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Samuel Claud Whitehead April 7, 2011

“Swamped and Submerged in the Bright Unreal Flood”: Reflections on Water and Metaphor in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*

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Abstract

"Swamped and Submerged in the Bright Unreal Flood": Reflections on Water and Metaphor in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*

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This thesis explores how an understanding of the role water as both a literal and metaphorical element of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* provides characters with a richer existence, offers readers a means of understanding the notoriously difficult novels, and revisions the ability of narrative to impart truth. Recent scholarship highlighting the importance of metaphors in human cognition provides a novel means of examining the exposed consciousnesses of Faulkner's characters and how the metaphorical nature of their perception guides their experiences. Focusing on water metaphors in particular places the novels in conversation: *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrates the pervasiveness of water metaphors as a part of characters' thinking and as an integral component of readers' understanding of the novels; the overwhelming presence of water metaphors in *As I Lay Dying* offers a means of reconciling the different narratives to revision truth as a product of the perceptions of many; *Absalom, Absalom!* highlights the fluid nature of truth and suggests how readers approach a narrative: question, doubt, and become part of it. Though, at first, these novels generate obfuscation, the means to understand them also flows through their pages. For readers with knowledge of the way the human mind understands through metaphors based in the natural world, Faulkner's texts offer a chart by which to navigate towards comprehension.

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Introduction

Of all the natural elements present in William Faulkner's fiction, water proves the most resonant. Faulkner's own fictional county takes its name from water—Yoknapatawpha, according to its creator, comes from "a Chickasaw Indian word meaning 'water runs slow through flat land'" (Gwynn and Blotner 74). In its ubiquity, water profoundly affects the lives of those who play out their human dramas within the borders of Yoknapatawpha County. The daily encounters that Faulkner's characters have with water prove so important because their interactions in the physical realm influence how they think. Metaphorical relationships born of contact with the natural world affect the conceptual systems of some central characters in Faulkner's texts and allow them to perceive more deeply the complexities of human experience. Such means of comprehension (understanding one entity through its relation to another) also become models for the best ways to approach Faulkner's challenging texts. In *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* relating to and interacting with water provides characters with a richer existence, offers a means of understanding the notoriously difficult novels, and revisions the ability of narrative to impart truth.

Many Faulkner characters obsess about water, and the author also has much to say about the power of water as a part of the natural world. In *Faulkner at Nagano*, which chronicles his travels to Japan, Faulkner comments on the ubiquitousness of water there: "everywhere I have been in Japan, I have been conscious of always of the sound of water or that water was flowing, and I have seen children along the road, they like to play in water, they sprinkle the streets, and always there is water in motion, there's the sound of it, everywhere" (121). Faulkner, however, soon expands the scope of his awareness. He

continues: “I’m conscious always of water, the flowing, the sound of it, of people moving in water, living very close to water, that water is a very important part of their lives, not just to drink it, but the fact that there’s water” (122). Faulkner hereby reveals his fundamental understanding that water is essential for life, and this knowledge filters into his metaphorical thinking.

Faulkner’s statement about the effects of water is not an isolated occurrence. Joseph Blotner’s *Faulkner: A Biography* recounts another instance of Faulkner’s taking careful note of the importance of water. According to the story, “on an occasion when the Faulkners were visited by a distinguished professor and his wife from New Jersey, the couple remarked that they had traveled along the Mississippi on their way to ‘Ole Miss’ to see a friend” (1060). Faulkner acknowledges that even the briefest of exposures to the great Mississippi River has the potential to alter an individual indelibly. “That big river flows through the lives of all of us,” he replies, “even though it’s seventy five miles away” (1060). Even in casual conversation Faulkner does not hesitate to comment on an element so crucial to the characters in his novels. His awareness of water, however, goes deeper than the surface level of his language. Like his characters and even his texts, water affects the way Faulkner presents the concrete world and abstract concepts.

Faulkner’s expressions about his novels reveal that water plays an integral role in his own conceptualizations. Faulkner relies on his knowledge of the basic properties of water, just as his characters do, to describe the abstract concept of narrative storytelling. As Writer-in-Residence at the University of Virginia, Faulkner describes the goal of the writer: “[to] catch this fluidity which is human life and . . . focus a light on it and . . . stop long enough for people to be able to see it” (*Faulkner in the University* 239). Not only

does Faulkner best understand the onrushing of events that comprise human existence as a flow, but he also views time as an entity that is changeable, flexible, and in constant motion. In a statement that rests firmly atop the list of notable Faulkner phrases, recounted in Meriwether and Millgate's *Lion in the Garden,* he comments, "the fact that I have moved my characters around in time successfully, at least in my own estimation, proves to me my own theory that time is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people. There is no such thing as *was*—only *is*" (253). Such a sensitive understanding of water and its basic properties and qualities gives Faulkner the means to articulate the complex relation between the past and the present. For the author as well as his characters, then, water is indispensible in image making and the creation of language.

As demonstrated by the way his characters rely upon water in their linguistic constructs, Faulkner comprehends the fundamental power of the element in enhancing human understanding. Water has the most notable impact on Faulkner's characters in the cognitive structures that rely upon comparison (metaphor, simile, and the like). When seeking to comprehend the abstract concepts and experiences they face, individuals' often turn to what they best understand—common, concrete entities. By comparing one such object or abstraction they do not understand with another that they do, characters arrive at ways to face complexities with more forbearance. To cite an example from *As I Lay Dying*, when the young Vardaman equates his mother, who has recently died, to a fish he has just caught, his comparison stems from his quest to understand the idea of his mother's death by associating the stillness of her body with that of the dead fish. In saying, "My mother is a fish," he simply relies on the commonly understood "fish" to aid

in his comprehension of "mother" and her mortality (*As I Lay Dying* 84). This kind of comparison, however, can differ vastly from person to person. One individual may liken a mother to a fish in that both are living, while another may see that a mother is a fish in that both can swim. Despite these differences, certain components serve as effective terms of comparison because of their omnipresence. Water is one such element that fills this important role. The discrepancies between how individuals use water to think metaphorically illustrate many of the particularities of their personalities. André Bleikasten notes a like phenomenon—that Faulkner's "characters project themselves onto the landscape and make it throb with their desires and anxieties" (*Faulkner's As I Lay Dying* 113). The way characters understand nature not only provides them with a means to meet the complexities they encounter but illuminates their particular relation to the natural world.

The means by which Faulkner's characters understand the world becomes ever more relevant when considering Faulkner's storytelling style. His novels present the human mind in its immediacy, a feature of his works that makes them infinitely complex and engrossing. For example, the way that Benjy understands water influences how readers of *The Sound and the Fury* perceive water; Darl's interpretation of water in *As I Lay Dying* becomes that of the readers. Other novels, like *Absalom, Absalom!*, borrow from this technique an intense closeness to and awareness of its narrators. These three works accentuate the voices of individual characters and their modes of thinking. Stripping away the vestiges of narrative storytelling and relying purely upon the consciousnesses of his characters seems to be a result of Faulkner's own awareness of the natural world. Calvin Bedient describes this structure as "primarily naturalistic in

technique . . . the narrative soliloquy . . . a means of presenting the mind in its immediacy, directly [serving] the ends of realism" (75). That Faulkner's characters frequently rely on metaphorical conceptions of water and that such configurations make themselves evident through characters' perceptions suggests ways to understand the texts.

Faulkner's reliance on first-person narrators and their metaphors enhances how characters understand, influence, and alter the comprehension of his texts. The way Faulkner constructs his narratives draws readers into the experience of understanding. In *The Depictive Image: Metaphor and Literary Experience*, Phillip Stambovsky argues, "every work of art demonstrates to the literary reader a process of vision. Yet in literary experience more occurs, the reader actually participates in this demonstration" (67). The process of envisioning inherent in the experience of reading a narrative becomes ever more apparent as Faulkner exposes the consciousnesses of those whose perspectives constitute his texts.

An abundance of metaphor further calls readers into action. Though metaphor involves the close association of one entity with another, the terms never literally equate. For example, a human mother is never literally like a fish, but the process of equating the two terms instigates a search for the reasons why the two can be compared. "If literature is a kind of discourse which permits maximal subjective involvement to the reader," Gerard Steen notes in *Understanding Metaphor in Literature*, "understanding metaphor in literature may be the epitome of this kind of reading experience" (241). Readers work to equate the terms in metaphor and also seek to reconcile how Faulkner's characters' perceptions work together. The four distinct perspectives in *The Sound and the Fury*, the fifteen in *As I Lay Dying*, and the four in *Absalom, Absalom!* put readers to work just as

metaphor does. Offering a number of distinct perceptions of common series of events, the novels foster understanding of how the differing beliefs both of character and reader work together to establish meaning for the texts as a whole. Because of their sheer presence and utility for Faulkner's characters, water metaphors call readers to action and provide ways to unite the seemingly fragmented texts.

Like Faulkner's characters, those who read and study Faulkner rely heavily on water metaphors when understanding his work and thereby further establish the importance of water for Faulkner and perhaps even for human understanding. In *Faulkner's As I Lay Dying,* for example, Bleikasten likens the effect of Faulkner's use of multiple narrators to "a handful of pebbles . . . thrown into still water, rippling it's surface, making concentric circles which overlap and interact in unexpected ways as they expand" (48). His appraisal of Faulkner's storytelling method aptly describes the effect created by the multiplicity of narrators that construct his novels. Such metaphorical commentary does not exist in isolation. In his consideration of Faulkner's literature in *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond*, Cleanth Brooks also turns to the language of water: "the artist's age old problem [is] how to salvage from the onrushing stream of time a story or episode or simply a moment of insight or revelation, and preserve it in a form impervious to time" (259-260). The language of water and its properties again appears in its liquidity, fluxionality, and fluidity. Even such brief examples of critical language establish the key repetition of metaphors—Faulkner's characters and critics alike rely on metaphors involving water.[1] Whether understanding

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[1] The very ascription "stream of consciousness" to Faulkner's work exemplifies the tendency to describe his stylistics in terms involving water.

concepts as abstract as human sexuality or even as complex as written narrative, water works. Discovering the specific reasons why water so suits Faulkner's texts further reveals how conceptions of water help interpret the process of storytelling and reveal even the very nature of truth.

Most questions that have Faulkner's work as their focus, however, do not have simple answers. Water, in its fluidity and multiplicity of states is not quick to yield a solid foundation upon which to rest. The search for answers becomes even more difficult when accounting for many texts and the many characters they contain. The decision to focus on *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* results from the ways the texts speak to one another about water. Indeed, starting with *The Sound and the Fury,* traversing the pages of *As I Lay Dying,* and finally arriving at *Absalom, Absalom!* demonstrates how metaphors navigate toward revealing the effects of understanding on a narrative. The novels take their respective turns following the chronology of their publication to reveal how water deconstructs the traditional narrative, how that deconstruction and the overwhelming presence of metaphor incorporates the reader, and why responsibility divides among all parties in establishing narrative truth.

Faulkner's groundbreaking novel *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrates the pervasiveness of water in the conceptual systems of its characters and is the first novel in which Faulkner presents stories told from the perspectives of different narrators. Relying on the narratives of Benjy, Quentin, Jason, and Dilsey, Faulkner presents the story of the Compsons as they struggle to survive as a family. Although the perspectives of these four characters dominate the novel, Benjy and Quentin's are the most striking. Their associations with water come from their relationship with their sister, Caddy.

These connections, however, become obsessions that determine the actions of the two young men. Although the strongest images of water come from Quentin and Benjy, all four perceivers engage in storytelling, one of the novel's central preoccupations. Olga Vickery notes this particularly meta-fictional quality of the text: "It would appear . . . that the theme of *The Sound and the Fury*, as revealed by the structure, is the relation between the act and man's apprehension of the act, between the event and the interpretation. This relation is by no means a rigid or inelastic thing, but a matter of shifting perspective" (1018). The relationship between act and interpretation applies not only to the characters telling the story, but to an individual reading a text. *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrates the pervasiveness of metaphor—as a part of characters' thinking and as an integral component of readers' understanding of the novels.

As I Lay Dying, published only a year after *The Sound and the Fury,* further advances the centrality of water in characters' mental constructs and in understanding Faulkner's narratives. Relying on many more narrators to tell the tale of the Bundrens than that of the Compsons (fifteen instead of four), the novel at first seems terribly disjointed, and drawing a coherent narrative from the chaos seems quite impossible. Many of the characters in the novel, however, interact with and use water as a key component of their imagistic thinking. These conceptions dominate not only their immediate experiences, but that of reading the novel as well. Michel Delville highlights a central problem of the text: "*As I Lay Dying* is a novel struggling towards a unity of experience and articulation, created in spite of a multiplicity of experiences" (270). Such is the narrative tendency in much of Faulkner's work. As in *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying* not only tells a story, but revisions how a coherent, unified story can be told.

The overwhelming presence of the narrators' conceptions of water offers a means of reconciling the different narratives with each other to arrive at narrative truth created through the perceptions of many. Of the heard voices, Darl's and Addie's speak the loudest, but all characters who rely upon water in their modes of abstraction propose how to understand the novel—by dissolving the distinctions between tellers and allowing readers a way to reconcile the differences that occur among varying perceptions.

The importance of *Absalom, Absalom!* arises from its focus on stories and storytelling, and the relationship between water and the narrative form is significant to the meaning of the novel. The story of Thomas Sutpen constructed years after his death is a central subject. As in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying,* many voices create the narrative in *Absalom, Absalom!* Here the presence of distinct narrators espousing different truths and opinions discards traditional narrative form and authority. No single voice carries the most influence, and the novel offers no solitary and trustworthy guide. Laura Bolinger notes that the novel "gives no comforting certainty to which to cling: the narrative offers no clear chronology, no single protagonist whose actions [readers] follow, no central narrative authority on whose authority [readers] may rely" and further reveals how "principle narrators cannot even agree on points of fact, much less the interpretation of those facts" (199). In its own seeming chaos, however, the novel offers a solution to the disorder.

As Quentin and Shreve work through Sutpen's story in their cold dorm room at Harvard University, their process becomes wholly fluid—they at one point become such a part of the narrative they tell that their very consciousnesses enter the story. In their construction of the tale, they come closer than any other narrator to reaching the truth of

the story, even though that truth is by no means certain. Their process redefines the ability of a narrative to present truth and as such bears on other Faulkner texts as well. Reading *Absalom, Absalom!* suggests how to approach a story: question, doubt, and become part of it. Just as Quentin and Shreve do, readers of Faulkner must, when facing a multiplicity of narrators, sift through various interpretations to find truth.

The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying, and *Absalom, Absalom!* work together to demonstrate the importance of water in Faulkner's fictional world and beyond. The attributes of water—dissolution, erasure, and fluidity—upon which Faulkner's characters focus make themselves apparent in these narratives. Readers of the novels cannot ignore how water affects Faulkner's texts—distinctions among narrators dissolve and perceptions coalesce. This dissolution offers the opportunity for readers to engage with the novels, and the presence of metaphor facilitates finding meaning amid chaos. This process of incorporation, along with Faulkner's storytelling method, which is fluid and involves a number of different parties, defines the reader's task. *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* reveal the ways that distinct perceptions become indistinct and flow together when characters obsess about water. *Absalom, Absalom!* offers an example of ideal storytellers and the importance of equality in narration in accessing truth. Though, at first, these novels generate obfuscation, the means to understand them also flows through their pages. For the reader with knowledge of the way the human mind understands through metaphor, Faulkner's texts offers a chart by which to navigate towards comprehension.

The Sound and the Fury: Water and Dissolving Minds

Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury,* first published in 1929, introduces his technique of presenting a narrative through the perceptions of multiple characters. Such means of storytelling revisions the process of narrative construction because it provides a direct view of the consciousnesses of Faulkner's characters. This proximity allows for the close examination of the ways character think of their world and their place in it. Although Benjy, Quentin, Jason, and Dilsey share the responsibility of presenting the narrative of the Compsons' collapse, the first two sections of the novel best illustrate the ubiquity of water in the conceptual systems of Faulkner's characters. Water and its metaphorical implications dominate Benjy's and Quentin's sections, especially concerning their respective relationships with their sister, Caddy.

For both Benjy and Quentin, their awareness of water pulls them through the novel and guides their actions and perceptions. In "Symbolism of Water in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*," Biljana Oklopčić notes the importance of "water in all its physical conditions and manifestations" and how water is the element "without which the [novel] would not be what it is*"* (247). Benjy and Quentin's sections best demonstrate the power of metaphor to guide the interpretation of an experience. Because Faulkner presents the story through their eyes, the ways that Benjy and Quentin understand impose themselves on readers of the novel. As their awareness of water begins to shape their world, it also affects the novel. The force and impact of their understanding illustrate the importance of water not only for the characters of the novel, but for the derivation any cohesive meaning from the four distinct sections of the text.

Because his section illustrates the influence of the human conceptual system (even in the least developed of minds), Benjy Compson's chapter of *The Sound and the Fury* serves as the best entry point into the discussion of water and metaphor. To borrow the language of Macbeth's soliloquy from which Faulkner takes the title of the novel, Benjy is an idiot. As Faulkner presents Benjy's consciousness, no complex metaphors occur in his perception. He describes the events of his life with the objectivity of what Elizabeth Kerr refers to as his "unreflecting 'camera eye'" (48). Although Benjy cannot articulate the relationships that structure his experience, he lives in a world shaped by those associations. The presentation of Benjy's mind as it exists, without the filtering of any thoughts or perceptions, fully exposes his metaphorical thoughts and how they influence his understanding. The way he relates to water guides his actions and thoughts and plunges his already fragile existence into further turmoil.

The simple ways Benjy relates water to his sister dominate his thoughts and control his actions. Though he does not connect water to Caddy as others might—by the fact that the two share common properties—Benjy's conceptions of his sister nonetheless comprise some of his most poignant experiences. For him, the simple memory of Caddy bathing in the Compson's branch firmly establishes his sister's relation to water. Upon going down to the stream to help Luster find his quarter, Benjy's mind slips back to the memory of when he first makes this connection. He recalls a scene of the Compson children playing in the branch and focuses upon his sister: "She was wet. We were playing in the branch and Caddy squatted down and got her dress wet" (*The Sound and the Fury* 11). The brief dispute among siblings that follows stands out in Benjy's memory and reveals the strength of his attachment to his sister. Caddy claims that she

"will run away and never come back"—the hollow threat of an exasperated child, but words that forecast her later flight from her family and her hometown of Jefferson (*The Sound and the Fury* 12). Her statement upsets her brother Benjy, and after she marries and leaves home, he grieves for her loss the rest of his life. The mere sight of his sister in the water triggers a reaction from Benjy. He sees his sister's muddy drawers and begins to cry—only Caddy can effectively comfort him to "hush." As he always does, Benjy obeys his sister. He perceives, however, that Caddy smells "like trees in the rain" (*The Sound and the Fury* 12). This simple sequence of events stands out as one of Benjy's most emotional moments with his sister because the series of events links Caddy to water in his mind. Though often easily formed, such metaphorical representations can become permanent features of the intellectual landscape. The rest of Benjy's section—and indeed the rest of his life—consists of the pull and tug of his exposure to water, which inevitably evokes sweet but painful memories of his sister.

Faulkner's choice in constructing the narrative of *The Sound and the Fury* through the perceptions of his characters seems even more radical when considering the often-erratic nature of human consciousness. Even the most focused minds wander, stray, and slip. This instability increases, however, when the elements combined in metaphorical relationships begin to alter their states. Benjy Compson's mind is quite prone to fluid shifts, many of which transport him from the present to the past and memories of his sister, Caddy. In these "fragmentary impressions" of the past, as Kerr refers to them, "Caddy is frequently the central figure," and water recurrently plays an important role (48). In one such instance, Benjy not only connects Caddy to water, but she becomes and seems to merge with water. Benjy remembers how "he [goes] to the bathroom door"

where he can "hear the water" (*The Sound and the Fury* 27). He listens to the sound of the faucet in the bathroom until the noise ceases, and the bathroom door opens. Benjy's consciousness presents the events as such: "I listened to the water. I couldn't hear the water, and Caddy opened the door" (*The Sound and the Fury* 27). In Benjy's mind the water stops flowing when he sees Caddy because in his mind the two have become one. To Benjy, Caddy is water—water is Caddy. So, when Benjy feels that Caddy, the most stable person in his life, somehow changes, he becomes quite distressed.

Any alteration in Caddy's normal state destabilizes Benjy and throws his mind into disorder. Caddy's discovery of Benjy waiting outside the bathroom leads to another demonstration of his of his strongly metaphorical perspective of his sister. As she opens the door Benjy notices not only that the water stops running, but that "Caddy smells like trees" (*The Sound and the Fury* 27). Here, Benjy places his sister more fully in the natural world and again adds to her relation to water. Although Caddy's natural smell comforts Benjy, he soon becomes unsettled by the unnatural smell of her perfume. Caddy offers Benjy her perfume and characterizes its scent as most would: "'Sweet. Smell. Good'" (*The Sound and the Fury* 27). To Benjy, however, the perfume smells neither sweet nor good because it is unnatural and not the smell he normally associates with his sister.

As Benjy begins to bellow, Caddy realizes what has upset her brother and takes the perfume away, but she fails to grasp the implications of what she witnesses. In Benjy's mind, Caddy is water or trees in the rain—both associations are natural and pure. The possibility that she might change her natural properties, or share her natural gifts with another individual disturbs Benjy. Caddy, as Benjy understands her, provides

stability to his tumultuous existence. When Caddy becomes less natural—less like water and trees in the rain—one of the fundamental principles of Benjy's world shifts. His mind is unwavering in its need for Caddy and her stability, an immutability illustrated by his memory and its ability to disturb his mind so intensely.

Benjy's conceptions of his sister not only establish his connection to her, but also present his relationships with other members of the Compson family. In his mind, Benjy links more than one Compson to water. Those he feels close to become associated with water—his metaphorical understanding proves so effective because of its ability to expand. In his memories, Benjy perceives both Quentin and Mr. Compson in relation to water. Benjy remembers: "Father took me up. He smelled like rain" (*The Sound and the Fury* 41). Later, in another memory, Benjy also senses that "Quentin [smells] like rain, too," and he thereby creates a web of connections in the novel (*The Sound and the Fury* 42). To Benjy, Caddy is the rain; Quentin is the rain; and Mr. Compson is the rain—he expands his conceptual understanding of water to include others for whom he cares. This alteration represents an instance of what makes a metaphorical conceptual system so effective: its ability to expand past an initial connection. Benjy, however, also observes the way his family members react to the rain and thereby indicates how his siblings relate to water and each other.

Though Benjy quickly relates Quentin, Caddy, and his father to the rain, not all who fall into this thought pattern find themselves pleased to be there. Quentin and Caddy, in particular, reveal their discomfort with water on a number of different occasions. When he remembers the rain on the Compson's roof, Benjy recalls how Caddy reacts: "It's still raining, Caddy said. I hate rain. I hate everything" (*The Sound*

and the Fury 37). In another memory, Quentin reacts similarly. As Benjy's mind wanders to the recollection of Quentin returning home after a fight, he recalls his brother "[wishing] it wouldn't rain" (*The Sound and the Fury* 42). Their shared dislike of rain seems quite in sync with how Benjy conceives of water. Caddy and Quentin both appear to understand how water evokes sentiments of extreme, natural connectedness, which in their case eventually haunt their relationship. Benjy also sees water as the substance of intense connection and extreme naturalness, but he simply appreciates the ability to connect to another individual. Though he does not seem to be conscious of his own mental state, perhaps his obsession with water, evocative of the natural world, indicates his remove from that world of which he desires to be a part. In their dislike of the rain, however, Quentin and Caddy establish their belief that the natural world offers much to despise. Their reactions to water, indicative of the importance and dominance of water in their relationship, become a central preoccupation of Quentin's section of the novel.

Section Two of *The Sound and the Fury* concentrates on Quentin Compson, the oldest of the Compson children, and shows how water affects Faulkner's texts. The chapter chronicles the final hours of Quentin's life on June 2, 1910, and his somewhat mundane experiences in Cambridge, Massachusetts, interspersed with jumps in time and place made by his very active memory. As with Benjy, understanding Quentin's interactions with water illuminates his relationship with his sister, Caddy. The way he relates to water, in his case, leads him to death—Quentin's suicide and the manner in which he chooses to end his life are a direct result of his association of his sister with water. Faulkner's summation of Quentin's predicament paints him as and individual "who [loves] not his sister's body but some concept of Compson honor precariously and

(he [knows] well) only temporarily supported by the minute fragile membrane of her maidenhead . . . who [loves] not the idea of incest which he could not commit, but . . . some Presbyterian concept of its eternal punishment" (*The Sound and the Fury* 207-208). Understanding the reasons why and how Quentin obsesses about his sister and what she represents reveals the effect of water on his mind and the text. Like Benjy's, Quentin's mind falls prey to his attraction to water—by the close of his section all his thoughts dissolve and flow together until he literally drowns. Like Quentin, the novel also becomes consumed with naturalness, alters its narrative, and allows its distinct perceptions to blend.

The moment when Quentin initially associates his sister with water comes through Benjy's point of view and reinforces the shared nature of their preoccupation—both men connect their sister to water as the Compson children play in the branch. Upon becoming muddy, Caddy threatens to remove her soiled clothes. After establishing his superiority over Caddy (by noting her younger age), Quentin warns her not to do so: "'I bet you better not'" (*The Sound and the Fury* 12). Caddy refuses to listen and begins to undress. Benjy recounts like a reporter the scene that follows: "'You just take your dress off.' Quentin said. Caddy took her dress off and threw it on the bank. Then she didn't have anything on but her bodice and drawers, and Quentin slapped her and she slipped and fell down in the water. When she got up she began to splash water on Quentin" (*The Sound and the Fury* 11-12). Caddy ignores her brother's command—she has no modesty and is carefree in exposing her body to those around her. Quentin reacts as expected partly because he has been disobeyed and partly because he is embarrassed by her lack of modesty. Caddy's defiance, however, shakes Quentin in a very particular way. In her

actions, Caddy not only resists Quentin but exposes her budding female body. Though the scene devolves into a seemingly innocent water fight, the event makes Caddy's sexuality shockingly apparent to Quentin. He spends the rest of his short life ruminating upon this and similar experiences with her. In the moment, Caddy is confident of natural sexuality. Indeed, standing there in the branch she splashes everyone around her with water as she revels in her naturalness. In his mind, Quentin quite easily makes, as Oklopčić notes, "the connection between the body of a woman and the body of water"—and finds himself soaked through with the double awareness that his sister is not only kin, but a sexual being (251). The scene that follows, however, further connects Caddy to water in Quentin's mind.

Caddy's sexual nature proves to be more than some fleeting attribute—just as her sexuality never fades from Quentin's consciousness, it remains a strong drive in her. As the Compson children prepare for bed after playing in the branch, Caddy must accept the consequences of her actions. Though Benjy narrates the events, Dilsey pronounces Caddy's fate: "'Just look at you,' Dilsey said. She wadded the drawers and scrubbed Caddy's behind with them. 'It done soaked clean through onto you.' she said. 'But you won't get no bath here this night'" (*The Sound and the Fury* 48). Caddy must sleep in the soiled wetness that Quentin comes to associate with her sexuality—even the work of Dilsey's hand proves insufficient to remove the effects of Caddy's open acknowledgement of her body in the branch. Although the Compson children view this series of events, Quentin takes most to heart what Vickery articulates: "the stains of one's experience are not that easily removed" (1030). The incident intensifies the conception of water in Quentin's mind. He has discovered his sister's womanhood and her lack of

shame, realities which he constantly struggles to comprehend. He cannot ignore the fact that his sister is a desirable young woman and that he too possesses a natural sexuality. He also cannot deny that he is Caddy's brother. As these desires play themselves out in Quentin's section, they do so in terms of water. Indeed, as Bleikasten notes, "throughout section two Caddy's body is . . . metaphorically linked to water and wetness" (*The Most Splendid Failure* 119). The particular connections that Quentin makes between his sister and water highlight the components of their relationship that trouble him most—her sexuality and their shared blood.

Once established, Quentin's conflicting desires begin to pull him apart. He sees in water the lucid pureness he wants to find in his sister as well as the wetness of her natural sexuality. Over the course of his final hours in Cambridge his mind jumps back and forth between the past and present to define further his understanding of Caddy and water. A later visit to the Compson's branch reveals the darker implications of his strong mental connections regarding Caddy's sexuality. The flashback comes in the last hours of his life and recalls a time shortly after Quentin discovers Caddy's amorous escapades with Dalton Ames. In the recollection, Caddy " [lies] in the water her head on the sand spit water flowing about her hips . . . her skirt half saturated [flops] along her flanks to the waters motion in heavy ripples" (*The Sound and the Fury* 94). In Quentin's mind, Caddy does not simply sit in the branch, but becomes a part of the water, a connection that echoes the one Benjy makes while listening to his sister in the bathroom. The water and Caddy are each imbued with what Oklopčić calls a "sensual, erotic quality" that further illuminates the troubled relationship with her brother (4). Spiteful and jealous that another man has experienced Caddy's sexuality, Quentin returns with Caddy to the

branch hoping to regain the past when the desire for Caddy was his alone. Unable to reconcile his urges and his filial responsibilities, Quentin responds to his sense of loss by turning to another one of his preoccupations—how oblivion might allow him to escape the world and his obsessions.

Back in the branch, Quentin's preoccupation with his sister reveals his fixation on death, which he sees as an escape from his internal conflict. He holds "the point of the knife at her throat" and tells Caddy, "it wont take but a second then I can do mine I can do mine then" (*The Sound and the Fury* 96). For a moment it seems as if Caddy might agree and end her own problems as well as those of her brother by letting him take both their lives and allowing their blood to spill and commingle in the branch. The intense emotion of the scene warrants its presentation exactly as it appears in the novel:

> dont cry
>
> Im not crying Caddy
>
> push it are you going to
>
> do you want me to
>
> yes push it
>
> touch your hand to it
>
> dont cry poor Quentin
>
> but I couldnt stop she held my head against her damp hard breast I could hear her heart going firm and slow now not hammering and the water gurgling among the willows in the dark and waves of honeysuckle coming up the air (*The Sound and the Fury* 96).

In this instance, Quentin's mind establishes the connection between water and death, adding to his understanding of water. Even though he has the opportunity to act upon his desires, Quentin allows the moment to pass. Only when his sister finally agrees to accept Quentin's blade, in language that could easily describe the tension before sexual intercourse, does Quentin break. At the height of his despair from his conflicting desires, he inquires of Caddy multiple times whether she recalls "the day damuddy died when [she] sat down in the water in [her] drawers*"*—shedding light on the experience that sparks his struggle (*The Sound and the Fury* 94). Caddy, however, does not respond and leaves Quentin to his own grief. He has the chance to end his anguish in a conflation of sex, blood, and water, but he cannot act. The rest of his action on the final day of his life occurs in the shadow of this moment of impotence. Later, this failed suicide attempt deepens Quentin's obsession with water, and this element becomes even more central to his existence and quest to escape.

As a relic of his obsession with death and a precursor to his drowning, Quentin translates his emotional anguish to the physical realm and associates water with pain. After breaking his grandfather's pocket watch in his Harvard dormitory, Quentin moves to clean his freshly cut finger and notices how "the water [makes] his finger smart a little*"* (*The Sound and the Fury* 51). The incident would appear insignificant if Quentin had not already connected water and pain. In the aftermath of a physical altercation with Caddy, when she discovers Quentin with Natalie, a fleeting love interest, Quentin recalls "where the rain [touches] his forehead it [begins] to smart [his] hand [comes] away streaking pink in the rain;" when asked whether or not his forehead hurts, he responds, "Of course it does what do you reckon" (*The Sound and the Fury* 87). That water would

cause a recent cut to hurt seems somewhat obvious—Quentin does not notice the pain, however, until his wound comes into contact with water. Before the water from his dormitory faucet and before the rain, he does not feel pain. For Quentin, water is more than water—he links it to Caddy and her natural sexuality. To argue that Quentin's conceptions alone cause him pain would be somewhat extreme, but the idea is nonetheless seductive. When Quentin understands Caddy as water, and water causes Quentin to hurt, he thereby ascribes water with the power to inflict pain. As his obsession with his sister and water expands to encompass physical pain, it also comes to include other forms of the element.

The Charles River, that flow of water that moves along the banks of Harvard University always within sight, sound, or smell, dominates Quentin's section. This river becomes as important to Quentin's life (and death) as the Compson's branch. His mind so obsesses with the river that "he [begins] to feel the water before he comes to the bridge" (*The Sound and the Fury* 73). Even when otherwise occupied, Quentin fixates on the Charles River. Riding the trolley back from Boston, he can "feel the water beyond the twilight," long before he sees the river (*The Sound and the Fury* 107). The very presence of the Charles shakes Quentin to his core because it serves as a constant reminder of his desires for Caddy. Quentin's awareness of water becomes even more inescapable when he smells the river in spring and associates it with the smell of blooming wisteria (a smell he associates with the Compson's branch). According to Quentin, "when [the Charles] bloomed in spring and it rained the smell was everywhere you didn't notice it so much at other times but when it rained the smell began to come into the house" (*The Sound and the Fury* 107). As if the scents of new life in spring do

not torment him enough, the river sends them into the air and soaks the world with the indications of sexuality and rebirth. In Quentin's mind, water relates not only to sexuality, but an intensified sexuality he cannot escape. When in Cambridge he "[smells] the curves of the river beyond the dusk"—his olfactory awareness provides another dimension of water he cannot avoid (*The Sound and the Fury* 107). Quentin's constant awareness of the Charles River simply indicates his inability to escape from the shadow of his own obsessions.

Having already projected Caddy's sexuality and his own pain onto water, Quentin sees water as the inevitable source of his demise. Indeed, in the face of his own depression, Quentin apprehends the power of water to destroy. While standing on a bridge across the Charles River, he thinks, "When you leave a leaf in the water a long time after a while the tissue will be gone and the delicate fibers waving slow as the motion of sleep. They dont touch one another, no matter how knotted up they once were, no matter how close they once lay to the bones*"* (*The Sound and the Fury* 74). He sees that water dissolves but feels that in destruction comes peace. The leaf easily represents Quentin's own body and his relationship with Caddy—two individuals tangled, never allowed to touch, and destroyed by water. Bleikasten takes full account of the network of emotions that Quentin comes to associate with the element, which holds its "promise of obliteration, oblivion, and peace, and yet . . . also retains to the last the ambiguity of its sexual implications . . . water is a figure of desire, of its seductions but also its dangers" (*The Most Splendid Failure* 119). In the water that causes Quentin such anguish, he also sees a way to end his suffering. He envisions witnessing his own death in the Charles, how he "will look down and see [his] murmuring bones and the deep water like wind,

like a roof of wind, and after a long time they cannot distinguish even bones upon the lonely and inviolate sand" (*The Sound and the Fury* 51). Water, the very representation of what causes Quentin such pain, offers him a means to escape that anguish, for water possesses the ability to dissolve his being. He wants nothing more than to flow into the natural world where he can become one with what he so desires in his sister.

Though Quentin never dissolves into Caddy, he claims that he does. By desperately putting his desires into words, he tests the power of language to bring truth into being. He wishes to speak his desire for Caddy into reality and takes many opportunities to posture as one who has committed incest. From very early in his section, however, Quentin seems aware of the limits of language and the kind of confusion that arises when talking precedes action. When he encounters three young boys fishing for an elusive trout, Quentin observes how "they all [talk] at once, their voices insistent and contradictory and impatient, making of unreality a possibility, then a probability, then an incontrovertible fact, as people will when their desires become words" (*The Sound and the Fury* 75). When multiple voices express a common desire (or one voice tries to express multiple desires), those voices often become interwoven and confused as they try to speak their wants into being. Quentin, as Donald Kartiganer articulates, wants "to be in a world where telling alone makes things 'so,' where unreality may be spoken into fact" (87). To impart language with such power, however, threatens the identities of the voices speaking. For Quentin to speak his desires into being would further undermine the stability of his mind. He struggles to equate the two conflicting desires, just as any individual works to find the connections between two terms in a metaphor. As with metaphor, however, Quentin will never possess the ability to reconcile his desires for

Caddy with the fact that they share blood. Quentin moves closer and closer to his end while continuing to try placing his desires into words. He throws his mind into more disorder as he draws closer and closer to the water he now connects with Caddy, death, and dissolution.

When Quentin tries to bring his desires for his sister into reality through language, his mind thrusts him into further despair. As he becomes even more torn between his obsessions and more focused on water, he realizes the gap between saying and doing. As in Benjy's section, leaps between the past and the present plague Quentin's mind. The first of these instances comes as he recalls the day of Caddy's wedding and confesses to an imagined sexual relationship with his sister: "I have committed incest, Father" (*The Sound and the Fury* 49). Though his confession does not represent the truth, Quentin hopes that language somehow possesses the power to make it true. Quentin hopes that incest will somehow negate Caddy's sexual relationships with others. He remembers trying to convince his father of his desired deeds: "I have committed incest I said Father it was I it was not Dalton Ames" (*The Sound and the Fury* 51). Each time he approaches his father with his confession, however, Mr. Compson does not believe him. His father so doubts his son's capacity for such action that he speaks of the matter with much candour and does not realize Quentin's anguish. Mr. Compson seems to mock his son's final attempts to resolve the troubles fragmenting his mind. At the end of his chapter, when Quentin recalls the final time he and his father discuss the matter, a crucial scene reveals the effect of water on his mind and on his sexuality.

The climax of Quentin's internal struggle comes from the moment just before his section (and his life) comes to a close. His recollection of a conversation with his father

highlights the reasons why Quentin's struggle dominates his being. His own mind begins to dissolve as a result of his preoccupation with water. The scene commences in orderly fashion as Quentin hears the belltower chime "the three quarters " (*The Sound and the Fury* 111). Despite its structured beginning, the passage quickly devolves into a stream of thought as Quentin recalls speaking candidly to his father about Caddy. Mr. Compson questions his son: "did you try to make her do it" ("it" referring to the act of incest) (*The Sound and the Fury* 112). Quentin's response presents the reasons for his continued insistence that he has indeed committed incest and the hope he puts in the power of language—"i was afraid to," Quentin responds, "i was afraid she might and then it wouldn't have done any good but if i could tell you we did it would have been so and then the others wouldnt be so and then the world would roar away" (*The Sound and the Fury* 112). This confession, pulled from the interwoven threads of Quentin's and his father's voice (by this point in the section all speech markers and punctuation disappear from the page in a flood of words), illuminates both his reverence and fear of the power of language. In these passages, Quentin's very mind dissolves and prevents him from keeping track of individual voices. He also expresses his desire to erase what he sees as Caddy's transgressions and feels a willingness to sin, but he finds himself largely impotent to do either. He wants to act but because of his instability finds that he cannot. He cannot reconcile his sexual desire for his sister with his desire to protect her. Though he fails to bridge the gap between the two impulses, he cannot escape the influence of his metaphorical understanding of his sister.

In the last reaches of his sorrows, Quentin turns to water—the element that most calls his sister to mind—and becomes drawn not so much to his sister but his conceptions

of her. The extent to which his very existence comes to be dominated by his metaphorical understanding illustrates the impact of his mind on his existence. Trapped between the twin currents of his desires for Caddy, Quentin wants nothing more than to dissolve seamlessly into his hesitations. He simply wants, as Vickery puts it, to "surrender [himself] to [water's] hypnotic rhythm, which, like sleep, soothes the mind into unconsciousness, blurring thought and emotion, eliminating the necessity for acting" (1030). His inability to reconcile his conflicting obsessions prevents him from acting upon either desire. Quentin sees his failure as wholesale and complete and this particular realization leads him to the breaking point.

That Quentin chooses to end his life in water comes as no surprise. His recurring obsession with water and its entanglement with his desires make his suicide by drowning expected, but no less telling. Essentially, his merger with the Charles River resolves his mind's most insistent preoccupations. Oklopčić points to Quentin's dominant motivation for choosing the river for his death: "by drowning in a natural element that he associates with his sister Caddy, [he] makes his dream come true—he eventually engages in forbidden sexual intercourse with his sister" (251). Though he speaks of his suicide in peaceful terms ("[the river] twinkled and glinted, like breathing, the float slow like breathing too"), the very fact that he chooses to end his life underscores his tremendous pain (*The Sound and the Fury* 51). His penetration of the water's surface becomes not only his union with his sister and a means of both inflicting and alleviating pain, but also an escape from the world that has hindered his ability to express his desires.

Quentin's act of ending his life in water has an intimate association with his web of metaphorical conceptions related to Caddy. In his suicide Quentin finally acts, even

though that act serves as what Vickery calls "a means of escaping the situation" (127). Such an escape, however, comes as no surprise. Hortense Spillers comments on the inevitability of Quentin's final actions: " to my mind," she says, "one of the most remarkable features of *The Sound and the Fury* is that the reader never actually experiences Quentin's suicide by drowning but collects clues along the trajectory of his narrative that indicate its imminence" (548). The certainty of Quentin's fate relates closely to his metaphorical conceptual system and the elements that form his understanding. From the moment Caddy splashes him in the branch and Quentin grasps his dual desires for his sister, Quentin charts a course toward his drowning in the Charles. Living his life in the shadows of his competing desires, he simply cannot equate his sexual craving for Caddy with his role as her brother and sees dissolution as the perfect means to incorporate. The way he understands his sister and his relation to her determines his course of action in the novel.

Quentin's obsessions and how he understands his world hold an important place in *The Sound and the Fury,* a novel of narrative innovation. A number of the qualities of Quentin's section emphasize his preoccupations with language and its inability to create reality. Quentin involves himself in telling a story, and his perception of events brings the narrative into being. Though language somehow falls short of creating truth in his reality, the same language makes his story. Words do not form or ever fully articulate reality but exist as a kind of second-best option. As in a metaphor, one term (language) never fully equates with the other (reality). Language, however, still serves as an effective means by which to access and understand reality. This quality of Quentin's section takes *The Sound and the Fury* into the realm of meta-fiction. The presentation of

his thoughts in their immediacy and how his metaphorical conceptions guide his actions draw much attention to understanding the narrative. In a novel concerned with the acts of narration and interpretation, Quentin's obsession with the relationship between language and reality becomes crucial.

Although Quentin's preoccupation with water makes itself manifest in the subject matter of his section, his mind falls prey to his concerns about water. He finds himself locked in a struggle between the world of nature and the world of society—one dictating his desires for his sister, the other that those desires not exist. His place in between these two conflicting currents reveals itself in the form of his narration. By the end of the section, Quentin has become so obsessed with water that his very mind begins to show the effects of the properties of water—his thoughts become indistinct, he loses himself between the past and present, and he struggles to find the surface and gain control of his desires. Quentin's very consciousness yearns to become the water he sees flowing in the Charles River "whispering and clucking about the stone in fading swirls" (*The Sound and the Fury* 74). Like his struggle with his conflicting longings, Quentin cannot gain control of his narration. Bleikasten remarks that "many paragraphs in the second section begin quite conventionally as controlled narration, only to end in uncontrolled interior discourse . . . again and again he tries to tell his story in an orderly fashion; again and again his narrative gets caught in the vortex of his obsessions" (*The Most Splendid Failure* 93). His mind, it seems, wants to reconcile his desires as his section takes on a fluidity of its own. Such an outcome is not surprising, considering Quentin's continuous return to water. The chapter's fluidity, however, provides a means by which to

understand the innovative narrative in *The Sound and the Fury* and how its seemingly disjointed perspectives cohere.

What makes *The Sound and the Fury* innovative as a novel also makes it difficult—the challenge of constructing a narrative from the accounts of multiple narrators and their seemingly distinct, isolated perceptions. This method of storytelling would seem to inhibit the construction of plot but in fact incorporates the reader into the storytelling process. An omniscient, authoritative narrator upon whom to rely cannot be found in *The Sound and the Fury*. As Cleanth Brooks notes, however, the recurrence of subject matter begins to open the text: "the sense of enlightenment comes simply from the fact that [readers] are traversing the same territory in circling movements . . . the cumulative effect of names and characterizations begins to dramatize for [readers] with compelling urgency a situation [they] have come to accept as [their] own" (*William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* 326). The process of reading the novel becomes a process of interpretation—of reconciling the perspectives with one another to create a (somewhat) unified whole. Vickery describes this action as "Faulkner [forcing] the reader to reconstruct the story and apprehend its significance" (1018). Between the gaps in the narratives among the four sections stands the reader invested with power not generally afforded by a linear narrative. Since no two narrators in the novel have the same perception of Caddy's deeds, no two readers will approach the synthesis of the sections in the same manner. This process, which Vickery describes as "a matter of shifting perspective, for, in a sense, each [reader] creates his own truth" echoes the process undertaken when understanding metaphor (1018). The presentation of distinct entities forces an individual to consider how those entities interact and inform one

another. An awareness of the power of water to dissolve and incorporate only facilitates this process of reconciliation. Without Quentin's and Benjy's obsessions with water and the metaphors which open the space for the reader, *The Sound and the Fury* would prove neither as immensely challenging nor as vastly rewarding.

Water is not only significant for the narratives of Benjy and Quentin, but also serves as an effective tool by which to understand the novel. Like both brothers, readers of *The Sound and the Fury* must make meaning of what they experience. Like Benjy they find themselves "trying to say . . . trying to say*"* (*The Sound and the Fury* 34). For both brothers, memories of their sister Caddy, often very closely associated with water, dissolve the past from the present and transport them into memory. Thus, entities thought to be distinct and separate become one and the same when water is involved. This dissolution calls the narrative into question from the moment that Benjy travels backward in time through memory. The instability of the narrative, in Kartigarner's view, reveals how the novel "fiercely celebrates invention [with] the freedom of prose that [communicates] yet will not be controlled into what normally passes as a stable set of meanings" (72). In the end, the novel does not "signify nothing," but conceives of truth as a fluid process involving the perceptions of multiple minds. Vickery provides a fitting, final appraisal: "the result" of understanding the fluid nature of the text "is not a needless confusion, but rather, in Henry James's words, 'a certain fullness of truth—truth diffused, distributed and, as it were, atmospheric" (1017). The novel ends "as cornice and façade [flow] smoothly once more from left to right, post and tree, window and doorway and signboard," a fluid progression that comforts a wailing Benjy (*The Sound and the Fury* 199). So too should readers find in the flow of narrative satisfaction and the sense of

comfort that comes from incorporation and connectedness invoked by conceptions of water, and the sense of complexity afforded by an understanding of metaphor.

As I Lay Dying: Water and Dissolving Texts

Because of their intimate knowledge of the natural world, the characters of *As I Lay Dying* repeatedly turn to nature in their metaphorical understanding. Water, in particular, appears again and again as an element that allows characters to comprehend abstract concepts.[2] The number of instances in which characters employ water metaphors signal water's primacy in the natural world and human understanding. In *Faulkner's As I Lay Dying*, Bleikasten notes the importance of water: "[it] . . . seems to be the most dominant element in *As I Lay Dying* . . . for it is water that translates most appropriately in to the register of the perceptible, the obsession with chaos and death which wells up from the whole novel" (111-112). Indeed, the players in Faulkner's dark comedy exist in such close connection to their natural environment that they see themselves wholly in it, and the natural world wholly in them. These strong associations manifest themselves in the way characters use the natural world in their conceptual systems. Like T*he Sound and the Fury* before it, *As I Lay Dying* builds its narrative from the distinct perceptions of its characters. Also like its predecessor, the novel becomes best understood when the many voices begin to blend into each other—a process helped along by the presence of water metaphors in the text. In particular, the water metaphors that Addie and Darl employ to understand the idea of existence and the very concept of definition prove especially useful in seeing how the characters understand themselves, and also how to interpret the fragmented novel as a unified whole.

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[2] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson assert that for all individuals, "there is a physical environment [they] interact with, more or less successfully" that plays an integral role in structuring human conceptual systems (146).

Addie Bundren's metaphorical conceptions signal not only her expression of the failure of language but highlight the pervasive nature of metaphor in structuring experience. From the very early days of scholarship focused on *As I Lay Dying*, critics have seen Addie as "the center of the story" (O'Connor 46). Her death provides the impetus for the Bundren's journey, and her section of the novel puts the others into focus. Taking thorough stock of how she uses water metaphors reveals their role in the text as a whole. Addie Bundren is a woman obsessed. In "Being, Knowing, and Saying in the 'Addie' Section of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*," Constance Pierce delineates just what Addie yearns for: "what [she] is before she begins to think about, or objectify, it (Addie Bundren before she is aware of being Addie Bundren)" (294). Addie realizes, however, that objective experience is hard to come by and that with every experience comes the awareness of that experience. She thus wants what she can never have—simply the chance to be. Despite the impossibility of what she seeks, Addie comes to ascribe certain featured parts of life with more access to being than others and turns to the very forces of her body and nature when understanding these experiences.

In her mind, Addie forms two connections essential to her account of human existence. She equates sexuality with being and associates water with both of these states. Addie's section opens with a description of her going "down the hill to the spring . . . with the water bubbling up and away and the sun slanting quiet in the trees and the quiet smelling of damp and rotting leaves and new earth" and establishes her conceptual system as well as the urgency of her desires (*As I Lay Dying* 169). She craves being and sexuality so much that she places herself where she can experience the natural environment to assuage her desires. Her connection with water, sexuality, and being, acts

as a predictor of her future actions and guides her belief in what Cleanth Brooks describes as the "assertion of her identity in terms of the body" (*William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* 69*)*. In her sexuality, Addie sees the opportunity to exist without perception of that existence. She seeks what Pierce refers to as the "loss of consciousness . . . which, for the moment before it is lost to perception and evaporates into the stars" will allow her to be (298). The interactions between sexuality, water, and being, then, drive her search for fulfillment in the remainder of her section.

Addie's actions in her chapter result from her understanding of being. She decides to marry Anse and presents her decision—"And so I took Anse"—as a kind of resignation. She never shows any affection for Anse, but sees him as a possible means to access being through sexuality (*As I Lay Dying* 171). Her choice also seems to be a result of pure chance: Anse goes as far as the spring in his pursuit of Addie and enters the space where she feels most in tune with her sexuality and being. When most overwhelmed by her concurrent desires "in the early spring" and unable to "wait for the last [student] to go so she [can] go down to the spring," she looks up to find Anse (*As I Lay Dying* 170). Had she looked up to find any other man, or had she any other way to explore her sexuality, Addie probably would have taken a different course of action. In the brief record of the courtship that follows, Addie recounts a short, but curious exchange with Anse that signals a slight shift in her obsession with being. When commenting upon her relatives in Jefferson, she says she "never had any other kind" than those "in the cemetery" (*As I Lay Dying* 171). The idea that her entire family is dead and have always been dead alters her focus from the promise offered in sexuality. She implies that her family has never lived because they, like her, must search for being while trapped in a world of language. Only

after becoming pregnant with her first child, an experience that allows Addie to approach being, does she come to such conclusions.

Once she finds that she is pregnant with Cash, Addie sets her sights on language—what she feels is the true barrier to being. She asserts, "words are no good; that words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at" (*As I Lay Dying* 171). In her motherhood, she finds that words serve as no substitute for the experience itself. She elaborates on this idea, commenting, "that motherhood [is] invented by someone who [has] to have a word for it because the ones that [have] the children [don't] care whether there is a word for it or not" (*As I Lay Dying* 171-172). Her qualms with language relate directly to the kind of relationship proposed in metaphor—one term (being) compared with another term (words). Addie knows the two terms will never equate because of her awareness of the impossibility of being without perception. Pierce best articulates how Addie's awareness that "perceiving kills its catalyst and in turn is killed by the act of naming the perception" continues to dominate her thoughts (295). Still, when her first son, Cash, finally arrives, the act of giving birth provides such access to being that Addie feels some respite for her plight. Her metaphorical constructs keep her focused on her sexuality as a means of being and allow her to access the fluidity of reality just as she diagnoses the exact problems with language.

As she assesses how language fails to present being, Addie draws on her previously established ideas. A word, she concludes, is "just a shape to fill a lack" (*As I Lay Dying* 172). In her ruminations on the true nature of words and language, Addie turns to names. For names—how human beings in their complexity represent themselves in the world of language—surely must have some of the same intricacy within them.

When considering Anse's name, Addie sees it only as "a shape, a vessel" and can "watch [Anse] liquefy and flow into it like cold molasses flowing out of the darkness into the vessel, until the jar [stands] full and motionless" (*As I Lay Dying* 173). Despite her ambivalence toward Anse, in her quest for answers Addie does not deprive him of his being. He too possesses the fluidity that fills the shape of his name, but that shape is "profoundly without life like an empty door frame" and soon she finds "that she has forgotten the name of the jar" (*As I Lay Dying* 173). Addie comes to the same conclusion when thinking of the names of her children. In the end, even those who have brought her closest to being through sexuality only matter as they are, not as they are called. She cannot believe that a name can represent an entity as complex as an human individual. With any word, name or otherwise, Addie cares not for the container. She cares only for the being contained inside.

In light of her belief in the failure of language, Addie's relationship with Reverend Whitfield serves a dual purpose—it allows Addie another chance to revel in her sexuality and the opportunity to flout the inadequacies of language. Whitfield offers her another chance to manifest her sexuality, described as "the red bitter flood boiling through the land," but his position within the community offers Addie another more important opportunity (*As I Lay Dying* 174). As a member of the clergy, Whitfield serves as the embodiment of the word in the flesh and should live his life in accordance with the message of God he is ordained to spread. His willingness to enter into a sexual relationship with Addie, however, undermines his teaching. Whitfield's actions take primacy over the words he uses, invalidating, in Addie's mind, any real force behind language. To Addie his actions indicate the vacuity of words. Her view of their sin "as

the clothes [they] both [wear] in the world's face . . . the sin more utter and terrible since he [is] the instrument ordained by God, to sanctify that sin he created," reveals that moral concepts like sin are only kinds of containers, surface phenomena (*As I Lay Dying* 175). Furthermore, she feels these surface structures of language must be removed to reconcile the difference between words and action. Only in being can an individual "shape and coerce the terrible blood to the forlorn echo of the dead word high in the air" (*As I Lay Dying* 175). Although she changes her metaphor from water to blood in regard to being, the shift in language stays within the scope of her understanding—she still understands being in terms of its fluid nature. With Whitfield, Addie finds herself doubly satisfied: in terms of her sexuality and in receiving additional confirmation of the failure of language.

Addie's sexual satisfaction, however, proves ephemeral. Her relationship with Whitfield ends, but to Addie such ideas of continuity no longer have any meaning. The relationship is "over in the sense that [Whitfield is] gone," though "for Addie, it [is] not over . . . because to [her] there [is] no more beginning nor ending to anything" (*As I Lay Dying* 175). Upon discovering her pregnancy with Jewel, she seems finally to give up on living. Even though Addie connects most with Jewel, the child conceived in her most direct taunting of language, she knows that the pregnancy will pass. Like her other experiences that have brought her close to being, Jewel's birth will also be temporary. She finally understands what Pierce describes as the fact "that Being cannot be grasped any more firmly in sex than in any other context" and sets her sights on death (298). Tired of fighting for what she will never attain—the liquid nature of true being— and weary from trying to reconcile reality and hope, Addie resolves to end her life all together.

When she gives up on living, Addie returns again to the close tie between water, blood, and being. As she sits and nurses Jewel, she feels "the wild blood [boil] away and the sound of it [cease]. Then there [is] only the milk" (*As I Lay Dying* 176). Jewel, the product of Addie's flouting of her sexuality and belief in language, removes the last bit of being from her. Her father's belief "that the reason for living is getting ready to stay dead" transforms from an adage to a directive (*As I Lay Dying* 175). Addie, however, claims that only after her own experiences does she understand her father, and that "he [cannot] have known" the meaning of the words (*As I Lay Dying* 176). In claiming her father's lack of comprehension, Addie posits her own means of understanding—knowledge gained from personal experience and represented by language. Her conclusion about her father's particular phrase begins qualifying her conception of being.

Although Addie feels that words are no good and that they cannot represent or contain what they claim to, she bases her decision to escape the world of language upon a similar kind of representation—that of metaphor. Since she views words as inadequate containers for fluid being, they remain inadequate in her mind and always will. Addie understands that the terms will never equate, yet she will not settle for any less. She comes to this decision, however, through her metaphorical understanding. While metaphors are built on the entailments entities share and language is wholly arbitrary, both forms of representation involve conceiving of one entity in terms of another. In "William Faulkner and the Drama of Meaning: The Discovery of the Figurative in *As I Lay Dying*," Joseph Urgo argues that "what Addie misses in her conception of words is that unless the user charges them with significance they will remain what they are in the dictionary" (16). The kind of signification Addie performs, however, bears further

analysis. Her belief in the shortcomings of language results from her ideas about water, being, and language. Addie's attribution of meaning to her father's words results from her experience of what the words mean. Taking this into account, Addie's section becomes less about the failure of language and more the success of conceptual metaphor in structuring understanding. Only through her action of signifying does she reach any conclusions, whether about language or her decision to escape life.

Darl Bundren's metaphorical conceptions involving water prove similarly important, for they offer another example of how metaphors influence experience as well as his understanding of the relationships between distinct entities. In Darl's case, however, these metaphors serve to deconstruct. His understanding of water highlights its ability to dissolve and bring about the mixing of distinct elements, and by the end of the novel his mind, like Quentin's, falls prey to his own conceptions of instability. He first notes this characteristic of water when he and his brother, Jewel, head into town with an order of lumber and meet a long-awaited rainstorm. He sees "about the shattered spokes and about Jewel's ankles a runnel of yellow neither water nor earth swirl" (*As I Lay Dying* 49). What generally seem to be distinct entities—the water and the earth—Darl conceives of as wholly undefined as a result of the rain.

This conception appears again as Darl describes the rain "curving the yellow road neither of earth nor water, down the hill dissolving into a streaming mass of dark green neither earth nor sky" (*As I Lay Dying* 49). His reflections suggest not only how the rain negates definition, but also proposes new definitions through the blending of natural elements. Darl's visualization of the landscape in the rain calls to mind an impressionistic watercolor in the making, in which distinct entities lose their form and

become part of one another. Bleikasten's assessment of Darl's understanding is apt: "nothing [is] fixed . . . in its function and identity . . . everything is fleeting and flowing in the 'flux of incessant change'" (Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* 105). As he moves through the narrative, his focus on water and dissolution returns many times and eventually affects Darl's self perception.

The connection between water and definition in Darl's conceptual system appears again when he is on the road with Jewel. The sound of rain on the roof keeps him awake. He hears "the rain shaping the wagon that is ours [his and Jewel's], the load that is no longer theirs that felled and sawed it nor yet theirs that bought it and which is not ours either," and his mind turns again to thoughts of limnality (*As I Lay Dying* 80). Critics tend to see his ruminations at this point as linked to his mother's passing, an idea posited by Paul Nielsen in "What Does Addie Bundren Mean, and How Does She Mean It?" Darl's focus on transition, indistinctness, and flux, however, also must accord with the ways these properties manifest themselves in his sections of the novel. Both passages represent points at which Darl's perspective jumps from events occurring at the Bundren household to those occurring while Darl and Jewel are on the road. Darl's understanding of the ability of water to dissolve other matter (whether physical or otherwise) shapes his experience. Beneath the "rain on a strange roof," his own identity begins to dissolve, and he can access and comprehend events outside his immediate realm of experience (*As I Lay Dying* 80). As Bedient notes, "Darl's mind leaps barriers of space and flesh, flowing everywhere like the floodwaters, but flowing because unformed" (67). Darl's conceptions of water, then, render his own perceptions indistinct.

When the Bundren's party arrives at the flooded river, Darl's conceptions of water expand in scope. Standing on one of the banks of the swollen torrent of water, Darl sees "the space between" the two banks as "time: an irrevocable quality. It is as though time, no longer running before [Darl] in a straight line, now runs parallel between [the two banks] like a looping string, the distance being the doubling accretion of the thread and not the interval in between" (*As I Lay Dying* 147). Formerly, Darl only thinks of water as dissolving solid entities such as earth, but at the river he expands his view to include the abstractions of space and time. In his mind, as Bleikasten points out, the two "exchange their attributes; time becomes space, space time" (Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* 104). When water dissolves both the concrete and the abstract, the stability of Darl's own mind, an entity as abstract as space or time, comes into question. He falls prey to his thoughts of and obsessions with dissolution. His mind becomes indistinct "because," as Bedient observes, "it has no home in itself, no principle of containment" and because he conceives of such principles of containment as essentially pointless when they are so easily dissolved (67). From the river onward, Darl's mind continues this process brought about by his own understanding.

Darl's final section of the novel not only manifests his mental dissolution, but also questions his role as the most prominent voice in the novel. The last time Darl appears in the text, his mental function has declined considerably. Though attributed to Darl, the viewpoint shifts to third-person ("Darl has gone to Jackson;" "Darl is our brother, our brother Darl") (*As I Lay Dying* 253; 254). This alteration of perspective calls attention to the disintegration of Darl's sense of his own identity as a distinct entity. He becomes completely dissociated from the person who calls himself Darl—he is lost in the fluid

space between name and being. In the process he also loses grasp of traditional logic and reason. When looking for reasons why "there is about [the train he's on] that unmistakable air of definite and immanent departure that trains have," he thinks the answer rests with "the fact that Dewey Dell and Vardaman on the seat and Cash on a pallet in the wagon bed are eating bananas from a paper bag" (*As I Lay Dying* 254). Lost in the dissolution of his metaphors, Darl's understanding of cause and effect becomes itself infinitely metaphorical as even two unrelated concepts—the departing train and the bag of bananas—represent the significance of each other.

The distinctions between separate, concrete, and abstract entities disappear almost entirely from Darl's conceptual system—all three become related and relevant. This final condition in the novel results directly from the tools he uses to understand his world. Were he asked whether his own mind bears the blame for his terminal insanity, Darl, despite his dissolved state, could offer an answer: "Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes" (*As I Lay Dying* 254). Since Darl so obsesses about dissolution and does so through metaphor, his own dissolving is quite appropriate. Like his mother, and Quentin before him, he too falls prey to his conceptual system, suggesting again the pervasive ways in which metaphorical relationships structure not only human understanding, but human being.

Darl's mental disintegration by the end of *As I Lay Dying* has implications for the text as a whole. In a novel of many voices and perceptions, Darl's proves the hardest to ignore. In "Alienating Language and Darl's Narrative Consciousness in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*," Delville reveals what is at stake in Darl's change of state: "in a novel whose dynamics are inherently and deliberately entropic, by virtue of its very monologic structure and the absence of any explicit authorial voice, Darl's ubiquitous consciousness

provides the story with ‘some’ authorial timbre” (70). The fact that nineteen of the novels fifty-nine sections occur in Darl’s consciousness indicates what Bleikasten calls his “highly privileged position as [a] narrator” (Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* 56). Recognizing how Darl perceives meaning is essential to a full understanding of the novel.

What is most striking about Darl’s fate is the process by which it occurs—through the dissolution of distinction among both concrete and abstract entities. His continued focus on this phenomenon through metaphor, though it relegates Darl to “a cage in Jackson where his grimed hands [lie] light in the quiet interstices,” offers a way to think about the interactions among the seemingly fifteen different perspectives comprising the novel (*As I Lay Dying* 254). Only by reconciling Darl’s conceptions with those of his mother can readers best approach understanding the novel and reach a middle ground that does not relinquish understanding, submit to meaninglessness, lose all sense of distinction, or slip into dissolution.

Though Addie and Darl’s metaphorical conceptions of water lead them to different conclusions, the interaction of their ideas presents a way to approach understanding *As I Lay Dying* as a collective whole. In “Faulkner’s Narrative Styles,” J.E. Bunselmeyer argues that “the vision at the heart of Faulkner’s works is of a life as a process of accretion, of overwhelming connectedness,” a very fitting appraisal for *As I Lay Dying* (424). The story at times seems nothing more than a gathering of distinct, often contradictory voices, who without the cohesiveness of a single narrator rule out any possibility of narrative certainty. From among these voices, however, two call out the loudest, and by the end of the novel they remain strong and clear. Addie cries out for action, the only way she can access true being and connect language to reality. Darl cries

out in pain and eventually loses his mind amid the dissolution of metaphor. Both of these characters do not harmonize and never will, but their conceptual systems ultimately doom them both.

Together, Addie and Darl propose a balance that provides an understanding of the text. Their combined metaphorical conceptions of water form a third, distinct system of understanding that allows for comprehension of *As I Lay Dying*. Like Addie, readers should be weary of language that substitutes for fluid being and like Darl, they should consider dissolving the distinctions that serve to keep entities separate. Delville understands that "*As I Lay Dying* is a novel struggling towards a unity of experience and articulation, created in and in spite of a multiplicity of experiences" and, as the novel progresses, readers must enter into that struggle with Addie and Darl and must take action by reconciling the differences that exist from section to section (70). In doing so distinctions dissolve between one perspective and the next. As is the case in metaphor, different entities will never equate, and readers of *As I Lay Dying* must work to discover how the viewpoints enhance and enlighten one another. By the end of the novel, readers focused upon the conceptual metaphors of Addie and Darl discover the ways that the text itself has the free-flowing properties of water. In the face of the onrushing stream of increasingly indistinct perspectives, they must act to stay afloat and draw meaning from the complex narrative.

Absalom, Absalom!: Solution and Dissolution

Absalom, Absalom!, first published in 1936, adds to the importance of the natural world in metaphorical understanding, as well as to how Faulkner's narratives can be understood in their relation to water. Though he does not appear in the present time of *Absalom, Absalom!,* the novel concerns itself with the story of Thomas Sutpen and the lives of those he affects. From the spinster Rosa Coldfield to Mr. Jason Compson, Quentin, and his roommate at Harvard University, the narrators of the novel seek the truth concerning Sutpen's story. As in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying,* characters rely on water metaphors to apprehend the complex emotional aftershocks that still resonate in those affected by Sutpen.

Absalom, Absalom! at its core, however, is a novel about the storytelling process. The various narrators rely on different storytelling modes, which eventually affect the stories they tell. The authority vested in isolated narrators like Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson becomes a means to control the stories they tell. As Quentin sits and listens to the accounts of his father and Miss Rosa, he plays no part in the construction of narrative and, therefore, possesses no power to create meaning. When Quentin takes part in constructing Sutpen's story on an equal footing with his roommate, however, the two young men become a part of the story they tell—a sure sign of their engagement in narrative. As Peter Brooks comments, "[*Absalom, Absalom!*] becomes a kind of detective story where the object of investigation—the mystery—is the narrative design, or plot, itself" (254). As in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying, Absalom, Absalom!* comes into fullest light when considering the use of water as a conceptual tool. Such examination, much of it focused on the fluid nature of narrative the novel employs,

reveals the importance of the tale of Thomas Sutpen and the best ways for any story to access the truth. Only through the synthesis of listening, hearing, telling, and questioning can any individual make meaning of a narrative.

As in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, water becomes relevant because of the role it plays in the minds of the narrators of *Absalom, Absalom!* Water first appears in relation to Rosa Coldfield and how she perceives the emotional state of her sister, Ellen Coldfield, at the time of her marriage to Thomas Sutpen. Rosa best comprehends her sister's tears by imagining water—like rain, the tears come uncontrollably, but also offer a kind of cleansing. From the stuffy, airless room in which Rosa and Quentin sit, she tells her young listener, "Ellen seems to have entered the church that night out of weeping as though out of rain, gone through the ceremony and then walked back out of the church and into the weeping again, the tears again, the same tears even, the same rain" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 46). Rosa exposes (and imposes) the inner workings of her mind as she imparts her tale to Quentin. She later conjectures about the ultimate meaning of Ellen's tears: "Ellen, I think, did [forget that wedding night], since she washed it out of her remembering with tears. Yes she was weeping again now; it did, indeed, rain on that marriage" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 56). In this description, Rosa stresses a property of water that appears again and again in Faulkner's novels—its ability to remove or dissolve. In her description of the scene, Rosa highlights what she sees as the most important role of tears—their uncontrollable nature, their capacity to erase—and reveals how she comprehends the relationship between water and human emotion.

Rosa's understanding of tears expands beyond her belief in their ability to expunge—they become a cathartic means of overcoming a terrible experience. By underscoring the urgent, uncontrollable nature of tears, she elaborates on another way that tears and rain signify. Upon hearing of Bon's death at the hands of Henry Sutpen, Rosa recalls how Judith Sutpen "[bursts] into tears . . . Yes, [bursts], as if that entire accumulation of seven months [erupts] spontaneously from every pore in one incredible evacuation" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 165). Judith's tears come with as much force and exigency as a torrential downpour. Indeed, in the same breath Rosa again illuminates the "instantaneous and incredible" nature of Judith's reaction to the terrible news (*Absalom, Absalom!* 165). Though the tears cease quickly, Rosa's description emphasizes their force. While the tears of which Rosa speaks are the manifestation of unwieldy human emotion and seem beyond the influence of human control, they offer those who experience them an emotional outlet that Rosa cannot seem to access. Rosa attributes Ellen's ability to move past her terrible experiences to the catharsis her tears provide—they purge Ellen's memory. In her characterization of the emotions of others Rosa stresses her lack of emotion and in doing so exposes her real desires behind telling the story of Sutpen.

Unable to shed tears and release her own emotions about Sutpen's story, Rosa turns to narration as catharsis. As she asserts her control over the tale, however, she distances her narration from the truth. Though she becomes quite involved in passing Sutpen's story to Quentin (a story in which she plays a part), Rosa never allows herself the emotional release that she so focuses upon in others. In "the eternal black in which she [has] worn for forty-three years now," in the "dim hot airless room with the blinds all

closed and fastened," she tells Quentin her story, but she never sheds a tear (*Absalom, Absalom!* 1). Though she conceptualizes tears as the means to help her sister dissolve unwanted memories, Rosa herself does not participate in such erasure. Instead, she speaks and controls the narrative by positioning herself as a woman spurned and mistreated. Rosa believes that passing on her tale to Quentin provides retribution for Sutpen's ill treatment. Quentin himself realizes that Rosa's reason for telling the story originates in her emotional injury. He understands he must hear the story "because she wants it told" and propagated (*Absalom, Absalom!* 5). She manipulates the narrative to gain control of a situation that she never before had the opportunity to manage. Laurel Bolinger notes the one-sided nature of this narrative event and how "Rosa's narration permits no synthesis between Quentin's experience and her own" (204). Rosa essentially takes possession of the story to project her own desires upon the past. Her narrative process, however emotionally cathartic, remains mired in a blind subjectivity that subjects her tale to doubt and calls her credibility into question.

Quentin's father, Jason Compson, also uses water to apprehend the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen. Additionally, like Rosa, he dominates his narrative and by doing so undermines its truth. Mr. Compson's relationship to Thomas Sutpen, however, is much more removed than Rosa's—all Mr. Compson knows about the man comes from his father, a close acquaintance of Sutpen's. Mr. Compson sees Sutpen's rise and fall as nothing short of inevitable. Early on he speaks of "the destiny of the Sutpen family which for twenty years now [is] like a lake welling from quiet springs into a quiet valley and spreading, rising imperceptibly" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 73). Mr. Compson knows well Sutpen's aspirations to wealth and power—he even knows the reasons why Sutpen

focuses on such a goal. Enjoying this particular advantage of knowledge, Mr. Compson assesses how the "four members" of the Sutpen family "[float] in sunny suspension, [feel] the first subterranean movement toward the outlet, the gorge which [will] be the land's catastrophe too, and the four peaceful swimmers turning to face one another, not yet with alarm or distrust but just alert, feeling the dark set" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 73). Living beyond Sutpen's time, Mr. Compson sits in a very comfortable position as a narrator and feels free to turn figuratively to water to assess the emotional states of those tied up in Sutpen's plan. His lack of personal involvement in the story, however, does not keep his understanding from imposing itself upon the tale. He grasps quite well the havoc Sutpen reeks on all those who fall within reach of his design and, like Rosa, passes on the story to Quentin. When Quentin begins to speak, therefore, he reveals his father's influence on Sutpen's story.

The next example of Sutpen's relationship to water comes from the mind of Quentin Compson and results from hearing his father tell Sutpen's story. When Quentin describes the way that Sutpen's family "tumbles head over heels back to Tidewater by sheer altitude, elevation, gravity" from Appalachia, he begins to exhibit the particular influence of his father's narration—Quentin could have gleaned such information from no other source (*Absalom, Absalom!* 232). At this point in his search for the truth of Thomas Sutpen, Quentin still remains heavily under the influence of his father's narration. He is born of his father's mode of storytelling just as he is "the morose and delicate offspring of rain and steamy heat" from Mississippi (*Absalom, Absalom!* 362). He builds upon his father's metaphorical conceptions as he later explains Sutpen's family "sliding back down out of the mountains and skating in a kind of accelerating and sloven

and inert coherence like a useless collection of flotsam on a flooded river" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 232). This repetition and expansion of metaphors, as Bolinger observes, illustrates Mr. Compson's "assumed status . . . as the power figure for Quentin," who, like Miss Rosa, "orchestrates the dissemination of information according to his own preexisting narrative design" (203). Even though Quentin's narrative process later becomes quite inclusive, at this point he remains absorbed in mimesis of his father. As he spends more time with Shreve in their cold room in Cambridge, however, Quentin's reliance on water to understand Sutpen's story begins to shake his assumed position of narrative control.

On some occasions in *Absalom, Absalom!* the narrative depends on the voice of an external narrator. This feature of the text makes it somewhat difficult to situate. While the narrative centers mostly on the consciousnesses of the characters involved in the story as in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying,* this non-character narrator plays an important role in the storytelling process. The fact that this voice forms separate thoughts about water, however, makes the analysis of its system of understanding quite relevant. This voice makes itself most known in the later half of the novel when Quentin and Shreve are at Harvard. As Quentin recalls traveling to Sutpen's Hundred with his father and Luster, the narrator recounts how "the slope before them where the wall of wet yellow sedge [dies] upward into the rain like melting gold" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 195). As in other instances, water in this description makes the concrete details of the landscape indistinct. Indeed, "the clump of cedars on the crest of the hill [dissolve] into the rain as if the trees [have] been drawn in ink on a wet blotter"—even the party's dogs "[drift] . . . like smoke" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 196). Like the other voices in the novel, the

disembodied narrative voice draws attention to the power of metaphor and the abilities of water. As in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying,* such focus on the blurring of distinct narrative lines plays an important role in understanding *Absalom, Absalom!* When even the external narrator begins to focus on dissolution, the idea of narrative certainty comes into question, especially for such consummate storytellers as Quentin Compson and Shreve McCaslin.

Each having made a previous appearance in *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin and Shreve make the most of their role in *Absalom, Absalom!* by becoming the ideal narrators in a novel obsessed with narration. Their search for the truth of Thomas Sutpen takes on a mutability that allows their narrative to come strikingly close to the truth. They find themselves pulled into "a sort of hushed and naked searching, each look burdened with youth's immemorial obsession not with time's dragging weight with which the old live but with its fluidity" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 313). From the onset of their conversation Quentin and Shreve stand apart from the other narrators of the novel. As youth, the two young men find themselves unencumbered by the weight of the past. Possessing no firsthand knowledge of Sutpen, they find themselves free to speculate on what they know and open to inferences and conjectures about what they do not. Their process is wholly mutual and builds upon the earnest desire of both speakers to gain understanding. Just as Quentin later lets the waters of the Charles River wash over him (the action in *Absalom, Absalom!* comes before his death in *The Sound and the Fury*), he allows himself to submit wholly to Shreve's ideas. As the latter half of the novel warns, however, the process of storytelling boils down to more than interaction with a narrative—"it [is] not the talking alone which [does] it" or allows the two men to come closest to Sutpen's story

(*Absalom, Absalom!* 331). Though no character knows every exact fact of Sutpen's story, only through the synthesis of their perceptions do Quentin and Shreve come closest to the truth of the tale.

Quentin and Shreve's process of narrative creation proves effective because of its reliance on mutual participation and inclusion—no one teller controls the story and passes it on to a passive listener. Not even factual accuracy matters much—the story comes through "some happy marriage of speaking and hearing wherein each before the demand, the requirement, forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the other—faulting both in the creating of this shade whom they discussed (rather, existed in) and in the hearing and sifting and discarding the false and conserving what seemed true" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 331). In this melding of minds the two men become equals. Bolinger describes this particularly salient quality of their process by noting that "the addition of that second voice . . . challenges the primacy of the speaker's narrative authority*"* (199). Set against the other narratives of the novel, Quentin and Shreve's undermines the idea of a single, omniscient, authoritative narrator. The other storytellers of *Absalom, Absalom!* have such emotional connections to the stories they tell that they cannot separate themselves from their biases, which inevitably taint the truth. Shreve and Quentin, however, use one another as sounding boards. Their method blurs the lines between their roles as narrators and the story they narrate, dissociates the past from the present, and allows them to enter into the story they tell.

Although the many voices in *Absalom, Absalom!* endeavor to speak the truth about Thomas Sutpen, Quentin and Shreve come the closest to the facts of his narrative through their fluid storytelling process. Indeed, as they speak, Quentin and Shreve seem

to become Henry and Charles: "neither of them [Quentin and Shreve are] there. They [are] both in Carolina and the time [is] forty-six years ago, and it [is] not even four now but compounded still further, since now both of them [are] Henry Sutpen and both of them [are] Bon, compounded each of both yet either neither" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 367). The fact that they enter into the story imbues their narrative with an intimacy that the other narratives lack. The efficacy of their means not only sets them apart from the other narrators of the novel but proposes a new way in which a story can be told, a process Bolinger describes as "two characters [speaking] as one to generate a process of becoming through which the past can be understood" (201). Quentin and Shreve lose their sense of selves as they talk and become wholly a part of one another, as well as a part of Bon and Henry. As with understanding metaphor, Quentin and Shreve allow their distinct perceptions to enhance one another and provide a fuller understanding of the matter at hand. As they dissolve the authority of a single narrator, they come close to the truth of Sutpen's story, but at the same time they threaten the overall stability of the narrative they tell.

Because Quentin and Shreve rely on the interchange of information and conjecture when constructing Sutpen's story, they deconstruct the idea of a traditional narrative. Even though their method allows them greater access to the events of history than found elsewhere in the novel, their process is inherently destructive. Peter Brooks questions "what kind of narrative principal and authority . . . can be provided, by these two young men who have usurped narrative, de-authorized the eyewitness account (Rosa's) and the account at one remove (Mr. Compson's) in favor of something at a greater distance (both temporally and spatially)" (256-257). This concern is very real, for

every fact meets uncertainty, perceptions compete, and no opinion seems to surface in isolation. Any kind of narrative certainty would seem to disappear completely from such an inhospitable setting. Their process, which seems at any moment to collapse under the weight of its own freedom, not only undermines the structures of narrative authority—the world in which they live then falls prey to the subjectivity that enables them to know Sutpen's story more fully.

As the two young men become more and more involved in their exploratory narrative creation, their world seems to lose its distinctness. Time itself, although not the most stable concept in the wake of general relativity, now needs interpretation. As Quentin and Shreve sit in their Harvard dormitory, Quentin notes the chiming of a nearby clock tower. Instead of hearing the expected tolling of the hour, the narrator notes that "the chimes for midnight would have rung some time ago now" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 339). Not even the third-person narrator seems sure about the exact time. Like the multiple voices and opinions that craft Faulkner's narratives in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying, Absalom, Absalom!* seems almost too subjective. At times, the meaning that the text seems to purport is that no complete account can come from any narrative. Like *The Sound and the Fury,* and *As I Lay Dying,* however, *Absalom, Absalom!* manages to not collapse under the weight of its own subjectivity. Quentin and Shreve, while not omniscient authorities and by no means necessarily correct, provide stability to the novel and their active efforts together make meaning of Sutpen's story.

Though dissolution seems inevitable, *Absalom, Absalom!* does not disintegrate under its own weight of uncertainty—the novel revels in the very atmosphere it creates. The lack of authority undoes the idea of a narrative, but this dissolving serves a distinct

purpose. When looking for the meaning behind Faulkner's narrative inclinations in *Absalom, Absalom!* readers need look no further than his use of that narrative—unmaking narrative. The lack of certainty, however, does not equate to a lack of meaning. The process of recounting a series of events only erects structures of power between the participants in the act of storytelling and often allows the teller to control the story. Consider the way Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson narrate—they make history their own through their singlehanded control of the events of the narrative. "A text 'mastered," as Bolinger notes, "becomes a text so controlled that it no longer has anything new to offer—a species of joke that, once heard, becomes a burden to hear again" (216). A text "so controlled," becomes much like an overused metaphor—its ability to aid understanding becomes vacuous through repetition. This process of communicating narrative, the kind employed by Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson, completely arrests the events of the story and turns them into a lifeless tableau. Even though the truth Quentin and Shreve reach concerning Sutpen remains partial and still somewhat unclear, their story revives a series of events rather than freezes them in time and interpretation.

By so testing the access to the truth of narrative, *Absalom, Absalom!* questions the very nature of that truth. The mysteries of the story of Thomas Sutpen arise in other narratives. Though Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve work to tell a story, as Philip Egan argues, their "individual stories finally cannot be separated from their speakers . . . each narrative effort . . . [reveals] the speaker" and their prejudices (200). In short, no interpreter can escape his bias, even if he knows that opinion taints perception. Although *Absalom, Absalom!* concerns a fictional narrative, the lessons learned apply to

any narrative. Even tales that have been passed down for generations cannot escape this inherent characteristic of stories—bias inspires uncertainty everywhere.

The way that Quentin and Shreve approach storytelling, however, counteracts the partiality that appears with those who construct the story of Thomas Sutpen. More importantly, their mindset applies to other forms of narratives. Whether fictional, or otherwise, those looking for truth must open themselves to speculation, opposing opinions, and perceptions. They must allow all voices, as Bolinger notes, "to speak as one to generate a process of becoming through which the past can be understood" (201). In this process all voices are equal because they all contribute to painting the fullest picture of an event. *Absalom, Absalom!* illustrates this kind of approach that allows those involved to become a part of the story they tell and by doing so come closer to truth. Cleanth Brooks recognizes that "some commentators argue that Faulkner [indulges] in deliberate mystification," but understands also that "the problems of the novel are insoluble because [Faulkner means] them to be" (*William Faulkner: Towards Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* 302). These same concerns appear when telling any story, all of which resist their fullest interpretation when told by a single teller. Quentin and Shreve show that the fuller the chorus of voices the better—including the interpretative voice of the reader.

The same fluid interchange of information that allows Quentin and Shreve to enter the story of Thomas Sutpen allows the reader of *Absalom, Absalom!* to do the same. This process, while not arriving at any definite truth, emphasizes the reader's role in understanding a narrative. The reader of a text usually looks on as an outside interpreter, but as Quentin and Shreve's distinct identities begin to dissolve in light of their process

of telling, so evaporates the distinction between the world of the novel and that of the reader. Quentin and Shreve become one with their story. As this occurs, Peter Brooks argues, "the distance between telling and listening, between writing and reading, [collapses]; the reader [is] freed to speak in the text, toward the creation of the text" (263). The power of the narrative on the page, regardless of how many are involved in its creation, only comes to its fullest once the reader becomes involved. Indeed, as Bolinger articulates, "only by speaking with narrative can [the reader] begin to make sense of its power" (219). The novel, then, in failing to offer a dependably accurate story of Thomas Sutpen, presents a way to view the narrative process and even envisions what comes as a result of that process.

Any stable understanding of a story inevitably results from control of that tale, a means of possession that inherently proposes the idea of a singular truth. Faulkner's whole world works against this isolated approach to understanding by positing the benefits of multiplicity. The many different perspectives found in stories told in Yoknapatawpha often disagree and contradict. From this discord, however, arises a kind of truth built from many perspectives, which together paint the fullest picture of reality. Ideas overlap, interact, and flow into another—eventually the fluidity of the telling approximates truth. Though the voices are often those of characters, those voices open spaces into which readers of the novel may enter. Peter Brooks offers an effective way of approaching this phenomenon: "the reader, like Quentin and Shreve, will always take over the text [as he takes over metaphor] and write it in his own design, finding in it 'what will suffice' for his own hermeneutic desire" (263). In the end, the number of voices necessary depends on the desired scope of truth, although with more voices comes

greater likelihood of truth. Unless searching for reality according to a single individual, readers will only be satisfied when a number of voices work together. Faulkner orients himself in this category by not allowing his characters to settle for this narrow truth born from the control of narrative.

Any search for narrative truth in *Absalom, Absalom!* should include Faulkner's view of the matter. Many times he faces questions concerning his work, and he offers much clarification about how his texts function. In one notable instance, found in Frederick Gwynn and Joseph Blotner's *Faulkner in the University*, an inquisitive student at the University of Virginia asks, "Mr. Faulkner, in *Absalom, Absalom!* does any one of the people who talks about Sutpen have the right view, or is it more or less a case of thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird with none of them right?" (274). Faulkner (quite tellingly) responds: "That's it exactly. I think that no individual can look at truth. It blinds you. You look at it and you see one phase of it. Someone else looks at it and sees a slightly awry phase of it. But taken all together, the truth is in what they [see] though nobody [sees] the truth intact" (274). As within the pages of *Absalom, Absalom!*, this approach to truth makes its attainment seem impossible—any solid basis for fact seems possible only if viewing all perspectives. Faulkner, however, explains his statement further and offers the bounds and limits of seeking truth in narrative: "It [is], as you say, thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird. But the truth, I would like to think, comes out, that when the reader [reads] all these thirteen different ways of looking at a blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of the blackbird which I would like to think is truth" (274). As with *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying,* the reader plays an integral

part in the synthesis and understanding of truth. The more perspectives taken into account, the fuller picture of truth attained.

Only through the conscious effort to mimic the model storytellers of Quentin and Shreve can readers apprehend the truth of Thomas Sutpen and *Absalom, Absalom!* As Quentin and Shreve weave the story of Sutpen, their voices become at once interchangeable and the same: "Shreve ceased. That is, for all the two of them, Shreve and Quentin, knew he had stopped, since for all the two of them knew he had never begun, since it did not matter (and probably neither of them conscious of the distinction) which one had been doing the talking" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 349). At moments like these, water and metaphor shape the perspectives recounting the story of Thomas Sutpen. The dissolution that occurs as Quentin and Shreve work on Sutpen's story wears away at many distinctions, especially that between reader and text. Bolinger notes how the text calls the reader into the process: "self and other, speaker and hearer, writer and reader all must slide away from oppositionality and into a speculative realm Faulkner envisions" (218). The truth reached will not be solid (for indeed no truth can ever be solid), but only when taking into account as many perspectives as possible does the process of working toward reality begin.

Staying Afloat

The Sound and the Fury acts as the first step in understanding the importance of water in William Faulkner's work because it serves as the first appearance of the centered consciousness exposed in his fiction. For three of the novel's four sections, Faulkner relies upon a vantage point that delves deeper than the traditional first-person point of view. The text does not merely present the thoughts of its characters—rather it becomes a story by the very force of those thoughts. At important moments during Benjy and Quentin's sections, their thoughts and emotions seem to rend the very words from the page in a blatant alteration of formal convention. These passages (which occur quite often within the novel) seem to resist interpretation. Readers should bear in mind, however, what Vickery calls the "plausible reasons for the particular arrangement of the four sections and of the use of the stream of consciousness technique" (1017). The confusion that comes from viewing the story through the perceptions of Faulkner's characters reveals their processes of understanding.

Faulkner's method of presenting characters' minds exposes the forces that most impact those characters' interactions with their world. From the "stream of consciousness" presented by the minds of Benjy and Quentin, readers observe the pervasiveness of water and metaphor. Benjy relies upon water as a stand in for his desire to be a part of a world from which he finds himself removed. Quentin obsesses about water because of its connection to his sister, Caddy. In the end, however, their heavy reliance upon water in their conceptual systems begins to take its toll on the text. The preoccupations with water these characters share begin to shake their minds and the very

stability of the novel. This dissolution first implies that the reader should take an active role in interpretation.

Built from the minds of an idiot and an intensely emotionally torn Harvard student, *The Sound and the Fury* becomes mired in subjectivity. Only Dilsey's section of the novel provides the perspective of any character outside the Compson family and gives the novel its only hint of traditional narrative certainty. Despite her anchoring presence, the novel still leaves many of its important events largely to interpretation. Kartiganer notes this particularly uncertain form of the narrative: "its principle object is that . . . it seeks to withstand from beginning to end every critical strategy. *The Sound and the Fury* fiercely celebrates invention, the freedom of prose that communicates yet will not be controlled into what normally passes for a stable set of meanings" (72). This difficulty of the novel, while at first confusing and disheartening, becomes the focus of *The Sound and the Fury*. The text may not offer stable meaning but nonetheless does not devolve into meaninglessness. Instead, in *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner takes a number of important steps toward revolutionizing the narrative process. Just as the novel seems to devolve into chaos, readers have a perfect means of understanding what they experience—by adding their perceptions to those found in the novel. Those who adapt to the fluid nature of the novel not only gain better access to the characters and events in the narrative but also find the kind of truth that such narratives engender.

As I Lay Dying relies more heavily upon the perceptions of its characters to construct its narrative, and as with *The Sound and the Fury* the presence of water metaphors in these minds drastically impacts the text. In a novel of many voices fragmented into fifty-nine different sections, Darl and Addie Bundren speak the loudest

and rely the most upon water when trying to comprehend their existence. Addie, on the one hand, believes, as Cleanth Brooks notes that "man must not simply vegetate—must not simply grow up like a plant and in due course flower, yield his fruit, and subside again into the nurturing soil. Addie believes that man must assert himself through some unique gesture to indicate that he had lived" (*William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* 153). She sees action as the only way for an individual to make meaning of existence because she denies the ability of language to do so. Darl, on the other hand, exists in the world of language. With more attributed sections than any other character in the novel, Darl spends most of his time thinking and articulating to himself. He believes fully in the power of words to access reality and invests language with much power—as Delville comments, even "the strategies used by Darl . . . in order to come to terms with [his] mother's death are essentially verbal" (63). *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrates the importance of characters' conceptual systems in making sense of their narrative, and *As I Lay Dying* presents two models of thought that must be reconciled to understand the text—those of Addie and Darl Bundren.

A fusion of Addie and Darl's thought patterns allow for the understanding of *As I Lay Dying* without meeting the eventual fates of the two characters. Addie's belief in the failure of language, a conviction fully founded in her conceptual system, leads her to give up on living in a world in which she feels trapped by words. Darl's focus on dissolution and his penchant for speaking leads him to the mental institution in Jackson where nobody hears or cares about the words and thoughts he so values. Like Addie, readers should not fully trust the representative power of language but should add their perceptions and interpretations to those of the novel's narrators. Like Darl, readers

should use their language to speak and think with the text. Accessing this fused process of understanding comes only through knowledge of water and its basic properties. The novel invites readers to take part in the process of making meaning, but simultaneously it casts the certainty of that meaning even more into doubt. With more consciousnesses and perceptions than *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying* seems even less able to present any sure understanding. The two novels taken together do not work towards a stable set of meanings, which Faulkner rarely presents, but they emphasize the often-uncertain nature of meaning and truth. As Urgo notes, "throughout the Faulkner canon, meaning is not an external fixed commodity . . . to be consumed . . . it is a drama where human understanding is created and projected by the mind . . . meaning . . . is not fixed and established but elusive and subject to change" (13). Entering the process of making meaning with the novel's characters serves as the best way to approach truth. Faulkner's novels, however, transform the very nature of truth. Unlike, its predecessor, *As I Lay Dying* proposes what can be done in this space. *As I Lay Dying* paints a fuller picture of the state of human understanding and the ways to access reality, but *Absalom, Absalom!* and its characters' struggles to make meaning highlights the best ways to do so.

In some ways, *Absalom, Absalom!* represents a departure from the style of narrative presentation Faulkner relies on in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* and provides the final and most resounding word on the role of water metaphors in creating meaning. Though the perceptions of characters alone do not comprise the novel (a non-character narrator plays a substantial role in the story), the sections of *Absalom, Absalom!* tie closely to the perceptions of its narrators. Together, the accounts of Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve build the story of Thomas Sutpen's meteoric

rise and fall in Jefferson by telling the stories of all those who fell under the influence of his grand design. Each of the narrators, however, weaves his or her story with different intentions. Miss Rosa, a woman spurned and manipulated by Sutpen, uses her account of his life as a way to control the facts of the past and finally exert dominance over circumstances she never has the chance to influence. Mr. Compson similarly wields his narration as a means of exerting his power as a storyteller and seeks to depict the Sutpen he knows through his father. Like Rosa, however, his process of accessing the events of the past becomes wholly one-sided. Alternately, Quentin and Shreve's process of narration exemplifies the power of sharing and balance in storytelling and the advantages of a story created from multiple voices. Understanding the differences among the storytelling styles in *Absalom, Absalom!* proves essential to a rewarding comprehension of all three texts.

The characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* represent two very different types of storytelling—one that allows for no synthesis and, therefore, no truth; another that relies on synthesis and therefore offers an approach to truth. The metafictional concern of *Absalom, Absalom!* carries over from *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. As Spillers notes, "Sutpen's story, which occupies the lion's share of the narrative space, is actually secondary and pretextual to what it allows . . . that is to say, the showing, the making, the fabricating narrative" (563). The novel largely becomes a discourse on discourse—a story about storytelling. In this climate, Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson represent how the power structures often involved in storytelling alter the very nature of truth. They stand isolated as interpreters of the past and cannot escape their prejudices. Quentin and Shreve, however, make narrating a collective process. They work together

with the story they tell to uncover the complicated truth of the past. While Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson's narration remains solid and static, Quentin and Shreve's becomes fluid and dynamic—at the height of their process they become a part of the very story they narrate and gain greater access to the truth of their narrative. This distinction in methods matters to readers seeking the fullest possible meaning in Faulkner's novels.

Quentin and Shreve not only serve as model storytellers, but they also offer a method of comprehending *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* Just as they use each other as sounding boards for their ideas, the reader of Faulkner's fiction must enter into the same sort of interaction with the texts. Cleanth Brooks openly recognizes the similarities between Quentin, Shreve, and the modern reader: "Faulkner has in effect acknowledged the attitude of the modern 'liberal,' twentieth-century reader, who is basically rational, skeptical, without any special concern for history, and pretty well emancipated from the ties of family, race, or section" (*William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* 313). Egan echoes this conclusion as she argues: "the reader, like Quentin and Shreve, will always take over the text and write it to his own design, finding in it 'what will suffice' for his own hermeneutic desire" (263). Whether reconciling four perspectives or fifteen perspectives, the reader must enter into the spaces in the texts worn away by the constant flow of narrative through them, stand on equal footing with those perspectives, and work together in a fluid process to make meaning. To do so does not overstep the role and bounds of a reader. Rather, to so enter a text is to invest one in the process of uncovering truth. With a stake in making meaning, readers must decide what suffices for truth. For Quentin and Shreve, truth

comes from cooperation and the input of multiple perspectives. For the reader, truth comes the same way.

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