A TALE OF TWO JESUSES: FAULKNER'S "THAT EVENING SUN"

by

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(Under the Direction of Hugh Ruppersburg)

ABSTRACT

Many critics have noted the indirect, ambiguous, complex nature of language in William Faulkner's "That Evening Sun." In order to demonstrate Faulkner's linguistic indirectness in "That Evening Sun," this analysis will consider some of the important Faulkner texts published around the time of the short story, namely *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Sanctuary*. These novels, much like the short story, demonstrate Faulkner's preoccupation with language's ability to construct meaning. "That Evening Sun" is divided into six scenes that unfold much like a play, and each scene demonstrates the linguistic ambiguities at stake. The various devices of language employed—idioms, puns, and passive voice constructions—heighten the sense of ambiguity. Ultimately, the story's linguistic complexities foreshadow and enhance the demise of the story's protagonist, Nancy.

INDEX WORDS: Signifiers, Focalizers, Linguistic ambiguity, Meaning construction, Puns, and Idioms

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DEDICATION

For “Pops”

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Many critics have noted the indirect, ambiguous, complex nature of language in William Faulkner's "That Evening Sun." In fact, Laurence Perrine's "'That Evening Sun': A Skein of Uncertainties" enumerates a partial list of twenty-one questions "raised by the story which cannot be certainly answered" (297). In order to demonstrate Faulkner's linguistic indirectness in "That Evening Sun," this analysis will consider some of the important Faulkner texts published around the time of the short story, namely *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Sanctuary*. These novels, much like the short story, demonstrate Faulkner's preoccupation with language's ability to construct meaning. "That Evening Sun" is divided into six scenes that unfold much like a play, and each scene demonstrates the linguistic ambiguities at stake. The various devices of language employed—idioms, puns, and passive voice constructions—heighten the sense of ambiguity. Ultimately, the story's linguistic complexities foreshadow and enhance the tragedy of the story's protagonist, Nancy.

From his artistic beginning, Faulkner showed a penchant for blurring the lines of signification, as his fiction incorporated words that upended the traditional, prescribed relationships of signifiers and the signified. Words such as "myriad," "sourceless," and "serene" continually appear throughout his fiction, yet these words convey no fixed, attached meaning, and the same word often carries different meanings within the same text. In *Sanctuary*, for example, the narrator uses "serene" unflatteringly to depict Narcissa Benbow: "Narcissa was a big woman, with dark hair, a broad, stupid, serene face" (18).

Later in the novel, while Horace is sitting alone in his sister's house, Narcissa enters, unaware of her brother's presence: "She had almost crossed the parlor door and vanished when she paused and looked full at him, with that serene and stupid impregnability of heroic statuary; she was in white" (85). Here, the narrator ironically fashions Narcissa in terms of the epic, the heroic. "Serenity," as the narrator uses it here, implies Narcissa's detachment and sense of self-importance, two defining qualities of her character. Juxtaposing "serene" with "stupid" distorts the traditional signification of "serenity," yet later in the novel, this rift between signifier and signified is repaired. While in Oxford searching for Temple Drake, Horace muses on young college women as they pass him in a "steady stream of little colored dresses . . . like music moving, like honey poured in sunlight, pagan and evanescent and serene, thinly evocative of all lost days and outpaced delights" (135-6). Here, the narrator's use of "serene" is not ironical; the word heightens Horace's impression of the girls, imbuing them with an ethereal quality. This proclivity for attributing multiple meanings to one word occurs throughout the novel. Moreover, Faulkner's obsession with words, and how words convey meaning, is evident in three other texts, *The Sound and the Fury*, "That Evening Sun," and *As I Lay Dying*.

Faulkner wrote prolifically between the spring of 1928 and the fall of 1931, publishing several texts that question the relationship between signifier and the signified. *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and "That Evening Sun" defamiliarize language to varying degrees, ultimately raising questions about the construction of meaning. These three texts demonstrate Faulkner experimenting with the use of language. *The Sound and the Fury* appeared in October 1929, *As I Lay Dying* followed in October 1930, and "That Evening Sun," rejected by *Scribners*,

was published in the *American Mercury* in March of 1931.[1] Faulkner's three novels and the short story skew traditional notions of the signifier-signified-referent relationship. Within these texts, signifiers distort that which is traditionally signified, the mental conception produced when words are spoken. This alteration, in effect, subverts the referent—the actual, physical object. Quentin's analysis of the term "nigger" in *The Sound and the Fury* illustrates how signifiers can float, producing mental conceptions and referents that defy the traditional assumptions that gather about words. Quentin's analysis coupled with Addie Bundren's posthumous diatribe shed light on the linguistic ambiguities in "That Evening Sun." Quentin addresses the formal dimensions of semantics, the logical aspects of meaning, such as sense, reference, and implication. Addie, in contrast, rejects language as a source of meaning, linking the burden of words with the burden of family, envisioning the two mutually conspiring to bring about her demise. This tension between Addie's mistrust of language and Quentin's re-envisioning of meaning-constructions culminates in "That Evening Sun," wherein words carry multiple meanings.

The tragedy of "That Evening Sun" results because the various characters simply do not understand one another; they do not recognize the potential for words to convey multiple meanings. In fact, the narrator only partially understands the events that he relays. An adult Quentin Compson narrates an episode from his childhood, one involving Nancy, the family's laundress who also doubles as Dilsey's relief servant, the situation at the time of Quentin's narrative. The narrative is jolting, meandering back and forth between exposition and Quentin's

[1]Three versions of the story exist. In October 1930, Faulkner sent H.L. Mencken a typescript, "That Evening Sun Go Down," a revision of an earlier manuscript, "Never Done No Weeping When You Wanted to Laugh." Mencken suggested that Faulkner revise some of the coarse content of the original submission, and Faulkner complied. Later, Faulkner restored excisions and changes that he made for the magazine version. The present, restored version, simply titled "That Evening Sun," was included in *These 13* and Faulkner's *Collected Stories*.

recollection of snippets of dialogue. Quentin's mature consciousness cannot fully comprehend the events that he witnessed as a child, but more importantly, the young Quentin did not fully understand what he saw at the time he was observing it. Therefore, he arranges the story much as one would a jigsaw puzzle. Quentin's memory of his childhood impressions is blurry, yet the dialogues he recounts, coupled with the diction in his exposition, reveals the widespread linguistic confusion that accounts for Nancy's tragedy. As the story unfolds, the language system breaks down, and the characters' perceptions and understandings become obscured. The characters' ability to connect signifiers with what is being signified gradually diminishes; this confusion proves detrimental for one character, Nancy.

Initially, Nancy's language, the particular diction Quentin remembers, is bellicose, acerbic and condemning. Her speech and her actions are outward affronts to the traditional, Southern society. Additionally, she manipulates language in such a way as to avoid being held culpable for her actions, as her continual refrain, "I ain't nothing but a nigger," illustrates. As Quentin's narrative unfolds, however, Nancy's language not only softens, but is also reduced to the language of fear. She gradually becomes vocally paralyzed, left able to utter only a single, distinctive "sound." This sound, much like a spoken thought, has signification, but the meaning falls upon deaf ears. As her voice gradually disappears from the text, the "sound" emerges as a signifier with profound meaning. For Nancy, the "sound" conveys mental and spiritual anxiety; unfortunately, it conveys no meaning to the Compsons. Although Quentin recalls hearing the "sound," he—child or adult—cannot attach any meaning to it.

CHAPTER 2

WORDS ARE A PUNNY THING

Though racially pejorative implications abound with the word “nigger,” Quentin’s analysis of the term in *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrates the multiplicity of meanings that words convey. Quentin’s analysis questions the formal dimensions of semantics, and his observation that “nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among” illustrates language’s potentiality (55). His introspective narrative offers insight into the linguistic associations of “nigger,” suggesting the utterance signifies a behavior, not a particular person. Thus for Quentin, the term “nigger” produces both a mental conception and referent different than those traditionally evoked by the word in the early twentieth century South. In other words, the behavior and the object do not necessarily correspond with any particular person. In “Faulkner’s Nancy as ‘Tragic Mulatto,’” Robert Slabey argues that for Quentin, in *The Sound and The Fury*, “negritude is not a matter of pigmentation but a condition of being . . . a symbolic involvement in the human condition” (410). Slabey indicates that Quentin understands that the word “nigger” expresses more than skin color; and thus, Quentin’s observation becomes quite profound, both morally and linguistically. He does not attach the word “nigger” to any particular race or creed, but instead, he connects it with a multitude of referents. His keen observation suggests that the referent can float, as anyone from any race or creed can inhabit the same condition of being as those traditionally considered “niggers.” Ultimately, *The Sound and the Fury* questions the connection between words and their attached meanings, but language, as a means for conveying meaning, is not wholly dismissed.

In *As I Lay Dying*, however, Addie not only dismisses language, but she cites it as the cause of her demise. Her posthumous lamentations denounce the contingencies associated with language, as words and the meaning-constructions they produce force personal relationships upon her. Her monologue reveals an aversion to personal relationships and emphasizes the problematic signifier-signified-referent relationship. After Cash's birth, Addie says that she "knew that living was terrible and that [procreation] was the answer to [life]" (171). Immediately following this nihilistic resignation, Addie states: "That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit what they are trying to say at" (171). For Addie, signifiers cannot attach meaning to anything. Addie rejects language's ability to convey meaning, insisting instead on its utilitarian value: "We had to use one another by words" although these words are "just a shape to fill a lack" (172). At the peak of her anger, Addie temporarily abandons words; Faulkner shifts focalizers from text to empty space, thus punctuating Addie's belief that language is meaningless. Here, she denounces the futility of words: "The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of " (173). The word omission in Addie's statement corresponds to a personal void she feels, a void resulting from the usurpation of her aloneness. By lapsing from language into empty space, Addie effectively communicates her sentiments regarding language, but she fails to realize that the absence of language still carries implication. This "void," ironically, signifies an emotional truth; it connotes utter despair. Addie posits herself as the voice of truth, but her diatribe complicates and obscures the truths. Ultimately, Addie goes too far; she rants rather than instructs; she tries to highlight the washed-out bridge between signifier and signified, but she fails to affirm that language—and the omission of language—does convey partial meaning.

In "*Fit and Surfeit in* As I Lay Dying," Benjamin Widiss examines what he calls the novel's "cross-referential" possibilities, the importation of words from their original contexts into other textual positions. His analysis is concerned with "what words do not immediately appear to be trying to say, what they do not have as their ostensible objects, but what they are nonetheless also saying (100). As it pertains to Addie's monologue, Widiss notes that words may "be resonating in ways that Addie does not even pause to consider" (101). Addie, then, remains oblivious to the effect that her language has on others, and her word omission, ironically, resonates most profoundly, as this "void" reveals more about language, and Addie herself, than her spoken monologue. Widiss's observation here is applicable to "That Evening Sun," as words float throughout the text, working in ways that illuminate Nancy's dire situation.

In "That Evening Sun," the word play with the name "Jesus" shows that words have clear meaning, but that meaning can vary among individuals, and context controls which meaning becomes most important. The focus shifts from words to isolated individuals trying to use words to understand the world around them. In the story, the terms "nigger" and "Jesus" demonstrate that words convey meaning, but the way in which meaning is internalized varies among the characters. The Compson family associates the word "Jesus" primarily with a human presence, Jesus—Nancy's husband. For Nancy, though, the term carries a far graver meaning; for her, the term signifies a vengeful spiritual presence. Additionally, although Jason and Nancy continually use the word "nigger" in the story, both assign a different meaning to it. Therefore, the tragedy of the story emerges: characters gradually lose their ability to convey absolute meaning to one another.

Thus, word play within the text creates a "Jesus" figure quite contradictory to Christian notions, upending the word and its traditionally assigned meaning. In a strictly religious context,

"Jesus" signifies Christian doctrine—hope, love, and charity—and a crucifix serves as the physical reminder of the martyr's passion. In the story, Jesus is the antithesis of Christ: he evokes absolute terror in Nancy. His physical form inverts the Christian savior, as this black man possesses a "razor scar on his black face" (392). His scar, which appears like a "piece of dirty string," marks Jesus as a stigmatic, an early indication that Nancy's husband possesses far more agency than Quentin's narrative awards him (394). Additionally, both the spiritual Jesus and the earthly Jesus in the story have a mysterious, uncertain parentage. The parentage of the earthly Jesus is a distorted representation of the parentage of the Christian Jesus. Quentin explains: "they said [Aunt Rachel] was Jesus' mother. Sometimes she said she was and sometimes she said she wasn't any kin to Jesus" (396). Again, Christian mythos is evoked, but it is upended[1].

Aside from his encounter with Nancy and the children in the Compsons' kitchen, Jesus remains relatively absent: his characterization results primarily from the statements of other

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[1] In "Faulkner's 'That Evening Sun' and Mencken's 'Best Editorial Judgment,'" Leo Manglavati includes a correspondence between Faulkner and Mencken. After receiving the story's typescript, Mencken wrote:

"This is a capital story and I certainly hope to use it, but it leaves me with doubts about two points. One has to do with the name of Nancy's husband. I see no reason why he should be called Jesus—it is, in fact, a very rare name among Negroes, and I fear using it would make most readers believe we were trying to be naughty in a somewhat strained manner.

Don't you think the story would be just as effective if it were changed to some more plausible name?

Secondly, it seems to me that the dialogue about Nancy's pregnancy . . . is somewhat loud for a general magazine? I believe it could be modified without doing the slightest damage to the story."

Faulkner returned Mencken's letter, commenting about the changes he made to the typescript on the reverse side of Mencken's letter:

"I did not delete this section, the dialogue about pregnancy, altogether, because it seems to me that it establishes Judah [sic] as a potential factor of the tragedy as soon as possible. [and so *crossed out here*] Otherwise, to me, the story would be a little obscure [until *crossed out here*] for too long a time. However, if you think best, it might be taken out completely. I am glad you like the story; I think it's pretty good myself" (651-52).

characters. It's as if he is lurking through the story's landscape, actually appearing only once, vanishing, and leaving behind an enigmatic aura. Instead of participating in the story's events, Jesus emerges as a conception, a nebulous abstraction, signifying horror and impending doom. This conception coincides with the conception of "nigger" in *The Sound and the Fury* in so far as traditional meaning-constructions are inverted. At the beginning of Quentin's recollection, Nancy's language antagonizes Jesus. Quentin remembers Jesus referring to Nancy's stomach, commenting that Nancy had "a watermelon . . . under her dress." Nancy responds to his obvious insinuation: "It never came of your vine, though" (394). But as the narrative develops, she gradually understands his indomitable, binary presence: "Can't nobody do nothing with him . . . He say I done woke up the devil in him and ain't but one thing going to lay it down again" (396). At this point, Jesus, initially only a human presence, transforms into a divine avenger. Nancy's plight is now two-fold: she believes that both Jesus figures are going to judge her and send her to hell.

In *Faulker's Search for a South*, Walter Taylor briefly investigates the connection between white racial prejudice of the South and white American religious experience. In his chapter entitled "A Visit with Some Puritans," Taylor asserts, "Faulkner used that Spanish name [Jesus] to suggest how Jefferson was polarized into blacks who could receive the Word and whites who could not" (56). This distinction becomes salient when considering the fashion in which Mr. Compson responds to Nancy's fear of Jesus. Like Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*, Nancy perceives a divine presence. Thus, Taylor notes, "The light, St. John said, 'shineth in darkness'; 'Jesus,' Jason perceived, 'is a nigger.' For Nancy, the Word had literally been made flesh" (57). Nancy, then, comes to understand that "there [is] no distinction between her guilt against her husband and her guilt against God," confusing "one Jesus with the other, fusing them

into an unbearable image of divine vengeance" (56). This mingling of physical and supernatural underscores the ineffectiveness of definite signification, as Nancy's Jesus evolves into something altogether different from what the other characters perceive. Essentially, Nancy and Dilsey recognize the Christian Jesus' pervasive spiritual presence; for Dilsey, however, Jesus is a spiritual redeemer, not an angry avenger. Nancy, on the other hand, believes herself to be "hellborn," (399) and Jesus—both the physical and spiritual—serves as an agent of fear and retribution. Dilsey's pervasive absence from the story's action is noteworthy, for if anyone could comfort the increasingly terrified Nancy, it would be Dilsey. When she does intermittently appear, Dilsey only recognizes Nancy's fear of her husband; she does not connect Nancy's anxiety also with a spiritual presence.

The Compsons, however, understand that the signifier "Jesus" signifies a human being, Nancy's husband. But, if Benjamin Widiss's theoretical model is applied to the text, the term "Jesus" accentuates this inverted Christian order. By taking Nancy's signified concept of Jesus—a presence of divine vengeance—and applying it to the term when spoken by the Compsons, "Jesus" becomes an ominous force. Additionally, Mr. Compson's remarks regarding Jesus demonstrate his pessimism and fatalism, hallmarks of his character in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin's descriptions of Jesus ironically resonate, again inverting religious notions: "Jesus never did that for Nancy"; "Father told us not to have anything to do with Jesus" (392); "we could see [Nancy's] apron swelling; that was before father told Jesus to stay away from the house" (393). Jesus remains an enigmatic character throughout the story, residing on the periphery, constantly lurking about the story's landscape. In the story's sixth and final scene, Caddy questions whether Jesus, hidden about the grounds, can see the family members as they leave Nancy's cabin. Mr. Compson replies, "He's not there . . . He went away a

long time ago," an observation underscoring Jesus' ubiquitous physical absence (410). Mr. Compson continually denies the presence of Jesus, literal and metaphorical, thereby enhancing Nancy's plight. Throughout the story, his sentiments regarding Jesus evoke, and invert, Christian order. According to Christian doctrine, Jesus sees all and knows all. Mr. Compson's continual references to Jesus challenge this Christian notion. Thus what Quentin recalls destabilizes the traditional Christian mythos, creating a contradictory, inverted Jesus presence. So, Jesus emerges as a central driving force in the story; in fact, the presence assumes the most agency in determining Nancy's fate. Mr. Compson too has agency, but he is nihilistic and perceives Nancy's fear as irrational.

Additionally, Faulkner incorporates a rhetorical technique, involving the names of Jesus and Mr. Compson, which reflects Mr. Compson's general indifference towards Nancy's spiritual plight. At the end of the first scene, for instance, Quentin recalls Nancy's discussion about Jesus' presence with Mr. Compson: " 'He ain't gone nowhere,' Nancy said. 'I can feel him. I can feel him now, in this lane. He hearing us talk, every word, hid somewhere, waiting. I ain't seen him, and I ain't going to see him again but once more, with that razor in his mouth'" (396-97). Ironically, many of Mr. Compson's comments are reminiscent of the Christian Father's doctrine. Throughout the story's text, Mr. Compson is referred to as "Father," both in Quentin's exposition and his remembrances of dialogue. For instance, Mr. Compson, responding to Nancy's fear, morally censures Nancy: "'If you'd behave yourself, you'd have kept out of this,' Father said." Mr. Compson emerges as the overwhelmingly powerful earthly presence, a substitution for the divine one. But, one passage indicates a much different power arrangement between Mr. Compson and the omnipresent Jesus. During his early allusion to Nancy's pregnancy, Quentin remembers "when Dilsey was sick in her cabin and Nancy was cooking for

us, we could see her apron swelling out; that was before father told Jesus to stay away from the house" (393). First, this instance is the only occurrence in the text where the patriarch's name appears as "father" and not "Father." Mr. Compson's position parallels that of the Heavenly Father, as the former is the master of his earthly domain. But in all other places in the text, Mr. Compson's name is capitalized, a subtlety adding to his large and powerful persona. The juxtaposition of "father" and "Jesus" suggests a different sort of power arrangement, one where Mr. Compson fears, or denies the presence of, Jesus. Metaphorically, Mr. Compson's request alludes to his nihilism and general disbelief in divinity. Stylistically, Faulkner's pairing of "father" and "Jesus" undermines Mr. Compson's authority. Therefore, Faulkner's prose here alludes to the proper spiritual hierarchy, a power arrangement that Mr. Compson does not understand, and seemingly, does not care to understand. And herein lies much of Nancy's plight. Even if Mr. Compson wanted to act as an earthly "Father" and protect Nancy, his actions would be thwarted because he fails to attach any religious meaning to the word "Jesus."

CHAPTER 3

LANGUAGE OF THE DEAD

The story's language functions in various ways, as demonstrated with the term "Jesus." Quentin's exposition in the first scene of the story, while providing the reader with general details of the town, characters, and circumstances in Jefferson during the late nineteenth century, sets the stage for Nancy's linguistic breakdown that will occur as the story unfolds. Other language complexities surface throughout the text, peculiarities that foreshadow Nancy's tragedy, enhance the ominous atmosphere, and suggest answers to some of the story's oblique mysteries.

Early in the story's first scene, an image of Nancy's hands appears, a symbol that continues to surface throughout the story, each time with increasing profundity. As her vocal prowess wanes, Nancy's hands become her primary communicative power. In the first scene, Quentin's description of Nancy's hands carries a slightly different signification than it does later in the story; here, it gives a sense of overwhelming agency to her hands, as opposed to her voice. While Nancy is in jail, the townspeople see Nancy's hands holding onto the prison bars. She is "singing and yelling," creating vocal signifiers, but these signifiers do not have a recognizable morphology. The next morning, Nancy attempts to commit suicide, but "she couldn't make her hands let go of the window edge" (393). At this point, the symbolism of Nancy's hands as a communicative tool first surface; her yelling and singing have little effect in providing meaningful expression, but her hands, in this instance, provide her with some sense of agency. She is empowered with the ability to preserve her own life, even if only temporarily. By the end

of the story, however, her hands, while still providing communication, symbolically imply a sense of guilt and impending doom.

The first scene sets up much of the language play at stake within the story, and the subsequent five scenes gradually play out Nancy's tragedy. Quentin's exposition first describes the present situation in Jefferson, and then plunges the reader into a nostalgic reminiscence, recounting Nancy's tragic demise. Initially, Quentin describes the nature of the town, modernized and changed:

> The streets are paved now, and the telephone and electric companies are cutting down more and more of the shade trees . . . to make room for iron poles bearing clusters of bloated and ghostly and bloodless grapes, and we have a city laundry which makes the rounds . . . gathering the bundles of clothes into bright-colored, specially made motorcars: the soiled wearing of a whole week now flees apparitionlike. (391)

Aside from expressing disapproval of encroaching technology, Quentin's initial exposition grounds us in a world of ghosts. His designating the street lamps' encasements as "bloodless," a word that Faulkner used throughout his fiction, conjures up the idea of something dead, something lifeless. Elsewhere in Faulkner' fiction, this word carries similar connotations. For instance in *Sanctuary*, the narrator describes Popeye's face as having a "queer, bloodless color, as though seen by electric light" (1). In the novel, the narrator literally depicts a gaunt, haunting figure. In a similar fashion, the story's "bloodless grapes" attached to the "iron posts" signify that the town is dying; or rather, that the old way of life is dead. Quentin's diction suggests an atmosphere occupied by the other-worldly, diction foreshadowing the identity of the story's chief agent, Jesus. Finally, Quentin's initial exposition foregrounds his forthcoming narrative in terms

reminiscent of Shakespearean tragedy. Much like Hamlet's father's ghost and the three witches in *Macbeth*, Jesus' presence ignites the story's tragedy, propelling forward its action.

Additionally, language constructs both white and black racial identity in "That Evening Sun." In the first scene, for instance, Nancy approaches and accosts Mr. Stovall, bank cashier and Baptist church deacon: "When you going to pay me, white man? When you going to pay me, white man? It's been three times now since you paid me a cent" (393). Nancy informally addresses Stovall and confines his identity to a racial construct, "white man." In "Speech Act Theory and Faulkner's 'That Evening Sun,'" Paula Sunderman suggests that Nancy's request for payment, which implicates Stovall in sexual promiscuity with a black woman, has an illocutionary effect of public humiliation.[1] By making the sexual liaison a public matter, Nancy exposes Stovall's hypocritical behavior, and as Sunderman notes, the subsequent violent reaction that Nancy provokes "shows how lacking [Stovall] is in Christian charity and mercy" (309). Sunderman's observation points to the discrepancy between definite signifiers, as "Baptist deacon" generally signifies a person upholding the Lord's word. While her "speech" does "act" in a way that demeans Stovall, Nancy uses "white man" to signify a form of behavior, one of social relegation. Nancy signifies Stovall as a "white man," which suggests that he belongs at the bottom of the white social hierarchy, a position inhabited by people like Wash Jones (of *Absalom, Absalom!)*. By addressing him as "white man" instead of "Mr." or "Sir," Nancy has demoted Stovall's social status. Therefore, the signifiers, "white man" and "nigger," while assuming different referents, carry a similar implication in old Southern society, one of

[1] Sunderman discusses three kinds of "acts that one performs as a speaker within the communication situation," locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Locutionary acts are sounds. Illocutionary acts are "acts performed in the speaking of a meaningful utterance." Perlocutionary acts are "the causing of any contingent consequence as a result of speaking" (305).

abasement. The contingent consequence of Nancy's language, the prelocutionary effect, is that Stovall proceeds to kick her in the mouth, and as Quentin tells us, "that was how she lost her teeth" (393).

As demonstrated in her encounter with Stovall, Nancy understands that words can carry various implications; and thus she uses words to combat oppressive forces. Although Nancy gradually loses her verbal power as Quentin's narrative develops, she initially proves herself to be crafty with language. In the case involving Stovall, Nancy embarrasses him by exposing his sexual misconduct. But more importantly, Nancy employs the term "nigger" in such a way as to deny personal responsibility for her actions. For instance, she continually fashions her identity in terms of racial constructs: "I ain't nothing but a nigger . . . It ain't none of my fault" (394). In *Figures of Division*, James Snead correctly observes that for Nancy the word "nigger" has the social significance of "abasement and exclusion" (11). Upon first consideration, Nancy's self-effacing language appears to signify a negative self-image, but she manipulates the racially charged word so that it signifies dispossession. This sentiment appears throughout the text, and it points towards her fatalistic disposition, as she avoids personal agency by adopting a preconceived notion of ethical responsibility. Nancy constructs her persona according to the signified concept Quentin Compson, from *The Sound and the Fury*, attaches to the word "nigger," a "condition of being." Nancy essentially emerges as a hybrid of the term's possible signified behaviors. She adopts the signified concept of the term "nigger," that of a human condition, in order to mask her irresponsibility. In the end, Nancy associates the word with a behavioral condition, ultimately synthesizing the racially-affiliated, expected behavior of "niggers" with a disenfranchised condition; in effect, she adopts a particular form of behavior, one that exploits, one that maneuvers. Nancy denies personal agency throughout the text, but she

demonstrates possession thereof by manipulating words. But as an inhabitant and victim of the conditions of her time, Nancy has no other means for fighting oppression.

In the paragraph immediately preceding the one featuring Nancy and Stovall's dispute, Quentin introduces a vague pronoun. One morning after Nancy had not arrived to prepare the Compsons' breakfast, the children go to her house, throw rocks at her windows, and rouse her from her sleep. In Quentin's subsequent remark, he uses the vague pronoun "it," which points to the ambiguous wordplay that is so rampant through the story. Quentin surmises, "So we thought it was whiskey until that day they arrested her again and they were taking her to jail and they passed Mr. Stovall" (392). Faulkner's repetition of such indirect language highlights the difficulty in attaching concrete meaning: Does "it" refer to Nancy's absence at the Compsons' house for breakfast, her sexual encounter with Stovall, the fear instilled by Jesus, her general condition, or something else? A few pages later, approximately midway through the first scene, Quentin uses "it" in much the same way. Quentin describes Nancy, "She looked at me, sitting in the chair before the cold stove . . . It was the cold stove and all, when you think of a kitchen being warm and busy and cheerful." Quentin's comparison indicates that he is not fully aware of her plight, yet he senses something uncharacteristic about Nancy, though he cannot concretely articulate what he is witnessing, for he is only a child. Thus, he creates this unusual comparison. Quentin's phrasing—"It was the cold stove and all"—tacitly implies a possible reason for Nancy's anxiety and fear. Quentin's diction, again, has profound meaning. First, the passive voice construction again raises the question: what is "it?" Grammatically, no subject is acting, just as no subject acts in the sentence, "it was the whiskey." These sentences abound with vague pronouns, and various possible referents exist for each of them. Both passive voice constructions create ambiguity. "It was" can be connected to Mr. Stovall, as Quentin's subsequent narration

features Nancy's damning indictment of the banker and Baptist church deacon. Likewise, the antecedent to "it" here can be construed to be Mr. Stovall. By juxtaposing "stove" and "all," Quentin's language profoundly resonates, marking Mr. Stovall as an indirect source of Nancy's fear. So, the clause might be read as, *it was the cold Mr. Stovall*. Quentin's wording, then, implicitly indicates the culprit in Nancy's pregnancy, and thus, the reason Jesus, both physical and supernatural being, pursues the adulterous and sinning Nancy.

This episode ends with Nancy "lying in the street, laughing," after which she turns her head and spits out blood and teeth (393). Faulkner's fiction often demonstrates that characters' language becomes fragmented, abstract, and illogical when they are experiencing psychological turmoil. In *The Sound and the Fury*, for instance, Quentin, minutes before he commits suicide, mentally reconstructs a conversation with his father. Quentin's disorientation is palpable: " . . . and he every man is the arbiter of his own virtues but let no man prescribe for another mans wellbeing and i temporary and he was the saddest word of all there is nothing else in the world its not despair until time its not even time until it was" (113). Quentin's internal monologue ends here, ending with no punctuation and leaving a line of blank space. Quentin's "section" of the novel, and his life, ends one paragraph later. Nancy's outburst of laughter signifies the same waning of sanity evident in Quentin's monologue. More to the point, though, is that Nancy's laughing episode anticipates Darl's hysterical outburst of laughter in *As I Lay Dying*, at which time he is being ushered off to the state insane asylum. Darl, referring to himself in third person, states, "Darl has gone to Jackson. They put him on the train, laughing, down the long car laughing . . . They pulled two seats together so Darl could sit by the window to laugh" (253-4). In *Sanctuary*, Temple Drake, cloistered in a Memphis brothel with Popeye, tells Horace about her brutal rape, describing the surreal nature of the violation. As she relives the experience,

Temple's occasional use of the word "laughter" evokes Darl's unraveling consciousness. Temple tells Horace, "the shucks began to make so much noise it was like laughing. I'd think they were laughing at me . . . I lay right still to keep from laughing about how surprised he was going to be" (174-5).

Directly after the first description of Jesus, and the only one that illustrates him as a literal—and not a figurative—presence, Quentin recalls an exchange between the adult Compsons that highlights the meaning potential of words. In this passage, Mrs. Compson questions whether Nancy has finished her kitchen duties. On the surface, the verbal exchange seems typical and mundane, but an evident disconnect in meaning construction surfaces. Quentin recounts,

> "Isn't Nancy through in the kitchen yet?" Mother said. "It seems to me that she has had plenty of time to have finished the dishes."
>
> "Let Quentin go and see," Father said. "Go and see if Nancy is through, Quentin. Tell her she can go home." I went to the kitchen. Nancy was through. The dishes were put away and the fire was out. Nancy was sitting in a chair, close to the cold stove . . . "Mother wants to know if you are through," I said. "Yes," Nancy said. She looked at me. "I done finished." (394)

First, the repeated use of "through" in this passage creates ambiguity, for on the literal level, Mrs. Compson's query indicates a concern about her kitchen. But on the metaphorical level, her question foreshadows Nancy's doom. The textual proximity of this remembrance and Quentin's initial description of Jesus makes "through" resonate more profoundly; in other words, not only is Nancy "through" with her duties, but she is "through" with her earthly life, an idea punctuated by her exclamation: "I done finished." Paula Sunderman notes this ambiguity:

> The utilization of the lexical item "through" is ambiguous, for in one sense it might be represented in this lexicon as [+ completed the task]; on the other hand, the images of fear and death associated with Nancy also suggest another interpretation [+ finished with living]. Both are equally possible as Caddy's subsequent statement demonstrates, for the pun on 'Jesus' marks 'home' in both a literal and metaphorical sense. There is even an echo in Caddy's statement of the well-known Negro spiritual 'Old Black Joe,' where the chariot come to take the faithful slave home to his heavenly reward. (312)

Sunderman's analysis indicates the meaning potentials present within one brief exchange. Quentin's remembrances often position episodes focusing on Nancy's fear of Jesus next to episodes in which she praises Jesus. Shortly after her exclamation that she is finished, she concedes that "Jesus has always been good to me . . . whenever he had two dollars, one of them was mine." Nancy's statement reinforces Jesus as a binary. Her concession that Jesus had "always been good to [her]" rings of the spiritual, in much the same way that her resignation of being "through" and "finished" rings of "well-known Negro spiritual." Nancy's mention of the "two dollars," however, evokes the earthly husband. While her discourse literally attributes a selfless, charitable quality to her husband, it has the simultaneous effect of evoking the supernatural. In the traditional Christian sense, Nancy's acceptance and resignation should result in salvation. In the story, however, Jesus continues to pursue Nancy, even as she becomes increasingly remorseful.

Finally, scene I includes clues as to how Mr. Compson perceives Nancy's situation; moreover, his language expresses general disbelief in both the physical and spiritual Jesus. The Mr. Compson of the short story corresponds, on a philosophical level, with the one of *The Sound*

and the Fury, the nihilist who instills into Quentin the idea of time as "the mausoleum of all hope and desire," the man who told Quentin "that Christ was not crucified: he was worn away by a minute clicking of little wheels" (48-9). In the short story, Mr. Compson's language—the particular diction that Quentin remembers and recounts—defines him as a skeptic and cynic. As early as the first scene, for instance, Mr. Compson introduces the word "nonsense" into the swirl of floating signifiers. As Quentin remembers it, "nonsense" becomes Mr. Compson's conditioned reply to Nancy's expression of fear, a fact that gives the story a heightened sense of tragedy because he discounts every claim she makes. The first account of Mr. Compson's refrain underscores the story's intentional ambiguity and ironically demonstrates the inadequacy of verbal communication.

As the first scene closes and Nancy's fear becomes palpable, Mr. Compson acquiesces to Nancy's request to be escorted home, if for no other reason than to put her fears, which he perceives as unfounded, to rest. The discussion that ensues between Mr. and Mrs. Compson reveals the covert nature of language in the story:

> "You'll leave me alone, to take Nancy home?" Mother said. "Is her safety more precious to you than mine?"
>
> "I won't be long," Father said.
>
> "You'll leave these children unprotected, with that Negro about?"
>
> "I'm going too," Caddy said. "Let me go, Father."
>
> "What would he do with them, if he were unfortunate enough to have them?" Father said.
>
> "I want to go, too," Jason said.
>
> "Jason!" Mother said. (395)

Quentin abruptly ends this remembrance and returns to expository narration. The conversation recounted here, though, exposes the story's intentional indirectness. The Compson family contains two Jasons, father and son. Quentin's abrupt departure from remembered dialogue is important; he understands the inherent difficulty in attaching the correct referent to Mrs. Compson's signifier, "Jason." Therefore, he reports that his mother "was speaking to Father." He then adds that the distinction between father and child can be made by noting Mrs. Compson's voice intonation: "You could tell that by the way she said the name" (395-96). Quentin's observation points to the chaotic whirlwind of words floating through the text, ambiguously signifying referents. Fortunately here, Quentin clarifies the remembered dialogue, but elsewhere in the text, the reader must speculate. The wordplay in this exchange, as well as the wordplay with Jesus, is highly reminiscent of Benjy's confusion in *The Sound and the Fury*. Benjy, notably absent from the short story, continually incorrectly attaches the golfing term "caddy" to his sister Caddy. Floating signifiers create an emotional resonance in the novel and the short story, for both texts convey the idea of total disconnection. Nancy's and Benjy's cries have little effect on their listeners, but both characters' words convey an emotional truth, much like Addie's lapse from prose to empty space does in *As I Lay Dying*.

Quentin continues his first person account, describing several loosely related familial details: his mother's petulance, her selfishness, and the ages of the children. After this description, Quentin returns to recounting dialogue, effectively capturing the essence of the dialogical exchange. Mr. Compson, presumably responding to his wife's plea that he not escort Nancy home, exclaims, " Nonsense . . . We won't be long" (396). First, this episode illustrates the communicative disconnect between the children and the adults, a persistent condition that the story continually highlights. In this case, Mr. Compson's disconcerting comment does not go

unnoticed by the narrating Quentin, but the other children either do not hear it or are incapable of recognizing the insult. This example of competing conversations is typical of the verbal exchanges in the story. Secondly, the way in which Quentin reconstructs this episode points to the gaps in his, and our, understanding of the events. Quentin provides a clue here to understanding one of the story's premises: phonetic utterances gain semantic meaning through secondary, and even tertiary, means. For instance, Mrs. Compson's response is a reaction to her husband's indifferent comment about their children. Mr. Compson's refrain of "nonsense," although coming after Mrs. Compson's exclamation, responds to the accusation that he would leave his children unprotected while a deviant lurked about. Quentin's break from dialogue into his own exposition creates the impression we get of the scene. Quentin, seemingly, connects his father's comments with his mother's previous allegation. Yet another possibility exists here, the fact that Mr. Compson is denying the presence of Jesus, the husband and the spiritual being. In this scene, and increasingly as the narrative unfolds, Mr. Compson appears completely detached from any individual in the story. His utterances become predictably defiant, emerging as a figure paralleling Nancy. As she becomes increasingly more aware of a spiritual presence, he becomes increasingly defiant. Additionally, Mr. Compson's repetition of " be long" rhetorically emphasizes this idea of casting himself as an "other." The phrase "be long" carries similar implications as the word "through," both functioning metaphorically. The same analysis applied to "Nancy being through" can be applied to "be long." Phonetically, only a slight difference in inflection differentiates "be long" from "belong," although semantically these two words have little in common. When imported into its new context, Mr. Compson's reply emphasizes his utter disbelief in Jesus' divine presence, a fact that becomes increasingly tragic as the story progresses. What is more, the refrain has a self-reflexive quality to it, ironically pointing to the

fact that the much of the characters' language is nonsensical; that it follows no logic. Quentin's insightful observation—"You could tell by the way [Mrs. Compson] said the name [of Jason]"—points to the importance of vocal intonation, as the spoken word has an ability to connote multiple meanings unperceived by the characters yet nevertheless present. Quentin cues us into the way he, as a child, made distinctions. At the very end of the story, a similar moment occurs, but Quentin provides no analysis on its significance.

CHAPTER 4

AN INEFFABLE SOUND

Nancy's spiritual anxiety gathers force throughout the last five scenes of the story. The first scene lays a foundation for the subsequent events, but Nancy does not appear to recognize her impending doom until the second scene. In a gesture ostensibly employed to appease Mrs. Compson, Nancy stays at the house so that she does not have to be taken home each night. The most significant instance of the Compsons' general misunderstanding of Nancy's condition occurs at the beginning of the second scene, a moment coinciding with the onset of Nancy's spiritual turmoil.

At the beginning of the second scene, Quentin remembers that "one night we waked up, hearing the sound. It was not singing and it was not crying . . . It was like singing and it wasn't like singing, like the sounds that Negroes make" (397). Quentin refers to this "sound" throughout the text, and by the story's sixth and final scene, he simplifies his impression of it, referring to the "sound that was not singing and not unsinging" (410). This verbal utterance shares a connection with Addie Bundren's word omission, her lapse from prose into empty space—both function as "voids" to fill a lack.

Instances in *Sanctuary* demonstrate how "sounds" have meaning. For example, during the novel's opening scene, a singing bird appears: "Behind [Popeye] the bird sang again, three bars in monotonous repetition: a sound meaningless and profound out of a suspirant and peaceful following silence which seemed to isolate the spot" (2). The adjectives "meaningless" and "profound" seem illogically connected, but they give a weighty significance to the bird's sound.

These “sounds” shed light on the meaning of Nancy’s verbal utterance. The way in which the narrator describes these “sounds” intensifies Temple Drake’s utter terror, creating a parallel between Temple and Nancy. The novel’s ninth chapter, which consists of roughly two and a half pages, depicts Temple, fearful and essentially alone. The chapter opens, “The room was dark” (61). The following pages depict Temple alone in a room save Gowan Stevens’s drunken-slumbering presence. About her, Temple hears the sounds of others and “feels” their lurking presences. In an effort to save Temple from the predators of Frenchman’s Bend, Ruby aids in her escape: “Temple got up, the shucks whispering. In the further darkness, Gowan snored, savage and profound” (62). The word coupling here, savage and profound, hints at the grave consequences of Gowan’s irresponsible actions; furthermore, it also serves as an analogue to the Nancy-Jesus dynamic in “That Evening Sun,” for Nancy’s Jesus is savage and profound. As the chapter closes, Temple and Ruby, fleeing from the lurkers—Popeye, Goodwin, and Tommy—halt just before the house, at which time Ruby scorns Temple “in a whisper, a sound no louder than a sigh and filled with fury” (63).

During the course of his narrative, Quentin impressionistically reports these phonetic gestures, but he does little to clarify their importance. Beginning in and continuing through the second scene, Nancy becomes increasingly frightened of the divine Jesus, which coincides with her gradual loss of sensory perceptions. Tired of having her husband usher Nancy home, Mrs. Compson allows Nancy to sleep on a pallet in the kitchen. From upstairs, Quentin notices that “the sound began again, in the stairway, not loud, and we could see Nancy’s eyes . . . They looked like cat’s eyes do” (397-98). In *Sanctuary*, Ruby describes Tommy, “[he] looked at me and I could see his eyes, like a cat” (129). Ruby’s mention of Tommy’s “cat eyes” adds to the novel’s noirish quality, creating an impression of the darkness inside the corn house at

Frenchman's Bend. Quentin's observation also evokes the sense of one deciphering his surroundings in the dark, but it also shows Nancy beginning to lose her sensory apparatus, which in turn gives way to a physical and spiritual paralysis. In "Motive and Metaphor in Faulkner's 'That Evening Sun,'" E.W. Pitcher reinforces this claim, noting, "Nancy fears not just loss of life, I would contend, but loss of her immortal soul. The freedom-in-death so often a theme in black folk music is inverted here. 'Jesus' will slay, not save Nancy" (134).

As scene II comes to a close, Nancy's fear of spiritual reckoning becomes salient. Her physical presence wanes, and she begins to become catatonic. Quentin describes Nancy as her fear becomes palpable: "Nancy whispered something. It was oh or no, I don't know which. Like nobody had made it, like it came from nowhere and went nowhere, until it was like Nancy was not there at all" (398). Again Quentin's narrative opens the door for ambiguity. Nancy's exasperation, "oh" or "no," being indistinguishable for the narrator, underscores both the complex language associations existing amongst the characters and Nancy's spiritual awakening. "Oh" signifies an avenging spiritual presence; "no" signifies a human presence, her husband. She is doubly threatened. Her gasp signifies an inherently competing hybrid, simultaneous salvation-damnation. Caddy, acknowledging Nancy's growing unease, asks if her husband Jesus is responsible for her increasing anxiety. At this point, Nancy bellows: "Jeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeesus." Quentin immediately informs Caddy that "it's the other Jesus she means," correctly identifying her moaning as a cry for spiritual help (398). In her essay "Rhetoric and Ethical Ambiguities in 'That Evening Sun,'" Leona Toker notes that Nancy's utterance "may suggest not only feelings of guilt but also an appeal for supererogation" (436). Nancy assumes a catatonic state from here and becomes disassociated from her immediate context. Her continual refrain, which denies responsibility for her actions, adds another dimension now: " I ain't nothing but a nigger . . . God

knows. God knows." Her appeal now implies that God understands and sympathizes with her plight, an assumption that proves ironic.

Dilsey serves as Nancy's spiritual foil throughout the story. Dilsey rarely appears, and her absence enhances Nancy's plight. Dilsey, like Jesus, floats in and out of the text, occupying a spiritual terrain much like the one she occupied in *The Sound and the Fury*. In the novel, Dilsey's faith begets an understanding of humanity, as her gesture with Benjy during Reverend Shegog's sermon indicates. Hearing the reverend's Easter sermon, Dilsey "sat bolt upright, her hand on Ben's knee. Two tears slid down her fallen cheeks, in and out of the myriad coruscations of immolation and abnegation and time" (183). Faulkner's compounding of nouns here points to Dilsey's spiritual understanding. This same figure is a part of the short story's landscape. In "That Evening Sun," Dilsey is not physically present for most of the narrative, but when she is present, her language creates a foreboding atmosphere. When Dilsey finally returns to work, Mr. Compson tells her that he would prefer that she rest, not work. Dilsey responds: "What for . . . if I had been a day later this place would be to rack and ruin." The idiom, "rack and ruin," rings of the spiritual, and Dilsey's language foreshadows Nancy's impending crisis. Unfortunately, Dilsey does not perceive both sources of Nancy's plight, as the following exchange demonstrates:

> "How do you know he's back?" Dilsey said. "You ain't seen him."
>
> "Jesus is a nigger," Jason said.
>
> "I can feel him," Nancy said. "I can hear him laying yonder in the ditch."
>
> "Tonight?" Dilsey said. "Is he here tonight?"
>
> "Dilsey's a nigger too," Jason said.

This particular exchange brings Nancy's situation into further relief, as Jason's striking declaration—"Jesus is a nigger"—demonstrates the utter linguistic confusion circulating among the characters. For Jason the word "nigger" signifies a sensory perception; he connects the term with sight. Jason connects darkness, or the invisible, with his understanding of what the word means. In scene III, Nancy firmly believes that both Jesus figures are pursuing her, and she believes that nothing will stop either one.

The narrative space devoted to scene III is greater than the story's other six sections, stretching, as Toker notes, "like a rubber band," creating a heightened sense of tension (432). The action of scene III begins where scene II ended: Nancy is drinking the coffee Dilsey gave her, and she begins to make the sound again. Nancy's physical presence looms large in this scene, but her verbal utterances indicate that she is aware of an encroaching spiritual presence. As the scene opens, Quentin reflects upon Nancy's unusual disposition, remembering that Nancy, continuing to make the "sound," looked at the children "like there were two [Nancys]: one looking at us and the other making the sound" (400). Although he does not perceive the physical and spiritual agents working upon her, Quentin's observation points to Nancy's internal struggle. Nancy seems to believe that the children have some agency in thwarting Jesus; she tells Dilsey, "Won't no nigger stop him," and then, with "her eyes moving fast, like she was afraid there wasn't much time to look," Nancy finds those who will, focusing her eyes on the Compson children (400). Again, as in the first scene, Nancy manipulates language; but here, she does it so as to play on the children's understanding of the meaning of a word, "fun." Nancy urges the children back to her cabin, coaxing them with promises of "fun": "Let's go down to my house and have some more fun" (401). The word "fun" echoes throughout the third scene, as the children resist Nancy's notion of fun while Nancy continues to urge them along. En route to her

house, Nancy manipulates language in hopes of staving off Jesus, repeatedly referring to the young Jason as “Mr. Jason,” a signification that has two implications (402). First, Nancy gives young Jason the title “Mr.” to keep the lurking Jesus at bay, as Nancy assumes that her husband will not accost her if Mr. Compson is present. Additionally, “Mr. Jason” signifies a racial hierarchy. As a servant, Nancy is expected to address the young white boy for whom she works as “Mr.” Both implications of the word come into play here: Nancy is suggesting the presence of the absent father and complying with social customs. Ultimately, her aim is to confuse Jesus. Though this painfully long scene centers on Nancy, she gradually recedes from the focus of the story. As the scene closes, Nancy tells the children a story, ostensibly hoping the children will connect it with her plight. Quentin remembers her detached presence: “She talked like here eyes looked, like her eyes watching us and her voice talking to us did not belong to her. Like she was living somewhere else, waiting somewhere else. She was outside the cabin. Her voice was inside and the shape of her . . . was there. But that was all” (403-4). Quentin’s observation again points to the fact that Nancy is gradually becoming catatonic and despondent; her understanding of “Jesus” has changed, and she now realizes the implications of being pursued by Him and him.

The last three scenes are progressively condensed, in terms of both Nancy’s presence and the narrative space devoted to each one, foreshadowing Nancy’s total paralysis and the language breakdown at the story’s conclusion. By scene IV, Nancy has “quit talking,” and her expression is “like when your eyes look up at a stick balanced on your nose” (404). Jesus’ spiritual presence increasingly usurps Nancy’s personal agency; and at this point in the narrative, Nancy begins to experience mental deterioration. Quentin’s image here portrays her in a daze, as aloof and estranged. Scene IV contains several instances where Nancy handles a lamp, gestures signifying both spiritual purification and her diminishing physical presence. The entire scene takes place

around Nancy's hearth, where she has started a fire for popping corn. Nancy puts her hands on a lamp globe, and then later, she places them directly into the hearth's fire; both gestures, moreover, demonstrate that Nancy is losing another sensory perception. Additionally, the image of fire simultaneously suggests purification and self-destruction. On one level, Nancy hopes to be purged of her mortal sins; while on another level, she fears that her husband's desire for retribution is so great that she is willing to take her own life. Throughout the scene, she urges the children to remain with her in the cabin, promising that they will have "fun." But, as the scene closes Caddy hears her father approaching, signaling the end of both the "fun" and Nancy's safety. The scene ends with Nancy mumbling, crying, and pleading: she lapses back into vocalizing the "sound," indicating Jesus' lurking presence; thus, her crying commences, as she understands the imminent departure of the Compson children; and finally, she pleads for the children's comfort, begging for their continued presence: "Tell [Mr. Compson] we going to have fun . . . Tell him to let me come home with yawl and sleep on the floor . . . We'll have fun" (407). Nancy's vocal prowess, however, fails her this time, ultimately signaling the Compson family's departure and Nancy's deepening isolation.

Scene V signals the final unraveling of the narrative's language system, a breakdown culminating in the story's final section. Nancy no longer possesses the power of lexical manipulation, and thus, she resigns to the fact that Jesus, in one form or another, will have his vengeance. Her verbal utterances primarily come in the form of the "sound." Nancy informs Mr. Compson, much to his chagrin, of Jesus' lurking and foreboding presence, pointing to a "sign": "I got it. It was on the table. . . It was a hogbone, with blood meat still on it, laying by the lamp" (408). These two items juxtaposed, one pertaining to folk mysticism and the other to Christian doctrine, indicate that both Jesus figures will be exacting their vengeance. Nancy, acquiescing to

her fate, reiterates the futility of escaping divine vengeance: “He’s out there. When yawl walk out the door, I gone”; “putting it off won’t do no good”; “I can’t do nothing. Just put it off. And that don’t do no good. I reckon it belong to me. I reckon what I going to get ain’t no more than mine” (408). Her lamentations, however, fall upon deaf ears, as Mr. Compson responds to her fatalistic resignation by deeming her contentions as “nonsense,” a refrain underscoring not only the ubiquitous lapse in understanding that circulates throughout the text, but also punctuating the fact that he (and by extension, the white characters of the story) do not perceive Nancy’s inner emotional turmoil. As the scene concludes, Mr. Compson, maintaining a firm belief that neither Jesus figure will slay her, tells Nancy that she will “be the first thing [he will] see in the kitchen tomorrow morning” (409). Mr. Compson’s semantic choice of “thing” relegates Nancy to the status of an impersonal object, removing from her any sense of personal identity, suggesting a loss, too, of her physical presence. Nancy, understanding that the Compsons’ departure correlates with her imminent demise, responds to Mr. Compson: “You’ll see what you’ll see, I reckon . . . But it will take the Lord to say what that will be” (409). Her remark seemingly goes unnoticed by Mr. Compson, as he believes Nancy’s fears are ungrounded, and he expects to see her at the breakfast table in the morning. But, Nancy’s semantic choice of “see” signifies an elusive mental concept, one that Mr. Compson cannot fathom. Nancy, certain that she is going to die, suggests that if Mr. Compson does “see” her, he will be seeing a ghost. But, that decision, she claims, is the Lord’s, a final indication that Nancy has lost all hope.

The sixth and final scene demonstrates that Nancy is fully despondent, highlights the language and communication breakdown that has hitherto been gathering momentum, and punctuates the Compsons’ indifference towards Nancy’s plight. The scene opens with Quentin remembering the family’s departure: “We left [Nancy] sitting before the fire” (409). Quentin can

no longer see Nancy, as she remains behind in the cabin, awaiting her fate in isolation. Though he cannot see Nancy's physical presence, Quentin impressionistically recreates the scene: "We could still see Nancy's house and the open door, but we couldn't see Nancy now, sitting before the fire with the door open, because she was tired. 'I just done got tired,' she said. 'I just a nigger. It ain't no fault of mine.'" Quentin's reflection here is rife with ambiguity and raises several questions: How can Quentin not see Nancy but at the same time see her "sitting before the fire?" Did Quentin actually hear Nancy make this claim of fatigue? Did he hear her subsequent refrain? Most likely, Quentin, as narrator, has reconstructed the scene from his youthful impressions and remembrances of Nancy. These issues come into relief in the scene's next passage, suggesting that Nancy's physical presence is waning. Quentin reflects, "But we could hear her, because she began just after we came out of the ditch, the sound that was not singing and not unsinging" (410). By juxtaposing these two passages, Quentin's distorted understanding of the events comes into further relief. Aside from Quentin's one contention that Nancy spoke in the last scene, no textual evidence exists showing that Nancy still possesses the power of speech. During the final three scenes, Quentin portrays Nancy's verbal utterances gradually lapsing from recognizable speech into the "sound that was not singing and not unsinging." In the end, Nancy resembles Jesus: both have an undisclosed fate, both remain hidden from sight, and both have been transformed into different beings.

Ultimately, the tragedy of the story results from a major breakdown in communication among the acting characters. The misunderstandings arise not only because the story's white characters cannot recognize the inner turmoil of black characters, but also because word meanings do not have absolute significations. In an earlier version of the story, printed in *American Mercury*, Faulkner further accentuates Nancy's abandonment. Quentin narrates: "Then

we crossed the ditch, walking out of Nancy's life. Then her life was sitting there with the door open and the lamp lit, waiting, and the ditch between us going on, the white people going on, dividing the impinged lives of us and Nancy" (267). The story's final conversation underscores the fact that not only can the Compson children not understand Nancy's language, and thus her plight, but they cannot understand one another. Jason, still obsessing over language, exclaims that he is "not a nigger." Caddy, taking her final jab at her brother, claims that he is worse than a "nigger," deeming him a "tattletale." Caddy prods at Jason, exposing his fear of the dark: "If something was to jump out, you'd be scairder than a nigger." The subsequent and final exchange of the narrative further demonstrates the disconnect in signification, a disconnect that exists between the white children and the white adults:

> "I wouldn't," Jason said.
>
> "You'd cry," Caddy said.
>
> "Caddy," Father said.
>
> "I wouldn't!" Jason said.
>
> "Scairy cat," Caddy said.
>
> "Candace!" Father said. (410)

By using Caddy's proper name, Mr. Compson hopes to stop the children's bickering, but his words do not indicate this to Caddy. Thus, Mr. Compson utilizes his wife's technique for demanding attention. Earlier in his narrative, Quentin indicated how he knew when his mother was addressing his father and not his younger brother, both characters possessing the same name: " 'Jason!' Mother said. She was speaking to Father. You could tell by the way she said the name" (396). Mr. Compson too realizes that he is being addressed. Additionally, since Quentin is narrating these events as an adult, he understands how to decipher the true meaning of his

parents' words. In hopes of quieting his daughter, Mr. Compson employs the signifier "Candace" after she fails to respond to "Caddy." The story concludes with Mr. Compson's last exclamation and, therefore, provides no opportunity for Caddy to engage in discourse or for Quentin to provide his analysis on the competing dialogues between the father and the children. But as he has stated previously, "you could tell by the way" the name was said. The meaning Mr. Compson attaches to his vocalization will not be internalized by Caddy, as she has hitherto shown no evidence that this type of gesture has any semantic connection to her.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In the end, the story contains such rampant ambiguity that we can make no conclusive comment on the major which it raised. Ambiguity is crucial to, and at the heart of, "That Evening Sun." In fact, Pitcher argues that "the question of Nancy's survival is only the climactic example of a long series of questions which the story raises and leaves unanswered . . . Faulkner meant the story to end with a question mark to which no train of inferences would supply a truly reliable answer" (297). We only get to see the action of the story through vignettes, which have been filtered through other vignettes. Therefore, Quentin's impression of the story's events gives us an impression of Nancy's tragedy. At the end of the story, we can only really conclude that Nancy feels hopeless and helpless.

Several critics have sought to prove that Nancy survived the night by pointing to her presence in *Requiem for a Nun*, and a scene from *The Sound and the Fury* that mentions the bones of Nancy lying in a ditch. But, these bones belong to Nancy, a horse, not Nancy of the short story. Nancy appears much later in Faulkner's fiction, and Faulkner himself insists that the Nancy of the novel is the same as the Nancy of the short story. In *Requiem for a Nun*, Nancy's appearance and past life are discussed. Additionally, we are told that she lost her baby in the sixth month of her pregnancy by being kicked in the stomach by a man. And finally, she reveals that she has slept with many men and has no idea who her infant's father was.[1] All of these facts withstanding, Nancy cannot be interpreted from a novel published almost twenty years later. The story and the novel should be judged on their own merits. Although, it is interesting to speculate.

[1] In his essay, Laurence Perrine points out these connections between the short story and the later novel.

In *Sanctuary*, the narrator mentions a black man singing in prison, sentenced to die for cutting his wife's throat with a razor. The narrator's description of the imprisoned man evokes both Nancy's husband and the atmosphere of "That Evening Sun." On the day that the sheriff brought Goodwin into custody, the narrator tells us that "there was a Negro murderer in the jail, who had killed his wife; slashed her throat with a razor." After he beheaded her, "she ran out the cabin door and for six or seven steps up the quiet moonlit lane." Could this man be Jesus? Several aspects of the narrator's description provide a case for the argument. First, the inmate killed his wife by cutting her throat with a razor, exacting his murder much like the death that Nancy fears. We also know that she was in a "cabin" at the time of the murder, a cabin that evokes Nancy's, especially since the beheaded woman runs into a "quiet moonlit lane" (91). Is this the lane that the Compsons travel down at the story's close? Was Jesus moments away from slaying Nancy at the close of the story? Quentin concedes that while crossing it, the ditch was "quiet," and he "couldn't see much where the moonlight and the shadows tangled" (410).

Immediately following his initial description, the novel's narrator describes the jailed man, detailing him in a way that is reminiscent of the story's spiritual Jesus. The murderer, head stuck out of the cell bars, leads a choir of people down below: "They sang spirituals while white people slowed . . . to listen to those who were sure to die and him who was already dead singing about heaven and being tired" (91). The narrator describes the man as being "already dead" because he is set to die for his crime. But, "him," he who is "already dead," might signify the inverted Christian martyr of the short story, for our jailed man is "tired" of his earthly existence. The narrator also notes that the "white people" might stop because "in the interval between songs," a "rich, sourceless voice coming out of the high darkness where the ragged shadow of

the heaven-tree . . . fretted and mourned" (91). This description evokes the ethereal, suggesting a dark, spiritual presence floating about, waiting to take the inmate away.

Making any sort of conclusive statement about what happened after the events of the story is impossible. But, Faulkner capitalizes on such ambiguity and portrays a world where white individuals and black individuals cannot are too out of touch with one another. Nancy's "sound" is essentially a "call," but unfortunately, she gets no "response."

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