ABSTRACT

This project covers the process of writing a modern reworking of the second chapter of *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner and consists of four chapters. The first covers character and setting and how they exist within the original text and popular scholarship, focused on the way these elements combine to impact the character of Quentin Compson. The second chapter takes on Quentin through a queer reading, as well as addressing queer life within Quentin’s historical moment and issues surrounding the connection between mental health and the LGBTQ communities, including a discussion of the “dead queer” trope. The third chapter works off the two prior, using the information to construct a modern Compson family, noting both how the characters change and what parts of them remain intact as their setting is transitioned from 1910 to 1990. It also includes a quick study of style as it’s utilized in the fourth chapter, a short story that details Quentin Compson’s path towards suicide in Cambridge, MA in June of 1990 and works with more explicit queer themes to address issues of sexuality and identity.
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INTRODUCTION

Quentin Compson has been haunting me for eight years. I first picked up a copy of *The Sound and the Fury* at a library sale in eighth grade, a battered hardcover edition from the fifties with pages that smelled like age and vanilla. I had no previous introduction to Faulkner, but I was always desperate to read above my age level and tackling heavy volumes of classics was the way to go. I didn’t realize this at the time, but reading Faulkner would not be like struggling through Dreiser or attempting to master the full, unabridged text of *The Count of Monte Cristo* the year prior. When I finally got around to reading *The Sound and the Fury* at the beginning of my freshman year of high school, it felt like stumbling into a room I’d never seen before but that also seemed oddly familiar. It also sort of felt like being locked in that room for extended periods of time with a cast of confusing, complicated, and often traumatizing figures. In the best way, of course. I would read the book before school started. I would read it during classes. I would read it after school and stay up too late with it. These were my rebellious years, obviously, and Quentin was the poster child for that adolescent angst. After all, while the rest of the Compsons were engaging in their tragedy, none of them grabbed me and held on like Quentin. When I say he’s been haunting me for eight years, I’m being pretty serious. I’ve not been able to get his voice out of my head since he snuck in there when I should have been running during gym class.

Of course, as I grew up, my perception of Quentin did, as well. In a way, I stole him from Faulkner far before I started working on this project. By the time I was entering college, I had the initial stages of the Quentin that I’m writing about now realized. He
didn’t exist on paper, but he was out there, tragic and queer and repressed, and I knew from previous research for an essay in my junior year on masculinity in Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” that the scholarship existed to back him up. This wasn’t just the Quentin Compson living inside my head anymore. By the time I started this project, I already had a decent picture of the Quentin that exists within academia. It wasn’t until I finished it, though, that I became immersed in what exactly Quentin represents across a broad range of perspectives and felt capable of moving the boy I knew in my head to the page.

This project covers three research-based chapters, culminating in a final chapter that contains a short story that transitions the Compson family from 1910 into 1990 and poses Quentin in a world where he’s forced to deal with a more clear view of queer sexuality, as well as other issues formed from the original text and playing out in the late 20th century, such as his sister’s promiscuity and early pregnancy and his father’s fatalism. The first chapter explores the factors that came together to define Quentin as he exists within Faulkner’s canon: the settings his story plays out in and the characterization of the members of his family. This chapter works both with the text of The Sound and the Fury and a variety of scholars to synthesize relevant information on both of these factors. The second chapter goes on to explore Quentin’s characterization through the lens of queer theory, focusing on a queer reading of Quentin and his roommate Shreve McCannon and a look into the perception of male queer sexuality within Quentin’s time. It also addresses the connection between mental health issues and the LGBTQ community, particularly as it’s utilized in the “dead queer” stereotype. The third chapter takes the information presented in the previous two and addresses it from a modern viewpoint, asking the question of what would change when the characters and ideas that
were previously addressed are moved 80 years into the future. It also covers a short analysis of style as it is most relevant to the final chapter, a short story titled “When They Touched Me I Died,” which reworks the second chapter of *The Sound and the Fury* as if Quentin were walking around Cambridge on a day in early June of 1990.

I had a lot of different intentions when it came to writing this thesis, so many that it’s hard to fit them all into a cohesive statement. I wanted to radicalize a character that I thought made more sense that way. I wanted to explore this world even deeper than I had before. I wanted to carve out my own place in it and stay there for a while. Overall, though, I think it’s valid to say this is really a love letter. Faulkner had this to say about writing on his own hometown, that “you don't love because: you love despite; not for the virtues, but despite the faults” (Ulin). The cast of characters found in *The Sound and the Fury* are not necessarily easy to love, but I love them. I’ve spent over nine months with them in order to create this. I spent a few days wandering Oxford, MI to try to get a feel of where they might have walked. I read Quentin’s chapter of the novel so many times that I can probably quote large parts of it verbatim. Through all that, even when it was difficult, I never stopped loving it. The next 100 or so pages are a product of that love, and I hope that it shows.
CHAPTER ONE

HOW QUENTIN CAME TO BE

Quentin Compson is a character that has been stuck in the head of Faulkner’s readership since the beginning. Once readers have found their way through the four different narratives in *The Sound and the Fury*, it’s likely that Quentin’s is the one that they will continuously come back to. Whereas the rest of the narratives have a certain sense of straightforwardness despite their own stream of consciousness style, Quentin’s narrative is notably more tangled and dangerous. There’s no way to tread lightly within it; if someone is to truly get into Quentin’s mind and world, they have to throw themselves into the middle of it. They have to hold the knife to Caddy’s throat and listen to Mr. Compson spout fatalistic philosophies. They have to stand at the train station in Jefferson, to feel that disconnect between two worlds and be unable to bridge it. They have to be with Quentin as he sits in his dorm and wanders Cambridge, and they have to take that final step into the river. Along with that, though, they need to have a clear picture of everything that created the Quentin Compson that is being studied to this day. This picture includes the worlds that Quentin unsuccessfully attempts to inhabit, both Jefferson, MS, and Cambridge, MA, and the family which shaped him from birth to death.

In initially viewing Quentin Compson, a reader might turn to setting first to begin to determine what is important about his character. After all, Quentin is the Southerner who leaves the South, on his parents’ wishes, to go to an entirely different environment in
Cambridge, MA. Quentin is defined by his home and defines himself by it. There is no Quentin Compson without the image of Jefferson, MS which fuels his memories and centers his emotions on the things which occurred within those few miles of land that he was exposed to. To begin to get an impression of what Jefferson is, it’s necessary to get a picture of Faulkner’s journey and intent with Yoknapatawpha, including the connections to the reality of the Oxford which will influence Quentin’s characterization. There’s also the necessity of exploring what world Quentin would have stepped off the train into when he came to Cambridge into 1910, because the divide between the two places is one of many things that could have potentially incited Quentin’s path towards suicide.

In 1925, Sherwood Anderson essentially gave William Faulkner that universally applied writing advice of “write what you know,” when he encouraged him to write about his life in his hometown of Oxford, saying, “You’re a country boy, all you know is that little patch up there in Mississippi where you started from. But that’s alright, too. That’s America, too” (Hines 11). Faulkner obviously took this and additional influence from Anderson, who is known for his stories about a fictional Ohio town created in the image of his own hometown, to heart. That influence can be clearly seen in his creation of Jefferson, Mississippi, in Yoknapatawpha County, based off his own small hometown of Oxford, Lafayette County. He’s certainly at his most popular when he’s writing about his “own little postage stamp of native soil,” and there’s undoubtedly a reason why these stories are still constantly being studied to this day. Southerners have been looking to Faulkner for their own stories for generations and have used his narratives as a basis for their own for just as long. It could be said, perhaps, that Faulkner’s works went a long way towards legitimizing the literary narrative of the American South in the twentieth
century; he was capable of taking stories that might otherwise be untold, stories about people like poor sharecroppers and lonely widows, and gaining national attention and a place in the literary canon that showed that his stories were not just stories of the South. They were stories of a sort of universal significance, and though taking them out of the overall image of the South removes important context and certainly people of Faulkner’s time and Faulkner’s region have a special hold on them, they also have importance outside of that context to Southerners and non-Southerners, to writers and to readers alike. Ultimately, Faulkner is often considered a sort of cultural gatekeeper of the South, with other writers of his time below him in the hierarchical structure of the ever-looming Southern Literary Tradition.

In creating Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha, Faulkner constructed a version of his hometown that he could play in endlessly, with a cast of characters that he constructed both from his perception of Southern archetypes and from observations of the real citizens of Oxford and Lafayette County. A visit to Oxford, MS today will uncover the fact that practically everything within a few miles of Faulkner’s home could be considered a Faulkner landmark, and it puts into perspective how Faulkner was able to frame all of these stories around an area that it wouldn’t take an entire day to walk around. Unlike many of his contemporaries such as the safari-going Hemingway and the eternally Gatsby-esque Scott Fitzgerald, Faulkner preferred his relatively quiet life in Oxford, which lent itself well to opportunities for building up his own universe around the relatively normal bustle of town going on around him. Lewis Gaston Leary describes the area in loving detail, drawn from the collected Faulkner canon, in his book William Faulkner of Yoknapatawpha County. He paints the picture as an area of “swamp,
In Northern Mississippi, not too far outside of Tennessee but fairly isolated in its geography. He expounds further on with descriptions of those aspects as, “cotton fields, lush bottom-lands, and deep forests of pine.” It’s settled between the Tallahatchie River and the Yoknapatawpha River, with a railroad running through the middle, and overall it’s a small county with a small county seat.

Jefferson is representative of Oxford in looks, at the very least, with a similar population (according to Leary, 15, 611 people, with over 9000 of them black, largely a population of freed slaves still working as indentured workers, with only a little over 6000 of them being white), a similar layout, and a general sense that everything used to be little nicer. The real estate is composed of “ill-kept houses, sharecroppers’ shacks, Negro hovels, and dilapidated mansions.” The only thing that seems to be well-kept are their barns. The people who inhabit the homes are of a larger variety than the homes themselves, of course, with a misfit cast of, “small farmers, lawyers, bootleggers, itinerant salesmen, horse-traders, politicians, preachers, and poor whites, and by landed aristocrats and their descendants.” Jefferson is full of people who have the potential to exist as archetypes of their groups but who generally end up just seeming uniquely human. Plenty of people who lived in Oxford while Faulkner was writing have claimed to see themselves and their family members in the characters out of Yoknapatawpha, and it would certainly make sense; Faulkner was trying to construct something as real as he could while still maintaining artistic license over it.

The overall sense of reality presents us with an obvious truth: Jefferson is not the moral center of Faulkner’s South, the idealized hometown, the quintessential Mayberry. That’s not why it exists. If one thing could confidently be said about Faulkner,
particularly in his Yoknapatawpha centered works, it would be that he rarely falls victim
to the sin of idealization. The Mississippi he paints is neither unflattering nor flattering,
neither moral nor immoral. It is not the stuff of the fairy tale South, because Faulkner
does not view the South that way or expect his readers to do the same. His works are a
handful of long letters to the stretch of mud and clay that Faulkner called his home; they
are not necessarily love letters and they are not necessarily accurate to the overall reality
readers and would-be critics away from treating Faulkner’s novels as a sociological study
and of taking too much of his perspective as historical or sociological accuracy. He
writes, while acknowledging that much of Faulkner’s characterizations have roots in
reality and are applicable to literary-sociological studies of his time, “Faulkner is writing
fiction, not sociology or history, and he has employed all the devices for the heightening,
special focus, and, in some instances, distortion that fiction demands and justifies” (13).
Jefferson is not entirely synonymous with Oxford, in the end; Yoknapatawpha is not
Lafayette. As John T. Matthews reinforces in his recent biographical study of Faulkner,
the areas are very much imaginary, though rooted in reality. They are controlled solely by
"William Faulkner, sole owner and proprietor” (Moreland 285) rather than the history
and reality of the time and town the works were set in. It’s important to keep these things
in mind when setting out to understand Faulkner’s South, because Faulkner’s South is not
necessarily the South. It’s an impression of it.

In the same way, all Southern writers have different impressions of the South,
because they’ve all had different experiences and encounters that have shaped them as
Southerners and as writers. In his book Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to
Fred Hobson explains that Southern writers (not just novelists, but historians, sociologists, and others who seek to explain the region), no matter their personal experience, tend to fall in two schools of thought for how they write about their homes and the weight of the negative, highly scrutinized history behind them. There are apologists, who emphasize “salvation in Southern values - and a glory of the past now always properly captured in written history,” and there are critics, who are focused on taking on the burden of that history (4). Not all writers will fall into these black and white divisions, but inevitably they will fall within a certain shade of grey. Ultimately, they all have a singular goal and, for many of them, a singular obsession. As Faulkner said himself, Southern writers want to “tell about the South.” They have a desperate need to explain their lives, their work, their image of themselves, and all of it outside of the framework that the rest of the country had built up around them.

Quentin Compson is a prototypical Southern storyteller in this way, as he explains the South to his roommate, Shreve, in Absalom, Absalom! Quentin is torn apart by his attempts to rationalize both himself and the South as he viewed it, something he couldn’t even put into words as he quickly claimed that Shreve would have had to been born in the South to really understand anything about it. Setting is one of the most important things when defining Quentin’s character and his motivations; he cannot escape Mississippi, even when he’s in Cambridge. He always goes back there, in flashbacks, in memories. Hobson puts it beautifully when he writes that Quentin is a “Southerner consumed in large measure by his Southerness,” (7) which goes back to the writers that Hobson studies in his book. Out of eighteen of them, four of the writers killed themselves, three of them soon after publishing works that defined their image of the South (9). Self-
destruction is a common thread that, while not necessarily rooted in the South itself, could possibly be rooted in the endless fight that these writers have to explain, defend, or just simply tell about the South. It certainly parallels cleanly with Quentin’s fate.

Just like Quentin would not be himself without the South, he would also not be himself without Yoknapatawpha, without Jefferson, just as Faulkner would be nothing without Oxford. Though Faulkner’s Jefferson and the reality of Oxford are not entirely synonymous, the similarities are clear. Lafayette County’s population was approximately near that of the one listed for Yoknapatawpha from the same year. Many of the monuments referenced in Faulkner’s works are found all across Oxford and Lafayette County. It is easier to piece together a neat, general history of Oxford, though, whereas tracing the history of Yoknapatawpha would be significantly harder because it has the types of stories that lived in Oxford but could only survive through fiction. On the history page of the City of Oxford website, they describe the initial vision of the town as “centered on education,” referencing primarily the creation of the University of Mississippi in 1841 which put Oxford on the map in ways it hadn’t been before. They started to thrive under this image, but their growth was temporarily cut off during the Civil War, when Oxford faced the loss of “structures, livelihoods, and lives,” with the loss of around 2000 citizens, the Court House, and much of the Town Square (Oxford History). It has never been a town to give up, though, and it was thriving again by the 1890s, with increases in commerce and a higher population count that ultimately led them to have to pass new buggy speed limits and a new sewer line. The success of Oxford led many families from surrounding areas to migrate there, including the Faulkner (or, then,
Falkner) family in 1902 (Oxford History). From that point on, Oxford maintained a certain level of success, even throughout the struggles of the Great Depression.

In his book *William Faulkner and the Tangible Past*, Thomas S. Hines traces similar paths of history but through the architecture and landmarks that connect Yoknapatawpha and Oxford. He points out that Oxford is one of the only small towns in the South to have two monuments honoring Confederate soldiers, which points to Oxford’s strong ties to Southern history and to the overall perception of the South in general (17). Most landmarks in Oxford functioned (and continue to function) the same way as these monuments. There are multiple cemeteries and, in particular, there are several Native American burial mounds from the Chickasaw tribe that were highly present in Faulkner’s life and that influenced him to name his fictional county after the Chickasaw tribe’s word for “slowly moving water,” Yoknapatawpha (23). All of these represent the history that Oxford was built on and the legacy that has come before them. Even the small hometown stores, like the one where the shopkeeper finds a picture of Caddy with a Nazi General in a magazine, and the train depot, where Quentin left for Harvard and never returned, are heavy with history and with memory (32).

Faulkner felt the full weight of that history and, through that, so does Quentin. Through this connection, it starts to become necessary to see Quentin through both Jefferson and Oxford because he is ultimately a product of both of them. He physically is a product of Jefferson, within the novel; it is his hometown, and the central locality of his mind and body, even when he’s away. As stated earlier, he never really leaves Jefferson, and he lives on to an extent through his family and in other works by Faulkner. He’s a product of Oxford, though, because it took Oxford’s tree lined neighborhoods with, at the
time, both new Greek revival homes and aging, more primitive structures, to inspire Faulkner to create him. The house which inspired the Compson home, the Thompson-Chandler House, is two streets away from Rowan Oak, the home Faulkner lived in until his death, and within the neighborhood of other significant locations in Faulkner’s life (“Description of Map Sites”). One of the children who lived there, who had cognitive disabilities and wandered the fence line, inspired the character of Benjy Compson and it unfolded from there. The contrast and the divide between Jefferson and Oxford is important, but Quentin is a son of both of them. He was born in Jefferson, but he and the rest of Faulkner’s characters would be nothing without Oxford.

Another important aspect of Quentin is that, though he is consumed by the South, he is removed from the South and placed in Cambridge, MA, where he’s enrolled in Harvard for a year prior to his suicide in June of 1910. The difference between Cambridge and Jefferson/Oxford is immense, and it’s a transition that Quentin obviously cannot successfully make. By the late 19th century, Cambridge had a larger population than the already large Boston, and in 1910, its population was at 104,839 people (U.S. Census). Throughout the 19th and 20th century, it grew immensely due to an increase in manufacturing that made it a go-to place for immigrants to come to seek jobs (hence the Italian girl who Quentin cares for in a large portion of his narrative). Between 1850 and 1900, Cambridge developed into a city with a strong economy, outlined with three different large areas separated by class outlying it in the surrounding suburbs—the working class neighborhoods largely populated by immigrants in East Cambridge, the middle class neighborhoods in mid Cambridge, and the upper class neighborhoods which were closer to Harvard (Kehoe). Just like Oxford was basically built around the town
square, Cambridge was centered around a grouping of several different town squares which act as the intersections for major streets, most notably Harvard Square. Radcliffe College, the women’s equivalent of Harvard, had been around for several years before Quentin came to Cambridge in 1910, and academics were beginning to become the most important aspect of the city during the 20th century (Kehoe).

Their renown for academics was obviously centered around Harvard University. Reading up on the history of Harvard shows that, at the very least, the rhetoric surrounding the place has remained similar. Just the name Harvard has weight to it, and there’s a reason that Mr. and Mrs. Compson want their son to go there. To have a son at Harvard means they haven’t ultimately failed at their own lives; it’s almost a path to redemption for the family as a whole. Old issues of the Harvard Crimson show that life at Harvard reflected the image of it as arguably the most important academic institution in the country, at least at the time. In 1910, they entertained two notable speakers: Theodore Roosevelt, who spoke on the Panama Canal, and William Jennings Bryan, who spoke on “the importance of strong oratory for Democracy” (Wu). It’s unlikely that Quentin could have ever been in the same room with men like that if he had stayed in Jefferson. Even the structure of the classes had a certain amount of gravity, with several class offices ranging from “secretary,” to “marshals” to “class poet” that were elected in true Democratic fashion (“1910 Class Day Officers”).

Not everything was quite as prestigious as being elected class orator and then listening to William Jennings Bryan make a speech on it, but even the social events were fairly formal. They would have official “Smokers” where students would take breaks from studying to smoke pipes and calm down with their classmates (Wu). Students were
entertained at events by Vaudeville performers (“Last 1910 Smoker in Union at 9”).

Sports were also a large part of the student culture at Harvard, often dominating the pages of The Crimson with news of football, basketball, baseball, and lacrosse teams playing other colleges in the area (Wu). These are, of course, the idealized versions of Harvard that they put in their student newspaper. There isn’t room in their headlines for students like Quentin, who was not an athlete or an officer or, admittedly, much of anything.

Nothing is known about what Quentin actually accomplished during his time at Harvard, but it’s likely that his impact wasn’t huge. All things considered, his whole year there probably consisted of the time he spent with his roommate and working to pass his classes despite his plans to kill himself. Based on these lines from his chapter, Quentin’s suicidal ideation at least had him anticipating his own suicide for a while: “Let us sell Benjy’s pasture so that Quentin may go to Harvard and I may knock my bones together and together. I will be dead in. Was it one year Caddy said” (Faulkner 174). Even with that awareness that he would be dead by the end of the year, someone like Quentin would have never let himself do poorly when so much went into getting him there, when they sold Benjy’s pasture, when he had the entire fate of his family on his shoulders.

It’s interesting to wonder whether or not Quentin could have ever fit into Harvard. If he hadn’t killed himself, if he had stayed and received his degree, would he have stayed in the north? Would he, so obviously changed, have been able to return to Mississippi? Arguably, Quentin’s suicide is enough evidence that he would never have been able to successfully make either transition. By killing himself in Cambridge, Quentin manages to both remove himself from that world while also effectively rejecting the South. He will only return there as a corpse, and he will never have to face the family
that he leaves behind, the family that he so desperately needed to save. Quentin Compson spends his entire life in a large grey area, trapped between morals and desire, the new and the old, and it’s only through his suicide that he finds something concrete. As Nathaniel Miller writes, “Quentin is obviously misplaced, both in the twentieth century South, and even more so in New England” (36). There is no place in the physical world where Quentin can comfortably reside; the closest thing he had was the domestic sphere of his childhood home, and he had to leave that for the sake of his family. Miller details these issues further, discussing the fact that Quentin is only capable of identifying aspects of himself through his family, that he makes no reference to school friends or romances. Though he can’t fully fit into either of these places, at the very least his life in Mississippi lead to a sort of arrested development. This shows us exactly how important it is to understand the difference between these two settings when looking into Quentin’s character—he has to leave the South to fulfill his role as the eldest child, but he’ll never make it back, and he’ll never fully leave New England, where he chose to end everything in June of 1910.

To continue to take an in-depth look at Quentin, it’s necessary to examine not only the setting in which his character develops but the other characters around him that influence his actions and his thoughts. Quentin is highly susceptible to outside influences, particularly those of his family, even as he descends further and further into his own mind. Arguably, Caddy holds the greatest influence over him, as her life and the impact that she has on her family ultimately provides the framework of the novel itself. It is the structure of his family as a whole, though, that made Quentin what he is, the intersection of parents, siblings, and the overall picture of what it means to be a Compson. This
includes the full weight of their family history, their illustrious beginnings and their slow, continuous downfall, as well as the overarching knowledge of what a proper Southern family is and all of the ways that they each are unable to live up to their roles. Quentin takes the brunt of this history on his own shoulders. When taking a look at his character and how he ended up on that riverbank in Cambridge in 1910, it makes the most sense to start at the beginning: his parents. They are the central figures of the Compston family, and they represent the transition away from the old South and into the new South that their children are coming of age in. Mr. and Mrs. Compson are not the moral center of their family, though (Dilsey is arguably the closest approximation that they have to a moral center), and they each have hands in turning what was once a respectable family into the dysfunctional group depicted in this novel, ironically often in the name of maintaining that respectability.

Mrs. Caroline Compson, Quentin’s mother, is arguably the least sympathetic character in the novel. This could be because her place in the novel is relatively small in comparison with the four siblings and, understandably, there is less time and less reason to sympathize with her. She can be easily reduced the role of bad mother and not dealt with more than that. When going deeper, though, there are at least three distinctive areas through which Mrs. Compson is viewed, as laid out by Ulrike Nüssler: her hypochondria, her physical immobility, and her inability to meet maternal expectations (573). These are all issues which primarily define how other characters view her. For instance, her hypochondria is largely treated as non-existent and just another method of inciting attention for herself. If it’s a legitimate disorder, it’s not held up to the same level as Benjy or Quentin’s mental disorders. Her physical immobility works in similar ways, but
it also works in the same way as her hypochondria. Instead of getting her attention, though, according to Nüssler, it also works to define her power by centralizing it in her body (575). She’s trapped on the second floor of her home, which limits her physical command of the house itself, but she still commands attention via her body, especially her voice and gaze. Jason is particularly victimized by this, as his mother’s attention for him is constant and demanding, considering she is watching him intently to make sure that he is more Bascomb than Compson, not like Quentin and Caddy and Benjy. Quentin observes this idea in her when she says, in his chapter,

“Jason I must go away you keep the others I’ll take Jason and go where nobody knows us so he’ll have a chance to grow up and forget all this the others don’t love me they have never loved anything with that streak of Compson selfishness and false pride Jason was the only one my heart went out to without dread” (Faulkner 174).

This type of preferential treatment, though negative for Jason, is indicative of Mrs. Compson’s role as a mother in general. She’s not the central maternal figure of the novel. Most would consider that to be Dilsey or, certainly, Caddy. Instead, she rejects her children if they don’t live up to the image that she builds up for them, which would be impossible in the situation that they’re in. She turns away from Benjy as his disability becomes clear, even going so far as to insist that they change his name so that he’s no longer named after her brother and that shame won’t be on her side of the family. She doesn’t even attempt to understand Caddy’s situation, saying of Caddy’s pregnancy and promiscuity, “I never dreamed when I held her in my arms that any daughter of mine could let herself don’t you know I can look at her eyes and tell,” soon calling Caddy
“secretive,” and claiming, “I know things she’s done that I’d die before I’d have you know” (95). There’s no room for sympathy when she’s attempting to make sure the blame for whatever Caddy ends up being is not connected to her at all. She can’t even fully accept Caddy after she marries Herbert Head entirely to satisfy her, and, when that marriage is annulled, their relationship is ruined entirely. When it comes to Quentin, who was fulfilling all of his mother’s expectations by going to Harvard, she doesn’t even begin to understand why he would kill himself. She can’t bring herself to consider it for long enough to come up with a reason, and it doesn’t seem to be out of grief but, rather, an inability to connect with Quentin’s emotions. Out of all her children, Jason is the only one she shows affection for, but even that is tinged with manipulation and is ultimately a negative experience for both of them. Her death brings Jason more relief than anything else.

Internally, Mrs. Compson’s motivations seem to generally match up with her actions and with the way the other characters view her. She’s primarily motivated by self-interest, her own view of family honor distorted in favor of idealizing her side of the family and demonizing Compson blood for causing all of her family’s problems. Linda Wagner describes her as, “a woman motivated only by social pressure and status,” (55) and that resolute “only” is indicative of the general opinion of Caroline Compson; her character is not seen as especially complex. Ultimately, all she is interested in is a cleaner image of herself that was never there to begin with, and the way that she sees to do that is by figuring out the right people to blame for things that she had a hand in herself. She argues with her husband about whose blood has caused the trouble within their children, claiming it couldn’t have come from the Bascombs, an idea Quentin reiterates when he
says, of their families connecting, “Done in Mother’s mind though. Finished. Finished. Then we were all poisoned” (Faulkner 102). Most of her actions, though, can ultimately be explained by a strong need for attention and pity, because that’s the only way that she can manage to get anything from her children. She never manages bonding with them on any significant level, so forcing them into, at the very least, feigning affection is good enough for her at this point. Jason recounts a scene at one point where Mrs. Compson catches Caddy kissing a boy when she’s fifteen and spends days in mourning clothes because of it. She goes through fits of dramatics when things don’t fit her mental image of what things should be, and she props herself up on the second floor of their home and tries to manage a household like there isn’t a family inside of it.

While attempting to explain Mrs. Compson, Nüssler goes on to point out her place in society relative to other women, which has the possibility of giving us a clearer picture of her. Because of her position as a woman in a changing economic system, from the Old South’s emphasis on social class, to which she desperately clings, to the New South’s emphasis on capitalism, investments, and making money, she is “bound to the place that society once assigned her” (574). She is relatively powerless in a patriarchal system, and powerless is not a place where Caroline Compson is comfortable being. In this light, we might be able to find her redemption - caught between the tenuous divide of the Old South and the New South, Mrs. Compson is struggling to understand her identity just like her children are. She might victimize her family and consistently victimize herself, as well, but it’s possible that she’s just as much a victim of the times, caught between her own expectations for her life and the sort of Cult of True Womanhood mentality that she’s unable to live up to. According to these nineteenth century ideals of
womanhood, which largely grew out of the Civil War, mothers are expected to be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic (“True Womanhood”). While she might be comfortable coercing her daughter into these roles, Mrs. Compson is incapable of fulfilling them herself. The Compsons, in a way, are all defined by their inability to exist in cohesion with the world around them, and Mrs. Compson is a prime example of this. It is possible the reader is so turned off by her because of a certain degree of expectations for mothers in general; not only do we see her as an abhorrent person but, even worse, an abhorrent mother. Critics have managed to redeem Jason, after all, and he is certainly his mother’s son.

When it comes to Quentin, the connection between his mother and him is fairly obvious. As previously mentioned, she was never the mother figure, which means Quentin didn’t have much of a connection to any mother figure at all. He couldn’t view Caddy as a maternal influence, and his ties to Dilsey were the closest thing he had, though even those were loose at best. When it comes to parental influence, Quentin’s was clearly overpowered by his father’s. His mother certainly made an impact on him, though, and it calls back to her tactics for inspiring pity and guilt from her family members. Harvard is his “mother’s dream” (Faulkner 102). To have a son at Harvard could ensure the Compson’s social standing, and Quentin was the clever one, the intellectual one. His parents are willing to risk financial failure to send him to school, which is a huge burden on Quentin’s psyche. This feeds into Quentin’s spiral towards suicide, because, as previously mentioned, he’s aware to an extent that he’s going to take his own life, and the reality of that failure and knowing he won’t move forward with his education is one the of many, many possible reasons that he ultimately decides to drown.
Nevertheless, Quentin does finish his year at Harvard, because he won’t waste his parent’s money. Considering the image of Quentin playing with Caddy as a child, imagining a dungeon with their parents as guards, with “Mother . . .and Father upward into weak light holding hands and us lost somewhere below them without even a ray of light,” (148) the weight of expectations that his mother placed on him with no hope of her understanding his position had a clear effect on Quentin.

Mr. Compson’s effect on Quentin can be more clearly seen in the text, though. Mr. Compson, or Jason Compson III, is described in the appendix to The Sound and the Fury as having been “bred for a lawyer and indeed he kept an office upstairs above the Square, where entombed in dusty filingcases some of the oldest names in the county” (Faulkner 322). In that office, he sits and drinks whiskey all day while reading philosophy and composing, “caustic and satiric eulogies on both his dead and his living fellowtownsmen,” (323) all the while regretting that he never lived up to the grand image his father imagined for him. He’s also motivated by family honor, but it manifests in a different way than it does in his wife. While Mrs. Compson’s obsession with her family name is more about maintaining her own image, both within her family and to the insulated town of Jefferson, Mr. Compson’s is far more rooted in history. He is one of the people influencing Quentin’s stories in Absalom, Absalom! He is the one who is rotting away in the office surrounded by files containing men who are far greater than he has ever been, who have lived greater lives than he’ll ever expect for his sons. This division between their conceptions of family honor is also evident in their treatment of Caddy after her pregnancy is revealed. While Mrs. Compson is horrified and does everything she can to get Caddy married before the baby comes, Mr. Compson, on the other hand,
takes her pregnancy and the news of her promiscuity casually, because his views on 
women and female sexuality don’t lead him to expect anything more from her.

Mr. Compson is also fueled by his own fatalism, which is evident in both *The 
Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* He is frequently undone by existential angst, 
but instead of being prone to dramatics like Mrs. Compson, he simply lets what happens 
happen. He doesn’t believe that fate is something that he or anyone else can fight, and 
this view enables him to consistently give up. As a character who lives by the ideal “no 
battle is ever won; they are not even fought,” (Faulkner 76) there’s not much more to 
expect from him and it makes the primary way that Mr. Compson displays this fatalism 
entirely unsurprising. The man who sits and drinks whiskey all day to pretend like his life 
hasn’t started to fade around him is obviously an alcoholic. He cannot find it within 
himself to depend on anything or anyone else, so when his stories aren’t enough, he turns 
to alcohol. In a way, this is modeling self-destructive behavior to his children, a 
predecessor to Quentin’s suicide, Caddy’s promiscuity, and Jason’s gambling. It’s also a 
physical indication of the degradation of the family structure. If Mr. Compson can’t see a 
light anywhere in his future, he is passing this belief through his children, no matter how 
effectual or unimportant he sees himself to the universe at large.

Mr. Compson’s biggest role is the part that he plays in Quentin’s life. When 
Quentin is unable to comprehend the things that are happening his family and even the 
things that are happening in his head, he constantly turns to the words of the father who 
used to tell him stories and who later spouted fatalistic philosophies at him that wormed 
their way into Quentin’s skull more than any of the rest of the Compson children. If 
Quentin were not uniquely himself, though torn at the edges by all of the voices that are
still echoing in his head, he might have ended up in similar conditions as his father. In the end, though, as Giles Gunn writes:

Quentin and his father occupy the ground in the middle. Both men are deluded, and by nothing so much as the need to compensate for a sense of failure and impotence that they think has been visited upon them from outside. But Quentin's father's delusion is more self-regarding than his son's, in its cynicism more sodden with sympathy for himself and in its Stoicism less sensitive to the suffering his irresolution produces in others” (160).

Quentin takes what his father gives him, this aching need to follow through with keeping their family both together and honorable, but ultimately neither of them have that follow through. Mr. Compson gives up and continues to drink himself to death, and Quentin can’t stop taking in ideas and fighting against time and trying to make sense of the inconsistencies that his father has left him with. Quentin is never able to rectify his own head with his father’s reality, and thus, he’s never able to make anything happen but his own early death. When Mr. Compson gives Quentin his grandfather’s watch, infamously saying, “I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire,” and, soon after, “I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it” (Faulkner 76), he displays this contrast clearly. In life, Quentin is incapable of removing himself from the constraints of time, even as his memories are not tied linearly, and he is incapable of embracing fatalism. It’s only through that early death that he can make peace with his father and his father’s world.
To begin with the siblings, it’s beneficial to start where Faulkner does: with Benjy. To the outside observer, Benjy Compson is just a child trapped in a man’s body. The last time he has a voice in the novel, he is thirty three, described as “a big man who appeared to have been shaped of some substance whose particles would not or did not cohere to one another or to the frame which supported it” (Faulkner 273). He has “dead looking” skin, but eyes that are the “pale sweet blue of cornflowers” (274). Because of his size and his inability to use coherent language to communicate, he is capable of frightening people but doesn’t have the intention or the will to do so. When he rushes and shouts at a group of schoolgirls as a teenager, an act which leads to his castration later on, he is not meaning to intimidate them. He just wants to talk about Caddy, who they remind him of and who is the strongest thread he has to his own reality. Because he can’t express himself with language, Benjy resorts to crying and moaning, words which he repetitively links to himself in his narrative. It’s the only way he can put forth the emotions that he allegedly seems to have, regardless of Faulkner’s claims that, because of Benjy’s disability, readers “can't feel anything for Benjy because he doesn't feel anything” (“The Art of Fiction No. 12, William Faulkner”).

To the outside observer, Benjy Compson is just a child trapped in a man’s body, but, nevertheless, Benjy ages. His mind changes. It might not change in a linearly typical way, but, as Ted Roggenbuck places the idea in his study of Benjy’s mental atrophy, the novel shows the way that Benjy’s mind changes from fairly perceptive at the age of three to the state it’s in at thirty three, at which point “he has so withdrawn both mentally and emotionally from the world and people around him that he no longer possesses enough emotional investment in it to attempt to interpret much of what transpires” (581). As a
narrator, the reader can see him grow and develop, and, to an extent, interpret the events that are happening around him. In a way, Benjy is as coherent, if not more, than Quentin. His view of the world is less muddled, told through snippets of conversation and not filtered through the varied perception that Quentin has. It’s chaotic but, in a way, it’s simple. Most of what can be said about Benjy’s character can be pulled out of the things he hears other people saying, particularly early on when he’s a child, and much of the characterization of the rest of the family can be similarly pulled out. As Stacy Burton puts it, Benjy’s narrative is one that readers “rely upon” and one that shows both Benjy’s ultimate significance as a means of understanding the Compson family as a whole, just like his brothers and Dilsey (208).

As Benjy withdraws internally, though, the reader can see the root of his character, what drives Benjy despite the constraints of his condition. Originally, this drive is based around Caddy. She’s the maternal, grounding figure in his life, the one person who made a genuine effort to understand him. Benjy tries to communicate with the girls who look like Caddy; Benjy cries when one of the golfers on the course that used to be his pasture, before they sold it for Caddy to be married to a man she didn’t love and Quentin to end his life so far from home, talks about his “caddie” (283). He cries, and without Caddy there to interpret his reactions, Roggenbuck emphasizes the idea that his efforts at communicating, “become mostly pointless because nobody will pay enough attention to understand him, Benjy's interest in his own voice and the voices of those around him deadens” (585). These attempts at communicating show that Benjy is aware of other’s emotions and is capable of processing them to the point of feeling something, even if he can’t trace what those feelings are or what they mean. Essentially, he lacks a
“conceptual grasp of experience” but that doesn’t stop him from experiencing (Spilka 455). He’s perceptive enough at a young age that he cries when his brothers and he see Caddy’s “muddy drawers” and, later, to react to a change in Caddy on the night that she loses her virginity and to the atmosphere when Quentin gets into a fight at Caddy’s wedding. These experiences and others are connected to sense memories that he explores throughout his narrative that allow him to travel back through his past, primarily to those of Caddy, that show he has certainly been shaped by what has happened to him and those around him.

Despite being extensively studied because of his unique narrative, Benjy has almost exclusively been treated as a symbol rather than a fully realized human character. His status as a person with mental disabilities, strong emphasis on the word person, has rarely been addressed as anything other than a narrative device. Faulkner wanted to filter his world through the mind of an “idiot,” and scholars have been accepting that idea ever since at the same time as they have been providing more and more depth to other characters through modern lenses and frameworks (Truchan-Tataryn 1). Quentin can be explored through his gender, his sexuality, his Southerness, his intellect and a whole host of other perspectives on top of his mental illness. Caddy can be read through a feminist interpretation; the possibility of misogyny in Faulkner’s work and in scholarly works surrounding her can be confidently addressed. When it comes to Benjy, though, scholars have been hesitant or just uninterested to move further than Faulkner’s own dehumanized image of him as a pitiful character, as someone who has no emotions, as “an animal.” Benjy is his disability. He is his innocence, his naïveté, and his inability to understand what’s happening around him.
As a character taken out of his novel, this disservice to his humanity is a sign of the times; people were not aware enough to know better than to refer to those with mental disabilities on terms that are so blindly offensive as “idiot.” If someone were writing Benjy in today’s time, the situation would be wholly different. Disability narratives have evolved, primarily in that they are rooted in the actual experiences and often voices of actual people with disabilities, to give genuine, tangible characterization to people like Benjy. This understanding should certainly be applied not only to modern disability narratives but to the study of characters, both past and present, with disabilities. For one thing, this could open up the possibility of an in-depth psychological study of Benjy, as suggested in a study published in the *Faulkner Review of Japan*, in which the writers posit that Benjy could possibly be diagnosed with severe, untreated autism (Samway & Silver 1). This idea of an autistic Benjy has been supported by other scholars, including Evan Chaloupka, Maria Truchan-Tataryn, and Sara McLaughlin, who popularized the idea in her 1987 article, “Faulkner’s faux pas: Referring to Benjamin Compson as an idiot”. In the right hands, Benjy Compson could be seen as so much more than a child in an adult’s body, an “animal” or a “blathering idiot.” He certainly at least has the potential to be more than a plot device.

When it comes to connecting Benjy and Quentin’s characters, it is necessary to look past the connection that they have in the novel, which isn’t strong, at least not when compared to Benjy’s connection to Caddy. It’s likely that Benjy is just another issue that takes away from the strength of the Compson family to Quentin, as Benjy largely is to the other members of his family, particularly his mother and Jason. The one true connection that is seen is the fact that Faulkner gives us a glimpse of Quentin’s guilt over Benjy’s
pasture being sold to pay for his year at Harvard, when he laments that they “will swap Benjy’s pasture for a fine dead sound,” soon before he kills himself. That’s treated as something of a passing thought, though, if any of Quentin’s thoughts in his narrative can be treated as such. It’s more likely that the guilt was over his family selling the land and Quentin ultimately not meeting their goals for him that spurred on that idea. Outside of their interactions in the novel, though, one connection that can be made between them is the fact that they both represent different mental disabilities, though Benjy’s are obviously more severe and Quentin’s fall more in line with a mood disorder. It does connect their narratives in a way, though, because both of them show a certain disconnect from reality, an inability to contain their story within the bounds of time, and neither of them come to any clear conclusion before their stories are cut off and left to Jason and Dilsey to finish.

   Jason Compson, the middle brother, is a character that is just as difficult to contend with in scholarship as he is within the novel itself. He, similar to Mrs. Compson, is one of the wholly unsympathetic characters. His section starts off with the infamous line, “Once a bitch, always a bitch,” (Faulkner 163) and it doesn’t get much better from there. He’s the middle child, and our impression of him as a child also puts him in line with his mother: he craves attention that he ultimately does not receive. He resents his siblings. He becomes a “tattletale” because it’s the easiest way to get that attention from their somewhat absentee father, telling him when Quentin and Caddy were throwing water on each other or otherwise misbehaving (22). Overall, he doesn’t cause much of an impression early on outside of that, and he’s relatively absent from Quentin’s chapter. It’s not until his own narration that we see him full force as he grew out of this child who
would try to manipulate his siblings into a man who is willing to steal from his niece and his sister. Jason as a child used the same methods that Jason as an adult uses: force, shame, and the full range of the anger that is constantly sitting in his chest. It’s that anger that fuels Jason, and it is up to speculation what exactly that anger is rooted in. There’s one idea that works to humanize him, though, and it’s the idea that, like Quentin, Jason is suffering under the weight of the expectations of their family name. His anger is rooted in exhaustion over his new role in the family, a role that, like the rest of the family and their respective roles, he is unable to live up to.

In “Jason Compson: The Demands of Honor,” Linda Wagner details a more sympathetic picture of Jason than he normally receives. She emphasizes the fact that despite Faulkner having described Jason as “vicious,” he is generally sympathetic to the situation that he is in. With Quentin and his father both dead, there is nobody left to assume control of the house. Even if Jason had other ambitions, he was not the son that was allowed to leave the home. He was not the one for whom they sold the field so he could go to Harvard. He gradually turns into the authority figure in the house, with Caddy’s daughter, who he clearly and almost violently resents just as much as he resents Caddy, under his care, Benjy continuing to deteriorate, and his mother slowly losing herself. As mentioned before, his mother’s affection is entirely focused on Jason because he is “more Bascomb than Compson” and because she sees herself in him. Accordingly, not only does he have the pressure to keep the family going on his head, he literally has his mother judging him from above him, where she lives on the second floor. Faulkner sees Jason as the “responsible Compson” and the “last remaining sane male relative” (Kirk 41) because he makes the choices that have to be made. If anything can be said of
Jason, it’s that he stays. He could have left. He certainly has enough agency as a character, in that he’s willing to make decisions and the anger that he’s fueled by, that anger which is rooted in this role, is also indicative of his sense of self. Like his mother, even while he’s looking out for the family, his main goals are based in his own self-importance. That’s potentially how he justifies stealing from his niece and treating Benjy like he does; if he’s going to be the man of the house, then he’s going to be the one that’s in control and the narrative is going to be entirely about him.

Wagner also details the ways in which Jason could be clearly representative of the New South, but she warns against associating him too strongly with Faulkner’s infamous family, the Snopes, who are wholly New South themselves. Instead, Jason’s greed and his fixation on acquiring money to the point where it’s almost as if he’s being cosmically punished by having him lose it all, are implications of the new economy being set up in the South post-Reconstruction. As Nathaniel Miller writes, Jason struggles to be a part of this modern world “with Coca-cola and automobiles, connected with cotton markets and the New York Stock Exchange” (37) and, ultimately, does not succeed in this. He is not the brooding aristocrat that his father would have wanted to be, and he is not the established member of society that his mother wanted. He’s not even quite as affected by his parent’s obsession with their previous place in society as Quentin was. The only connection he has to that past is the aging house that has basically trapped him in this role; the house, including the land on which it sits, that he eventually sells, removing the last of his ties to that image. Jason is the Compson who survives the end of the narrative because he at least attempts to convert to the new ways, but he has a clear hand in the
destruction of his family, and there’s no proof in the text that his future will be a bright one.

There is little emotional connection between Quentin and Jason, besides their kinship. When looking to see Jason’s impact on Quentin, it might be better to compare the two to see where they differ and how that came about. As mentioned before, Jason took on the physical task of maintaining the Compson home but was not over-involved in the stories their parents told. Whereas Quentin took on the psychic burden of the Compson legacy, attempting to make sense of their place in the world and his own place within them, Jason’s burden was almost entirely financial and time-driven. There’s also the image of Jason as the quintessential Southern man, compared to Quentin whose masculinity isn’t clear and is the somewhat pathetic, weak counterpart to the rough anger that Jason takes on. They are brothers, but there isn’t much there besides these contrasts. Jason never really connects to anyone in his family besides the clear hold that his mother holds over his actions and, in a way, his mind. If there’s any connection that can be made between Quentin and him, it’s through jealousy, as Jason continuously refers back to the fact that Quentin is the one they sent away with hopes of his success. “‘Sure,’” he says, early on in his chapter, to his mother, “[...] I never had time to go to Harvard [like Quentin] or drink myself into the ground like Father. I had to work” (Faulkner 181). Later on, he tells Caddy’s daughter, “I never had to go to Harvard to learn that” (235). Jason sees that Quentin was his family’s great hope and, now that he’s failed, Jason is forced to fulfill the same role while simultaneously being aware that they weren’t going to sell anything to send him to Harvard.
Despite the focus that her brothers often receive over her and the lack of a clear voice, Caddy is often considered the main character of *The Sound and the Fury* because of how her story overarches the rest of the narratives. She might not have her own narrative, but her life dictates the flow of the novel, with Benjy’s illustrating her childhood, Quentin’s illustrating her adolescence, Jason’s illustrating her motherhood and early adulthood, and Dilsey’s illustrating the Compson household in her absence. She’s almost mythical in her characterization; Benjy idolizes her, Quentin treats her as a quest for redemption, and she is everything that Jason resents throughout his narrative. In reality, Caddy is a beautiful girl who falls into promiscuity young and becomes pregnant outside of marriage, and that alone would doom her in the society she was a part of. On top of that, she’s also a Compson, and as it’s been noted in the other characters, it is no longer an honor to be a Compson. In fact, for the children, it’s more of a burden, and the honor that her parents are obsessed with leads her mother to influence Caddy into a loveless marriage that quickly ends in divorce. Caddy, Faulkner’s “beautiful one,” is one of the most hopeless characters in a novel that is largely devoid of hope, despite the fact that she’s one of the most positive entities. Her loss of innocence bears the weight of the whole story; it’s often seen as the catalyst for the rest of the family falling apart, which is even more of a burden than the whole of the Compson history for such a small, young girl.

Out of all the characters, Caddy’s internal motivation relates closest to Benjy’s. While she’s motivated by pleasure to the extent that it ties into her promiscuity (though, arguably, Caddy doesn’t always seem pleased with her own actions – when she says “when they touched me I died,” [Faulkner 149] she seems to be referring to more than the
Shakespearean idea of orgasm as a “little death.” Caddy is just as much swept away in the wake of her loss of virginity as her brothers are), it seems that she is ultimately motivated by love. As Lewis Leary claims in William Faulkner of Yoknapatawpha County, “The Sound and the Fury is about love. It is about misdirected love and true love, and about what happens when love is absent or distorted” (43). With Caddy, her love is focused on her brothers, even Jason, and later on her daughter. Caddy leaves her daughter at home because she knows she won’t be capable of taking care of her on her own, and probably due to insecurities based around how her poor relationship with her own mother will impact her treatment of her daughter. She sends money when she can; she doesn’t know that Jason is keeping it, though she suspects when she writes in one of her letters,

“I’ve had no answer to the last two letters I wrote her, though the cheque in the second one was cashed with the other cheque. Is she sick? Let me know at once or I’ll come there and see for myself. You promised you would let me know when she needed things. [ . . . ] You are opening my letters to her. I know that as well as if I were looking at you” (190).

Caddy knows Jason well, and she knows how to talk to him in the same way their mother does, attempting to guilt him into doing what he should. This is a clear indicator both of her concern for her daughter, rooted in her motivation of love and particularly familial love, and of her presence as a mother figure.

Along with Dilsey, Caddy is representative of a more traditional form of mother figure that contrasts easily with the characterization of Mrs. Compson. She’s the one who Benjy is most attached to for a reason; she’s the one who loves him regardless of his
issues. She’s the only one who can interpret his attempts to communicate, learning how to read his moods and talking to him sweetly, cooing, “don’t you want Caddy to feed you?” to him when any of the others would have simply fed Benjy without addressing him. As Linda Wagner puts it in her analysis of Caddy, to Benjy she is a “creator and conveyer of language,” again posing her as something mythic or godlike (50). Wagner continues this idea when she writes, “Unlike Mrs. Compson, the ironic mother of the novel, she never reproves him. Caddy rather attempts to reach Benjy and to give him the means of reaching others,” (50 – 51). She sticks up for Benjy when Jason cuts up his dolls, showing how assertive she is despite gender constructs of the time, saying, “‘I’ll slit his gizzl [. . .] I will, I will,’” (Faulkner 65) and fighting to get out of her father’s hold to punish Jason. Caddy displays this assertiveness when it comes to her brothers as a child and teenager throughout Benjy and Quentin’s narratives (her gender performance in regards to this will be discussed at greater lengths along with Quentin’s in Chapter Two). Where Benjy gets no affection and Jason gets little to no accountability from either parent, Caddy is there to fill in the gaps. In a way, she fills in the gaps of the entire novel. In order to trace through the chaos of the novel, it’s necessary to trace its connection to Caddy. As referenced earlier, her life story is essentially its structure.

In her book *The Feminine and Faulkner*, specifically in the chapter, “Hearing Caddy’s Voice,” Minrose C. Gwin writes about Caddy as this sort of monolithic figure. Despite her lack of a voice, she’s a constant feminine presence in the predominantly male world of the novel. Gwin writes beautifully about the power that Caddy’s character has even within her absence, saying,
“Caddy won’t fade completely; her voice and her presence emerge and reemerge throughout the narrative. She will not leave us; she rushes out of the mirror of male discourse, smelling like rain, offering Benjy’s box of stars, speaking to us the language of creative play, of *differance*, of endless construction and generation” (38).

This falls neatly in line with Wagner’s view of Caddy as a “creator”—through her words, Caddy discursively creates the world of *The Sound and the Fury*. She constructs Benjy’s consciousness by imparting her own views and language on him and guides her fantasy play with Quentin and keeps Jason in line with her own rules. As far as we can tell, Caddy consensually chooses to lose her virginity before marriage and have sex with more than one man, an act that, as referenced before, informs all of the narratives. Without Caddy, these stories and this world wouldn’t exist, or, at the very least, there would be nothing to centralize them out of their inherent chaos. Her presence is necessary, and it’s constant, guiding and sweeping in and out of the perspectives of the other characters. Gwin writes of this as Caddy finding “a way out of male discourse,” a way to “rise from Quentin’s mind,” as well as the minds of Benjy and Jason (47).

Through this viewpoint, Caddy is endlessly important and so much more than her sexuality.

Quentin is even aware of this view of Caddy, to a point. To him, Caddy is everything—when Quentin is unable to process his own world, he does it through Caddy, her voice in his head and her sexuality and her position as a woman within his perception of traditional Southern society. Caddy is everything at once to Quentin: sister and mother figure, savior and damsel in distress, the still-virginal girl and the promiscuous young
woman. When he goes to his father and claims, “I have committed incest,” (Faulkner 77) it’s his final option, to put them on the same level so they might be punished as one. When all of Caddy’s roles collide and Quentin can’t make sense of what is happening to them, he turns to this plan, along with their suicide attempt, to end everything at once. If they commit a sin so terrible, all of the other ones will be washed clean. If they die together, he won’t have to watch Caddy fall any further from grace or begin to fall himself. Once again, Caddy and Quentin’s tumultuous relationship will be further explored in Chapter Two, but here it’s essential to at least state how important Caddy is in this narrative. As Nathaniel Miller writes, Quentin associates Caddy with “an older, mythic, pre-industrial society and with a quasi-Edenic pre-history” (39). She is something larger than all of them, and this is why her actions and words so strongly affect the entirety of the novel and particularly impact Quentin.

Of course, it’s important to note that Quentin and Caddy’s relationship is not inherently a positive one, and that despite Caddy’s hold on the narrative, her overall agency as a woman is still in question. As Olga Vickery points out,

“At the Branch he slaps her for disregarding his orders, and periodically after that he reasserts his control, scouring her head in the grass for kissing boys and smearing her with mud for not being concerned with his behavior. But his main intention is not simply to punish her for forgetting her part but to make her understand the significance of her role as the guardian of Compson honor” (1026).

Caddy’s loss of innocence is a powerful tool in the text, but it’s necessary to understand that it’s ultimately her downfall, what separates her from her birthplace and from her own
daughter. For someone whose maternal instinct is particularly noteworthy, this can certainly be seen as a punishment for her actions. As a plot device and sometimes even as a character, Caddy is strong, but as a woman, she still falls victim to social convictions and the ideals of both her time period and her family, particularly Quentin’s.

Finally, we come to the most important character in the novel who is not a Compson. Along the same lines as the lack of work surrounding Mrs. Compson, scholars have sometimes been hesitant to focus on Dilsey Gibson, the Compson family’s domestic worker and a central figure to the story. The scholarship that does exist is largely that of her symbolism, and that’s a fair point: when it comes to Faulkner and, more extensively, to Southern literature, black characters are rarely independent of themselves. Rather, they represent their race as a whole, and often they do this through clear-cut stereotypes. There’s no questioning that Dilsey fits the picture of the “mammy” character. On a larger scale, her position within the crumbling Compson family and her body as a black woman can be seen as being used by Faulkner “as a sort of twentieth-century ruin or landmark in a South shifting from an agrarian to an industrial economy and from a rural to an urban society” (Lester 126). This idea of positing black bodies as hugely metaphorical is defined by Toni Morrison as “African Americanism,” summarized by Cathy Caruth as “the over-determined metaphoric use of black figures in white texts” (14). Neither her stereotype nor her symbolic exaggeration are particularly humanizing portraits, but, nevertheless, Dilsey becomes one of the most, if not the most, human characters in the entire novel. This begins with the fact that out of the haze of the first three chapters, Dilsey is the first to actually be physically described. We are finally gifted with the
ability to fully see, outside of flawed narrators. Faulkner depicts her vividly as once being physically large

“but now her skeleton rose, draped loosely in unpadded skin that tightened again upon a paunch almost dropsical, as though muscle and tissues had been courage and fortitude which the days or the years had consumed until only the indomitable skeleton was left rising like a ruin or a landmark above the somnolent and impervious guts, and above that the collapsed face that gave the impression of the bones themselves being outside the flesh, lifted into the driving day, with an expression at once fatalistic and of a child's astonished disappointment” (Faulkner 265 - 266).

Along with being able to form a distinct image of Dilsey in our minds, she also has a clear voice in the text where characters like Caddy lack them. She’s caring, the aged maternal foil to Mrs. Compson’s coldness, and her voice is sharp and funny and sweet, at points. Her affection is rooted around the younger children in any part of the book. In particular, this is seen in her treatment of Benjy and Miss Quentin, who she’s willing to stand up against Jason for when she says things to undermine his authority like, "En I wouldn't blame her none ef she did [break the window] wid you naggin at her all de blessed time you in de house" (Faulkner 278). Generally, Dilsey is shown to be the beacon of goodness in the relative darkness of the Compsons’ lives, something to set the family against to show both their transgressions and their tragedies. As Philip Castille argues, this idea tends to lead Dilsey to be seen as a static character. When addressing her personal motivation, though, one of the first things to be addressed other than her morality would be her faith. Castille contends that Dilsey has that faith reinforced on
Easter Sunday and that actually causes the beginning of a character shift. As he writes, “Her life changes as she begins to distance herself from the Compsons and to reaffirm her membership in her African-American family” (424). That isn’t necessarily to say that Dilsey turns her back on the Compsons—she doesn’t. She is not unaffected by their downfall, though, and that can be seen through the way she’s impacted on that Sunday.

When it comes to Quentin, Dilsey is once again largely relegated to a symbol rather than someone who personally, individually impacts him. The reader sees Quentin at Harvard being faced with black characters who do not necessarily transcend the kind of stereotypes that Dilsey is somewhat mired down in but that definitely give Quentin pause. He immediately associates them with “Roskus and Dilsey and them,” (Faulkner 86) who he admits to missing, but he struggles to view them through any other lens. Without the backing of a relationship, he has no idea what to do with the black people he comes across just in his day to day life, and we see glimpses of him fighting his perception of them which is one contention of his Southernness against the environment of the North. Quentin’s own personal relationship with Dilsey is more maternal than the one he has with his mother, but it is not necessarily the maternal experience that he needs. Overall, Dilsey’s impact on him seems entirely based in his opinions and reactions to black people in general, but there’s something to be said for the contrast of their narratives that can also be said about her contrast with the rest of the characters. Each of the brothers’ narratives are difficult to face—Benjy’s and Quentin’s because of their separate senses of disconnect from reality and Jason’s because of his unrelenting anger—but the final chapter, which is generally considered Dilsey’s chapter despite the lack of a first person narration, give us the first real glimpse of hope. As Faulkner says of Dilsey and her
family in his appendix: “They endured” (335). Even as the Compson family falls apart, as Benjy is constantly mourning and Quentin gives up and Jason loses everything, Dilsey still gets up in the morning and makes breakfast. She was there in the beginning, and she’s there in the end, the singular thread of loyalty that the family has left. This is the ultimate view of Dilsey that readers and scholars come back to: she’s the one who stays.

Our final image of the Compson family, who surrounds, engulfs, and turns Quentin into who he is, is Benjy quieting as he is escorted through Jefferson, almost content for the first time in that time sequence. It takes a suicide, a teen pregnancy, alcoholism, elaborate hypochondria, and a child running away with a former circus member before the story can settle and one of the characters can have even a moment of contentment that isn’t settled away in a memory somewhere. Over the course of the novel, the Compsons have been rotting away in their beautiful home, which is beginning to become less beautiful around them. They are not the Southern aristocracy that Mr. and Mrs. Compson can still picture, and there are not places for them in the new South, as we can see clearly through Jason’s money failures. If even the Compson who is hypothetically the most sensible, though that’s not necessarily saying much, can’t make it in this world, what choice do they all have but to fall apart?

This moment with Benjy, at the end of Easter Sunday, might be seen as the beginning of a redemption. It’s early April, flowers are starting to bloom again, Christ is risen, and maybe now the Compsons’ lives will calm down and even out. It’s the chance for a new beginning. The appendix is quick to inform the reader, though, that soon after Mrs. Compson passes, Jason has Benjy institutionalized. He sells the house and the land. If it’s a new beginning, it’s only for Jason, and it’s hard to picture a happy future for
someone like him. With Jason as the theoretical remaining Compson, considering Benjy is soon locked away and Caddy is essentially missing, he won’t have much but the ghosts of his family and the memory of a house that has long since been torn down and replaced with “row after row of small crowded jerrybuilt individuallyowned demiurban bungalows” (319). At the very least, that memory will live on. After all, Faulkner writes in the appendix that, no matter what happens to the land, it’s always known in Jefferson as “the Old Compson place” (319). Through this, the Compsons never fully die off. They are always remembered as the physical structure of their decaying home and, full circle, they are always remembered for the loss of that home.

These are the environments and the characters who come together to influence and, to a point, create the Quentin Compson that loves his sister, the Quentin Compson that goes to Harvard to save his family’s name, and the Quentin Compson that puts weights in his pockets to make sure that he dies when he steps into the river in Cambridge. They are the voices he can’t get away from and the memories that haunted him until the end, even as he went into them for comfort. The next chapter will outline a character study of Quentin and, in relation to him, his roommate Shreve McCannon, through a queer lens and then discuss the implications and possibilities of a queer Quentin Compson. The characterizations and settings detailed here will remain important to the chapters following this and to the overall perception of how exactly Quentin grew up to become the messy, interesting, perpetually studied character that he is today.
A queer reading of Quentin Compson isn’t a new concept, but it’s still a fairly radical method of exploring the character. The act of queering a character in general is radical in that it removes authority not only from the author but from the society that surrounds both the author and the reader. “Queering” can loosely be defined as the act of pulling out the possibility of a queer identity from an otherwise heteronormative piece of work in an overarching heteronormative canon. The intent behind it varies; for some, it’s to piece together a queer history that didn’t have the opportunity to openly exist. Others, like Lee Ronald, posit it as an act of “queer love” (Ronald 1). In Ronald’s paper, the aptly named “Reading as an Act of Queer Love,” she defines queering as a method in which “the reader/text encounter could be reinvented, made strange and its conventional framework undermined,” further elaborating, “By this I mean by concentrating upon reconfiguration of the oppositional stance, reader/text, re-imagining it as a different sort of relationship, one less competitive and tense, instead more inclusive and mutual” (7).

The act of queering is both radical and affectionate, both political and personal. It’s ripping apart traditional literature and tenderly putting it back together in a way that makes sense, and it’s so aptly applied to Quentin Compson for these reasons. Quentin exists in a world where he is not capable of existing as he is, and Faulkner is writing in a world that would not have accepted Quentin, had he lived. By queering Quentin Compson, we’re creating a world in which Quentin’s actions are constructed in a way
that move away from the traditional chaos of his world and into something new, something redeemable. Through this, it’s possible to take him away from Faulkner, away from Yoknapatawpha, and even out of the river—of course, it’s also possible to leave him precisely where he is and simply view how his life can be read in a way that allows for his identity to be explained under a number of different definitions of “queer.” Either way, the act of queering Quentin offers context for his struggles with identity and removing him from his historical moment, from views surrounding queer love in the early twentieth century from society as a whole and from his community and family, allows for the possibility of redemption or a happier ending.

From here, it makes sense to get back to the beginning; queering a text is part of the study of queer theory, which mainly has its roots in writers like Michel Foucault. Foucault popularized, in *A History of Sexuality*, the concept of sexuality as something that is essentially socially constructed and rooted in power dynamics within societies. As he writes on homosexuality specifically, a new focus on writing and discussing homosexuality (and, in particular, male homosexuality, which Foucault and many other scholars are wont to focus on):

“made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of ‘perversity’; but it also made possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturality’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (I: Introduction).

It’s easy to see that sense of radicalism that queer theory rests on in this statement, as well as threaded throughout much of his rhetoric, the idea of queer people using the
language that’s been used to demonize them for their own purposes, of skewing that which oppresses them into something that’s uniquely theirs.

Queer theory started to take significant hold several years after Foucault was writing, specifically in several formative woman writers, including but certainly not limited to Judith Butler and Eve Sedgewick, the former whose focus was primarily on gender and the latter on sexuality. Both of them essentially work within the same framework as Foucault, but they take it further. Butler’s main points on gender are its existence as a performance; it is not something that humans innately know but something they are taught. We do gender. It consumes our identity because that’s the way society is constructed. Continuing on the same line of thought, Sedgewick’s focus was primarily some of the central aims of queer theory, as she wrote on queer performativity and particularly homoeroticism in novels by writers like Charles Dickens and Henry James. Sedgewick is a decent place to start when putting a definition to the word, “queer,” which is important to understand because it’s a word that’s not entirely possible to pin down to one airtight definition. She writes of queer having one of several meanings: “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically” (10). People who exist outside of heteronormative boundaries generally fall under the banner of queer. It’s, again, both a political and an intensely personal identification. When Quentin is written as queer, it’s in reference to the issues he faces living up to societal and familial expectations of his gender and his sexuality, along with the existence of queer desire that can be traced
through his narrative. Before those topics are engaged with, though, there needs a clear picture of who Quentin is outside of his queerness.

Like the rest of his family, Quentin is driven by two things: honor and love. These are two things which are both completely grounded in the structure of the Compson family—the need to maintain honor even when it’s a falsity and a certain desperation for love, even when it can’t be found. As the eldest Compson, Quentin seems to be the nexus of all of his family’s issues. He can’t brashly throw off his obligations like Jason or leave like Caddy. He can’t just sit and waste away like his parents. If Quentin is driven by the need for honor and by his love for his family, however sick it becomes, both of those things are tied to obligation. He has an obligation to do right by his family, and he has the weight of Southern history on his characteristically weak shoulders. He goes to Harvard because it’s what his parents think their family needs, and he finishes the semester and passes his classes so that, even though he kills himself, his family won’t have that shame weighing them down. Everything that Quentin does is under the motivation of being the person who can pull his family out of their downward spiral, from going to Harvard to obsessing over Caddy’s promiscuity, but it inevitably sends him into his own spiral.

Quentin has been treated by scholars in countless different ways, though the majority of them focus on his suicide as necessary part of his character analysis. He’s been compared to “Hamlet, [. . .] to Macbeth, [. . .] to Dante’s Paolo, [. . .] to Raskolnikov, [. . .] and to Prufrock” (Slabey 81). Based on these comparisons, according to Robert Slabey, he is an essential figure of the Romantic hero, fighting for the ideals of the past, for purity, for his own poetic death (82). Others have characterized him less flattering as pathetic, sickly, and unsympathetic at points. Out of the shattered
confusion of his narrative, critics have pulled out visions of Quentin that are as opposing as the “Narcissus incarnate” (Kim 1) for the way his viewpoint treats other characters like Caddy, and the prerequisite Christ figure, with the argument that he dies for his family’s sins (Mellard). There is no one true vision of who Quentin Compson is, and each interpretation has its own validity. There is one thing that everyone agrees on, though: Quentin is obsessive, and he is characterized by those obsessions. What obsessions one chooses to focus on guides what reading of Quentin Compson will come out. For many scholars, particularly those in the fields of queer theory and gender studies, Quentin’s obsessions with his inability to perform his gender role, with Caddy’s and his separate sexualities, and with the concept of gender and sexuality as a whole are the ones that are deemed most important.

Quentin’s struggle with his gender, not only with societal roles but with physically existing within his own body, is one of the more obvious struggles within the narrative. Nathaniel Miller mirrors Quentin’s struggle with Simone de Beauvoir’s ideas on male power, detailing how his views on gender are impacted by who he thinks he should be. He’s shown to be obsessed with Southern ideals of masculinity and femininity from the beginning of his story to end when he puts weights on his chest and falls into the river, focusing on his sister Caddy’s loss of virginity and how that affects her womanhood and, also, on comparing his own identity to that of Dalton Ames, who took her virginity and whose aggressive, sexualized masculinity is viewed as a product of a new South that Quentin can’t conceptualize. Quentin is constantly going back to ideals of the old South to justify his own intentions, despite the fact that the gentility of that time is largely mythical even to him, especially when slavery and other forms of racial and
sexual violence are taken into consideration. He can’t live up to his ideals about the South because they don’t actually exist, and if they don’t exist, how can Quentin?

Quentin’s own identity as a man is held together by flawed ideas of these old Southern honor codes, and his only means of enforcing his own masculinity is by protecting his sister’s honor and fighting Ames (Miller 3). When the fight ends in Ames’ favor with Quentin getting in no more than an open-handed slap, this leaves Quentin with no routes left to take to defend both himself and Caddy, the only person he cares for. In this way, even before the fight, Quentin disassociates himself from the physical identity of maleness. This is shown in a fairly explicit manner in the scene in The Sound and the Fury when Quentin and Caddy engage in the beginning of what seems to be a symbolic sex act, with Quentin holding his knife against her throat but ultimately being unable to push it down enough to draw blood. Caddy takes on the role that he can’t, urging him forward insistently by saying, “no like this youll have to push it harder” and “push it are you going to” (Faulkner 152), and when Quentin stops and begin to cry, Caddy is the one who is strong enough to comfort him. According to Erin Cambell’s analysis of Quentin in which she compares him to Shakespeare’s Ophelia, this shows Quentin separating himself from his male genitalia and the concept of penetration (12), an act which would create a unified male identity, particularly in this aggressive, sexual realm of the new South, but that Quentin can’t bring himself to conceptualize.

Quentin’s movement towards, in effect, castrating himself and obsessing over his own feminine characteristics comes not only from his focus on Caddy’s lost virginity but on the fact that he is still a virgin. He is torn between the shame he feels when he goes off to Harvard and, as Nathanial Miller writes in his interpretation of Quentin’s suicide
through the lens of modernism, his inherent need to “[supply] the female voice that he would have Caddy speak,” (6) to almost take on the role of a traditional Southern woman in a way that she isn’t able to now that she is no longer virginal. Quentin and Caddy have been switching gender roles long before the idea of virginity was symbolized as anything more than Caddy’s muddy undergarments, though. “She never was a queen or a fairy she was always a king or a giant or a general,” Quentin says, describing a childhood where he is the one who is quiet and withdrawn, and he is the one who displays nervous emotions and cries and must be comforted by Caddy (Faulkner 173).

Throughout his life, Quentin takes on a gender fluidity which tilts drastically to femininity or even femaleness. At one point, he even openly fantasizes about becoming Ames’ mother: “If I could have been his mother lying with open body lifted laughing, holding his father with my hand refraining, seeing, watching him die before he lived,” (Faulkner 80). Campbell addresses this scene as Quentin’s “desire for the feminine,” as well as his need to erase Ames’ identity from birth, to leave him stillborn and agender, and to have control over death (9). These important moments show that, though Quentin is still psychologically wrecked over his inability to fit into either a new or old form of Southern male, the clearly feminine aspects of his identity are, at times, the most important and the most revered parts of his identity as a whole.

His frustration, driven primarily by previously mentioned gender roles but also by an overarching theme of sexuality, fuels Quentin’s descent into his mind. Instead of viewing Quentin’s lack of interest in engaging in heterosexual acts and his use of Caddy to obscure his own sexuality as something to mark him as functionally asexual, there’s the possibility of an interpretation that essentially states that Quentin is hiding homoerotic
desires behind his self-enforced virginity. Many queer studies of Faulkner’s works, including those referenced below by Norman Jones and Matthew Vaughn, focus on *Absalom, Absalom!* These primarily include analysis of the relationship between Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon, the main characters of the story being told within the novel, but there is also acknowledgement of the relationship between Quentin and his college roommate, Shreve. *Absalom, Absalom!* occurs within the timeline of *The Sound and the Fury*, and both of the stories connected are necessary to understand the nature of Quentin and Shreve’s relationship. In *The Sound and the Fury*, other students at Harvard notice how close they are, referring to Shreve as Quentin’s “husband” (Faulkner 78). This shows them acknowledging both Quentin’s femininity and, also, the fact that their relationship is noticeably different than that of other roommates. While it is either false or unrequited, the tension within their relationship is tangible, and it is public, whether they like it or not. The narrative continues in that same light, as if they’re both aware of something that is both greater and out of the ordinary, and it becomes even more notable in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Within the first two pages of his analysis of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Norman includes a description of Quentin and Shreve as they “sit in their dorm room together in a provocative state of undress,” (340) then goes on to compare the rise and climax of the story to an orgasm (344). As the story unfolds, the two young men switch back and forth between storytelling, engaging with each other through long winter nights. It sets a scene not only of young, earnest sexuality but also a warming sense of romanticism. There is affection behind the friendship, the kind of affection that fills up a somewhat dour text to the brim and that causes classmates to laugh, possibly in somewhat internalized state of
sexual panic themselves, at the image of the two of them as loving spouses. The potential of a romantic or sexual relationship is impossible, though, according to another analysis by Michael Vaughn. Quentin’s means of self-hatred potentially comes at the hand of pervasive, institutionalized heterosexism, and the only way that Quentin and Shreve can ever communicate a desire for each other is to do so in a love triangle with a woman, just like Henry and Bon (523 - 525).

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner compares Quentin and Shreve in the quote: “Shreve, the Canadian, the child of blizzards and of cold in a bathrobe with an overcoat above it, the collar turned up about his ears; Quentin, the Southerner, the morose and delicate offspring of rain and steamy heat” (353). They’re not necessarily opposites but it’s possible to present them that way because they have clear differences. We have Quentin’s character fully laid out for us, all of his nerve endings exposed, but looking into Shreve’s character presents a problem, because he doesn’t have much of a character. Faulkner only gives a handful away about him: that he’s Canadian, that he’s relatively protective of Quentin (see: the scene where he defends him when the other students make fun of Quentin’s lack of experience [Faulkner 78]), and that he’s operating in a significantly different manner than Quentin is. We know that he’s quick-witted and dry, the comic relief in a very dark story. That’s where it’s possible to see the real intention behind Shreve’s character, who, despite being undeveloped, is such a distinct presence in both of the novels. Shreve does not fully exist as a realized character because he’s primarily there to act as both a sounding board for Quentin’s spiral and a means of comparison. When faced with a family as monumentally screwed up as the Compsons, there needs to be someone that allows the reader to gain a certain amount of perspective,
to hold up to the other characters’ flaws and see where they stand in the ranks of normalcy. Shreve McCannon is that someone. He’s the outsider both to the Compson family and to American society at large that it required to gain a clearer perspective on the rest of the characters and their actions. He is important despite his lack of development and, in a way, because of his lack of development.

Shreve becomes important on a different level, though, if he becomes involved in the queering of Quentin’s narrative. By pulling Shreve into the homoerotic tension that is present, his character is no longer just part of the plot or a tool for the author. He becomes an integral part of Quentin’s identity and, specifically, in the struggle surrounding that identity. Strictly based in a reading of the text, it’s fairly clear that Shreve is the first person to show Quentin anything close to the kind of affection that Caddy showed him. It might not be on the same level or to the same degree, but to find a certain level of caring from another man in his life is certainly something that would affect Quentin, having only had his father, who had given up; Jason, who ostensibly doesn’t love much of anyone; and Benjy, who loves but is incapable of expressing it. If we’re reading Quentin as queer, affection from Shreve, even if it’s just to the degree that he pays attention to Quentin and to his stories, has the potential to have a huge impact on Quentin’s perception of his own sexuality. He’s a conduit through which Quentin might perceive his own queerness.

Michael Vaughn continues to define Quentin’s suicide in terms of these queer desires, writing that Quentin, “enacts his homophobic self-hatred through his imagined destructions of his shadow self and his later destruction of his literal self through suicide” (523). As well as a form of self-destruction, his suicide could also be viewed as a type of
rebirth, bringing in baptism and other religious interpretations, due to the utilization of
natural moving water. In *Surviving Literary Suicide*, Jeffrey Berman acknowledges the
similar interpretations of other notable literary suicides as something potentially
transcendent, but he also criticizes these viewpoints as romanticizing a tragic act (59). He
puts intentional emphasis on the idea of all suicides, regardless of their intent in literature,
being events without redeemable ends.

Of course, Berman also spends a large portion of his interpretation addressing the
aspects of mental illness that often lead to suicide attempts, which isn’t always addressed
within the realm of literary interpretations. Generally in literature, suicide is considered a
plot point and not a symptom of a larger issue. For Quentin, all that we technically know
is that he goes “insane,” which is an extremely limiting term and could be connected to
anxiety or something deeper. Obviously, Faulkner was writing prior to scientifically
sound research on mental illness, though, and it would be more significant in a literary
interpretation to address the symbolic purpose of Quentin’s suicide. When exploring him
from a queer perspective, one possible answer to this purpose could be summarized in a
way that is neither romantic nor unforgiving of his choices: he is escaping from an
oppressive, heteronormative, and patriarchal society. Anna Foca uses evidence from
Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* to explore this idea through Quentin’s narrative,
stating that, “When the psychic weight becomes too great of trying to rend
commensurable the idealized justification of patriarchy and its (often and perhaps
increasingly) hostile reality, Quentin Compson is faced with either losing his identity in
the world or taking himself out of the world” (346).
Looking further into the implications of Quentin’s suicide, it’s necessary to consider the means by which he kills himself. Modern statistics point to the fact that men are more likely to choose active, sometimes violent means of suicide: definitive things like guns and hanging. This is contrasted with women, who tend towards things like pills and, historically and in a significant amount of literature, drowning. When it comes to overdosing, this is generally seen as both a passive act—taking pills and waiting for death—and a convenient act. There is no blood to clean up, no bloated body or broken skin. It fits into a neat, tidy idea that women struggle to fill in this image of themselves that is, appropriately, neat and tidy. Even when they choose to kill themselves, they do it in a way that will not be inconvenient or messy to whoever will find the body. This extends itself to drowning, although it is not as frequently reported. When it comes to drowning as suicide, most examples can be drawn from literature, and a number of those examples are female characters choosing it. There’s a lot to be said about it in terms of water symbolism in general, particularly the idea of drowning as baptism or renewal, but the important message here is the feminine slant of it. On top of the connection between moving water and female sexuality, the image of drowning in our culture is largely feminine. It’s Ophelia floating in the river, and Edna Pontellier stepping into the ocean. It’s Virginia Woolf and Eustacia Vye. Similar to overdosing, the act of killing oneself via drowning is inherently passive. It’s not putting a gun to your head or stepping off of a chair; it’s simply walking forward and letting nature take care of the rest or putting weights in your pockets to make sure nothing happens when you struggle. This is not to say that any act of suicide in itself is passive, simply the means. As mentioned earlier, especially in literature, it can be seen as redemption. Edna can’t be the wife and mother
that she has to be, so she takes matters into her own hands. The same can be said for Quentin. When faced with those “impossible circumstances,” he does the only thing he can manage. Despite the method, Quentin’s suicide is one of the only times he is ever capable of doing anything definitive.

It’s easy to read Quentin as queer not just because of the events of the novel and the potential within his characterization but because he fits within certain frameworks and narratives which have become important to queer coded and presumed queer characters, as well as the community at large. One of these is the strikingly controversial image of the “dead queer.” Suzette Mayr defines it accurately as the issue where “non-heterosexual characters are rarely central characters in film or mainstream texts, and when they are, those films or texts that do receive significant attention usually include that disturbingly popular character of the queer man or woman who is doomed and/or dies either directly or indirectly because of his or her sexuality” (3). Many early representations of queer sexualities have characters who are either ineffectual, effectively desexualized, and on the sidelines, the aesthetes with ties to Wilde’s depictions in Dorian Grey, or villainous and predatory. Even as they begin to have more and more characterization and variety and life, though, there was still one seemingly universal truth. Queer characters aren’t allowed to live. Mayr references the novel A Single Man in her paper, and a quote from it stands out in defining a modern view of this idea of the “dead queer.” In it, the main character imagines how his neighbors will react to his suicide following the death of his partner and comes up with the bit of dialogue, “‘Let us even go so far as to say that [homosexual relationships] can sometimes be almost beautiful – particularly if one of the parties is already dead or, better yet, both’” (28).
If we’re reading Quentin as queer, then this image is unavoidable. He becomes part of it effortlessly, because it makes sense. Through this idea, even if he could have reached some semblance of understanding about his own identity, it’s likely that Quentin still would not have survived. There’s no place for Quentin in the world he originally inhabits, in Mississippi or at Harvard, and even when removing him from that context, he’ll still face death head-on. This brings up the legitimacy of the dead queer stereotype in modern times. The origin of it is simple: death is a means of punishment for characters who don’t fit into the norms. It’s a satisfactory ending to what was seen as a deviant life without necessarily explicitly stating that this is the reason they’re dying—this can be seen taken on in the novella and film *Brokeback Mountain*, where Jack, one of the main characters, is killed but explicitly in a hate crime (McMurtry). Nevertheless, Jack still dies, and that’s important. At what point does choosing an ending where the queer character dies, again and again and again, become a cop-out and not a commentary? In taking Quentin out of the early 1900s and constructing a notion of queerness around him, it becomes important to consider exactly what it means to still have him commit suicide. It’s such a common theme and such a legitimate issue with the LGBTQ community that it’s difficult to contend with. Does the obligation lay with canon accuracy or with a larger image of queer characters?

Of course, It isn’t just that queer characters are written as suicidal or written to be killed off, but that queer readers have grown used to finding themselves grouped with the dead and, like Quentin, those who “love death” (Faulkner 324). Quentin’s suicide, perhaps just as much as his character itself, is a way of seeing in line with other queers of his station. Queer readers have primarily been left not with the triumphant heroes of the
narrative but the deviants, the lost souls, the death fodder. In the end, it doesn’t come down to who Quentin was or was not attracted to, it comes down to how the reader comes to see themselves in him, in that queerness that is not necessarily quantifiable through Quentin’s actions or words but that becomes closer to being defined in his death. Within the confines of Faulkner’s world, that queerness is not something that is physically visible; if it’s there, it’s a mental construction. In fact, the closest claim to Quentin’s queerness is not the presence of homosexual desire but the absence of heterosexual desire—Quentin can’t express his queerness, but readers can see it nonetheless both in what is and is not there.

Those historical confines referenced previously are important. If we’re too look through the possibilities of a queer Quentin Compson, then it needs to be both in the context of queer studies as a whole and in his historical context. What image of male homosexuality would Quentin have known in 1910? Could he have justified himself within it? To begin with a legal context, most laws regarding homosexuality were focused on anti-sodomy, which in itself is a tenuously defined act. Generally, it’s associated specifically with anal intercourse and, more specifically, anal intercourse between men. Wider technical definitions, and especially those in anti-sodomy laws in the United States, fall more in line with the dictionary definition, “anal or oral copulation with a member of the same or opposite sex; also: copulation with an animal” (Merriam-Webster). These laws essentially seek to draw moral lines on what sex citizens are allowed to be having, reducing the legal, moral possibility to penetrative vaginal intercourse. The degree to which these laws have been enforced has varied throughout the years since their early inception in Colonial times and the first official record of them in
the mid-19th century to the ones which have only recently taken off the books or which still need to be taken off (Canaday).

Now, what’s left of anti-sodomy laws are largely symbolic, though there are certainly cases in which they’ve been used to persecute members of the LGBTQ community. Particularly through the nineteenth century and during a large portion of the twentieth, these laws created legitimate fear for queer couples and were legal, enforced methods of oppression. They set the environment surrounding queer sexual activity, and they are things which Quentin would have been aware of, to an extent. It’s important to note, though, that the focus of these anti-sodomy laws are on sexual activity and don’t strictly criminalize homosexuality, though it’s hard to argue that the implications are similar. George Painter’s essay *The History of Sodomy Laws in the United States* make sure to point out when verdicts in anti-sodomy cases were unclear or unresolved, many of which involved issues where both parties were clearly consenting (in which case, often the person who was identified as responsible for penetration was prosecuted and not their partner) or, especially, when penetration could not be proven (Sodomy Laws). This is important because while the physical acts surrounding queer love were stigmatized and prosecuted, affection between people of the same gender was significantly more acceptable and viewed with less suspicion.

According to research done for the documentary *Out of the Past*, which traces the history of the LGBTQ community in the United States, romantic friendships were a stronghold for queer couples who might have been penalized under sodomy laws. Women could live out their lives with other women in “Boston marriages,” and strong, intimate male friendships were considered necessary to an early twentieth century
conception of masculinity (“PBS: Out of the Past”). Queer couples could essentially “pass,” through these types of relationships. It’s the closest thing they could have to openly loving each other or depending on other, and, though it was still hiding to an extent, it was also a somewhat daring proclamation of existence, because they did exist. As John Howard details in his book *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, it’s necessary to acknowledge that there were queer men and women living their lives in small towns like Oxford, MI, and that their stories are important. Howard attempts to piece together the types of history that have been ignored or erased because of the people who inhabit it. For example, *Out of the Past* successfully details the rise of urban communities of queer people in places like New York at the beginning of the twentieth century, but they do not invest time in the same communities in the South, because it’s not a history that’s easily constructed. There aren’t a lot of records of arrangements of Boston marriages and other romantic relationships in Southern history, though they happened, according to Howard, just as sexual relationships happened.

Though the position between anti-sodomy laws and romantic same-gender relationships are an important crossroads to view Quentin, coming of age at the crux of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Howard poses a place that worked to construct queer identities in young men in Mississippi throughout the twentieth century: the home (40 – 48). Southern communities, particularly rural ones like Oxford and most of Mississippi in the early 20th century, operated differently from burgeoning urban areas in the North. As Howard writes,

“During the second half of the twentieth century, Mississippians on the whole had a distinctive way of living. As compared to other Americans, they were much
more likely to live in detached houses and mobile homes on larger tracts of land. Despite persistent tenacity and sharecropping, they were more likely to own their own homes, which were ordinarily of very low cost. Though the homes might be small, the households were large, often with more than one person per room” (41).

Because of the closeness of their quarters and the way that they were separated from their towns, people in rural Mississippi had strong family units. Through this, Howard claims, young boys would experiment with their male cousins and other boys from around the area—most of the time, parents didn’t approve of these experimentations but they were aware of them (43). This isn’t necessarily applicable to Quentin specifically, (the Compson family obviously operates differently than the ideal of a close Southern family) but it sets the stage for the way that queer Southerners found themselves outside of societal expectations and within their own insular families. When viewing Quentin this way, it would be more helpful to view the negative implications of his own insular family, specifically the conditions that led to his obsession with sexuality, and the insular community within Oxford.

So, it’s 1910. Sodomy laws are beginning to be contested. *The Intersexes: A History of Similisexualism as a Problem in Social Life* was published two years prior, a giant treatise justifying homosexuality via historical and modern examples (Mayne). Boys in Mississippi discover their sexualities in the safety of their homes through innocuous trysts with cousins and friends. Queer communities are being formed in New York City, queer visibility is becoming a goal, and Quentin Compson leaves Mississippi for Harvard and never comes back. As mentioned before, Quentin exists at the nexus of
the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and, because of his suicide, he’s pretty much eternally there. Had Quentin survived, though, he would have seen a lot of shifts in perspective. His death in 1910 coincided fairly neatly with the societal shift moving away from associating homosexuality and sodomy as sins and viewing homosexuality as an illness—an illness that could be cured. As Foucault wrote, “The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1). The period from around 1900 to 1940 was the height of this intention among the medical community to cure homosexuality, a term which was coined in this era (“PBS: Out of the Past”). Out of this era came the categorization of homosexuality or same gender love as a mental illness in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, where it stayed in at least some form until 1986 (UC Davis). The diagnosis was never a cohesive idea among the entire medical community, but it served its purpose and led to decades of harmful practices to “fix” queer people, many which still happen today. The view of queer love as something that stems from a mental disorder is still considered viable by some today, though it’s widely criticized, and mental health has become an issue that is inextricably linked with the LGBTQ community. As stated in a summary of the issue by the Department of Psychology at UC Davis, though queer urges as being representatives of mental illness has been discredited,

“The data from some studies suggest that, although most sexual minority individuals are well adjusted, nonheterosexuals may be at somewhat heightened risk for depression, anxiety, and related problems, compared to exclusive heterosexuals.”
The summary goes on to clarify, though: “given the stresses created by sexual stigma and prejudice, it would be surprising if some of them did not manifest psychological problems” (UC Davis). Given all of this information, it’s not hard to bring it back around to Quentin, the boy who “loved death,” who suffered from depression. His story as a mental health narrative is one of the strongest arguments for it also being a queer narrative; as mentioned before in relation to the image of the “dead queer,” it is sometimes easier to identify Quentin’s queerness in his death than in his life.

In the context of the early twentieth century, with both a mix of societal pressures in the north and the south and his family’s honor on his shoulders, Quentin’s suicide is essentially inevitable. Based on the scholarship around him, it’s the heart of his character. Quentin being queer would not steer the path any differently. He would have certainly been aware of debates surrounding sodomy and homosexuality, even isolated in Mississippi; it’s hard to imagine that Mr. Compson wouldn’t have touched on the subject in one of his screeds on honor and morality. It’s likely that, through that absence of heterosexual desire, Quentin could have gone as far as to identify as queer, however abstractly. It’s even possible, given the information in Howard’s “queer southern history,” that he might have had queer experiences, especially considering the largely heteronormative definition of what virginity is, though that’s exclusively speculation. This identity could not line up with his image of what it meant to be a Southerner and a man and a Compson. Quentin in 1910 would not have risked identifying as anything that might considered as deviant as he saw himself or Caddy.

In the process of queering Quentin, though, and over the course of the third chapter which will work to modernize each of the characters and the settings, it is
possible to take Quentin out of that historical context and societal context and give him a new context. In modern Oxford, there’s a GSA in the public high school. There’s an extensive and popular branch of PFLAG. There are plenty of resources for queer youth at the University of Mississippi. This is not to say that Quentin would have it easy. The South is still marked by intolerance, and Quentin’s parents would inevitably have been part of that. There are still plenty of LGBTQ kids who get kicked out of their homes because of some sense of family honor—plenty of families that don’t want a queer kid to affect how other people see them. Hate crimes and other anti-LGBTQ violence are marked issues in the community, and suicide rates are dramatically higher among LGBTQ kids than their heterosexual and cisgender peers. Considering the likelihood that Quentin would still suffer from depression, suicidal ideation would still be something that he faced. Taking him out of his historical context, though, gives him decades of information that he would not have had. It gives him history to back up his identity, and it gives him more communities that could help him foster that identity. In a modern, queer version of Quentin’s story, going to Harvard might not lead to his death. It might lead to the possibility for a completely new life. It might lift the weights off of his chest. Of course, as we continue to look at Quentin in the following chapters, we’ll see it’s not quite that easy. The Compsons never are.
CHAPTER THREE

UPDATING CHARACTERS AND STYLE

The previous chapters have been primarily focused on establishing an image of Quentin and the people populating his world, as well as the world itself. This image is of a young man with unrealistic expectations for himself, a severe disconnect with reality, and the will and means to take his own life. He’s not an unusual character by any means. He becomes relevant because so many parts of him are basic human emotions that are simply taken a few steps further. Those few steps are the interesting part, though. From here, it’s necessary to not only take Quentin those steps forward towards a breakdown but also take him into the future. To set the scene for the creative portion which this project will conclude with, we are no longer looking at Quentin Compson in 1910 but, instead, at Quentin Compson between the years of 1989 and 1990. Up until this point, this analysis has largely been playing in Faulkner’s sandbox or within the world of common, accepted Faulkner criticism. Transitioning the world of *The Sound and the Fury* into a more modern setting and with more explicitly queer themes involves serious changes to the structure of the narrative, though. It might not be an entirely new sandbox, but it’s certainly a different view of the original one.

Through this transition, it’s possible to both see the effect that the passing of time have on the characters within the novel and to establish the space between the prose that follows this chapter and what’s contained within Faulkner’s novel, the differences between this Quentin and Faulkner’s. After all, the intention of this project was never
necessarily to imitate Faulkner or to rewrite his second chapter. It was to create a separate work inspired by the original, a work that could correctly contain a Quentin Compson that exists outside of the world of his original narrative. To create this work, it’s necessary to summarize this transition through time in regards to character development, as well as note the aspects of style inspired by Faulkner and chosen independently of him to construct a modern Compson family.

While dark and brutally honest Southern settings are hallmarks of Faulkner’s work, his characters rival their hometowns when it comes to emotional draw. Books become classics for a reason, and one of the reasons the Faulkner canon has thrived is because of the connection that readers make with the people they meet within it. The people that inhabit the world of *The Sound and the Fury* have already been introduced in the first chapter as they exist within the text and within popular scholarship. The question now is how their personalities and their actions stand up against the test of time. When taking the Compsons and related characters outside of their historical moment within 1910 and placing them in 1990, from the early twentieth century to the late, it has to be true that some changes will occur both to their situations and to their personalities. More notably, though, are the aspects of their characterization that won’t be altered, the parts of them that are strong enough to push through to the surface even with 80 years worth of change between them.

Modernizing a classic work of literature is a task that, while not necessarily done easily, is actually done fairly regularly. Especially considering all of the new mediums that are available to work with now, works from writers like Jane Austen and William Shakespeare have found new life through modern novels, movies, TV shows, and songs.
These adaptations are not always deemed successful, but they’re often popular with the fans of the original texts because so many of the ideas remain similar, because the reasons they enjoyed the original text to begin with aren’t completely grounded or trapped within the text itself. There have been no extensive projects involving modernizing Faulkner stories, aside from a portion of Kathy Acker’s *In Memoriam to Identity*, which explores an incestuous relationship between Quentin and a stand-in for female characters like Caddy, named Capitol, and works to subvert popular literary interpretation of the novel. Lee Smith’s novel *Family Linen* drew heavily from *As I Lay Dying* but doesn’t directly work with the story or the characters themselves (Johnson 45 - 50). Other than a few film adaptations, Faulkner’s work has remained largely untouched outside of academics. When it comes to modernizing it, there’s practically a blank slate, which offers a lot of room for interpretation.

Changing the time period has the possibility to do both a lot of harm and a lot of good to the Compsons, though based on precedent, it’s fair to say that the scales will be tipped closer to harm as questions start to be addressed such as: what’s the possibility of Caddy choosing abortion over bearing a child out of wedlock? Can Benjy expect a better life because of greater knowledge about disabilities? What other aspects of motherhood will Mrs. Compson have to pretend to live up to? As before, these questions will focus on Quentin and how moving these characters out of their time period will affect his perception of them and of himself, but each character has an important place within his story. As they transition forward eighty years, it’s possible to explore this importance in a new way, through modern eyes and situations and ideals. It’s possible to understand these characters on a previously unexplored level.
In 1910, Mrs. Compson suffered under the image of the Cult of True Womanhood and the image of a Southern mother that was instilled in her childhood. Distantly, in 1990, that suffering would still be there, but, this time, there would be even more for her to have to embody. As Joanne Meyerowitz describes in the introduction to her book *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945 - 1960*, the ideal of motherhood that sprang from the 1950s was the “quintessential white middle class [housewife] who stayed at home to rear children, clean house, and bake cookies” (1). Meyerowitz points to women who aren’t able to fulfill this stereotype, because they’re not “white, middle-class, married, and suburban,” but Mrs. Compson has the means to do so. Despite financial struggles, she is still fairly privileged.

She has always had the means to strive for the ideals that haunt her, no matter what decade she was living in; she doesn’t want the full picture, though. She wants her house to seem perfect, but she doesn’t want to get her hands dirty. She want her children to do right by her and take care of her as they grow up, but she doesn’t offer them any affection or incentive to do so. This part of her character doesn’t change. No matter where she is, Mrs. Compson is still held in stasis, unable to move past herself and her own wants to see that motherhood isn’t just what other people can see of it. She’ll still be vain and overdramatic and full of pride, as can be addressed in the original text. Moving her forward in history gives us the opportunity to take a longer look at Mrs. Compson, though, to see the reasoning behind her personality and her decisions and to see that neither of those things necessarily have to change. In fact, Mrs. Compson’s personality probably wouldn’t change at all. Her situation would be the driving factor when updating her character.
As the Compsons’ financial situation slips away from them, as her husband locks himself in his office and drinks himself to death, Mrs. Compson looks for control and that control is often found in delusion. In 1910, she found that control by clinging to the superiority of her bloodline. In 1990, it’s easy to see her as the mother that dresses her kids in expensive, designer clothes even though it’s getting more and more difficult for them to keep their family home running, even though they have no steady income and old money only lasts so long. She’ll still find control through Quentin going to Harvard, but that’s the same thing as putting him in nice clothes, just an elaborate veil to wear to pretend like everything isn’t falling apart. On top of all that, she’ll also have easier access to anti-depressants and other prescription drugs (particularly considering it’s likely that she would be diagnosed with postpartum depression at some point in her life), which is a different type of veil with similar intentions.

Similarly, Mr. Compson’s personality seems as if it would translate perfectly to the late 20th century. After all, there’s always something to be nihilistic about, and Mr. Compson is all too aware that his family is falling apart and all too aware that he’s doing nothing to stop it. The image itself is almost poignant: Mr. Compson drinking his life away through eighty years of history, from law books to late night TV. Just like his wife, he’ll also have easier access to both prescribed medication and harder drugs. A 1999 study from the U.S. Department of Justice addresses the idea of alcohol as a gateway drug, saying it can lead to other addictions and, also, referencing a 1996 study which states:

“More than 67% of individuals who started drinking before age 15 went on to use other illicit drugs, compared with less than 4% of those who never drank....An
individual who starts drinking before the age of 15 is 101 times more likely to use cocaine than someone who never drank” (Marr 5).

The Compsons are all prone to self-destructive behaviors, after all. If Mrs. Compson can live on her allusions of grandeur, Mr. Compson would likely not think anything of spending money that they don’t necessarily have on more ways of wasting time until he dies. Through all this, as well, they’ll be passing these views and these choices on to their children. Mr. Compson will still pass his sense of hopelessness, it will simply be hopelessness based around a different time, and arguably his views on women and other philosophies would likely follow the same line of thought. In the end, both parents will still be displaying the kind of self-destructive, borderline obsessive behaviors that their children will pick up on and imitate or cringe away from, and modern frameworks will increase their range of ways to react.

One character whose range of behavior will still be limited is Benjy, whose story is inextricably tied up with his parents and, based on Mrs. Compson’s need to appear perfect to the outside world and Mr. Compson’s apathy, who will (and, in the novel, did) suffer for this fact. The major change that would come about from taking Benjy out of 1910 is the fact that he would have a firm diagnosis. As referenced in Chapter One, many scholars have attempted to diagnose Benjy within modern disability terms, but Faulkner wasn’t writing an informed disability narrative. He was writing about an “idiot,” and one of the positive things about modernizing this story is that, largely, people with mental disabilities are no longer referred to as “idiots.” To create Benjy’s story, though, it becomes necessary to acknowledge his existence within the healthcare system and within the school system. After all, 1990 was the advent of the Americans with Disabilities Act,
which provided legal recourse against discrimination and access to resources and was, at least, a start to better opening up schools to kids with disabilities (Fitzpatrick 13 - 24). This isn’t to say that modernizing Benjy’s story will necessarily assist him, though; arguably, he would have had a better chance at getting early intervention help and, also, attending school early on, but if Benjy’s disability is as severe as it’s depicted in the novel, then there’s no reason the Compsons couldn’t still keep him at home. Also, while the passing of the ADA marked the start of real legislative change, most of its benefits would not have been implemented in time for them to have an impact on Benjy.

This doesn’t mean that Benjy couldn’t get help, of course, but it’s his family who would have to seek it. Public schools sometimes have the means to provide at-home tutors, though those provisions weren’t immediately required under the ADA and school districts without appropriate funding wouldn’t be able to do this. Arguably, with parts of Oxford as affluent as they are today, that funding might have been available in a modern Jefferson. It’s also possible that this would be used simply as a means of keeping Benjy out of the public eye and, in the same vein, if public school services weren’t readily available, the Compsons would probably spend money on a private tutor. This way, not only is Benjy not part of the outside world, they also continue the illusion that they’re still well-off and, also, that they really care. They might not be able to hide entirely that they have a son with a major disability, but this way Mrs. Compson can act like a martyr to the neighbors when she talks about all they’re doing for poor, unfortunate Benjy.

Benjy’s main hope for affection in both decades would be Caddy, but a modern Caddy would have less time to be Benjy’s mother figure, arguably. After all, she starts to fit into modern frameworks, as well. Similarly to her parents, modernizing Caddy means
that she’s exposed to a harsher reality when it comes to the impact of her own behaviors. Based strictly on cultural norms, promiscuity is generally connected with drug and alcohol use and with unsafe sex. There are statistics to back this up, to a degree; a 2009 study of college freshmen showed that, of those who were both involved with drugs and alcohol and sexually active, “60.2% had intoxicated sex, 31.4% had multiple sex partners, and 48.9% had unprotected sex” (Arria et al 1). Risk behaviors from a young age, as mentioned early, generally come coupled with more than one type of risk behavior, and this could be especially true for Caddy. Though we may want to see Quentin as the modern, angst-ridden teenager, that role fits Caddy better, and that angst is genuine and unreserved and, frankly, deserved. She turns to sex (and potentially drinking and drugs) to temporarily remove herself from her home life; part of it might be because she enjoys it, but there’s definitely a component there that’s in it for a darker reason. In a way, it might be like her giving up. After all, Caddy would have access to a college education if she wanted, but it’s likely that she would be just as trapped in her father’s fatalism and not see it as an option, even before she gets pregnant.

Because Caddy would still get pregnant. It’s an essential part of her storyline, and everything points to it: a lack of proper sex education both in school and within her family, multiple partners, and, also, teen pregnancy was on the rise between 1985 and 1990 (Kaufman et al 1). What would change, though, are her available options. Being in 1990 means two things specifically: 1) casually marrying someone is significantly less likely and probably not an option at all and 2) abortion would certainly be on the table. This is where it gets interesting to see the story from multiple side of the Compson family because, inevitably, each of them would have a different opinion on abortion and
specifically on Caddy having one. Mr. Compson would probably still be apathetic and possibly suggest abortion as a means of getting over the problem; Mrs. Compson would act shocked at the notion but seriously consider pressing the issue if the rumor wouldn’t spread all over town; and Caddy wouldn’t go through with it. It’s possible that her maternal draw as exhibited with Benjy would prevent her from even seriously considering it, and if she’s already given up on a future independent of her family, then she might as well start her own. The Compsons themselves are something of a vicious cycle; this is exhibited particularly well with Caddy but, also, with Jason.

Jason is the one Compson that might actually not change at all. Most aspects of his personality are kind of essential, like resentment and anger. Even though he would have more access to a college education, it’s doubtful he would go after it; after all, college is for people like Quentin, and someone has to stay behind and tie up the loose threads that are holding their family together. His identity, as well as the identity of his father and his brothers, might be informed by more modern ideas of masculinity, but the Compsons are still mired in the past, to an extent. Jason will still be the man of the house after his father’s death, and he’ll still be under his mother’s thumb at the same time. He can stay in Jefferson, cycle through jobs, and develop his issues just as well in 1990 as he could in 1910.

On the other side, Dilsey is the character that would arguably change the most. She could still be in the Compson family as a domestic worker, filling the affectionate mother role that Caddy can’t quite fill and Mrs. Compson doesn’t care to fill. The position would be distinctly different, though; in the text, Dilsey’s family had been working for the Compsons for years, and her connection to them was more complex. The
role of a black domestic worker in a white household in 1990, though, would be entirely different and a lot more loaded. There are years of rights struggles between those time periods, and years of cultural change that would probably mean that Dilsey wouldn’t be as at home with the Compsons as she might have previously been. After all, she would have been able to get a public education and have a whole life prior to the job; in fact, the entire idea that it’s just a job and not her life is a distinct difference. While she would still fill a mothering role because of her attachment to the children, she also still has children of her own, and ones that she would probably go back to at night when she separates herself from the Compsons and goes back to her own life.

Having a black domestic worker could actually be another status symbol for the Compsons and work towards an idea that Mrs. Compson could certainly be perpetuating by keeping up their old house and their wealthy appearance, by clinging to her bloodline and to nostalgia. If the Compsons are mired in the past, then constructing this power dynamic between Dilsey and them is a part of that, a call-back to the Compsons as they used to be with a cultural resonance to the South in general. Not only is Dilsey almost objectified in this way, but her presence in the Compson household would also impact Quentin’s views on race as he travels up to the significantly more liberal Cambridge. For example, a Harvard Crimson article from 1990 discusses a student who removed a rebel flag from his window due to complaints from his classmates (Silver). Harvard in 1990 wasn’t a culture that easily accepted certain types of oppression, and there were certainly strong anti-racist ideals alive there, as well the beginning of some LGBTQ activism. Having Dilsey in his life would certainly cause a mix of both shame and understanding in Quentin; shame over being inside that power dynamic and understanding because he
would still be attached to Dilsey, as all the children were, to an extent. These things are not necessarily fair to Dilsey as a character, that she should have a life outside of the Compsons to call her own but still mostly be a symbol, but there’s still hope. She’ll still endure even when the Compsons do not.

Then, there’s Quentin, who carries all of this and more on his back—Quentin Compson, who was probably an honor student and a valedictorian and studied during lunch because he stopped trying to make friends at some point and he was trying to get as many scholarships as he could. At his heart, Quentin isn’t going to change, either; he’ll still go to Harvard and he’ll still feel the pressure to make his family successful through his own success, to fix their name, and he’ll still bend and break under it. He might have a better idea that he’s suffering from clinical depression or a similar issue, but it’s doubtful that he would seek help for it or that his parents would support him in the endeavor if he did. Really, the main route to take when modernizing Quentin is the one that was addressed in chapter two: a queer narrative. The 1990s are remarkably progressive compared to 1910 when it comes to queer rights, a good distance from Stonewall and the beginning of a strong and organized movement toward equal rights and representation. Queer sexualities are present everywhere, and they’re being talked about and protested for and against, and Quentin would have a hard time denying his sexuality to himself in the wake of so much evidence. In 1910, it could be pushed aside. In 1910, Quentin’s a virgin for a whole host of reasons, but none of them have to be because he’s not interested in having sex with a woman. In 1990, though, it’s an entirely different story. The movement’s already going from fighting for acknowledgement of queer
identities to open acceptance of them, and that’s present in Mississippi (especially considering the presence of the university) as well as in Massachusetts.

It’s not just that Quentin would have a harder time denying his sexuality, though; it’s that he would still have reason to. For one thing, his parents grew up through the 50s and 60s, when heterosexism sprang up full force in reaction to “free love” movements and other issues that were seen as immoral and worked to create a dichotomy between traditional families and “others” (UC Davis). With this awareness of queer identities and this fear of them, it’s highly possible that Quentin’s parents would be cognizant of his sexuality and work to help him suppress it without acknowledging it or just be openly guarded against the truth in general. For another thing, this is 1990. Ronald Reagan was recently in office, and the AIDS crisis began roughly nine years prior. Reagan didn’t acknowledge AIDS in a public forum until three years prior, and that fact really sets up the culture surrounding both queer men and AIDS (“A Timeline of AIDS”). Despite being an epidemic, it was easier for some public officials to not acknowledge it, because the people dying weren’t seen as a pressing issue compared to others. When it is talked about, it incites a strong wave of heterosexism and, as previously mentioned, fear. This is the world that Quentin Compson is coming of age in. This is the view of homosexuality that he’ll get from his parents and from his peers and from the news, and this is the view that he will internalize. This won’t only impact his view of himself but his transition from the South to the North. There was definitely a more visible queer community in Cambridge at that point, and it’s likely there would have been demonstrations from groups like ACT UP. This gives Quentin the possibility of an accepting community that could help him come to terms with his identity, but, first, he would have to join it. Based
on evidence, it’s doubtful that he would, especially considering the only real connection that the reader knows of Quentin making is with Shreve.

In this situation, Shreve becomes important, because the nature of their relationship means that, when you queer Quentin, you’re inevitably queering Shreve as well. This opens up a lot of possibilities, because Shreve is a constant. He’s one of the only constants in Quentin’s life. As an outsider to the story, he can essentially be brought in to gain relatability and to help Quentin do the same, especially considering the fact that he’s an outsider to the United States, to the South, and to Quentin’s head. To an extent, Shreve’s almost a blank slate; it’s even possible that he could be an openly queer character himself, to contrast Quentin’s state of mind. Through this, Shreve has the possibility to create a reaction and make even more of an impact than he does in the original text. He would also exist as a means of drawing out clear concepts of queer themes than are found in the original text, explicit references to one or more queer characters as a means of having Quentin contend not only with their sexuality but his own.

One way of going about this is posing not only Shreve as queer but another of Quentin’s peers, as well: Gerald Bland. While any version of Quentin that may be written would likely have such a repressed sexuality that he would never find himself in any form of romantic or sexual relationship with another man, the same isn’t as easily said for his classmates. By creating a relationship between Shreve and Gerald Bland, it opens up a view of queer male sexuality that is far less hypothetical and which has to be addressed by Quentin because it becomes an immediate part of his world.
Clearly, much of Faulkner’s original narrative changes when the characters are introduced to a new time with eighty years of progress, wars, and technological development behind them. As anticipated, the major aspects of their characterization remain intact, though, which is a testament to the power behind them, if not behind the aspects of human nature that they represent. It’s a compliment to Faulkner but a rather bleak look at humanity in general. Jason Compson will always be Jason Compson, regardless of his time period. Quentin will always suffer, whenever or wherever he will suffer. The only thing that inevitably changes is their situation and their actions within it. Of course, it seems as if the slow, steady decline of the Compsons will happen regardless.

Though careful attention has been paid to characterization in order to get the fullest view of who these characters are and what their potential for change, however limited, is, when it comes to style, it seems better to take a more general approach to avoid pure imitation. The nature of Quentin’s first person stream of conscious narrative has been studied over and over. For the sake of this project, the focus will only be on three main parts of it: significant imagery and patterns, the different levels of consciousness, and the slow disintegration of his hold on reality. All of these things work together along with Quentin’s voice to create the world that we see through his eyes, through the present day, through memories, and through what might could be viewed as hallucinations or visions.

One of the constant ties, the things we have to ground us within the story, are the repeated use of certain images. The focus is primarily on two specific images and the variety of ways the reader can be drawn back to them. One of them is time, shown through an awareness of the passing of time, timepieces like Quentin’s pocket watch
given to him by his father and the clocks in the storefront, and even shadows marking changes in the sun’s position. More important to this project, though, are the images of water. Quentin is constantly aware of water when he’s close to it in the original text, seeking it out both consciously and unconsciously as he moves closer and closer to death. As Dr. Edwin Hunter points out, “[. . .] he is sustained by the thought of water which is the thought of death,” also noting an “impulse towards poetry” as Quentin contemplates finding his end in the water (37). These two images, while indicative of Quentin’s obsessiveness, are actually the only things that really keep the reader in the present day of the story.

Hunter also addresses the levels of Quentin’s consciousness in his study of Faulkner’s prose style, writing,

“I suggest these five streams or levels of thought as being ready at hand in Quentin Compson’s mind throughout this one day [. . .] (1) the events of the day; (2) the fixation upon and preparation for Death, with emphasis upon Time and upon Death by Water; (3) the remembrance of his sister’s perverse conduct and consequent bitter experience which he had shared intimately; (4) lapses, at a few points, into amused and happy recall; (5) a prevailing homesickness for Mississippi amid the alien corn of Massachusetts.”

These levels, while blended together and constantly moving, are fairly easily traced in the text. In order to create a new text with them, though, and the final chapter does attempt to recreate these levels to an extent, certain changes must be addressed. The primary change being to number five, Quentin’s sense of homesickness. While that’s certainly still a factor, with this new, more modern Quentin, there are fewer ties to Mississippi. He feels
the weight of its history more because there’s more history to contend with. He even feels fewer ties to his family after his experiences with them pushing Caddy towards having an abortion, something which starts to sever the moral hold his father has over him. The issue of abortion in general changes his memories of Caddy’s actions, as well.

Of course, all of these levels have a primary goal within the text, even as they change with the times. They work to show us the way that Quentin is quickly spiraling out of control and they help take the narrative with him. Though Quentin flashes back to memories from the first few pages onward, they become less and less coherent as the story goes on until it’s hard to follow who’s speaking and what time he’s addressing. It picks up the pace of the novel. Where Benjy’s narrative is much slower, the reader is rushed forward with Quentin’s inner monologue and is offered very few places to get off until Quentin is standing at the river with his family’s voices running disjointed and unchecked through his head.

Dealing with issues like characterization and style and how much of each will be incorporated from an original text into a new creation brings up the question of what exactly someone who’s working within someone else’s world owes that person. What are the limits when you’re dealing with reworking parts of a classic piece of literature? Arguably, some would say that there aren’t any limits. There’s no place the Compsons could be taken that would be considered wrong. Considering the subject matter of Acker’s In Memoriam to Identity, this viewpoint isn’t out of the question. Given that I’m dealing with a very specific timeline within Faulkner’s novel, though, I feel there’s a certain obligation for authenticity. I’ve never seen the idea of a queer Quentin as something that existed outside of the realm of possibility in Faulkner’s canon, for
instance. Moving him forward in his timeline is just a way of drawing that out. The rest of my intentions are similarly rooted within the reality of the original text, though, not to rewrite it but to pull something new from the story that Faulkner originally laid out.
CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN THEY TOUCHED ME I DIED

The alarm has been going off for five minutes, five turns of the numbers and I can’t move, 7:30, 7:35. Shreve doesn’t knock before he comes in. He usually knocks. I can hear his sigh over the alarm, his footsteps, the creak of the door and the floorboards. Our rooms are old, but all of Harvard is old. Cambridge is made of preserved wood and dust. Dad said you’ll go to Harvard, and you’ll be the first of us to get out of Jefferson alive. You’ll become part of their history, not that it will change you, because history is just a long line of dead men who never finish what they started. But at least you’ll have a degree.

Shreve says, “You’re killing me, kid,” drops a hand on the alarm to fill the room with silence and the sound of his breathing, the feel of his eyes on me.

“Don’t call me kid.” I’ve been saying it for a year now, ten months really, since he dropped his bags on the floor in the common area and said, “You’re not as tall as I expected,” and “Come on, let’s hear that Mississippi accent.”

Shreve grins, says, “Sure, kid. You skipping?”

I tell him to go on, I’ll be there eventually. He hmms and watches me until I turn away again, until I face the wall and pretend like I’m going back to sleep, like I was sleeping to begin with. When he leaves, shutting the door quietly behind him, I get out of bed. I didn’t sleep, but I stayed in one place because it’s the closest thing, just sitting still until the alarm, until the clock that woke my parents up every morning starts to stutter out
a warning. Time starts to mean less when you don’t shut your eyes for awhile. It doesn’t slow down, but it changes, sits heavier on your skin. I feel older now than I’ve ever felt but that’s how it works.

Outside, Shreve yells out, “Don’t sleep your life away, it’s a beautiful day today that God made just for you,” and slams the front door as he leaves. My room feels bigger without him in it, like there’s more air. I don’t know if I can think clearer when I’m alone but I haven’t ever really been alone, it’s always roommates and siblings, a sister. I clear off the desk, putting everything back into the drawers except for a notebook. Two semesters worth of careful notes and a few clean pages in the back. I don’t take a lot of time to write anything today, just a few sentences, two different pages.

I get dressed, make the bed, turn all the lights off. I put the notes in my backpack with three library books that are due at the end of next week, and I lock the door before I leave. It’s early enough that most people who are awake are already in their classes, and the campus is quiet, just a few cars and silhouettes of people farther away. I don’t hear any voices at all until I’m halfway to the library and hear a shout, feel my back tense even when it’s followed by peals of laughter and I walk closer to see a few boys messing around on the Yard, playing at fighting. I didn’t know how to fight but I knew I was supposed to do it because when people say things like that about your family then you’re supposed to do something about it. He said things about Caddy and I pushed him, thought I could do better but I couldn’t do anything. I was on my stomach with a knee in my back, and I wasn’t ever going to get up. I didn’t know they weren’t rumors and I didn’t know how to fight, and all I could see was black, dirt in my throat. I was going to be buried and dead in Mississippi. I’m going to be buried and dead in Mississippi. They
weren’t rumors, but I still can’t do anything about it. One of the boys pins another one down, yells something I can’t understand and I think about home and Shreve’s fingertips warm on my neck like the window isn’t open, like somebody couldn’t see him. Nobody was there, but Shreve’s hand closed on my shoulder and I thought about home. A boy’s knee pinning me down in the grass. No air in my lungs. There’s less air when he’s in a room. He said, “I am absolutely horrifying you right now, aren’t I,” and then he never touched me again. Two weeks into the semester and he didn’t touch me again, even though he’s tactile, touches everyone else like he needs it.

Their voices fade off as I hurry, looking away, catching the breath I didn’t have when I can stop on the library’s steps and lean into one of the columns. The books feel heavier on my shoulders. This is the only library I come to, because Harvard is full of libraries but this is the one that is least like the one at home. All libraries are essentially the same in purpose, all keeping the dead alive, but this one fills up space in a history that Jefferson has never been a part of, full of books my family will never read--Caddy’s child won’t read them. Caddy’s child. I’ll keep it. She said, I’ll keep it and Mom has been crying since we’ve been alive, since she knew we were Compsons and it doesn’t have to be a Compson. I leave the books in the box outside and turn back, take the long way to the post office to mail the letter to Dad so he’ll know.

It’s warm outside, practically summer even this early, and girls and boys scatter across the grass further out to study and nap and kiss. Everyone is always kissing like it’s spring fever, fingers tucked away in back pockets and in hair and I didn’t see them. I didn’t see them touch but I saw Dalton Ames leaving. I didn’t know he was there until I heard a noise from Caddy’s room late at night and went out to see him trying to sneak out
the door. I would have fought him, too, I would have tried but he left before we knew what had happened to Caddy, what Caddy had done. He smirked when he saw me. He didn’t try to sneak anymore, made so much noise that he woke up Jason and I had to convince him that it was just me and he could go back to sleep. Dalton Ames left. *I don’t need him, I never even wanted him, Quentin. I can do this alone. I’ll keep it.* I watched Dalton Ames leave, cut across the yard, and there’s not a lot of places to walk in Jefferson but he doesn’t live in a house made of crumbling history like us, not in a place like Harvard.

It’s hard to walk off Harvard’s campus because Harvard has sprawled over Cambridge. Everywhere you are is Harvard or is owned by them or was owned or built by good dead men who found their start there. If I walk long enough, I know eventually I’ll get to suburbs. I took a whole weekend once to find out how far out of Cambridge I could get on foot but never made it past the city lines. Other men walk to find higher truths, take pilgrimages to holy lands, but I’m tired of knowing everything. I’m just walking. I wait a few minutes at an intersection while people drive past on their way to work, the same routine day in and day out, ruled by their watches. Dad says that people keep working because they think something’s going to change eventually, that we know that repetition as insanity but none of us will ever stop. We don’t have a choice in the matter. A truck speeds by me and I feel the wind pick up, take a step forward and then back until the light comes on, until I cross and keep walking.

Cambridge never has empty streets, but nobody ever meets your eyes, not for long. They don’t really see you. They don’t really see me but it’s okay, because everyone keeps moving. I keep my head down. I don’t mean to look up, but I do and she smiles at
me, a woman with a purse slung over her shoulder and a swollen stomach. She has a shopping bag in one hand, and she smiles at me until I pass her. I don’t know why Caddy told me first but she told me first, said: *Quentin, I need to tell you something that you have to keep between us* when she came into my room in the middle of the night, her eyes wide and red. I thought she was sick, because she wouldn’t say anything, just pressed the keys to Dad’s car into my hand and said: *please, please, come on*, her fingers tight around mine. In the car, she said: *I didn’t mean for this to happen, but I need to know for sure.* She said: *They’re never going to forgive me.* And I knew then, I saw Dalton Ames come out of her room, smirking, like it wasn’t the middle of the night, like he was supposed to be there, and I know why she looked like she was going to die right then and there. I didn’t stop at the pharmacy down the street. I kept driving, and Caddy didn’t try to stop me until we’re two towns over. She whispered to me, shifted closer, her voice broken and soft. *We have to stop sometime.*

I could just keep walking. I could just keep driving. We could have gone somewhere else, been other people, changed everything. I could have fixed it, because Caddy didn’t need Dalton Ames. Caddy never needed anyone, just kissed those boys because she liked it, because she wanted it. but I could try. I said, “We don’t have to stop,” but Caddy makes a noise like a cut-off sob, like she’s given up, one hand pressed over her stomach underneath her t-shirt. Women don’t always know what they want. Dad said that. They’re not taught how to do it. Said *your mother wants the world but she has no idea how to ask for it so she hates us all for not giving it to her.* Caddy wanted. Caddy wanted to kiss those boys wanted Dalton Ames but Caddy cried in the passenger seat and in the checkout lane and in the flickering light CVS bathroom while I waited outside. I
didn’t go in, not when she made a startled noise, not when she stopped crying, stopped making noise altogether. She came out on her own eventually, and neither of us say a word on the drive home but I want her to. I want her to apologize. I don’t know why, but I want her to be sorry. The woman on the street is gone and she’s not sorry she’s happy in a way that I’ve never known how to be, that a Compson has never been. I haven’t talked to Caddy since Christmas. Mom and Dad don’t mention her when they call me.

Farther down, the sidewalk slopes down towards the river so I can hear the noises it makes as it hits the banks, the bridge far behind me. The constant forward motion, never stopping. I want to pace my steps to it, think about being swept away. I could just keep walking. *We could keep driving and you don’t have to tell anyone what you’ve done.* The bank is steep and you used to have to slide down the part of the Yoknapatawpha at the edge of town because it was too muddy to climb. We came home and got scolded every time, except Caddy was eighteen, mud down the back of her jeans in the middle of December, standing with her toes sunk into the earth and her thin arms wrapped around her.

*Do you ever think about it, Quentin? Do you ever really think about doing it?*

Across from the river, there’s a public playground, fenced in and always busy. I walk by it every time I come out this way. Kids are always shouting because they don’t know how to do anything else, and I stop outside the fence, watch a dark-headed boy chase a girl around the swing set and a set of mothers and nannies perched on benches nearby. These kids are too young to be in school, tottering on short legs, grabbing at each other’s hair when they catch each other until the boy starts to cry and a mother comes over to pick him up and soothe him. *You’re going to make him cry again if you don’t*
Jason always put his fists on his hips when he tried to tell Caddy off, chin jutted out, looking for all the world like Mom even though he’d never hear it as he got older. *You’re going to get our TV taken away tonight, and I won’t forgive you this time.* I don’t know if Jason ever forgave anyone, if we’re capable of forgiving, this family, but Caddy talked and talked at Benjy because she heard the doctor say on the phone to Mom that we needed to talk to Benjy to help him learn to communicate while Mom said that she tried but it wasn’t any use, he didn’t understand. Nobody understands Ben like Caddy. She understands all of them, even when she’s young and stupid and not acting like a girl should, trying to climb the magnolia trees that canopy the yard and ripping her new skirt. *Mom’s going to be mad, she’s going to be mad at you.* Caddy rolled her eyes like she learned how to do from the kids at school and said: *I’ll get Dilsey to fix it, who’s gonna tell her?*

She got loud and made Benjy laugh and I watched the neighbor’s houses to make sure they weren’t watching us while Ben shrieked and shrieked and Jason went inside to get away from them. I look up and the mothers are staring at me, concerned, looks I’ve seen before on other faces and I keep walking while the children keep playing behind me and the river keeps moving and moving and moving. I’ve made this walk so many times that it’s familiar, not like Jefferson is familiar, not hundreds of year of history waiting for me but ten months of trying. Just one or two miles straight down through Cambridge, away from Harvard. It gets quieter the farther you go. I cut across the empty baseball field, near the bleachers and I don’t think about Caddy, about high school football games and skipping class and the necks of her t-shirts stretched out. I kick loose dirt underneath my feet. *Shreve snorted, said, “Swing and a miss,” when Gerald tried to pick up a girl at*
the bar that they dragged me along to. I haven’t wanted to do much lately, but Spoade kept finding bars that don’t card and Shreve kept finding ways to get me to come along. Gerald said, “She had a boyfriend, otherwise I would have gotten her to come into the bathroom with me and shown her what I could do.”

“All we’ve seen so far that you can do is get brutally rejected, so I’m sure she would have had a great time,” Shreve said, and Gerald knocked into him as he sat back down. He said: “I don’t see any of the rest of you trying.”

Spoade said, “I let them come to me,” and Shreve said, “Wrong kind of bar.”

“What about you?” Gerald turned to look at me.

“Quentin’s saving himself for marriage,” Spoade said, laughing.

“Or maybe he just has better taste than picking up the kind of girls that come to bars like this,” Shreve suggested, gesturing to the bar at large. I don’t tell them that I’m. I haven’t. That Caddy isn’t a virgin but I never. I was a kid when I kissed a girl and never did it again. Caddy never stopped. Shreve went home with Gerald that night, said he was going to make sure that his drunk ass got home safe, but I knew because I had seen them. I think I was the only one.

Gerald’s mom was shocked at Shreve’s existence, pulled me aside one time with a sharp-nailed hand on my arm to say, “Quentin, dear, a nice boy like you shouldn’t be forced to share space with a boy like that,” and Shreve laughed full body when I told him because a boy like that has been sharing more than space with her son. I saw them before, I didn’t mean to, and Shreve never said anything about it even though I wouldn’t tell anyone, I didn’t mean to know. Mrs. Bland loves her son so much but that doesn’t mean anything.
“You’re too much of a fine Southern lady for the likes of me,” Shreve said, at the time. “You can’t be around a leftist Canadian queer too long, I might rub off on you.”

At the bar, they fought and flirted and pretended like everybody didn’t see what was happening. Maybe they didn’t see. I've only seen Gerald and him accidentally, pressed up in the doorway in the night when Shreve comes in smelling like sweat and looking kissed. Dad said before I left Jefferson you've got to look out for men like that when you go up there. They're sad people, but they're no sadder than the rest of us, they just die quicker now and you don't want to let them get their eyes on you. They’ll think you’re one of them, Quentin, but you’re not, you're going to fall in love with a woman that you’ll hate as soon as she becomes a mother.

"Gerald will screw anything that will make his mother love him less," Shreve said once, quick and sharp. "He's very modern. An asshole, but modern."

Shreve is modern, I think, he's got a big voice and he’s always smiling. He likes people, and I want to, but I'm not anything I’m not anyone anymore. I said back, "I don't like anyone," and Shreve barked out a laugh. He's always laughing like I said something funny and sometimes I try to make him laugh because I wasn’t always like this, I used to know how to breathe outside of Jefferson. We took trips in the summer because that’s what people do, trips that they would argue about for months and months because we couldn’t afford anything we wanted but got it anyway, they thought we didn’t know what that meant.

"You know, sometimes I think you really don't like anyone," Shreve said, later, when I’d known him for four months and this was the only time I’d ever heard him sound shy. "It's too bad you're so appealing, you'd be beating off girls with sticks if you weren't
so scared of them.” I didn't kiss girls in high school, I didn't kiss boys underneath the bleachers like Caddy did, had marks on her record where teachers caught her with hands up her skirt they just like me, Quentin, it's none of your business what I do or who, you're acting like a jealous boyfriend. Caddy blushes and Dalton Ames is gone before it hits her cheeks, and stop looking at me like that, I’m not the first girl to kiss someone but I remember Caddy with knees ripped in her jeans from climbing trees. I know Caddy hadn’t grown into her limbs yet, on the last vacation, long and sunburnt pink as she padded across the hotel pool tiles while Mom sat to the side, listened to the radio she bought herself for Christmas loud enough to drown out everyone else out, the muffled yells of boys and girls as they slipped under water again and again while I sat on the edge and wait. My feet touch the surface. I sit on the edge and Caddy walks behind me, her skin sun warm against my back. We’ll take you out of school now, you’re not waiting until summer. If you’re staying in this situation, I won’t have you parading around town so everyone can see the mess you’ve gotten yourself into. Dad says, “You know how your mother hates you children being seen,” but he shuts his office door. Caddy doesn’t have to finish school. Benjy doesn’t have to go to school because there’s no use, he won’t know the difference, but I’ll go to Harvard because I’m going to get out.

“Are you afraid to get in?” Caddy’s voice is clear water blue, loud enough to hear over the music. “Are you afraid to get in, Quentin?”

I can’t hear the river from here anymore. It’s far enough away that I can’t see it or hear it but I think I can feel the wind off of it, still, damp and cool. The field’s deserted, the early sun hitting the metal bleachers and refracting behind me as I walk away. I’ve never been to the hardware store that I’m looking for before, but it’s not far down the
road, I can see the sign against the sky. I’ve never needed to come here. I called ahead to make sure it was the right place.

Inside, it’s clean and smells like paint and wood, and it’s lit up bright, every employee smiling as they pass me, as I wander through the aisles and refuse help and find what I was looking for. Two solid bricks worth less than a Harvard tuition that sit on top of each other in my backpack, straining enough that I can’t forget them, resting sharp-edged at the small of my back. The cashier asks me what kind of project I’m doing and I don’t have an answer but I smile because she smiled first. Nobody looks at me as I leave. I don’t expect them to, but. I can’t take these children anywhere. It’s bad enough that everyone stares at Benjy, but Caddy can’t even keep her hands to herself. I can’t stand this, I really can’t.

Outside, it’s just a block before you hit neighborhoods. The bricks pull on my shoulders. All I can hear is street noise, passing cars and chatter and music through the windows. The houses are all old but they look the same, rows and rows of bricks that won’t ever move. A jogger passes and a woman with a stroller talks on the phone and doesn’t acknowledge me and I know that Caddy is going to be a mother and that she didn’t have to be but they don’t talk about her when they call me. Dad said, “With all the college boys with futures in this town, Caddy picks the deadbeat dropout to reproduce with,” and he laughs, a dried out noise from the pit of his stomach.

Mom sniffs. “She is a Compson.” We’re all Compsons but Caddy doesn’t have to be, she can marry another man a man who will stay she won’t be one of us anymore, a wife and not a sister. A mother. Caddy’s going to be a mother, and she used to play at one when we were kids, she held Benjy’s hand and she was the only one who could calm him
down. She said she could understand him and he wasn’t wrong, he was just him. Ben just needs someone to try for him. He needs a mother, and Dad says you’ll fall in love, Quentin, with a woman you’ll hate and birth isn’t redemption, it’s spontaneous combustion. Your mother isn’t here anymore, not really. Some people have parents that turn them into the best versions of themselves, but you’re going to be all that’s left of either of us.

I’ve been in this neighborhood, in the park just outside it before because it’s far enough away that none of the students come out here and it’s quiet during the day while everyone’s working. Sometimes, I just need it to be quiet and everything can make sense here while everyone lives their lives on every side and every street. Everyone is constantly living like there’s nothing to stop them. I sit in the grass right next to the fence and leave my backpack on. I try not to think about anything, and I don’t know how long I spend trying not to be anything at all when I hear footsteps, voices, see Shreve’s big shadow over me.

"Spoade said he saw you wandering the streets, we figured you came out here to commune with nature like your country ancestors."

"I just needed air," I say. I try not to sound startled, but I suddenly remember that I can’t hear the water from here. There’s no water here, but there’s a park in Jefferson with a creek that runs through it and the kids play in it while their mothers stand attentively on the bank and Mom doesn't help Benjy in the bath, anymore, Dilsey does it, says Mom never stopped regretting the poor boy wasn’t a stillbirth on the phone in the kitchen to her family, her real family, the one that doesn’t pay her. This isn’t Jefferson, but the water’s the same, even when you can’t hear it.
"I think maybe you’re just pronouncing beer wrong," Shreve says, significantly, and I’ve never told them that I’ve never had a drink not in any of the bars and Dad’s never going to stop drinking because he's drinking instead of living. He drinks because we are all already dead and Shreve drinks to kiss Gerald in the hallway where nobody will see. Dad said I should probably avoid the faggots and maybe I would but you don't get to pick your roommates at Harvard and anyway Shreve isn't sad, he's happier than I’ve ever seen anyone with his big hands in the air and a laugh like an engine stuttering, cheeks flushed pink.

Spoade told me once, pulled me aside with an eyebrow raised and a casual, "It’s too bad you’re not a queer, because Shreve will pine for you.” they’ll think you're one of them, Quentin, but you're not. You’re not. You’re not anything.

I’m not. I said, I’m not—I don’t—and Spoade smirks.

“We all know that,” he says. “You’re just too polite to switch roommates.”

“He insisted we come rescue you from yourself,” Gerald says.

Spoade says, "Like a good boyfriend," elbowing Shreve who rolls his eyes, stretches his legs out in front of him. He says, "He should be so lucky," and shoots a smile at me that I can't return, and Gerald says, "More like a mother."

Shreve says, "Quentin is more fragile than the rest of us, he needs a guiding hand," and Spoade makes an obscene gesture and they all laugh and we needed a mother. Mom didn't understand, at first, or pretended not to understand that Caddy was pregnant. She's pregnant, it was an accident, and I said that she's sorry but Caddy never did apologize for anything. Caddy never needed to apologize. Pretty girls can fuck up their lives just as well as anyone else, Dad says, sighing out a mouthful of smoke. Even faster,
because they've got people lining up to help them do it. I don't know how to fix this and I've never fixed anything, and Quentin, go upstairs, this isn’t about you but I stay outside and shut the door behind me and Caddy is saying, I don't know how to fix this, I didn't mean for this to happen. Mom sobs no daughter of mine no daughter of mine no daughter of mine.

They don’t let Caddy talk and she stops trying and later Dad says, too decisive, “There’s a clinic in town the girls from the college go to, this isn’t a real problem.”

Shreve says, “We’re celebrating a year’s worth of survival, and you’re coming with us,” like I don’t have an option but he’s not serious. He’s never very serious. Spoade leans in and throws an arm around my shoulder and I don’t move under it at all. Shreve keeps staring at me steadily, like he’s looking for something.

“We’ll carry you to the car,” Spoade says, cheerfully. “You know how we like to force you to have fun.”

“It’s a hobby,” Gerald says. “Come on, seriously, we’ve got plans.”

I wasn’t going to say no, anyway. I’ve never been very good at that. Gerald’s got a nice car, too expensive for someone our age and someone reckless like him. It’s got a dent in the back from where he drove back to campus drunk one night and tried to parallel park. Shreve always pats it fondly as he passes it, does it before we both get into the back seat with Spoade in the front. They talk while I keep my head turned to the window, too aware of every time Shreve looks at me to see my reaction. I don’t think about what I’m looking for until I see it, the bone white building I wasn’t going to pass. I’ve only been in a funeral home once, a dead grandparent who retired out of state, because Mom and Dad stopped keeping up with relatives eventually. They’ve all been
dying slowly, working towards it but nobody really knows death. It was a closed casket. None of us cried because we didn’t know why. I don’t know if I want them to know why. I don’t think Benjy will even realize, I’ve been gone so long, but Caddy. I don’t want them to know but I don’t want to know either. Shreve says, “You’ve been daydreaming more lately,” with a strange look. Spoade says, “Maybe he’s in love. Has the wild bachelor Quentin Compson been tamed?”

I say that I’ve just been tired. I’ve been tired a long time, but I feel it more now, the bricks on my back and Caddy will cry even when she understands. Do you ever think about it, Quentin? She was up to her ankles in mud, her jeans rolled up her calves. The water close by. It’s too cold to be out here at night. We drive along the river on the way back, and Shreve opens his window when the conversation lapses so the car fills up with wind and the sound of the water hitting the bridge as we avoid it, turning towards campus and a parking spot close to the dorms. It seems like it could take forever to walk it, but there’s not much traffic in the middle of the day and Gerald drives fast. When Shreve gets out of the car, I pull the letter for him out of my bag and slip it between the seats. He’ll get it eventually. Outside, he says, “We’re going to stop by our place first,” and I say, “I’ve just got to do a few things first. I’ll meet you.”

“What do you have to do?” Shreve asks. Spoade and Gerald are already up the sidewalk, not paying attention. Shreve says, “Quentin. What do you have to do.”

I don’t answer him at first. I don’t have any more answers, and he reaches out like he doesn’t realize what he’s doing and puts a hand on my arm, the crook of my elbow. He hasn’t touched me since. We haven’t touched. I’m not. He says, “Just come with us.”
“I’ll meet you,” I say, again, stay still until he relents and catches up with the others, looking back even when I start to walk back towards the bridge. It’s not far, and I can’t really feel the stretch of my legs anymore, can’t feel it over the smell of the river as I get closer and it’s too cold to be out here. Caddy’s thin-skinned arms shook while she wrapped them around herself, kicked off her shoes to let her feet sink into the river bank and her toes turn mottled blue. *We could do it together, you know,* but I haven’t heard her voice since December, since she hugged me and said, “I’m going to keep the baby, Quentin, I need to do this—what else am I going to do?” Caddy should have gone to Harvard. Ben should’ve gone somewhere they could have helped him. Let Jason. I don’t know if she kept the baby, if she’s going to be a mother. I haven’t heard Caddy’s voice since December. She got so deep in the water that it soaked through her jeans but she didn’t have any bricks. I’ve thought about this. I’ve thought about a lot of things and I don’t want to anymore, not since. I dreamed more about being on the bank of the Yoknapatawpha and it’s dark and she is not there. I’m on my back in the grass, and I split open my ribcage but nothing is moving inside. Shreve’s going to med school after Harvard, says that it’s a fine family tradition and he wants to die angry and rich and I’m not even going to bleed. I’m not angry. Mom said that we were killing her when Caddy wanted to keep it but what else is she going to do. *I didn’t want my children to end up like this. My daughter. I only have Jason now. Quentin will leave us.* I never wanted to leave Mississippi but what else am I going to do. Water is the same everywhere. I didn’t get into the river with Caddy but she didn’t have bricks. They sit cold on my stomach. *Are you afraid to get in.* The water rushes over my ankles, and it never stops.
WORKS CITED


