Fire and water as symbols of life, death and personality in Faulkner's «The Sound and the Fury»

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William Faulkner, in a speech of acceptance in 1950, characterized his own writings as: "A life's work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit, not for glory and least of all for profit, but to create out of the materials of the human spirit something which did not exist before."[1] Faulkner constantly broods over the meaningful statements about life. He explores, and causes the reader to explore the significance of human experience. His works are tinged with obscurity, reflecting as they do psychological characteristics. The author concerns himself primarily with the individual consciousness and personal salvation, and he creates a sense of what time does to life.[2]

In *The Sound and the Fury*, to which he refers as his greatest novel, Faulkner accomplishes this creation through diverse literary devices: title, point of view, irony, allusions, italics, lack of punctuation, and symbolism. Symbolism is the tool of the poet, and Faulkner truly can be considered a great poet. It is his "stereoscopic vision, his ability to deal with the specific and universal

1. William Faulkner, *Speech of Acceptance Upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature*, Delivered at Stockholm, Dec. 10, 1950.
2. Malcolm Cowley (ed.), *The Portable Faulkner* (New York, The Viking Press, 1962), p. 1.

simultaneously, to make the real symbolic without sacrificing reality" that gives his art greatness.[3]

In this novel as in most of his other works Faulkner vivifies and concretizes the universal concepts woven throughout the theme by means of a variety of symbols: clocks, honeysuckle, shadows, slanting, birds, jimson weed, fire and water. Critics, after giving considerable attention to Faulkner's use of honeysuckle, shadows, and clocks, disagree as to the degree of importance each holds. Vickery asserts that "clocks are perhaps the central symbol, especially prominent in *The Sound and the Fury*".[4]

Hunt's belief, to the contrary, is that honeysuckle is "probably the most important single image" since its odor "hangs heavily in the wet atmosphere".[5] Few critics have delved at great length into the author's symbolic treatment of water, and fewer still have discussed his fire image. These two basic elements of life, nevertheless, play a significant role in the gradual decadence of the Compson family, particularly in the experiences of Benjy and his brother, Quentin, and their relations with Caddy, their sister.

D. H. Lawrence observes that "life is an unbroken oneness; indivisible...And the first and the greatest law of creation is that all creation, even life itself, exists within the strange and incalculable balance"[6] of these two elements. Life is to be discovered somewhere between the fire and the water; the opposition between them causes the central blaze of the universe. It is evidently from the confusion of these two elements that lesser worlds find existence.[7]

Since Faulkner is deeply concerned with life and its many facets, he makes appropriate use of fire and water to assist him to recollect reality. These symbols are carefully placed throughout *The Sound and the Fury*, and function as the personification of the characters. The symbol of water, however, is conspicuous by its

3. Edmond L. Volpe, *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner* (New York, The Noonday Press, 1964), p. 28.
4. Olga W. Vickery, *Novels of William Faulkner* (Louisiana State University Press, 1959), p. 226.
5. John Wesley Hunt, *William Faulkner: Art in Theological Tension* (New York, Syracuse University Press, 1965), p. 56.
6. D. H. Lawrence, *The Symbolic Meaning* (New York, The Viking Press, Inc., 1961), p. 164.
7. *Ibid.*

absence in Jason's section, with the exception of four incidents to be discussed later in this article.

Caddy Compson evolves as the focal point, the central blaze from which the lesser characters (her three brothers, the cook, her parents, and the Negro servants) receive their varying degrees of significance. Everything hinges on Caddy's loss of virginity, her fall, or more universally speaking, the fall of woman and its impact on man. Fire, since ancient times, is characterized as masculine and water as feminine. Nevertheless, Faulkner, who specializes in the technique of inversion, imbues Caddy (the only girl in the Compson family) with fiery passion and simultaneously with warmth and genuine cordiality; Quentin, the first-born son, on the other hand, occasionally expresses femininity.

Towards Benjy, the youngest child and an idiot, Caddy invariably expresses warm sympathy during the periods of her later childhood and adolescence. Benjy's section reveals this: "Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through... Stoop over Benjy. Like this, see... Keep your hands in your pocket... or they'll get froze. You don't want your hands froze on Christmas, do you."[8] Caddy on all occasions seeks to understand and pacify Benjy: "What is it... What are you trying to tell Caddy... You're not a poor baby. Are you. You've got your Caddy."[9] Benjy repeatedly utters satisfaction at his sister's solicitude: "Caddy knelt and put her arms around me... She helped me across... She took my hand... she came and put her arms around me."[10]

Caddy's spontaneous anticipation of Benjy's needs and desires is heart-warming: "He wants your lightning bugs, T. P...Let him hold it a little while longer, T. P... What is it Benjy... Tell Caddy. She'll do it. Try."[11] Later she consoles him with: "You mustn't cry. Caddy's not going away."[12] Upon Benjy's disapproval of his sister's first romance, Caddy sends Charlie away: "Go away, Charlie. He doesn't like you."[13] She insists: "He's not too heavy, I can carry

8. William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* printed in *The Faulkner Reader* (New York, Random House, 1968), p. 6.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 12, 21.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

him... I'll feed him tonight." [14] And again Benjy says: "Caddy gave me the cushion... Caddy held me." [15]

On page after page in the first section the fervor of Caddy's compassion and concern for her idiot brother reflects itself. Her glowing benevolence in Benjy's eyes stands in sharp contrast with the cold, indifferent, and even harsh behavior of the other Compson's. One would expect, for example, that the mother who bore him would lavish loving, care on Benjamin, her last-born; nevertheless, out of self-pity and solely out of regard for the Compson name, this hypochondriac woman frequently relinquishes the responsibility of his upbringing to Caddy, Dilsey, or to the Negro boys: "You, Benjamin. If you don't be good", she warns, "you'll have to go to the kitchen".[16] To Caddy, Mrs. Compson complains: "Do you want to make him sick, with the house full of company."[17] Later, she reproves the girl again: "Why won't you let him alone so I can have some peace... Come here... You, Benjamin." [18] When Benjy's moaning irritates her she argues: "Do I have to get up out of bed to come down to him, with two grown negroes to take care of him." [19]

Jason Compson mirrors his mother's attitude. Quite early in the novel, although late in time sequence, Jason harshly chides his mother for weeping in public. "Stop it, Mother. Do you want to get that damn loony to bawling in the middle of the square." [20] When Mr. Compson questions Jason about the open gate through which Benjy escapes, Jason's defiance flares up: "Do you think I wanted anything like this to happen. This family is bad enough, God knows... I reckon you'll send him to Jackson, now." [21] Luster verifies for Benjy Jason's emotion: "They going to send you to Jackson, where you belong. Mr. Jason says so." [22] Jason continually utters harsh phrases about Benjy: "It's bad enough on Sundays, with that damn field full of people that haven't got a side show and six niggers to feed, knocking a damn oversize mothball

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 55.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

around... Rent him out to a sideshow." [23] Dilsey knows Jason well: "You's a cold man, Jason, if man you is." [24]

Quentin, for Caddy's sake, usually does not vocalize positive coldness towards Benjy, but he does display a negative aloofness. On the night of Caddy's wedding, however, Benjy senses Quentin's contempt: "Quentin set me down in the trough where the cows ate." [25] Again Quentin portrays the Compson meanness when he forces Benjy to become drunk: "Lift him up... Drink this, Benjy... Drink." [26] Likewise, Quentin's response to Caddy's plea that he take care of Benjy and their father is tinged with bittenness. "The less you say about Benjy and Father the better." [27]

Benjamin views his father not as heartless as the others, but as manifesting a degree of warmth towards his idiot son. Mr. Compson's addiction to drink, however, and the distractions resulting from his wife's chronic ailments draw him further and further away from contact with Benjy. Only one person, Caddy, because of her warmth for Benjy reigns supreme from the idiot's point of view. Thus Faulkner permits Benjy, the sole innocent and retarded member of the family to put Caddy on a pedestal. From the distance, the reader may better perceive her gradual fall consequential to her uncontrolled, fiery passions.

Indeed, Caddy even at the age of seven flashes her superiority complex like a bolt of lightning aimed at Jason, the Negro boys, and sometimes even at Quentin. In response to Roskus, Caddy asserts: "It's not supper time yet. I am not going." [28] Versh and Quentin are her targets in the scene at the Branch when Caddy squatts and gets her dress wet. "It's not wet... I'll take it off... I bet you will... You unbutton it Versh... or I'll tell Dilsey what you did yesterday." [29] She throws her dress on the bank. Her threat to run away exhibits a childish spark of temper, but somehow it foretells an unchecked flame's fate, the girl's unhappy future. She calls Jason a tattletale, a cry baby, a knobknot; Quentin, a skizzard. Yet, Mr. Compson places all of them in her charge.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
29. *Ibid.*

Thus, in her behavior towards Benjy, the helpless idiot, and even towards her irresponsible mother, her toddy-drinking father, and towards Dilsey, Caddy glows with patience, thoughtfulness and respect. The girl is happy when she has contributed to their comfort, and upset when she has upset them. To the others, however, Caddy stands as an uncontrolled fire, scorching them with her commands and reproaches. Herein, Faulkner alerts his audience to an inner conflict. The reader may find himself asking which Caddy will triumph in the end.

Fire images are perceptible—and there is always conflict. The hearth fire is set against a cold December background: "It's too cold out there... The sun was cold and bright... The gate was cold... I could smell the bright cold."[30] Caddy reproaches Versh saying: "What did you let him get his hands so cold for, Versh."[31] Afterwards, Benjy strangely notes: "We ran up the steps and out of the bright cold into the dark cold... We went to the fire."[32] The dark cold of the house exposes the sterility of the Compson family tenaciously clinging to the past and to tradition.

Mrs. Compson refuses to permit her husband to ridicule her brother. "It's no joke... my people are every bit as well born as yours."[33] She persists in guarding the family name and honor. Nothing else matters. In rebuking Caddy for lifting Benjy, the mother claims: "You'll injure your back. All of our women have prided themselves on their carriage. Do you want to look like a washer-woman."[34] Mrs. Compson also reproves Caddy for calling her brother "Benjy". "Candace... I told you not to call him that... Nicknames are vulgar. Only common people use them."[35] Quentin, her son, relies also on the past. Of Deacon, the Negro at Harvard he speaks thus: "If it hadn't been for my grandfather, he'd have to work like whitefolks."[36]

Another series of conflicts which is linked to the fire image follows a pattern of light versus darkness; twilight of the first two sections versus daylight of the second two; sunlight and arti-

30. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

ficial light; winter versus spring; Benjy's concrete world versus "the elusive reality of Caddy, the convolutions of Quentin, and the logical precision of Jason;"[37] in other words: illusion versus reality. Numerous allusions to each of these contrasts set the stage for a more vivid awareness of the deterioration of the Compson household. Artificial lighting dims the moral sight, yet Faulkner permits bulbs, street lamps, the moon, and the stars to permeate the first half of the novel.

A few examples drawn from the text may clarify this: "Father was standing on the kitchen steps... Light fell down the steps on him... And the light came tumbling down the steps on me, too."[38] Further on, one reads: "There was a light in the hall. Across the hall we could hear mother."[39] In the same section Benjy hears Caddy suggest: "You better carry him, Versh. It's getting dark... When we went around the corner we could see the lights coming up the drive."[40] To amuse her brother, Caddy gives him a box. He finds that "the box... was full of stars. When I was still, they were still. When I moved, they glinted and sparkled."[41] Referring to his momentary escape, the idiot says: "It was open when I touched it, and I held to it in the twilight. I wasn't crying, and I tried to stop, watching the girls coming along in the twilight."[42] After Dilsey puts the children to bed and extinguishes the light "the room went black, except the door. Then the door went black... We could hear the dark."[43]

Water as a symbol bears great import, it is true, in Quentin's portion of the story; still, the slanted rays of the sun foretell the oncoming of his evening rendezvous with the Charles River. Quentin speaks about his watch in metaphors: "The hands were extended, slightly off the horizontal at a faint angle, like a gull tilting into the wind. Holding all I used to be sorry about like the new moon holding water, niggers say."[44] The would-be suicide remarks that "the street lamps would go down the hill then rise toward town I walked upon the belly of my shadow... the street

37. Vickery, p. 238.
38. Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 20.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

lamps."[45] Parts of this identical phrase are scattered along several pages later on. Quentin watches the sun's rays slant more and more. The brief reality of the sun fades as the young man contemplates the "illusive lights on the courthouse clock and the glare of town the square on the sky and the dark willows along the Branch and the light in mother's window the light still on in Benjy's room."[46] His stream of consciousness takes him on a series of journeys home to Caddy then back to Harvard. He is obsessed by the street lamps, for he reiterates: "The street lamps... go down the hill then they rise toward town like lanterns hung one above another on a wall... The street lamps."[47] His recollection of Caddy's refusal to forsake Dalton Ames causes Quentin to declare: "outside, the grey light the shadow of things like dead things in stagnant water."[48]

Jason, the second youngest member of the Compson family plays a completely malicious role. His lying and insincerity, his cruelty and tormenting speech disclose a heart full of devilish intentions. He is perpetually in conflict, en with water, as is evidenced through Benjy's viewpoint. Jason so exasperates Caddy's daughter (who was named Quentin after Caddy's well-loved brother) that she struggles to hurl a glass of water at him. Dilsey's interference causes the glass to break on the table "and the water ran into the table."[49] Through Dilsey, Faulkner denies Jason's passions' extinction by water. Quentin, however, refuses to be deterred. It is she who finally leaves Jason smoldering. The Jason section, as already noted, is generally devoid of water symbols, four instances excepted.

The first reference records Jason's caustic recollection of his brother's death by water: "I says no I never had university advantages because at Harvard they teach you how to go for a swim at night without knowing how to swim and at Sewanee they don't even teach you what water is."[50] Jason alludes to the water image again in the cemetery scene. He keeps dodging the rain and abhors getting wet.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Little they cared how wet I got because then mother would have a whale of a time being afraid I was taking pneumonia... I got under some cedars where the rain didn't come much only dripping now and then... I had to follow the path to keep out of the wet grass.[51]

Faulkner mentions this symbol a third time when Uncle Maury, inevitably found imposing on everyone, especially his sister, adds his touch of irony. He claims to need money to open an investment which he anticipates to be "a bonanza of the first water and purest ray serene."[52] Finally, Jason's continued bitterness concerning Quentin's suicide fulfills itself in his expression: "...just to look at water makes me sick."[53]

Jason (this water deficiency paralleling his fiery, raging temper) becomes as an arid desert, irrational at times and scorched by the circumstances into which he violently casts himself. So hellish does his character emerge that Faulkner admits Jason to represent complete evil and the most vicious character the author ever conceived.[54] Throughout the pages recounting Jason's viewpoint, the sun and dried grassland, the burning of letters and checks, fires and matches, hell and damned, the color red (red tie, red necked, red cent), fire engine, lanterns and flashes, graves and judgment furnish a tone of reality not revealed in the first two portions of the work. Jason's actions betray the degradation to which his rage goads him. Quentin, his niece, makes a fool of him: "It made me so mad for a minute it kind of blinded me."[55] Quentin's retaliation of her uncle's sarcasm ends in a desperate tone: "I'm bad and I'm going to hell, and I don't care. I'd rather be in hell than anywhere you are."[56]

The reader perceives throughout this part of the novel the increasingly demoniacal characteristics of Jason. He draws incalculable satanic pleasure from burning letters and false checks whereby he deceives even his trusting mother. "I tore it up and burned

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 152-153.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
54. Robert A. Jelliffe, *Faulkner at Nagano* (Tokyo, Tenkyusha, Ltd., 1956), p. 104.
55. Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 141.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

it over the spittoon."[57] And again, "I thought you were burning these two hundred dollars a month for fun."[58] In response to his niece's assertion that neither Jason nor his mother pay for Quentin's clothes, the uncle blasts: "Ask your grandmother... what became of those checks. You saw her burn one of them, as I remember."[59]

Jason's venemous behavior toward Caddy is totally inhuman. In a sinister way he does keep the promise to permit her (for one hundred dollars) to see her baby. But his strict adherence to the letter-of-the-law is unjustifiable. "We went past her like a fire-engine."[60]

Hardly a paragraph lacks some significant symbolism of hell-fire: suffering, brutality, aridity, heat. Within sixty-one pages there are over one hundred references to substantiate this statement. A small number suffice here to express the over-all pattern. Mrs. Compson admonishes Jason: "I'd rather see even you dead in your coffin first" than take charity from sinners.[61] She regretfully reminds him: "You've had to bury yourself in a little country store."[62] Aroused by Caddy's return Jason utters: "Damn if she didn't walk right into the store."[63] Benjy's howling infuriates Jason: "Damn if I don't think I deserve a little peace and quiet."[64] His mother superficially complains: "It's my place to suffer for my children."[65] Still later, she verbalizes: "Perhaps I shall be punished."[66] At various points Mrs. Compson repeatedly declares that the many circumstances disclosing the family deterioration is a judgment on her, the mother. She rationalizes her infidelity to the household on the grounds of her illness. Mrs. Compson is quite aware that her grandchild and ward supercedes her control. She refuses, however, to permit Jason to discipline the girl, because of his uncontrolled temper. "You'd be too brutal with her."[67] This awareness is long in coming; moreover, it is too late.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
62. *Ibid.*
63. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

The hell-image is all pervading: "What the hell chance has a man got."[68] Jason demands still more feverishly: "How the hell can I do anything right with that damn family and her not making any effort to control her nor any of them."[69] Miner describes Jason in a nutshell: "Jason gives us his thoughts about what a hell of a person everybody but Jason is."[70]

Mrs. Compson refuses to permit Caddy's name to be spoken in the house. She refers to her daughter as a fallen woman. Later, she rationalizes her position: "I'd gladly take her back, sins and all, because she is my flesh and blood. It's for Quentin's sake."[71] The mother certainly shows an appalling lack of self-knowledge, for she fails to recognize that her own want of charity for each of the Compsons is a far greater sin than that of a sinner who has loved much.

Jason Compson's willful meanness towards Luster cannot be overlooked. No rational being with the slightest spark of humaneness could treat a child with such contempt as Jason does when he burns the show tickets before the eyes of Luster whose only wish is to own a quarter—his admission fee to the circus. Dilsey lashes Jason with her tongue; he, however, coldly ignores her.

Justice, nevertheless, does triumph strengthening by its ray of hope those who foresee its victory. Since the robbery, Jason comes face to face with failure in his devilish plans: "The air brightened... and it seemed to him that the fact that the day was clearing was another cunning stroke on the part of the foe."[72] Speeding along the road "he passed churches and it seemed to him that each of them was a picket-post where the rear guards of Circumstance peeped fleetingly back at him."[73] He refuses to be halted even by physical exhaustion. He envisions "the embattled legions of both hell and heaven through which he tore his way and put his hands at last on his fleeing niece."[74] The matchbox of Jason's immorality is set ablaze by another match, Quentin. Jason "could see the opposed forces of his destiny and his will drawing swiftly

68. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
69. *Ibid.*
70. Ward L. Miner, *The World of William Faulkner* (N. Carolina, Duke University Press, 1952), p. 140.
71. Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 164.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

together now, toward a junction that would be irrevocable; he became cunning. I can't make a blunder."[75] Flushed with anger and embarrassment, Jason literally sees red. "...he'd have to trust to seeing her first, unless the man still wore the red tie. And the fact that he must depend on that red tie seemed to be the sum of the impending disaster."[76]

Faulkner continues his fire-image through expressions like:

> Smoke lay in the valley... He was trying to breathe shallowly, so that the blood would not beat so in his skull... He saw no sings of life... the sun glinting on the metal belly of the pan... The galley was dark... He blundered on in the cluttered obscurity.[77]

A cook at the circus impedes Jason in his fit of insanity. "The man's body felt so old, so frail, yet so fatally single-purposed that for the first time Jason saw clear and unshadowed the disaster toward which he rushed."[78] Jason is consumed—left cold in the midst of the dying embers of his passions. "Something—the absence of disaster, threat, in any constant evil—permitted him to forget Jefferson as any place which he had ever seen before, where his life must resume itself."[79] The fire in him sputters but once more when Luster drives the carriage to the left of the statue, causing Benjy to howl. As Jason jumps onto the carriage step, he strikes a blow at both Luster and Benjy saying: "Shut up'... Get to hell on home with him. If you ever cross that gate with him again, I'll kill you."[80] Deterred from venting his fury on those of his own stature, Jason exerts his execrations upon the young Negro and the innocent idiot. But Benjy is pleased, for everything returns to its ordered place, despite the fact that Jason's burn-out fury accomplishes it.

Thus, the characters of Caddy and Jason personify the destructive element of fire and simultaneously singe the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Compson and Quentin. Fire, nevertheless, has other characteristics; for example: its bright glow reflected on the hearth. Benjy is hushed and at peace when he is allowed to sense the

75. *Ibid.*
76. *Ibid.*
77. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
78. *Ibid.*
79. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
80. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

bright shapes. Only he and Dilsey are at home before the fire. Benjy experiences only concrete sense perception; that is, reality. It is likewise before the fire that Benjy must face major moments in his life. In the presence of the bright flame, his mother changes the boy's name from Maury to Benjamin. Here, too, Versh on another occasion tells the idiot, "you's born lucky and don't know it."[81]

As he sits facing the fire, Benjy sees the other members of the family in the mirror in the midst of the fire's reflection: "She led me to the fire and I looked at the bright smooth shapes... Caddy and Jason were fighting in the mirror... Father put me down and went into the mirror and fought, too."[82] When Caddy kicks Jason "he rolled into the corner out of the mirror. Father brought Caddy to the fire. They were all out of the mirror. Only the fire was in it. Like the fire was in a door."[83] Each of the Compsons is groping with illusion. Alluding to his favorite sense object, Benjy describes Caddy after her spat with Jason. He remarks that "her hair was like fire, and little points of fire were in her eyes..."[84]

In Dilsey's quarter of the story there are continuous references to dead fire and closed oven, each of which symbolizes deprivation and coldness. Jason refuses to let Luster make a hearth-fire to keep Benjy hushed: "We don't need any fire tonight... Let it alone."[85] Each effort made by Dilsey to build a new fire is thwarted by some other distraction. There is no wood, she must go out in the rain to chop some. Just as she begins to build up the fire, Mrs. Compson calls Dilsey. In response to Dilsey's "I'll have de fire gwine in a minute,"[86] Mrs. Compson retorts: "I thought maybe you were waiting for me to come down and start the fire."[87] Dilsey proceeds to build up the fire again. Gradually the stove begins to heat the room "and fill it with murmurous minors of the fire."[88] Mrs Compson complains about the cold: "My feet are like ice."[89] Dilsey assures her that Luster will make her a fire. After looking

81. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
83. *Ibid.*
84. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
85. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 198.
87. *Ibid.*
88. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
89. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

into the stove, again Dilsey goes out into the rain to find Luster to get more wood. Finally the room grows warmer, and Benjy sits motionless before the stove. When he begins to bellow, Luster opens the door of the firebox. "Ben sat down again facing the rosy door." [90]

Firelight has difficulty surviving by the end of the story. Faulkner here presents his audience with a symbol of the Compsons' completed deterioration. Poor moral vision and the dimmed light of reason are depicted under artificial lighting, darkness, moonlight, and stars; thus the characters are unable to make clear judgments and are motivated by no other principal than self-interest. Three physical deaths (Damuddy's, Mrs. Compson's, and Roskus') parallel three moral falls (Caddy's, Quentin's and Jason's). Mrs. Compson's physical death does not occur in the story, but her moral decay begins before and ends shortly after the narrative is under way. Dilsey weeps: "I've seed de first en de last... I seed de beginnin' en now I sees de endin'." [91]

The tragedy is not so much that the Compsons have escaped reality, but that none of the important characters except Dilsey and Benjy re-kindle truth in their lives.

Fire has destroyed Caddy and Jason; Quentin embraces his death by water. Each is at variance with the other and with all the other characters. In order for life to survive, however, these two elements "must exquisitely balance, commingle, and consummate." [92] Since life is found midway between the two, Benjy and Dilsey alone prevail. "For where fire is purest, this is a sign that life has withdrawn itself, and is withheld. And the same with water." [93]

Through Quentin, Faulkner expresses an acquaintance with Saint Francis' "Canticle of the Sun," for he quotes an allusion to "little sister death." When the Canticle is read in its entirety, we find these references to fire and to water:

> Praised be my Lord for our sister water, who is very serviceable unto us, and humble and precious, and clean.
> Praised be my Lord for our brother fire, through whom thou gives us light in the darkness, and he is bright, and pleasant, and very mighty, and strong. [94]

90. *Ibid.*, p. 212.
91. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
92. Lawrence, p. 164.
93. *Ibid.*

Volpe reminds us that like a poet Faulkner communicates primarily on an emotional level and that all the devices he uses contribute to the creation and communication of feeling. [95]

Faulkner's use of fire leads to the chain of symbols already noted, most important of which is water. "What symbol could be more natural, more humble, and at the same time more wonderful than the symbol of water?" [96] By the poet and the man of prayer "water is used in three significant ways, to symbolize three things: 1) cleansing... 2) death... 3) life..." [97]

The author of *The Sound and the Fury*, too, depicts the cleansing power of water in the three-fold purification of Caddy, whom Benjy idolizes. To him she smells like trees and continues to until her actions cause loss of her identity with him. "For Benjy,... any alteration in Caddy makes her not-Caddy." [98]

In the scene at the Branch when Caddy defies the others and dares to get wet and muddy, taking off her dress, Benjy cries. He cries harder when Caddy threatens to run away. For these few moments she ceases to smell like trees. This event presages her future pollution. Benjy is inconsolable until "she came and squatted in the water." [99] Her action signifies some degree of purification, as Father Vann expresses it:

"When we bathe in the waters we immerse ourselves in the bridal bath of Christ and His Church, so that as Saint Cyril says 'the soul must not put on again the garment it has previously taken off.'" [100] Caddy again smells like trees to Benjy, but unfortunately she does put on again the soiled dress. Her regeneration process is therefore incomplete.

Benjy describes the second incident when Caddy ceases to be

94. Saint Francis of Assisi, "Canticle of the Sun".
95. Volpe, p. 96.
96. Dorothy Donnelly, *The Golden Well: An Anatomy of Symbols* (New York, Sheed and Ward, 1950), p. 187.
97. Sister Mary Laurentia, C.S.J., *Design, Theme, and Symbol in the Liturgy* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957), p. 220.
98. Vickery, p. 35.
99. Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 17.
100. Gerald Vann, O. P., *The Paradise Tree: On Living Symbols of the Church* (New York, Sheed and Ward, 1957), p. 84.

Caddy at the age of fourteen. Perfume acts as the alterative force. Benjy does not sense Caddy smelling like trees. He refuses to be hushed even by Caddy. "Benjy, Caddy said Benjy. She put her arms around me again, but I went away... What is it Benjy. What has Caddy done."[101] Only when the girl washes the perfume away does she regain her former innocence and again smell like trees. "I could hear the water... I could hear the water. I listened to it... I listened to the water. I couldn't hear the water, and Caddy opened the door... I went and she put her arms around me."[102] Dilsey gets the perfume as a gift and once more Benjy has found Caddy. At each sign of her sexual growth Caddy's identity becomes less secure to her brother.

A third alteration takes place in Caddy the following year in the kissing scene in the swing with Charlie. As Benjy spies Caddy he howls. "She put her arms around me and I hushed and held to her dress and tried to pull her away."[103] When Charlie puts his hands on Caddy an uproar ensues. Caddy again promises Benjy to reform. "So I hushed and Caddy got up and we went into the kitchen and turned the light on and Caddy took the kitchen soap and washed her mouth at the sink, hard."[104] Benjy remarks that Caddy smells like trees—everything falls into order for him. Each alteration in Caddy is, nevertheless, a preview of Benjy's destroyed world. Three times she has removed herself from his sense vision and three times "water restores her innocence."[105]

Caddy's final fall from virginity deals a fatal blow to Benjy's security and peace. After she gives herself to Dalton Ames she is lost to Benjy forever. He smells her loss of virginity and howls interminably. When Benjy pulls his sister to the bathroom door to indicate his wish that she wash, Caddy just stands against the door and looks at him. "Then she put her arms across her face and I pushed at her, crying."[106] After this alteration in Caddy there is no cleansing; she is aware that washing will do no good. The central blaze in Benjy's life dies out and he is left with the flickering hope that Caddy will return.

101. Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 33.
102. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
103. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
104. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
105. Volpe, p. 103.
106. Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 54.

Faulkner immerses Quentin's section of the novel in water imagery. Unlike Benjy whose world is based on sensations, Quentin sees sensation only as a manifestation of abstractions.[107] Caddy's falls during her maturation disarrange Quentin's world. Slatoff suggests that "Quentin suffers a double torment since Caddy's behavior clashes not only with his ideal of virginity but with his own incestuous desires for her... His torment seems to continue at maximum intensity."[108] He has no desire to assuage his torment. Rather, in Faulkner's own words, Quentin "loved death above all, ...loved only death, loved and lived in a deliberate and almost perverted anticipation of death as a lover loves..."[109]

Between Quentin and water there is a close affinity. Faulkner expresses this perfectly when he occasionally characterizes Quentin as feminine. Death, virginity, sin, and Caddy are as one entity in Quentin's mind: "And the good Saint Francis that said Little Sister Death, that never had a sister... That Christ was not crucified; he was worn away by a minute clicking of little wheels. That had no sister."[110] Quentin's thoughts form an almost incomprehensible current moving toward destruction (he calls it peace). "In the south you are ashamed of being a virgin. Boys. Men. They lie about it."[111] Earl Labor conceives Quentin's "Why couldn't it have been me and not her who is unvirgin"[112] as an "attempt to assume Caddy's identity (and consequently her sin)."[113] Labor adds this to Quentin's list of effeminate actions. Quentin's college mates also imply at times that femininity is a fault of Quentin. Quentin recalls Spoade: "Calling Shreve my husband."[114] Besides, in response to Quentin's "I couldn't make it," Shreve argues: "Not with all that primping. What's the matter? You think this was Sunday?"[115] Quentin shows a further lack of masculinity in the scene with Dalton Ames on the bridge. Quentin's foolish challenge to fight

107. Vickery, p. 30.
108. Walter Jacob Slatoff, *Quest Failure: A Study of William Faulkner* (New York, Cornell University Press, 1960), p. 69.
109. *The Sound and the Fury*, Appendix, p. 242.
110. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
111. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
112. *Ibid.*
113. Earl Labor, "Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*," *The Explicator* (Vol. XVII, No. 4, Jan, 1959), p. 30.
114. Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 60.
115. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

and to kill Ames for dishonoring Caddy's virginity, and in turn dishonoring the family name, meets with consequential embarrassment. Girlishly, he doesn't close his fist before the attack: "I hit him my open hand beat the impulse to shut it to his face his hand moved as fast as mine."[116] Dalton falsely admits striking Quentin to save him from embarrassment, but Quentin coming to his senses states: "after a while I knew that he hadn't hit me that he had lied about that for her sake too and that I had just passed out like a girl."[117]

Finally, in the car scene, Quentin proves that he still has not acquired manliness. After he swings at Gerald saying "Did you ever have a sister,"[118] Gerald blackens Quentin's eye and knocks him unconscious. To Quentin's question "Did I hurt him any?" Shreve ironically remarks, "You may have hit him. I may have looked away just then or blinked or something. He boxed the hell out of you."[119] There is no real fire in Quentin, only a dim spark on occasion. Emotionally unbalanced, leaning far more to the side of water, he diminishes his potentiality for a full life which is found at the center of the two. Vickery reminds the Faulkner reader: "The number of times that the shadowy images are fused with images of water indicates that death by water is Quentin's way of reconciling two worlds."[120] She goes on to assert that "whatever suggestion of purification may be present water is primarily a symbol of oblivion for Quentin."[121]

Expressions relevant to the water motif are quite obvious throughout the second section. As some Harvard students hurry to the chapel Quentin observes "the same ones fighting the same heaving coatsleeves, the same books and flapping collars flushing past like a debris in a flood."[122] Quentin imagines Spoade as a terrapin (a fresh water turtle) "in a street full of scuttering dead leaves."[123] Faulkner frequently uses the verb "running" which augments the motion tone of water. One paragraph alone contains tense, hurried phrases such as:

116. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
117. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
118. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
119. *Ibid.*
120. Vickery, p. 42.
121. *Ibid.*
122. Faulkner, *S. and F.*, p. 60.
123. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

> Only she was running... In the mirror she was running... That quick, her train caught up over her arm she ran out of the mirror... her veil swirling... her heels brittle... and fast clutching her dress... running out of the mirror... she was across the porch... the floating shadow of the veil running... She ran out of her dress... running into the bellowing... Father had a V-shaped silver cuirass on his chest.[124]

"Pump," "murmuring," "crystal," "fragments of glass," "Jesus walking on Galilee," "Niagra Falls," "bathed and shaved," "floating," and "Columbus," contribute to the over-all pattern. "A sparrow cocked his head at me," Quentin notes, "his throat pumping... and I will look down and see my murmuring bones and the deep water like wind."[125] Before leaving the Harvard dormitory, Quentin bathes and shaves. Anticipation of death by water in no way lessens the suicide's fastidiousness.

On route, Quentin perceives the jeweler working "bent over his bench, the tube tunnelled into his face. His hair was parted in the center. The part ran up into the bald spot like a drained marsh in December."[126] With imagery such as this, Faulkner awakens the reader's consciousness to the impending doom of the eldest of the Compson children. Of all the experiences relating to early school days, Quentin recollects only the time when during a lapse into daydreaming he is unable to answer the teacher. "Tell Quentin who discovered the Mississippi River, Henry."[127] Their teacher might have questioned the class on mathematics, literature, or spelling. The discussion, however, centered on the Mississippi River and thus helps to amplify the water motif in the narrative.

As the time set for the suicide hastens to its end, Quentin from the train "could smell water, and a break in the wall... saw a glint of water and two masts, and a gull motionless in midair."[128] To stop at the open bridge sets the young man's thoughts splashing into metaphors. A ship "went through the bridge, moving under bare poles like a ghost in broad day, with three gulls hovering above the stern like toys on invisible wires."[129] Illusions seize

124. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
125. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
126. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
127. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
128. *Ibid.*
129. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

Quentin's thought-pattern; death and water have merged as a single symbol. He notices that "the float was empty... the shadow of the bridge... my shadow leaning flat upon the water." [130] He endeavors to anticipate the death of his shadow in the Charles River: "At least fifty feet it was, and if I only had something to blot it into the water, holding it until it was drowned." [131] No doubt is left in the reader's imagination what mode of death Quentin has in view. He reiterates a belief of "niggers" that "a drowned man's shadow was watching for him in the water all the time... The displacement of water is equal to the something of something. Reducto absurdum of all human experience.[132]

Faulkner employs phrases that form a pall over several passages here: "water shearing in long rolling cylinders, rocking the float... the float lurching... with a plopping sound... a long jarring noise... two men emerged, carrying a shell."[133] Intermittently, the motif flashes before Quentin's mind and he continues his revery of the boat: "the oars catching the sun in spaced glints, as if the hull were winking itself along." [134] These poetic descriptions give extension to the author's rank as artist; his recollection of reality evinces a talent praiseworthy of a poet.

This scene at the Charles River Bridge likewise parallels the event on the Branch bridge when Quentin threatens Dalton's life. Hasty, frantic phrases recapitulate that situation hours before Quentin takes his own life, and completes the water motif.

Quentin's character personifies the water symbol in its variability: its equilibrium when at rest and its bloated appearance when in motion. In the few scenes when Quentin manifests emotional normality, for example, his contact with the little Italian girl, his quiescence surprises the reader and temporarily retards the action of the story. When Quentin is in conflict (most of the time) however, his emotional instability swells and accelerates the motion of the language, causing Faulkner to change his style accordingly. As water subsides after laying waste to land, so Quentin's impulses subside once they have devastated his mind.

Water, moreover, is sterile when frozen; Quentin's spirit is

130. *Ibid.*
131. *Ibid.*
132. *Ibid.*
133. *Ibid.*
134. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

likewise barren in the face of the cold circumstances upon which he is cast. To carry the analogy still further, the water in the world supercedes dry land by a ratio of three to one. Inversely, Caddy and Jason (the fiery characters) and Benjy (in his own way) supercede Quentin: watery, at times effeminate, soft. In addition, Quentin sees in the healing power of the water security and peace. Lastly, as water constitutes about ninety per cent of the human body, similarly approximately nine tenths of the Quentin section involves Quentin's watery stream of consciousness. Herein the water image unveils the most secret modes of being.

Schorer once wrote that the author competent of the "most exacting technical scrutiny of his subject matter will produce works with the most satisfying content... with thickness and resonance... which reverberate... with maximum meaning." [135] In this sense, William Faulkner stands as a competent writer, for through the expert use he makes of the basic elements of life as symbols of personality, life and death, *The Sound and the Fury* does display resonance, reverberation, and a startling dramatization of "the deterioration of a family, and of the American South... a deterioration from the past to the present... a tragic sense of loss... predominant... pervasive." [136]

William Faulkner discloses as his motive for writing: "To uplift man's heart... we all write for this one purpose... This does not mean that we are trying to change man, improve man, though this is the hope—maybe the intention of some of us." [137] Faulkner concludes his Foreword with this prediction: "He who, from the isolation of cold impersonal print, can engender this excitement, himself partakes of the immortality which he has engendered." [138]

135. Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," *Essays in Modern Literary Criticism* (ed.), Raymond B. West (New York, Rinehart & Co., Inc., 1956), p. 190.
136. Volpe, p. 95.
137. Faulkner, Foreword of *The Faulkner Reader*, p. viii.
138. *Ibid.*, p. ix.

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