't going to drink it, T.P. said. All right, here tis. We better get another bottle while ain't nobody bothering us. You be quiet now. [Caddy's wedding]
> We stopped under the tree by the parlor window. Versh set me down in the wet grass. It was cold. There were lights in all the windows. [Damuddy's death]

Although Benjy began the day of April 7, 1928 with a willing exercise of his ability to make distinctions, the unhappy results force him to retreat to the mindless relinquishment to sequence that characterizes the quotation above. This more orderly, more formal, course assures Benjy that he will not lose control of a private reality. The more rigid the pattern of flowing episodes, the more Benjy is reassured that his world of smooth, flowing "shapes" is inviolate.

But however rigid this pattern may be, it is not inviolate or absolute. In his mindless panning of past and present experiences, Benjy stumbles infrequently, but terrifyingly, upon events so charged with significance that they force a present reaction. Immediately following his oscillation between the present scene with Quentin in the swing and his recollection of Caddy in the same swing, Benjy is led by Luster to the fence and the gate where Benjy is reminded of his attack on the Burgess girl. Here the frustration and sadness of the past impinges upon the present, for after Benjy's description of the attack and the subsequent castration Luster, once again, tells us that Benjy is crying.

> They came on, I opened the gate and they stopped, turning. I was trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say and trying and the bright shapes began to stop and I tried to get out. I tried to get it off of my face, but the bright shapes were going again, they were going up the

> hill to where it fell away and I tried to cry. But when I breathed in, I couldn't breathe out again to cry, and I tried to keep from falling off the hill and I fell off the hill into the bright, whirling shapes. [Attack on Burgess girl and castration]
> Here, loony, Luster said. Here come some. Hush your moaning, now. [present]
> They came to the flag. He took it out and they hit, then he put the flag back. [still the present] (64, 65)

Impelled by his involuntary recapitulation of the attack and castration scenes, noted above, Benjy's consciousness now seeks solace in a stringently ordered oscillation between the present and either the day of Benjy's name change or the day of Damuddy's death. Though movements and conversations in the present are contrapuntally integrated with one of these two past days, no meaning whatever is given to the comparative vacancies of immediate circumstances. Though a few associative clues are evident at the beginning of this hypnotic pattern, even they become unnecessary as the pattern becomes established. The present becomes only a touchstone for consistency, a completion of the search his mind makes for harmony and order. Only at the very end of the day does the emptiness of the present again force Benjy to respond. He is being prepared for bed and as Luster begins to put Benjy's pajama pants on, Benjy notices with horror the loss of his genitals. Now of course Benjy does not realize the sexual implications of his castration but he must make some comparison between another time and the immediate. He recognizes change and reacts to it. This abrupt surfacing of the consciousness does not last long, however, for as Luster diverts his attention toward Miss Quentin's escape down the tree, the accumulated associations with Quentin II and I and getting ready for bed in the present and the past ignite the last of Benjy's recollections. He resumes his recapitulation of the day of Damuddy's death, which ended with

bedtime for all the children. Benjy sleeps with Caddy; Father comes in to tell them goodnight; and he pats Benjy on the head. The day has ended. Benjy's mental wanderings end with a final vision of Caddy and of the "smooth, bright shapes" that come when he falls asleep with her. Darkness goes and the unconscious realm of smooth shapes rests in Benjy's mind.

> Then the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes like it always does, even when Caddy says that I have been asleep. (92)

IV. BENJY, THE SOUND AND THE FURY, AND FAULKNER'S AESTHETIC

The preceding interpretation of Benjamin Compson requires a readjustment of the relationship of section one to the remainder of The Sound and the Fury. Because we find Benjy to be more than a moral measure and a recorder of dialogue--to be, in fact, a "consciousness at work in the world"--his dilemma deserves to be considered in relation to the dilemmas of the two other brother-narrators, Quentin and Jason. In this way we can learn more about the novel's rendering of the ideal human response to reality. And, a comparative consideration of the three brothers in their order of narrative appearance clarifies the relationship between structure and meaning in this difficult four-part novel.

A comparison of the three Compson brothers must be based on one main point of dissimilarity and one main point of similarity. Benjy does not possess, as do his two brothers, the mental ability to perceive reality accurately. His need to compensate for his mental weaknesses is, therefore, intrinsic and monolithic. His obsessive fear of change is unavoidable and

his effort to establish his own rigid version of reality is a natural consequence of his fear. Quentin and Jason, on the other hand, possess the mental skills to view reality accurately. Yet they too persist, just as surely as Benjy does, in favoring a private and distorted perception of reality. Each becomes as feverishly obsessive as his idiot-brother and the obsessions of each are similarly related to motion, change, and Caddy.[16]

Quentin, whose monologue follows Benjy's, is threatened by change, not because he cannot understand it intellectually, but because he fears it emotionally. Denied a psychologically necessary mother-love, Quentin is an emotionally scarred adult. He is, in simplistic terms, an emotional child and a mental adult; and the discrepancy implied affects his responses both to people and to circumstances. Since Caddy is his main source of warmth and demonstrative affection, Quentin sees her as the absolute repositor of meaning in his life. Any alteration in his juvenile prescription for meaning is abnormally upsetting to Quentin. Caddy's sexual awakening alarms him for it presages her inevitable realignment of affections. Her pregnancy and marriage threaten him to the very core of his being, for he conceives of his being only in terms of a relationship with Caddy.

If Quentin finds such change too painful to accept, he finds his responsibility to effect change and to commit himself to action, impossible. His perception of his own role is so single-mindedly defined as preserver of the

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[16]Many critics comment upon the obsessive minds of one or more of the Compson brothers. Cleanth Brooks says, for example, that the Compson story "is told through one obsessed consciousness after another." (Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha County, p. 325). Peter Swiggart speaks of Quentin's and Jason's "puritan obsessions." (The Art of Faulkner's Novels, p. 88) I do not, however, know of any critics who have compared the obsessive consciousnesses of the Compson brothers in precisely that same way that I have in this essay.

status quo, of an imperishable relationship with Caddy, that he is repeatedly depicted as the observer of, and not the participant in, change, motion, and action. Caddy, not Quentin, carries Benjy when he cannot walk, feeds him, rubs his cold hands, and soothes him into peaceful sleep. Even Benjy senses Quentin's subjective distance, for though he mentions him frequently only once does he describe his brother as "smelling like trees." (81) When not an unwilling participant, Quentin is an ineffectual one. Not only does he fail to shoot Dalton Ames, but he is left, after that nearly comic confrontation, motionless and stunned, nursing a black eye. Even Benjy, as incapable as he is of intending and completing an action, makes a more honest attempt when he embraces the Burgess girl and "tries to say" and to express the inscrutable yearnings of his soul. Experiences in which Quentin actively participates are either trite or noticeably sparse. One crucial exception is his experience with the little lost Italian girl. Late in both narrative and chronological time, Quentin meets "a little dirty child with ears like a toy bear's and two patent-leather pig-tails." (155) She appears to be lost and Quentin assumes that she wants help and that he can indeed provide that help. At first he is persistent in his efforts to locate the child's home. However, his eventual rejection of her serves as his penultimate rejection of life and the responsible action that life demands. The scene precedes his suicide and gives him a last chance to reveal his potential for sacrifice and compassion. What is missing in Quentin's encounter with the Italian child is will; and, ironically, the suicide that follows is the only change Quentin willfully effects. Suicide is the one significant act that Quentin intends, plans, and completes but it is, at the same time, a repudiation of all possible existential

demands. What Benjy unwittingly accomplishes by redefining the real world in terms that he can manage, Quentin accomplishes in death. One seeks unconsciously, and the other consciously, to stabilize that which is emotionally satisfying and forestall that which is difficult and painful.

The similarities in Benjy's and Quentin's responses to reality are even more specific when we examine the kinds of images by which Quentin renders his private vision. These images are strikingly similar to those disclosed in the latent rhetoric of the Benjy section. One such parallel involves the two brothers' conception of fire. Quentin's vision of the "clean flame," which he imagines to isolate and eternalize his relationship with Caddy, is as disarmingly beneficent as Benjy's "bright, smooth, shapes." Both images accomplish a childish resolution of problems by according flames the benign qualities of containment and eternality. Benjy's real or imagined vision of a flickering fire soothes his spirit by suggesting an endless duplication of itself. Quentin too imagines his "clean flame" perpetuating endlessly an insular relationship with Caddy. If he says that he and Caddy have committed incest, then he envisions the flames of hell to which they would be banished, protecting them eternally and blissfully from the disapproval of the social world.

> If it could just be a hell beyond that! The clean flame the two of us more than dead. Then you will have only me then only me then the two of us amid the pointing and the horror beyond the clean flame . . . Only you and me then amid the pointing and the horror walled by the clean flame. (144)

In isolation, both Quentin's and Benjy's perceptions of fire are similarly comforting and eccentric. Considering them in their contexts, however, we find an important difference. For Benjy, fire is, unconditionally and

absolutely, "bright, smooth, shapes." Quentin's fire-image, on the other hand, is cast in conditional, rhetorical terms. "If it could just be . . .," he says, and indicates thereby that he knows it cannot be. Unlike Benjy, Quentin may perceive reality accurately while persisting in paradoxical visions of a reality that is comfortingly redefined. It is most appropriate that Quentin bridge the gap between the way things are and the way he wishes they could be with a mental trick. Emotionally he is still a child; mentally he is fully mature. He redefines a threatening world by containing both its reality and its reassuring unreality in paradox.

Quentin's imagistic descriptions of motion also echo Benjy's distorted conceptions of motion. Even as a child Quentin enjoyed a paradoxical perception of motion. When he awaited the school's dismissal bell he says that his insides felt as though they were "moving sitting still." (109) When older and a student at Harvard he implies a similar but more embellished concept. In the following passage, Quentin describes the movement of a train:

> And all that day, while the train wound through rushing gaps and along ledges where movement was only a laboring sound of the exhaust and groaning wheels and the eternal mountains stood fading into the thick sky, I thought of home. (108)

Like Benjy, Quentin distorts the nature of motion by the perceptual slant he assumes. The difference is that Benjy cannot achieve an accurate concept of motion because he cannot understand causality. He compensates for this mental void by attempting to perceive motion in other, albeit inaccurate, terms that reassure him. But Quentin is entirely capable of perceiving the world accurately. Since motion is as threatening to him as it is to Benjy, he circumvents its essence and chooses a perceptual angle that distorts the total vision.

Quentin's description of the train's movement is accurate but partial. Though the train's movement is, in fact, recorded by the groaning wheels and the "laboring sound" of the exhaust, the perceptual emphasis, the choice of sound as the measure of that which is seen, reveals the psychological motivation behind the image. Through the paradoxical identification of sight with sound, Quentin can accommodate his perceptual preference while retaining a certain mental accuracy.

In other images of motion, Quentin satisfies his emotional needs and perceptual preferences by extracting from a total view of the world only a segment of its reality. Again, paradox almost self-consciously bridges the gap between perceptual accuracy and emotional needs; for, while Quentin describes a portion of a scene accurately, that very tendency to segment reflects his determination to perceive motion in a narrow and unthreatening way. In his wanderings by the river in New Haven, he looks through a vertical crack in a wall and sees a gull flying between two moving ships.

> in a break in the wall I saw a glint of water and two masts, and a gull motionless in midair, like on an invisible wire between two masts. . . . (110)

Quentin proceeds to describe the fanciful unreality of the scene, the ship's unconnected movement, and the apparent motionlessness of the hovering gulls.

> the ship herself was like she was moving without visible means . . . . The ship went through the bridge, moving under bare poles like a ghost in broad day, with three gulls above the stern like toys on invisible wires. (110)

The metaphors accurately describe the way the scene appears to Quentin. The gulls do not seem to be flying if juxtaposed to the moving ships and insulated by the two walls from stationary objects. The portion of the scene that is framed by the break in the wall isolates the ship from the towboat and creates

the impression of self-propelled, ghost-like motion. The fact that Quentin enjoys seeing the moving ships in this unconventional way, reflects his preference for unthreatening, "still" motion and his propensity for the paradoxical conception. The break in the wall is Quentin's version of curling flower spaces. It is an apt metaphor for his perceptual preferences, for, while providing a narrowly accurate "frame" of reality, it also lifts a segment of reality from the whole, making static the otherwise dynamic quality of motion.

One final similarity between Quentin's and Benjy's perceptions of motion testifies to Faulkner's structural attempt to compare the two brothers. We remember that the Benjy section ends with a bedtime scene that recalls an earlier bedtime in which Caddy sleeps with Benjy, the darkness goes, and the "smooth, bright shapes" begin to flow. We also remember that Benjy describes the "shapes" of sleep and the motion of the fire in identical terms. Through both structure and image, the Quentin section reproduces a similar relationship. Notice that relationship in Quentin's description of a floating leaf:

> When you leave a leaf in water a long time after a while the tissue will be gone and the delicate fibers waving slow as the motion of sleep. (144)

Quentin's equation of motion and sleep is neither so simplistic nor literal as Benjy's, but he elaborates upon the same eccentric perception. The fibers of the leaf reproduce the self-consuming motion of waves which, he implies, is comparable to the "slow" motion of sleep. Of particular note is Quentin's use of the participial form of the verb "to wave." This reflects, as do frequent such uses in the Benjy section, a habit of mind that superimposes descriptive, not dynamic qualities on the real world. Accuracy, however, is again granted a certain deference for the description of the disintegrating

leaf requires no flight of the imagination. The metaphor itself betrays Quentin's perceptual prejudices, for motion is perverted into the non-motion of sleep. Quentin longs for, and, through his death by drowning, achieves the kind of motional state that is slow, nearly inert, like sleep. Both Benjy's smooth-flowing sleep and Quentin's drowning occur at the ends of their respective narrations and offer a kind of epitaph on the lives that we have known so intimately.

Quentin's story, like all great tragedies, is suffused in irony. A comparison of Benjy's and Quentin's predicaments clarifies and enhances this irony. Both brothers share the same fears, exhibit the same inflexibilities, and exercise somewhat similar perceptual distortions. Benjy, however, is not able to attain any degree of freedom, for he is ultimately dependent upon the people and circumstances that surround him. Even the possibility of freedom is, for him, a moot issue. Furthermore, he cannot change or grow. Though we may see him meet challenges or retreat from them, make valiant attempts to communicate, or withdraw into the smooth flowing of memories--all in one day--we do not perceive any alteration in the range of his abilities and responses from 1898, when Damuddy dies, to 1928, when his one-day narration takes place.

If we consider Faulkner a naturalist, then we might conclude that Quentin is as much a slave to genetics or whimsical circumstances as Benjy. The juxtaposition of the first two sections of the novel cautions against that conclusion, however, for Benjy's and Quentin's possibilities for at least a degree of freedom are unmistakably contrasted. Quentin possesses in great abundance the intellectual tools to insure, at the very least, an accurate and complete perception of reality. He prefers to see the ship and the gulls

through a break in the wall rather than to see them in the context of reality's multifariousness. It is easier to see Caddy in relation to his own needs rather than to see her as a whole person with the capacity for nurturing diverse relationships. In short, Quentin is self-indulgent, and he nurses his fears and feeds his obsessions with zealous and misdirected energy.

In the sequence of Benjy's and Quentin's narratives, a dynamic structural pattern emerges and becomes full-blown by the end of Jason's section. The pattern is based on a kind of incremental comparison. Quentin is like Benjy emotionally and perceptually, though certainly not intellectually. He should potentially be Benjy's opposite; but he is, in fact, very much like him. Jason, as we shall see, is the reverse of Quentin yet, like his brothers, he too feeds his obsessions, distorts the nature of effective motion, and perceives reality narrowly.

Although Jason is the most practical character in the novel, and although he is the most rational of his family, he too longs to control the open-endedness of life's continuum. He is, in a more tangible sense, frustrated by the impossibility of his task. As critics have repeatedly noted, Benjy has no conception of time, Quentin flees the exigencies of time, and Jason constantly and unsuccessfully attempts to catch up with time.[17] The same is true of motion and the completed act. In his confusion, Benjy distorts the nature of motion. Quentin retreats from action by refusing to perceive it in its

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[17] Perrin Lowery, "Concepts of Time in The Sound and the Fury," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Sound and the Fury," ed. Michael H. Cowan (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. 54-59.

unsegmented, unisolated form. The portion of Jason's life that we are allowed to see is full of furious, inadequate motion as he rushes too late to the futures market, too late to conceal Quentin's widely known promiscuity and, in the last section of the novel, too late to overtake Quentin and her lover and recapture the money that had been the object of years of acquisitive scheming. In the final section we see Jason in frantic pursuit, being overcome slowly and painfully by the gasoline fumes. This is as fitting and penetrating an image for Jason as the vertical image of masts and gulls is for Quentin or bright, smooth, shapes for Benjy. Jason is defeated literally by the fuel and figuratively by the fury of motion. He is a victim of his own obsession. After the job with the bank was denied him by an unanticipated change in circumstance, he spends his life and energy in a single-minded effort to establish absolute control over people and situations. Jason's life-long response to this early injustice is grossly disproportionate. While Quentin may be unduly concerned with the past, Jason is unduly concerned with the future and his ever-elusive efforts to correct a single and distant injustice.

Unlike Quentin, Jason is a man of action. His acting to control reality, however, is as distorting to truth as Quentin's immobility or Benjy's private vision. These distorted perceptions support in a negative sense the assumption that affirmative value lies in what Millgate calls "the multivalence of truth." The Sound and the Fury dramatizes, he says, man's

> . . . tendency to make of truth a personal thing: each man, apprehending some fragment of the truth, seizes upon that fragment as though it were the whole truth and elaborates it into a total vision

> of the world, rigidly exclusive and hence utterly fallacious.[18]

Support for such a multivalent perception of truth is not based solely upon the Compson brothers' failures. The Negro servant Dilsey is one character who approaches an understanding of truth's multivalence. Dilsey endures in the existential sense. She endures in time and in spirit; she needs no proof of her existence for "All I got to do is say I'se here." (71) She needs no private world, no lofty codes of honor, no trappings of success to announce or insure her existence. Faulkner scatters repeated clues suggesting that Dilsey's perceptions of reality are accurate and incisive. She knows what mischief Luster is about even when she doesn't see him. She knows Mrs. Compson's movements without seeing them.

> Dilsey raised her face as if her eyes could and did penetrate the walls and ceiling and saw the old woman in her quilted dressing gown at the head of the stairs . . . . (336-7)

She knows that it is eight o'clock even when the one-handed clock strikes five. She sees life in its wholeness for "I've seed de first en de last," "seed de beginning, en now I sees de ending." (371)

Dilsey does not bear the burden of affirmation alone. Structurally, she cannot outweigh the Compson brothers' fallacious visions of truth. Dilsey does not tell her own story, nor reveal the workings of her consciousness in a way that allows the reader to analyze, test, and unequivocally affirm her perceptions. Instead, the structure of the novel offers the reader his own opportunity to perceive truth in the manner in which it ought to be perceived.

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[18] Millgate, p. 87.

If we review the structure of the novel and the observant reader's response to that structure, we find that the reader experiences through the novel's informing aesthetic the truth that it holds so subtly. The first section is preeminently important for in it two challenges are confronted and overcome. The first section stands, first, as Faulkner's response to the aesthetic challenge that he puts to himself so often. Addie Bundren of As I Lay Dying phrases that challenge in the following way:

> . . . I would think how words go straight up in a thin line and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other . . . .[19]

> . . . words are no good; . . . words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at.[20]

Arnold Weinstein phrases the challenge in the words of the critic.

> Underlying Faulkner's aesthetic is the fear that rational sequential discourse deadens experience, prevents it from being as moving--in both senses of the words--as he wants it to be.[21]

Benjy's section is a specific answer both to Faulkner's fears and Addie's cynicism. In Benjy's section the efficacy of the "word" itself is at stake. Benjy has no words; Faulkner must endow his silent creation with words so close to his "doing" and his being that they succeed in communicating to the reader a distinct and knowable consciousness. Because the "word" can be

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[19]William Faulkner, As I Lay Dying (New York: Vintage Books, Alfred A. Knopf and Random House, 1946), p. 165

[20]Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, p. 163.

[21]Weinstein, p. 118.

effective, the reader, in turn, may meet Faulkner's challenge to him--that he assume Benjy's point of view and accept all of the stringent limitations that Benjy's vision imposes.

Reading Benjy's story is an experience in perceptual adaptation, for Benjy's world is narrow and his rhetoric is eccentric. Such an experience is necessary, however, for it not only bears witness to the efficacy of the "word," but it also prepares us for the Quentin and Jason sections of the novel. Though Quentin and Jason seize upon different fragments of truth for their frenzied elaborations, their perceptions of truth are as narrow and distorted as Benjy's. We adapt to their worlds and adopt their perceptual angles with greater ease and insight because of Benjy's existence.

In the fourth and final section of The Sound and the Fury the motifs of both form and content converge. This is accomplished in great part by Faulkner's choice of point of view. In a clear and persuasive essay, Margaret Blanchard argues that the fourth section is narrated from the reader's point of view because the speaker is neither omniscient, nor entirely without involvement.[22] Faulkner compliments the reader by adopting his point of view and seeing the Compson world from his angle of vision.[23] It is this perspective that allows the union of aesthetic and thematic statements; for not only may we witness Dilsey's indominability and multivalent perception, but we actually experience a kind of total vision of Faulkner's aesthetic and through

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[22] Margaret Blanchard, "The Rhetoric of Communion: Voice in The Sound and the Fury," American Literature, 41 (January, 1970), p. 556.

[23] Blanchard, p. 561.

his aesthetic, his ethic as well.

The most insistent demonstration of Faulkner's aesthetic occurs in the last scene of this final section. That scene serves as a structural counterpart of the first scene in the novel. The novel begins and ends with images of vision. The first sentence of the novel depicts Benjy's point of view, describes his vision, and gives insight into his perceptual individuality. "Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting." (1) The last scene of the novel depicts the kind of vision Faulkner seeks to elicit from the reader. The setting of the scene is important, for again it involves Benjy and reminds us of his rigid and very personal sense of reality. Luster takes Benjy for another carriage-ride; but this time Luster drives around the left, rather than the right, side of the Confederate monument. Reacting to this alteration in ritual, Benjy becomes hysterical. He is calmed only when Jason stops the carriage and directs Luster to drive the usual way.

> Queenie moved again, her feet began to clop-clop steadily again, and at once Ben hushed. Luster looked quickly back over his shoulder, then he drove on. The broken flower dropped over Ben's fist and his eyes were empty and blue and serene again as cornice and facade flowed smoothly once more from left to right; post and tree, window and doorway, and signboard, each in its ordered place. (401)

The vision that informs these sentences is a total vision, one that encompasses, first of all, Benjy's own distorted vision, his eyes that are serene and blue only when the shapes of his world flow smoothly, predictably, and in their "ordered place." Our vision includes Benjy's vision, but it transcends it as well. The reader's vision and perception originates in the ironical view. A juxtaposition of the first and last sentences of the novel

clarifies this ironical view, for it suggests that irony arises in the discrepancy between the narrow vision of truth and the novel's message that such truth is really un-truth, that rigid order is disorder in disguise. In the final section of the novel, the reader is both involved and detached, able to understand Benjy's vision of truth and appreciation of order, and able, at the same time, to see that this kind of fragmented perception has brought, through Quentin and Jason, chaos, tragedy, and futility into the Compson world. The novel does not moralize directly, but its structure allows us--indeed, begs us--to experience its aesthetic--to move sympathetically and insightfully through the private worlds of Benjy, Quentin, and Jason to a realization that their visions of truth are fragmented and fallacious. Moving through the novel is an experience both in "words" and in "doing," for the reader must perceive and participate in motion in a way that Benjy cannot and Quentin and Jason do not. In Faulkner's description of the way the viewer participates in the aesthetic experience of Cezanne's Impressionistic paintings, he might well have been describing the reader's involvement in the aesthetic that informs The Sound and the Fury.

> The viewer is forced to do a good share of the labor of composition, to enter into the process of constructing the picture along with the painter, to recapitulate and bring to life the painter's experience of the scene. For those who are not too lazy to do the necessary work, the result is a richly dynamic esthetic experience, which the artist does not present to the viewer so much as he allows and encourages the viewer to share it.[24]

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[24] William Faulkner. As quoted by Linda Welshimer Wagner, Hemingway and Faulkner (Metuchen, N.J.: 1975), 136.

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