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Faulkner and Humanity's Desire to Be as Solid as a Thing

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FAULKNER AND HUMANITY’S DESIRE TO BE AS SOLID AS A THING

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For my parents--Claudia, Philip, and my step mother, Joy--
who have loved me regardless
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This thesis uses existential-phenomenological theory to analyze two novels by William Faulkner: *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*. The critical texts applied are Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* and Albert Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The idea of existential authenticity, absurdity, and closeness to God are the major concepts applied to Faulkner’s work. The first chapter argues that the existential ideal of authenticity is displayed in the character Darl from *As I Lay Dying*. The second chapter argues that *As I Lay Dying* showcases man’s endurance in an absurd, ambiguous, humiliating world; yet, man is still capable of heroism in a Sisyphean sense as the character Cash exemplifies. The third chapter argues that Benjy Compson from *The Sound and the Fury* phenomenologically represents Faulkner’s character closest to Sartre’s concept of God—a synthetic Being-In-Itself-Being-For-Itself contradiction while Quentin Compson represents the character who strives to be close to God.
INTRODUCTION

Existentialism is a “timeless sensibility” that often arises from great spiritual and moral turpitude (Kaufman 12). William Faulkner expressed the overlying anxiety of his generation well in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech delivered on December 10, 1950: “Our tragedy today is a general and universal fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only one question: When will I be blown up?” Although Faulkner ends this famous speech on a rare positive note, claiming that man is immortal because of his will to endure, Faulkner identifies the present state of humankind as spiritually depraved in light of the possibility of instant annihilation.

Faulkner certainly lived in quite a tumultuous time in human history, growing up in the scarred postbellum South and witness to two world wars. Faulkner endured a world in crisis, and existential ideology grew out of the period in which Faulkner lived, offering for some the condemning yet liberating belief that humankind was in charge of its own destiny.¹ In essence, existentialism is simply a way of thinking—an empowering view of the world in light of suffering and madness, rooted long before Kierkegaard or Nietzsche or Sartre—arguably since the dawn of man. Existentialism identifies central problems of the human condition—problems that would have existed long before Sartre gave it a name. Most reputed existentialists are artists as well as philosophers; notably Dostoevsky, Camus, and Sartre; and this is not surprising, as existentialism privileges imagination as the supreme human faculty, rather than the presumptuous arrogance of the human intellect when viewed within Nature, as Nietzsche argues in his essay (1874), “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense.” Imagination and dreams are the tools with which humanity can live with dignity and self-endowed purpose. As Ralph A. Ciancio points out, “It is easy to see why Existentialism gives special credence to art. Since a knowledge of the world as it is experienced from within is vital to a knowledge of the

¹ Consider Walter Kaufman’s summation of existentialism in relation to the social and spiritual ramifications of World War I and II and particularly Nazi Germany: “The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life—that is the heart of existentialism.” 12.
world in general, the artist occupies a singularly congenial position for presenting the world as a totality” (72). The artist can offer a singular experience—a human life in its totality. For many existentialists, reason is not sufficient to explicate human experience (Bigelow 172). This runs contrary to the Enlightenment tradition and Western tradition of philosophy holding reason as the supreme faculty. John Milton, who was a neo-Platonist and general neo-Classicist, equates reason with virtue in his Christian epic, *Paradise Lost.* Existentialism, in contrast, is a “revolt” against traditional philosophy (Kaufman 11). It should not be surprising, due to Faulkner’s experience in a morally and spiritually degraded war-torn world, that Faulkner’s writing was informed by existential philosophy—the dominant mode of thinking following the presumed war to end all wars (Bigelow 178).

Faulkner was not an existential philosopher or theorizer, at least not in the academic sense. Faulkner never wrote a philosophical tract—nothing remotely akin to Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*—but we do see many deep-level ruminations on existence in both his narrative voice (we must assume) and the narrative voices of his characters. In the totality of existentialists, I would consider Faulkner as a literary voice of existentialism alongside Dostoevsky and Tolstoy—repeatedly cited as existentialists on account of the themes they explore in their novels (Bigelow 172). Faulkner’s prose propels the reader into an absurd world, both comic and tragic, where humanity’s capacity to reason can afford scant comfort or security. Themes of spiritual isolation and desolation run rampant in his work—the old romanticized South crushed after the Civil War. World War I provides a grim setting for his novels, as we see in *Soldier’s Pay* (1926) where a young coquette must try to own up to her marriage to a grievously wounded soldier. In *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), we can see the Compson family haunted by their past, forcing into question their freedom to act. In *As I Lay Dying*

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2 “Yet sometimes nations will decline so low / From virtue, which is reason, that no wrong, / But justice, and some fatal curse annexed / Deprives them of their outward liberty, / Their inward lost” Book XII: 97-101. *Paradise Lost.* Oxford UP, 2005. 354.

3 Ciancio also provides this opinion on the contrast between existentialism and tradition philosophy, “This [existentialism] is a far cry from the traditional view which holds that the intellect alone is sacred and that the philosopher, in order to unfetter his intellect and to safeguard it against a distorted perspective, must detach himself from the life around him” (71).

4 Interestingly, Faulkner is cited in the translator’s introduction to *Being and Nothingness* as a philosopher, alongside Nietzsche, Kafka, Salacrou, Heidegger, Croce, Marx, Hegel, Caldwell, Adler, Schnitzler, Malraux, and Bachelard. *Being and Nothingness* ix.
(1930) and *Light in August* (1932), we see characters such as Darl and Joe Christmas tormented and anguished to the point of madness through their impotent quest for concrete identity and essence.

I. Faulkner and Sartre

Faulkner and Sartre’s attitude toward Faulkner’s work was ambivalent. They were contemporaries who explored existential themes in much of their writing. John K. Simon points out that even the imagery both writers employ has its own existential relevance, suggesting that Sartre was *owing* to Faulkner: “A row of faces, either watchful or complacently inert, represents a number of Sartrean themes: the look and the judgment of Others, the lifeless animal-like multiplicity of the unconscious world, dehumanized by the external glance of the narrator, and so on. These themes and their presentation are apparent already in Faulkner” (218). In Sartre’s essay “William Faulkner’s *Sartoris*” (1952), Sartre opens in praise of Faulkner’s development of the protagonist, Joe Christmas, commenting on the memorable quality of his face:

This “man” we discover in *Light in August*—I think of the “man” of Faulkner in the same way that one thinks of the “man” in Dostoevsky or of Meredith—this divine animal who lives without God, lost from the moment of his birth, and intent on destroying himself; cruel, moral even in murder; then miraculously saved, neither by death nor in death, but in the final moments which precede death; heroic in torment, in the most abject humiliations of the flesh: I had accepted him without reservations. I had never forgotten his proud and threatening face, his blinded eyes. (95)

Sartre uses the distinct adjective “threatening” to describe Joe Christmas’ face which indicates a relation to Sartre’s *le regarde* (the look). Sartre contends that the Other is a threat to one’s existence through the imposition of one’s gaze: “Through the Other’s look I live myself as fixed in the midst of the world, as in danger, as irremediable. But I know neither what I am nor what is my place in this world, nor what face this world in which I am turns toward the Other (*Being and Nothingness* 268). Sartre’s natural inclination to

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focus on the face of Joe Christmas and its threatening disposition indicates an existential theme present in Faulkner. Even Sartre’s praise of *Light in August* qualifies that a good novel must have a certain perspective. One would assume Sartre’s “necessary” lens an existential one: “With the necessary perspective, good novels come to resemble completely natural phenomena; one tends to forget that they have authors, one accepts them as one does stones and trees, because they are present, because they exist. *Light in August* is one of these hermetic, mineral-like works” (95).

Although the style in which they wrote differed greatly, the meaning shared much common ground. Still, as scholar Robert Slabey points out, Jean-Paul Sartre found much in Faulkner’s work that disagreed with him (12). Sartre critiqued two of Faulkner’s novels which appeared in France in the 1930’s. Based on these essays we know that Sartre had read at least four of Faulkner’s novels: *The Sound and the Fury*, *Sartoris*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* Both of his essays—one on *Sartoris* and one on *The Sound and the Fury*—express concern for the manner in which Faulkner developed his characters.

In “William Faulkner’s *Sartoris,*” Sartre claims that Faulkner’s characters, Bayard Sartoris for example, only provide the reader with illusory gestures. His characters are somberly veiled, and we are restricted to their exterior gestures: “But does he [Faulkner] not realize that his imposingly somber figures have only an exterior dimension?” (99). In light of this assessment, I find it disappointing that Sartre never addressed his critical eye to *As I Lay Dying* which focuses entirely on the interior dimension—somber though it may be—of each Bundren.

In “Time in Faulkner: *The Sound and the Fury,*” Sartre sees Faulkner’s characters as lacking free will. In particular, he points out that Quentin has no future and his suicide is built up as inevitable. Events in Faulkner are often described as already completed with very little attention paid to the actual moment of the event. Instead of a battle, the reader is given corpses. The past, it would seem, completely overshadows and dominates the present. Sartre likens Faulkner’s characters to people in a convertible with their gazes forever fixed behind them as they drive onward:

Faulkner’s vision of the world can be compared to that of a man sitting in a convertible looking back. At every moment shadows emerge on his right, and
on his left flickering and quavering points of light, which become trees, men, and cars only when they are seen in perspective. The past here gains a surrealistic quality; its outline is hard, clear and immutable. The indefinable and elusive present is helpless before it; it is full of holes through which past things, fixed, motionless and silent, invade it. (228)

These metaphysics obviously run contrary to Sartre’s belief in free will and humanity as a capacity to become; nevertheless, Sartre was still fond of Faulkner’s fiction: “I like his art, but I don’t believe in his metaphysic. A barred future is still a future” (232).

Faulkner’s characterization of Quentin does seem to imply Quentin is not free to act, but this claim is certainly not applicable to the breadth of Faulkner’s characters. Sartre’s essay started a critical conversation on Faulkner’s metaphysics of time, and this conversation still flourishes today. Douglas Messerli’s essay, “The Problem of Time in The Sound and the Fury: A Critical Reassessment and Reinterpretation,” though somewhat outdated (1974), meticulously traces the critical debate on Sartre’s claim against Faulkner’s metaphysic that waged up to that point. Critics such as Euschio Rodrigues and Michael Maloney immediately defended Sartre’s claims. More recently, Justin Skirry in his essay “Sartre on William Faulkner’s metaphysics of time in The Sound and the Fury” (2001) disagreed with Sartre’s claim of a barren future and overshadowed present in Faulkner’s characters ironically by drawing on Sartre’s own discourse on temporality in Being and Nothingness. Scirry claims that some characters’ phenomenologies encompass the present. Scirry also argues that the future is present but only as an absence:

contrary to Sartre's conclusion in his original essay and in light of his later remarks in Being and Nothingness, some of the characters' phenomenologies of time include the present, and therefore are not of the past only. Third, the future is present to the reader as an absence in the novel, because the phenomenologies of the three Compson brothers do not include it. This presence as absence is personified in the character of Quentin, Caddy's daughter, found in the final section through whom Faulkner characterizes the future as something external to

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7 “Time and Technique in The Sound and the Fury” 1957
8 “Time and Destiny in Faulkner” (1966)
consciousness that cannot be captured, contrary to Sartre’s view. (16)

Time itself is not always a subject of concern in Faulkner, although it often is. Novels such as *The Unvanquished* or the Snopes trilogy (*The Town, The Hamlet, The Mansion*) display characters which are free to act, and Faulkner often dramatizes the present events in these works.

Though Sartre’s critiques may seem damning, Sartre still held Faulkner in high regard. Faulkner’s novels were particularly well-received in France. Writers like Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus saw a great deal in his prose that may have been lost on much of America. After all, Faulkner’s only early best-seller in America was *Sanctuary*, a novel owing much of its success to its scandalous nature, even by today’s standards.9 *Sanctuary* was translated into French shortly after its publication in America in 1931. A translation of *As I Lay Dying* was well received in France as well in 1934 (Skirry 23). John K. Simon’s essay, “Faulkner and Sartre: Metamorphosis and the Obscene,” offers a comparison-contrast close reading analysis of the imagery Faulkner and Sartre employ to establish existential undertones, such as objectifying the physical features of Others within a first person monologue. This essay pays particular attention to *Sanctuary*, Faulkner’s most popular novel in France. Sartre, however, made no mention of *Sanctuary* or *As I Lay Dying* (Simon 217). According to an excellent documentary on Faulkner, Jean-Paul Sartre was quoted as saying that “For young people in France, Faulkner is a God.” French existential writers welcomed Faulkner with open arms (*Great Writers: William Faulkner*).

II. Existential Criticism on Faulkner

As literary theoretical approaches, existentialism and phenomenology are rarely discussed or utilized anymore; yet, they offer the reader a framework and methodology in which to aid our understanding of character action and motive in literary works. It is with existential theory that Faulkner criticism can shy away from the chaotic whirlpool of structure and symbol and instead focus on value and meaning. The benefit of existential

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9 *Sanctuary* tells the story of the brutal rape (by means of a corn cob) and abduction of a young woman by a sadistic gangster.
theory is that it is a relatively unutilized approach that can shed new light on Faulkner’s work. Structure and symbol have been exhaustively explored. Existential theory can facilitate relatively new critical debates (Taylor 477). It is not the mother of all literary approaches. However, I do agree with William J. Sowder’s claim in his overall excellent book *Existential-Phenomenological Readings on Faulkner* (1991) that existential-phenomenology can bring the whole human condition under one umbrella: “These [Faulkner’s] characters in the range of their actions, in their diverse ethical, moral, and religious views, in the difference in their social status and other attributes are so various that heretofore they have required a multiplicity of critical approaches. Existential phenomenology can change this. As a philosophy of consciousness it covers the whole human spectrum (xiii).  

No one approach will throw light on all facets of a work of literature. I will, however, certainly claim that existential-phenomenological readings on Faulkner are greatly undervalued and surprisingly sparse at present. Homer B. Pettey’s recent essay “Perception and the Destruction of Being in *As I Lay Dying*” (2003) offers an excellent Sartrean-semiotic reading of the novel, addressing the role of language as precisely what Addie called “a shape to fill a lack.” Petty argues that Darl attempts to make sense of his world vainly through perceptual metaphors. In this struggle for meaning, he construes his reality into words rather than the actual world. Darl’s madness may be attributed to his confusing word with world—signifier with signified. In making this argument, Pettey applies Sartre’s concept of *le regarde* to prove that Darl, like many of Faulkner’s characters, seeks to resolve perceptual problems mainly through a reliance on the visual (Pettey 27-28). Aside from Pettey’s essay, I have not found any current (within the last decade) existential readings—at least any that draw on existential theory--of any of Faulkner’s novels. My aim here is to help resurrect this extremely applicable literary lens for critics and general readers of Faulkner.

The novels which have received the most existential criticism are, not surprisingly, *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*—two of Faulkner’s most

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10 …the existential-phenomenological investment in human existence is equal to Faulkner’s genius for creating human characters. If this is true, one finds in the existential-phenomenological approach to Faulkner’s characters what he looks for in vain in other critical approaches, a unified critical theory incorporating all of the characters. Other approaches—mythological, symbolical, Freudian, Jungian, religious, sociological, formalist, to mention a few—throw light on one or perhaps several of these characters to the neglect of all others. Existential-phenomenology brings the whole congregation under one tent. Introduction. xvi.
popular works. *A Fable* and *Absalom, Absalom!* received some attention as well. Notable critics such as Olga W. Vickery, William Van O’Connor, Edward Wasiolek, and Maurice Le Breton have all commented on the existential nature of *As I Lay Dying*, realizing the critical potential of such an approach when applied to Faulkner’s work (Slabey 14). In the 1960’s it seems that existential criticism on Faulkner was most fruitful. Robert B. Slabey’s analysis of *As I Lay Dying* serves as a decent starting point for critics seeking to build on the work of prior critics who note existential aspects from the ground up.¹¹ I would also highly recommend reading Ralph A. Ciancio’s comprehensive essay, “Faulkner’s Existentialist Affinities” (1960). This essay displays an impressive knowledge of Faulkner’s canon, offering detailed and specific analysis of a variety of his works. Ciancio’s relatively obscure essay unveils a treasure-trove of potential scholarly work that remains today uncultivated given the scarcity of existential analysis in Faulkner’s literature.

Professor Walter Taylor’s essay, “William Faulkner: The Faulkner Fable,” published in 1957, was one of the early essays to point out the critical potential of existential theory as applied to Faulkner. He restricts his analysis to *A Fable*, pointing out that a “kinship” exists between *A Fable* and existential literature. Taylor argues that “in overwhelming degree, Faulkner’s view is that man is not really man but subman, a creature subrational, disgusting, bestial, filthy and devoted to bottomless and incalculable folly. This—the hopeless bestiality of man, […] is the actual, underlying theme of *A Fable*” (477). Taylor sees Faulkner’s depiction of man in keeping with the existential view of humankind—a useless passion, neither above nor below Nature as a clever animal disposed to folly and absurdity. Hopeless in the sense that truth and God are forever veiled amid a world without inherent rhyme or reason. This view of man is not peculiar to *A Fable*. One finds this outlook expressed time and time again in the whole of Faulkner’s canon.

William J. Sowder responds to Taylor in his essay (1963), “Faulkner and Existentialism: A Note on the Generalissimo.” Sowder refutes Taylor’s and other critics’ belief that *A Fable* is the allegorical retelling of a Christian tale. Sowder sees the novel more as a blasphemous existential manifesto in which the idea of a Christian God is

undermined and posited as contradictory. If anything, the Corporal in *A Fable* is more akin to the Antichrist than Christ (“Faulkner and Existentialism” 166-167). In an earlier piece, Sowder used existential theory seeking to prove the heroic nature of Colonel Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* in his essay (1962) “Colonel Thomas Sutpen as Existentialist Hero.” Sowder argues that Colonel Sutpen’s actions exemplify those akin to the protagonists in many of Sartre’s works. Interestingly, in making this claim, Sowder refutes Sartre’s claim that Faulkner’s characters lack free will. Sowder counters Sartre’s claim, offering Faulkner’s thesis that “man is indestructible because of his simple will to freedom” (qtd. in 490). Sowder views Colonel Sutpen as dramatizing existential choice through his abandonment, anguish, possibilities, and bad faith (499). The existential failure of Sutpen, like Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, lies in his futile quest for identity—seeking to posit his own essence. Historical or social circumstances do not bear on the human mind in totality. The absorption or rejection of social ethics and values which motivate humanity is a matter of choice. Humankind is condemned to freedom.

William J. Sowder’s *Existential-Phenomenological Readings on Faulkner* draws mainly on four theorists: Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Karl Jaspers, and Gabriel Marcel (xv). Sowder displays an impressive understanding of a broad variety of Faulkner’s works, sometimes addressing a single character in reference to the multiple novels in which he or she appears. Sowder’s entire thesis rests on Edmund Husserl’s famous claim that intentionality “characterizes consciousness in the pregnant sense of the term” (qtd. in Sowder xiii). This founding statement posits humankind as accountable for each and every action, and Sowder believes that the goal of all existential-phenomenologists is to describe “the human being in the act of being—the act of intending” (xiv). Sowder’s entire book focuses only on Faulkner’s characters, holding each character accountable for his or her actions. The only exception to this would be in the case of the simpleton Benjy from *The Sound and the Fury*. Although Sowder’s essay on Benjy, “Benjy Compson and the Field of Consciousness,” makes some original observations in terms of Benjy’s unique perceptual field, I disagree with Sowder’s claim that the “poor boy” Benjy harshly endured a perceptual world of chaos—unable to separate reality from unreality. Sowder seems to suggest here a “validity” to be found
separating one person’s existential experience from that of another. I believe Sowder’s term “confused” in reference to Benjy is a completely inappropriate term that suggests an almost inferior nature to Benjy’s being. To the mind of Benjy, his world is not perceptual chaos because he cannot even perceive the difference between perceptual chaos and order. Benjy simply is, although not in the sense that an object is. Benjy exists, lacking a concept of space, lacking even a concept of possibilities, lacking intentionality, lacking even a future, but his experience is just as valid as any other living being.

Existential criticism on Faulkner reached its hey day in the 60’s but never left much of a legacy—not compared to the legacy of Marxism or Psychoanalysis. In the 80’s it essentially died out. In the 90’s William J. Sowder dusted off the approach with *Existential-Phenomenological Readings on Faulkner*, but even this enlightening and unique contribution to Faulknerian scholarship has yet to start a critical thread in the mainstream. Criticism on *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury* in the 1990’s was diverse, focusing on issues of race, language, and gender in particular. Many feminist studies appeared in the 1990’s such as Minrose C. Gwin’s *The Feminine and Faulkner: Reading (Beyond) Sexual Difference*, Doreen Fowler’s *Faulkner: The Return of the Repressed*, and Deborah Clark’s *Robbing the Mother: Women in Faulkner* (Tredell 146). In some ways, pure existential criticism tends to ignore issues of race and gender, focusing rather on the individual not necessarily as a determined product of his or her time and community by focusing intensely on the individual’s freedom of choice. However, such a thing as existential-feminism or existential-psychoanalysis or existential-Marxism is already in existence but not as a well-defined literary approach. Pure existential criticism, such as a wholly Sartrean approach, will likely continue to be outdated. Homer B. Pettey’s “Perception and the Destruction of Being in *As I Lay Dying*” uses Sartrean theory with semiotics. This may be a sign of things to come—not criticism that is purely existential but perhaps molded into the other popular approaches of today. Nevertheless, existential-phenomenology will always be well-suited in Faulkner studies because of Faulkner’s frequent use of stream of consciousness narrative which provides an intimate look into character consciousness.
Why has existential-phenomenological literary criticism never been popular? The reason might lie in the fact that existentialism is a term in search of definition. Even in 1963 Richard Calhoun points out,

On first glance, one might wonder why existential criticism has not had a greater vogue in this country; after all, existentialism has had a vogue. And yet the reason is not hard to find. Existentialism is more of a philosophical position taken for its view of human existence than a philosophy with a prescribed methodology. […] If one is to do more with existential criticism, he will have to use the methodology that existentialists like Sartre and Heidegger have used[…]

(4)
The irreducibility of existentialism may distress literary scholars, as Marxism or Psychoanalysis, for example, are more easily reduced into graspable terminology. As Walter Kaufman points out, existentialism cannot be reduced to a single set of tenets: “Certainly, existentialism is not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets. The three writers who appear invariably on every list of ‘existentialists’—Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre—are not in agreement on essentials” (11). It is even less defined in its literary critical theory. The primary manifesto for existentialism, Being and Nothingness, was not necessarily written as a critical literary guide—although it is easily applied as such. Furthermore, Being and Nothingness is a relatively inaccessible text, as it considers the history of philosophy in its argument which easily alienates the average reader. It is the unfirm ground existentialism stands on that may attribute to the reluctance of scholars to utilize it in literary analysis. Thus, this study is almost entirely Sartrean, so I will not have to deal with contradictory tenets. Sartre is the most known existentialist, and Being and Nothingness is generally considered the principal text of modern existentialism. My only digression is bringing in Albert Camus for “As I Lay Dying and The Myth of Sisyphus.”

III. Thesis Chapter Summary

Chapter One: Existential Authenticity in As I Lay Dying: Hell Is Other People.

(Yes yes yes yes yes.)
Thesis: Darl is authentic.

Proof: 1. Darl is authentic because of his ability to consciously define himself and resist bad faith. 2. Darl has come to terms with his own inevitable death. 3. Darl imposes his consciousness onto others.

Concepts: Sartre’s bad faith (mauvais foi) and the look (le regarde)

Chapter Two: As I Lay Dying and The Myth of Sisyphus

Thesis: Cash Bundren is the absurd hero of As I Lay Dying.

Proof: Cash is heroic because of his stalwart will to endure an absurd odyssey—a ritual that lacks meaning and causes suffering.

Concepts: Albert Camus’ absurd individual.

Chapter Three: Faulkner’s Closest to God in The Sound and the Fury

Thesis: Benjamin Compson is Faulkner’s character that is closest to God while Quentin is a character who seeks to be closer to God.

Proof: Phenomenologically, Benjamin Compson represents the mythical contradictory union of Being-In-Itself-Being-For-Itself Sartre calls God because he is conscious yet outside of a temporal dimension, as he shows characteristics of both Being-In-Itself and Being-For-Itself in synthesis.

Concepts: Sartre’s Being-In-Itself (en-soi) and Being-For-Itself (pour-soi).
CHAPTER ONE

EXISTENTIAL AUTHENTICITY IN AS I LAY DYING: HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE. (YES YES YES YES YES YES)

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit. (Hamlet: 2: 2: 504-506)

Jean-Paul Sartre would argue that it is definitely “not monstrous” for anyone to consciously build the self; in fact, he would say that to do otherwise is mauvais fois (bad faith). Our identities, like those of actors on the stage, are built entirely upon our consciously made decisions. Several critics of As I Lay Dying have noted similarities between Darl and Hamlet beyond their apparent bouts with lunacy. What they have in common, relevant to an existential reading of the novel, is their authenticity. The contrast between the idea of authentic and inauthentic life is often discussed by existential theorists such as Heidegger and Sartre (Kaufman 50). According to Richard Calhoun, “Heidegger makes it clear that our daily being-in-the-world is inauthentic in that it is seldom in our control. What he calls authentic existence is achieved only when a means is discovered to rescue the individual from doing ‘as One does’ to doing as he chooses to do himself” (5). According to The Oxford Companion to Philosophy, where Heidegger and Sartre differ in this discussion is that Heidegger “argues that our emotions characteristically reflect cares and concerns that we have not chosen” while Sartre “argues that we choose our emotions as much as any other aspect of our life, and that the

12 The precise term “authenticity” never appears in Being and Nothingness. The translator infers authenticity as a self-recovery from bad faith: “It is indifferent whether one is in good or in bad faith, because bad faith apprehends good faith and slides to the very origin of the project of good faith, that does not mean that we can not radically escape bad faith. But this supposes a self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted. This self-recovery we shall call authenticity, the description of which has no place” (116). Being and Nothingness. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square, 1984.
basic goals of our lives cohere around a fundamental project which is itself the product of an ‘original choice’—a choice which, since it provides us with all the motivations we have, must itself be unmotivated, or ‘absurd.’ (260). Thus, Sartre believes in total freedom, as even our emotions are a matter of choice. What we can infer from Sartre and Heidegger is that an existentially authentic individual is one, who avoids bad faith (self-deception) and who has come to terms with his own inevitable death. The authentic individual makes him or herself what he or she will. The only ground an individual can stand on is his or her past, but the future is open, as an individual is a capacity to become. The individual is free to make him or herself what he or she will. The individual exists for him or herself—forces his or her soul to its own conceit.

In terms of existentialism, Darl is the most genuine of the Bundrens until the very end of *As I Lay Dying*. He knows exactly who he is, and he is nothing more than his own conception. I intend to prove that his values and ethics are freely constituted in a manner unlike the majority of the Bundren family, who tend to fall inactively into their roles and traditional mores. The idea that Darl scatters his consciousness—sometimes supernaturally into the minds of those around him—is not uncommon among Faulkner’s critics; however, they fail to recognize that Darl’s acute ability to step out of himself—effectively imposing his consciousness—makes his identity authentic. For example, John K. Simon writes: “Darl’s meditation on existence questions his own authenticity because of his tendency to diffuse himself everywhere, in dream or imagination” (105). This statement seems to presuppose a fixed identity or essence or nature to an individual, as if one’s identity could ever exist unquestioned as a brute fact. I argue, with Sartre’s ideas of the self in mind, that Darl’s “tendency to diffuse himself everywhere” is a *declaration* of his authenticity, rather than a questioning of it. Darl is authentic because he consciously constructs his identity; he has come to terms with his own death, and he imposes his own consciousness onto others through the objectification of the Other.

Before I proceed, the sense in which I use the term “identity” requires some clarification. According to Sartre, my profession is not a part of my identity. Being a

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waiter or a policeman is not part of my identity because my profession is never fixed and is contingent upon my choices:

I can not be he, [café waiter] I can only play *at being* him; that is, imagine to myself that I am he. And thereby I affect him with nothingness. In vain do I fulfill the functions of a café waiter. I can be he only in the neutralized mode, as the actor is Hamlet, by mechanically making the *typical gestures* of my state and by aiming at myself as an imaginary café waiter through those gestures taken as an “analogue.” […] I am a waiter in the mode of *being what I am not.*

(*Being and Nothingness* 103)

I could quit being a waiter or a policeman at any moment. I can only *play* at being a waiter. In fact, existentially all of my traits are never fixed as part of my identity. My cowardice or generosity or heroism is always contingent upon new decisions. In this sense, I find myself floundered and anguished amid a world of possibilities with only the affirmations of freedom, reason, and self-consciousness to stand upon. What is fixed, though always as reconstruction, is my past; however, man is still not the sum of what he has, but the totality of what he does not yet have, or what he could have. My past does not dictate my decisions in the present, although the past may *inform* those decisions: “It [the Past] is the origin and springboard of all my actions” (*Being and Nothingness* 201).

Humanity is always a capacity to become and condemned to be free. Therefore, aside from the affirmations of reason, freedom, an individual’s past, and self-consciousness—aside from those traits which constitute an individual in his being—an individual’s identity is always in question.

Sartre provides us with a simple metaphor to explain the process of identity formation in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Imagine a woman in a restaurant, looking for someone she knows. The restaurant is crowded. How does she go about finding the one person she knows? She looks at each person she passes and says to herself, “I’m not looking for you, I’m not looking for you, I’m not looking for you,” until she arrives at the person for whom she was looking. Sartre would argue that we choose our identity in precisely the same manner as a woman in the restaurant (*Being and Nothingness* 41-42). Cultural forces can certainly influence our perception of who we are; however, each action is always a matter of choice, and our prior actions—our past—is the only
affirmation of identity we can stand on. Everyone defines him or herself, consciously or unconsciously, by positing what we are not. We can never come to terms with what we are in terms of our essence or nature. Therefore, what really is at the heart of identity? Nothingness is at the core of our identity. We are only the sum of our actions—our existence precedes our essence.

The encounter with nothingness is a major existential theme, and it characterizes Darl’s experience (Bigelow 176). Early in As I Lay Dying, in Darl’s second monologue, we can immediately see Darl has already encountered nothingness in this striking philosophical moment,

And at night it is better still. I used to lie on the pallet in the hall, waiting until I could hear them all asleep, so I could get up and go back to the bucket. It would be black, the shelf black, the still surface of the water a round orifice in nothingness. [...] After that I was bigger, older. (11)

In this instance of self-revelation, Darl sees nothing in the bucket just as he sees it in himself. He comes into a philosophical actualization of his own consciousness—after that I was bigger, older—as a self-actualized fluid and flexuous Being-For-Itself. Being-For-Itself is the mode of being, according to Sartre, confined to humans. The nature of the For-Itself is to constantly posit what it is not. Being-For-Itself is defined in Being and Nothingness as “consciousness conceived as a lack of Being […] By bringing Nothingness into the world the For-Itself can stand out from Being and judge other beings by knowing what it is not” (800). Darl uses the perceptual metaphor of the bucket black with water to express to the reader his realization of his own lack of being. And indeed, what can be said of Darl’s identity—his traits or pattern of behavior—other than it is as a round orifice in nothingness? Cheryl Lester describes Darl as a passive participant in the Bundren odyssey: “Darl, more observer than participant, inherits his mother’s difference from her rural surroundings, standing apart to observe others in the environment with an acuity that people find uncomfortable and ‘queer’ (44). Ironically, Darl’s monologues are by far the most plentiful in the novel; yet, the reader finds himself without any solid characterization of Darl other than he is philosophically inquisitive, though not in a traditional academic sense. It is Darl’s motive that is veiled to the reader. Darl’s admittance of an ultimately ungraspable self, as we see in the perceptual metaphor
of the bucket, demonstrates his first step into genuine consciousness—a sort of awakening where he suddenly becomes philosophically “bigger, older.”

Darl is not the only character in *As I Lay Dying* to encounter nothingness. Doc Peabody and Addie are both aware of what lies at the core of being. Darl and Doc Peabody and Addie constitute some of the most intellectually mature characters of the novel. Peabody is a medical doctor and Addie is a school teacher—both rely on their wits in their professions. Darl, however, does not have an academic background. Nicolas Tredell states, “[n]o doubt Darl’s speculations on being and nothingness far exceed the capacity for abstraction and reasoning of an uneducated young Mississippi farmer” (100). Several critics, in addition to Tredell, have noted this apparent incongruity, but I disagree with all of them. Formal education is not a requisite for philosophical curiosity—particularly existential curiosity which has been described by Walter Kaufman, author of a popular existential anthology, as a revolt against traditional philosophy, and one might even point at Faulkner himself for proof of this point (11). Academic ramifications on being and nothingness came about with Sartre, whose capstone *Being and Nothingness*, was not published until 1943. Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* was published in 1930. It would seem then that Faulkner’s ruminations on being and nothingness, as manifested in Darl, managed to precede those of Sartre. Darl is an exceptionally mature character in *As I Lay Dying*, but perhaps Faulkner is making the point through Darl’s ruminations on existence that this sort of elevated insight into the world is just as accessible for an “uneducated young Mississippi farmer.” To return to my point, Darl’s encounter with nothingness is just as viable as that of Peabody and Addie, despite his youth and lack of education; yet, each character articulates this existential understanding of identity in very different ways. In his monologue Peabody says,

That’s what they mean by the love that passeth understanding: that pride, that furious desire to hide that abject nakedness which we bring here with us, carry with us into operating rooms, carry stubbornly and furiously with us into the earth again. (45-46)

Abject nakedness is the nothingness at the core of identity. Darl never uses pride to hide his own nakedness. Calvin Bedient claims “[i]t is only his own identity that is obscure to
Darl—the failure of the mirror to reflect itself” (144). I argue, however, that Darl does see his identity. Darl’s identity isn’t obscure; he sees it as nothingness—as capacity to become. Bedient is correct not to describe Darl as a “mirror.” Darl does not simply reflect the world around him on an unconscious level.

Addie is also obsessed with nothingness and emptiness. Addie is quite aware of abject nakedness; however, she refers to this nothingness as a lack filled by arbitrary symbols and language:

He had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn’t need a word for that anymore than for pride or fear. (172)

Addie believes that language is the medium which tries to fill this void. She understands the impotency of trying to convey the signified with empty signifiers. She sees that words often attempt to conceal the nakedness of being because only action can provide a human being with definition. Addie also believes that gender roles are void: “I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn’t care whether there was a word for it or not” (171-172). Addie also mentions pride as does Doc Peabody, but she mentions pride as a word rather than a concept. In the majority of her single narrative, she demonstrates a frustration with others who shape their identity through words which is a signification of what Sartre would call bad faith—a lie to oneself (Being and Nothingness 87).

Bad faith or self-deception is a trait of the inauthentic. Bad faith (mauvais foi) usually stems from an inability to understand that at the core of one’s identity is vacancy, and victims of bad faith try to fill their consciousness with a false sense of being or essence—such as a value system adopted from someone else. Bad faith is a contradictory view of self-consciousness, in which we believe something but also deny it. Sartre uses the example of a woman who lets a man hold her hand yet simultaneously believes her hand is just lying there since she is a conscious being observing that hand: “she realizes herself as not being her own body, and she contemplates it as though from above as a passive object to which events can happen (Being and Nothingness 98). Some victims of bad faith are, in Sartre’s view, inauthentic because they drift unknowingly into
preconceived roles and identities dictated by society. Another example of this could be a person claiming he or she could not go to war because he or she is a coward, as if being a coward were a fact. Robert Slabey sees the contrast between *mauvais foi* and authentic existence woven into the entire novel:

Integrated into the total structure of the novel, the images suggest a basic contrast or valuative division between appearances and reality, death and life, non-being and being, negation and affirmation, pseudo-existence and authentic existence. (20)

Pseudo-existence is essentially bad faith, indicative of characters such as Anse and Dewey Dell, who fail to take responsibility for their actions and function through false affirmations. Anse actually blames the road for his problems in his narrative: “Durn that road[,]” (35) “if it hadn’t been no road come there, he wouldn’t a got them[,]” (36) “it seems hard that a man in his need could be so flouted by a road” (38). Dewey Dell decides to have sex with Lafe because her cotton sack is full: “if the sack is full, I cannot help it. It will be that I had to do it all the time and I cannot help it” (27). This portion of the novel is remarkably similar to Sartre’s story of the woman in bad faith. Dewey Dell wills herself as a passive sexual object; yet simultaneously, she thinks of herself as an actively conscious participant demonstrated by her ability to set a contingent “if the sack is full.” Darl is not a victim of bad faith early in the novel, unlike the majority of his family. As we have earlier noted, Darl has already confronted nothingness and accepted the absolute realm of possibility that is his self-consciousness, but I would argue that he does fall into bad faith at the end of *As I Lay Dying*. Darl’s slippage into third person narration describing himself on his way to the insane asylum seems to suggest the loss of his self-constructed identity, as if he has become another spectator viewing himself as a passive participant: “Darl has gone to Jack son. They put him on the train, laughing, down the long car laughing, the heads turning like the heads of owls when he passed” (253).

Jewel, like most of the Bundrens, defines himself through a false affirmation of his core being rather than as a vacant capacity to become. In the following lines from one of Darl’s monologues, we can see Darl specifically noting Jewel’s false affirmation: “I don’t know what I am. I don’t know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not” (80). Sartre defines human reality
as “being which it is not and which is not what it is” (*Being and Nothingness* 100). Darl does not know what he is because he has already encountered nothingness. In a sense, Sartre posits I think therefore I am not. Jewel assumes he is because he has not encountered nothingness. Jewel has not even contemplated “whether he is or not.” Jewel may think “he is” but existentially he is actually “what he is not.” He unconsciously conceals his nakedness of being, favoring the deceptive premise of the affirmation of his essence—knowing what he is, as if he were a fact.

We have concluded that passively falling into a role—not forcing the soul to its own conceit—is a sign of psychic inauthenticity according to existential philosophy because according Sartre, even our most intimate feelings are subject to original choice. All human motivation is subject to free will (Baldwin 260). Therefore, we should now turn our attention to Darl’s resistance to so-called “natural” roles. Hamlet expressed distaste for the role of his father’s avenger. He, too, felt like a doll in many ways. Darl displays resistance to the most primal of roles—the role of male procreator. In this quotation, we see Darl’s distaste for what the critic Doreen Fowler eloquently called “nature’s blind call to copulation and death” (25): “Squatting, Dewey Dell’s wet dress shapes for the dead eyes of three blind men those mammalian ludicrosities which are the horizons and the valleys of the earth” (164). It seems ironic that Darl sees death in the eyes of men who are leering at female fertility; however, he merely recognizes that all life eventually concludes with death and is, therefore, absurd. He also notes the absurdity of the endless, meaningless cycle of procreation. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ludicrosity has two applicable connotations. One connotation is in the Latinate sense: lude as in play, indicating mammalian ludicrosities as objects of sexual play. The other sense is ludicrous as absurd. Ludicrosity can also mean absurdly laughable. Both connotations were common at the time. A synonym for ludicrous is laughable, which is interesting because Darl’s final fall to madness occurs with a fit of maniacal laughter whose conclusive motive is absent. The concept of an absurd world in view of death’s endless cycle is relevant to all existentialists. Existentialists see life as inexplicable and unreasonable; yet correlatively, there is nobility in those who come to terms with their own deaths and manage to manufacture their own meaning and “live in the awareness of one’s redoubtable and inescapable Nothingness” (Ciancio 85). Martin
Heidegger believed that we can only truly live after we have approached the existential necessity of coming to terms with our own demise. Most people avoid the question. But in its essence, quite simply, life is ludicrous. Darl has already followed sexual feelings for his sister to the inevitable conclusion—death. He sees in her breasts the simultaneous signifier of both death and life. Darl, in this instance, views consciousness as Marcelian—broad, collective, and timeless (Sowder 154). Consciousness transcends death. The dead and the living are entirely intertwined which is certainly a lesson one can pull from *As I Lay Dying* because Addie’s will is what ultimately prevails. As Charles Palliser states, “Darl sees living people as in a sense already dead” (627). Darl contemplates the natural cycle of human sexuality and reproduction reductio ad absurdum.

Darl’s most revealing narrative in the novel occurs after Cash breaks his leg at the river which unveils Darl’s belief in his core nothingness, thus his freedom to act: “How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings: in sunset we fall into furious attitudes, dead gestures of dolls” (207). This moment in Darl’s monologue is the most popular among Faulkner’s critics because of its richness of expression and certainly because of its ambiguity. The idea of raveling out rather than in displays the existential ideal of free will. One is reminded of threads in a tapestry unraveling. The past is the tapestry that ravels outward into nothingness. In Faulkner, individual lives are unraveled rather than sown. The future, as identified in this quote, is completely vacant: “no-wind, no-sound.” Human consciousness requires nothingness in order for an individual to have choice. An individual must never fully know what he or she is. Humankind is condemned to act freely and responsibly. Darl also reveals his disgust for roles, which is an important theme here. The “weary gestures wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings” could refer to any number of perfunctory tasks: eating, drinking, sleeping, having sex—all recapitulated over and over again. Charles Palliser suggests that the image of broken “puppets” indicates that Darl is expressing the belief that “human actions are predetermined as a consequence of the pressure of the past” (626). I find it just as easy to argue the opposite on account of the very fact that the *dolls* do not have strings or hands operating those strings. Most of human life is mindless—regardless of free will or not—but that doesn’t mean we can’t engage in
“furious attitudes” at sunset. The fact that these attitudes are enacted at sunset is relevant according to a simple time metaphor. If morning is the past and afternoon is the present then the future must be the evening and sunset would imply the moment just before the present achieves the future—the very hour of consciousness where we are free to act. The final portion of the quote, “dead gestures of dolls,” does not refer to the death of our free will, as Charles Palliser would interpret without much explication of this complex quote, but rather to the death of meaning in the world (Palliser 626). A dead gesture is one that holds no significance whatsoever. Darl is very much aware of both the repetition in life and the mindlessness, which he particularly notes in his family. He sees them caught in this mindless spool of existence, yet himself is caught in it too, but he is always free to act.

As I mentioned previously, the “no-strings” Darl speaks of touches on the concept of free will, an important concept to existentialist (Bigelow 177). Darl paints the image of a doll with no strings, which is why he never uses the word “puppet.”

We are all displaced in an ultimately incomprehensible universe—the source of unyielding existential anxiety. Feelings of alienation and the inherent disconnect between I and the Other constitute human experience. Everyone is doomed to be responsible for his or her own actions. Darl knows any “gesture” is “dead” due to a lack of meaning. The inevitable conclusion will always be death. Darl never deceives himself into thinking there is inherent purpose.

Despite Darl’s resistance to the value judgments of the Other--the value attached to a burial ritual for example--as absurd as they may be, he is not immune to their absorption. Sartre states: “I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself” (Kaufman 361). Therefore, humanity is by necessity reflexive since the other is “indispensable.” Darl does not resist this truth. Darl displays his self-reflexivity in his ability to imagine a different perspective looking at himself, which he does at the very beginning of *As I Lay Dying*: “Jewel and I come up from the field, following the path in single file. Although I am fifteen feet ahead of him, anyone watching us from the cottonhouse can see Jewel’s frayed and broken straw hat a full head above my own (3). Darl steps out of himself easily to imagine the glance of the
other at him; thus, he has a duality of perspective of the self in relation to the other (Schroader 43). Darl imagines the scene through the eyes of a bystander in the cotton house observing him and Jewel walking single file. He interprets himself through the mediation of an imagined other, and this is the first instance of his doing so. Darl’s consciousness takes shape in relation to another.

Darl seems to step into the thoughts of his other family members, but in Sartrean terms Darl imposes his self by projecting it outward. This imposition of the self is what Sartre calls “the look” or “the gaze.” The look (le regarde) is an existential idea that the Other is a threat to my existence:

Through the Other’s look I live myself as fixed in the midst of the world, as in danger, as irremediable. But I know neither what I am nor what is my place in this world, nor what face this world in which I am turns toward the Other.

(Being and Nothingness 268)

The “danger” is falling into a role I never consciously chose. I should not let the procrustean eyes of the Other mold my consciousness into the Other’s conceit. If I “know neither what I am nor what is my place in this world” then I cease to truly be authentically conscious. The look of the Other has shaped my identity. Conversely, I must impose my consciousness in order to remain authentic as well. As Homer Pettay notes, “[n]early every narrative concentrates upon observations, looks from others, and the narrators’ own gazes, Darl, especially, disturbs others with his eyes” (29). Through Darl’s look, he constantly seeks to objectify characters as we see in the descriptions of people in his monologues. Jewel’s face is reduced to wood and Dewey Dell’s breasts become the earth itself—those mammalian ludicrosities which are the horizons and valleys of the earth. One critic even suggests that the entire narrative structure of As I Lay Dying, with its alternating first person perspectives, is meant to display each characters’ objectification of Others through their looks (Simon 220). The look represents an inevitable competition of being, and Darl shows his resistance to and imposition of the look, thus, a resistance to prescribed roles.

The fact that Darl refers to himself in the third person several times throughout As I Lay Dying indicates how often he projects his own consciousness onto others. Doreen Fowler actually counted that Darl uses plural pronouns over fifty times in the novel. She
then logically concludes that Darl defines himself through his relationship with others (26). Darl manages to step into the minds of both Jewel and Dewey Dell to resist the limits that their consciousnesses (as the Other) can pose for Darl’s existence. Dewey Dell’s illegitimate child is also a secret Darl manages to uncover through his seemingly supernatural gaze. Darl interrogates Dewey Dell with his eyes, managing to pin her down: “It was then, and then I saw Darl and he knew. He said he knew without the words like he told me that ma is going to die without words, and I knew he knew because if he had said he knew with the words I would not have believed that he had been there and saw us” (27). Through Darl’s gaze, he exposes hidden secrets both Dewey Dell and Jewel would rather he not know. It is not surprising then, that Jewel and Dewey Dell are the characters who turn Darl into the authorities for burning down Gillespie’s barn. Jewel and Dewey Dell both express a desire to kill Darl. Jewel yells at the police to “[k]ill him, [k]ill the son of a bitch” when the authorities arrive to haul him off to the asylum in Jefferson (238). Jewel sees Darl as a threat and betrays him to the police. Dewey Dell fantasizes about killing Darl with a knife during the wagon ride to bury Addie’s coffin because she also considers him a threat: “I rose and took the knife from the streaming fish still hissing and I killed Darl” (121). It is through Darl’s gaze that he threatens both characters.

Darl’s eyes don’t seem to just threaten Dewey Dell or Jewel, but they seem to pierce right into Vernon Tull, as he explains in his monologue:

He [Darl] is looking at me. He dont say nothing; just looks at me with them queer eyes of hisn that makes folks talk. I always say it aint never been what he done so much or said or anything so much as how he looks at you. It’s like he had got into the inside of you, someway. Like somehow you was looking at yourself and your doings outen his eyes. (125)

These lines easily call to mind the victims of *le regarde* as “fixed in the midst of the world” since Tull feels as if he is viewing himself out of Darl’s eyes, as if Tull is pinned and wriggling beneath Darl’s gaze. Darl is forcing Tull to his conceit just through his look. In a way, Tull has temporarily lost himself in light of Darl’s pointed consciousness. Darl’s gaze objectifies him, and suddenly he becomes like another object in the world—static and subject to Darl’s acute perception. According to Sartre, “For the Other I am
seated as this inkwell is on the table; for the Other, I am leaning over the keyhole as this tree is bent by the wind” (Being and Nothingness 352). Tull has perceptually become as scenery through Darl’s look.

Darl’s eventual flight into madness occurs because he lowers himself by letting others define him. During the Bundren journey, he displays no feelings whatsoever concerning the burial of his dead mother. He also expresses no grief for her death. Darl eventually loses his authenticity when he unconsciously desires to care for his mother’s corpse as a result of accepting the value systems of conventional society. He gets swept up in a pathetic cause. He tries to burn down Gillespie’s barn to be rid of his mother’s corpse in an almost honorable way. Addie’s corpse has begun to decay and smell badly. It also has holes in it because of Vardaman’s desire to give his mother air. Darl effectively removes himself from his detached self and takes a definitive stance; however, the fact that his stance was not consciously chosen drives him mad. He has let others define him without his knowledge.

The last of Darl’s monologues in As I Lay Dying reveals the tragic loss of Darl’s authentic identity. Darl still steps out of himself, referring to himself in the third person, but he ceases to consciously define himself through negation. As critic Homer B. Pettey points out, “Darl’s madness […] is due to an inability to recognize his own perceptions as a network of symbols that do not convey reality” (27). Darl equates symbols with reality—signifiers as signifieds. Darl finally breaks into affirmation with the line “Yes yes yes yes yes” (253). He breaks into this affirmation three times in his final narrative. The first line contains five yes’s, then six, and then the last line we hear from Darl is eight yes’s. He ends in affirmation which is the antithesis of what we have seen from Darl throughout the novel. He previously relied on negation for his identity—the source of his authenticity. Until he chose to burn down Gillespie’s barn to afford his mother proper obsequies, he pursued the existential ideal of authenticity. He was genuine. Darl’s final maniacal laughter is directed toward an absurd world, but he is effectively laughing at himself because the absurd world and its inhabitants ultimately defined him without his conscious knowledge. Sartre’s closing line of No Exit, “Hell is other people,” seems extremely relevant to Darl’s view of the world. He lost his conscious, authentic identity and was driven mad. Cash’s final words in the novel seem to approximate Darl’s
encounter with a ludicrous and insensible world: “But it is better so for him. This world is not his world; this life his life” (261).
Is there anything heroic about the Bundren odyssey? Indeed, in sum it seems all too tempting to label the Bundrens as pathetic if one considers both the overall idiocy of their decisions and the scarcity of their fortune and luck. Is there any sort of dignity in their endeavor to bury Addie Bundren? This essay seeks to explore the accountability of the Bundrens collectively in their tragic and comedic odyssey in order to assess each character’s responsibility for his or her actions, and I intend to redefine the heroic nature of Cash Bundren, whom critics have traditionally labeled the heroic figure of the novel. Joseph Blotner states that “Critics of the novel have pretty generally agreed that the Bundrens are poor whites, even ‘depraved hillmen…’ Vardaman has been called ‘moronic,’ and Darl ‘insane.’ Dewey Dell is dull and immoral or amoral. Jewel is sullen, violent, and vicious. Anse is shiftless and no account, a perennial burden to his neighbors and trial to his family. Cash alone with his self-denial, self-restraint, integrity, and human dignity, rises above their level” (16). Although my reading certainly doesn’t dovetail with that characterization of most of the Bundrens, I do find common ground in their appraisal of Cash Bundren, who is much more than a simple materialistic carpenter.

Perhaps the most positive aspect of the Bundrens is simply their willingness to keep going in light of adversity in order to fulfill Addie’s dying wish. However, I have trouble accepting this assessment, recalling to mind Einstein’s definition for insanity as trying the same thing over and over and expecting different results. With the exception of Darl, each Bundren is set on getting to Jefferson whether to bury Addie or fulfill a personal want (false teeth, bananas, toy train, a gramophone, an abortion). Perhaps the defining Bundren failure is their lack of revision—their incapacity at problem-solving. One of their neighbors, Samson, makes this point clear in his monologue: “I notice how it takes a lazy man, a man that hates moving, to get set on moving once he does get started off, the same as he was set on staying still, like it aint the moving he hates so much as the
starting and stopping. And like he would be kind of proud of whatever come up to make the moving or the setting still look hard” (114).

There is no more dignity in simply moving forward in light of adversity than there would be in banging one’s head against a wall over and over—the context of the moving forward or sitting still is all important. The capacity to endure is not noble in itself. The question we need to consider is to what extent is the family responsible for their own humiliation? To what extent is their adversity their own fault, the plain result of their own decisions? To what extent is their adversity completely beyond their control due to external forces? In order to fully explore these questions, we need to look closely at each Bundren and assess both the quality of their decisions and what might just be expressed as their fortune.

Anse Bundren is the progenitor of Bundren suffering. I find great value in Doc Peabody’s humorously recommended cure for the family while he’s stripping the concrete off of Cash’s leg: “Concrete,” I said. “God Almighty, why didn’t Anse carry you to the nearest sawmill and stick your leg in the saw? That would have cured it. Then you all could have stuck his head into the saw and cured a whole family” (240). Anse is in charge of the family, although in a way, Addie still is in charge of the family. The entire motive behind the death march to Jefferson is on account of Addie whose reason for burial, according to Cora Tull, is to escape the Bundrens: “[…] because she was not cold in the coffin before they were carting her forty miles away to bury her, flouting the will of God to do it. Refusing to let her lie in the same earth with those Bundrens” (23). In a way, Anse is acting as Addie’s puppet who rules him even beyond the grave. Nevertheless, Anse must get Addie to Jefferson by his lead. All of his children obey his command, and although his reasoning is often unsound, they generally follow his orders. The root of Anse’s misfortune seems to lie in his repeated refusal to accept responsibility for his actions. Anse frequently claims that he’s ever a luckless man. In one rather humorous passage, Anse finds that the road itself is the root of his problems: “Durn that road. […] Making me pay for Cash having to get them carpenter notions when if it hadn’t been no road come there, he wouldn’t a got them” (35-35). Anse is also indecisive. One critic describes Anse as “inaction incarnate” which is an overstatement but not by much (Slabey 15). Many passages during the beginning of the novel are filled with him
claiming “it would mean three dollars” in reference to being gone a few days in order to make a buck but risk missing out on Addie’s death. Even after the tragedy at the river, all Anse can seem to do to contribute is wipe the mud off of the wheels of the carriage with a handful of leaves. Anse is the leader but this does not excuse the remainder of his family from accountability. It is Anse’s idea to make three bucks thereby missing Addie’s death and delaying the journey long enough so that the flood waters rise which makes fording the river much more difficult than it should have been. Anse is the plague—a plague of poor and indecisive judgment and unsound egocentric reasoning. Anse even robs his Jewel of his treasured horse without telling him. And after they endure all of the tragedies of their journey--what does Anse forget? A shovel. He forgets to bring a shovel to bury his dead wife. What might easily be inferred by that short sight is that Anse is very selfish. He is really more interested in getting a new set of teeth than burying his wife. When Anse discovers Addie has died he says, “God’s will be done,” he says. “Now I can get them teeth” (52).

What one may easily infer from Addie’s monologue is that she’s somewhat selfish and narcissistic, although her monologue makes reference to certain sacrifices, in particular, she sacrifices her aloneness for her family: “my aloneness had been violated over and over each day” (172). Nevertheless, as one critic points out, Addie looks at people in terms of function and use: “Addie views her children as tangible […] they are part of her obscene economy of exchange and payment, as the name Jewel and Cash certainly suggest” (Pettey 39). The reader can easily see her lack of empathy or compassion just from the opening line of her monologue in reference to her distaste for her job as a school teacher: “In the afternoon when school was out and the last one had left with his little dirty snuffling nose, instead of going home I would go down the hill to the spring where I could be quiet and hate them” (169). Cora Tull observes how selfish the Bundren family is for the most part, asserting that Darl is the only character with any natural affection. Addie’s narration of when Anse proposed to her is accounted as a cold business proposal: “But you’ve got a house. They tell me you’ve got a house and a good farm. And you live there alone, doing for yourself, do you?” He just looked at me, turning the hat in his hands. “A new house,” I said. “Are you going to get married?” (171). Furthermore, Addie even viewed her kids as part of this marriage transaction:
“She [Cora] would tell me what I owed to my children and to Anse and to God. I gave Anse the children. I did not ask for them” (174). If one is to hold the Bundrens accountable for their materialism, one must point the finger heavily at the parents since excessively materialistic values gave rise to ulterior motives on the burial trip to Jefferson. Both Anse and Addie never once display the virtue of human empathy, as they view fellow human beings in terms of functionality and use.

Yet it would be quite a cop-out to hold Anse and Addie solely accountable for all Bundren misfortune lest we pay homage to the phrase “I was only following orders.” Anse’s children made their decisions just the same as him, and even some of the children are independently guilty of not taking responsibility for their actions. Dewey Dell is on par with Anse. She has a bad habit of blaming outside factors rather than taking personal responsibility for her actions. Dewey Dell’s entire conflict rests in her unwanted pregnancy since her boyfriend, Lafe, is apparently unwilling to marry her and care for the child. Although due to Lafe’s irresponsibility, I think one must sympathize; however, Dewey Dell’s pregnancy could have been prevented by her. She decided to engage in intercourse with Lafe for a ludicrous reason:

We picked on down the row, the woods getting closer and closer and the secret shade, picking on into the secret shade with my sack and Lafe’s sack. Because I said will I or wont I when the sack was half full because I said if the sack is full when we get to the woods it wont be me. I said if it dont mean for me to do it the sack will not be full and I will turn up the next row but if the sack is full, I cannot help it. It will be that I had to do it all the time and I cannot help it. And we picked on toward the secret shade and our eyes would drown together touching on his hands and my hands and I didn’t say anything. I said “What are you doing?” and he said “I am picking into your sack.” And so it was full when we came to the end of the row and I could not help it. (27)

The reasoning here represents a simple psychological trick. What this passage suggests is Dewey Dell’s indecision and irresponsibility. Jean-Paul Sartre claimed man desires to be as solid as a thing. Humanity seeks to be a cog in bureaucratic machinery in order to evade the crushing responsibility of decision. Dewey Dell’s reasoning here represents textbook self-deception (mauvais foi) which is a self-contradictory form of
self-consciousness. She simultaneously posits her body as an unconscious object and as a being of choice—thus the game of the cotton sack. She knows she should not have sex with Lafe; yet, instinctually she wants to have sex with Lafe. Therefore, she throws the weight of her burden onto something seemingly beyond her control—the amount of produce that happens to fall into her sack. She convinces herself that she’s left the decision up to chance; however, she hasn’t even done that because she can control the amount she picks into her sack; furthermore, Lafe can control whether or not the sack will be full. Dewey Dell wants to have sex with Lafe but not be held responsible for that action or face the consequences of such an action. She wants to be a thing. She wants the external forces of the world to dictate her behavior, so she can say she had no choice in the matter. This sort of thinking illustrated in the above passage is on par with Anse’s rationale for blaming the road for his problems or always claiming he’s “ever a luckless man.” Both posit themselves as passive participants in their own reality. Both Anse and Dewey Dell seem to cower beneath the burden of their choice—fundamentally unwilling to accept their condemnation to freedom.

One motivation for going to Jefferson aside from a desire to bury her dead mother is to find a way to abort her unborn child whether by some type of medicine or procedure. Indeed, even Cash and Vardaman have secret and selfish reasons for going to Jefferson: Cash wants a gramophone and Vardaman wants a toy train thereby making Darl and Jewel the only characters without selfish motivations for going to Jefferson (Palliser 630). Vernon Tull is acquainted with this overwhelmingly selfish family, noting at the flooded river that “They would risk the fire and the earth and the water and all just to eat a sack of bananas” (140). His theory for the Bundrens’ motive on this journey posits that the Bundrens don’t even consider Addie’s dying wish with much consideration. Tull mentions the sack of bananas as a synecdoche for the material desires of the family. Many alternate motives for the journey to Jefferson aside from burying Addie may just be coincidental; however, does one ever find sorrow overtly expressed for Addie’s death at any point in the novel? Is there any lamentation whatsoever for Addie? The answer is no, and no matter how closely you read the novel you will not see remorse for Addie ever expressed in words. The closest you can get is Jewel’s rescue of her corpse as it cruises down the river and perhaps with the act of burying Addie. After much speculation, I am
willing to conclude that overall the Bundren family is a selfish family with perhaps the exception of Cash and possibly Jewel. Anse wants his teeth, and in the process of burying his dead wife in Jefferson manages to take on a new wife. How long did he grieve? Dewey Dell wants to get rid of her pregnancy and eat bananas. Vardaman wants to eat bananas and gaze upon toy trains.

Jewel and Darl are two ambiguous characters and assessing the quality of their decisions and their willingness to be responsible for their actions is problematic. However, I would not consider either heroic: Jewel on account of his distempered, overly emotional disposition and vengeful desire to kill his own brother and Darl on account of his lack of action and attempt to burn down an innocent man’s barn. The issue with Jewel is that we only get one section of his narrative, so the reader is largely disconnected from his motivation. The only fault in terms of responsibility we may infer in Jewel is that he is ashamed that he is a bastard child—the product of a secret affair between the preacher Whitfield and his mother Addie. Somehow Darl discovers this secret—the how is left unclear by Faulkner. At the climax (arguably) of the novel, Jewel reveals to the reader just how crucial it is for Jewel that this secret remain a secret. In the following scene narrated by Cash, officers have arrived to arrest Darl for burning down Gillespie’s barn, and Darl resists,

…the fellows [officers] had to quit and hold her [Dewey Dell] and her clawing and clawing at him like a wild cat, while the other one and pa and Jewel threwed Darl down and held him lying on his back looking up at me. [Cash] “I thought you would have told me,” he said. “I never thought you wouldn’t have.” “Darl,” I said. But he fought again, him and Jewel and the fellow, and the other one holding Dewey Dell and Vardaman yelling and Jewel saying, “Kill him. Kill the son of a bitch.” (237-238)

There are two rational motives for Jewel’s desire to have Darl killed. One is that he is angry with Darl for attempting to burn down the barn containing the rotting corpse of his dead mother. After all, such a feat would, perhaps in Jewel’s mind, devalue all of the strain and suffering the Bundrens had to endure just to bury Addie in Jefferson. Jewel is the one who saves Addie’s body from the burning barn. The second is that he wants the secret of his bastard ancestry concealed for good just as Dewey Dell wants the secret of
her unwanted pregnancy concealed for good. Whether or not Jewel is a bastard is existentially irrelevant because Jewel had absolutely no choice in the matter. One cannot be held responsible for something one did not decide. Jewel, as all humankind, is only the product of his actions—he has no essence. Jewel’s motive to silence Darl is founded on a premise without meaning; therefore, his action in the above passage is completely illogical. Yet, this is consistent with Jewel’s character. Jewel is easily the most emotional Bundren, prone to fits of anger and constant cursing. The most common phrase the reader may observe from Jewel is “son of a bitch” or “goddamn you.” It is Jewel’s emotionality that affects the quality of his decisions. Nevertheless, Jewel’s love for his mother, though expressed ambivalently and often violently, seems genuine enough: “It would just be me and her [Addie] on a high hill and me rolling the rocks down the hill at their faces, picking them up and throwing them down the hill faces and teeth and all by God” (15). This fierce love, which Jewel displays in the intense manner in which he drags her coffin alone up a hill is similar to the type of love he holds for his horse—intense and passionate (Slabey 17). The only fault we may find in Jewel is his denial of his bastard heritage which existentially should mean nothing as the concept of identity is simultaneously reflective and absorbent and never determinant at its core, although one must appreciate the social pressure of the 1920’s and its stigma against illegitimacy. But this sensitivity over his illegitimacy motivates him to encourage the officers arresting Darl to kill him. The realization of Jewel’s self-posed essence may be inferred from Darl’s frequent mention of Jewel’s “wooden face.” Facial metaphors in this specific philosophical context are not uncommon in Faulkner, as Joe Christmas from A Light in August, another character who fiercely seeks to deny contingency, is described as having a rocklike quality (Palumbo 26). Even the name Jewel implies compact solidity of matter. Jewel’s name is literally a type of stone. Humanity strives to be as impenetrable as a stone—to falsely and fiercely posit his own essence in order to escape contingency. As Sartre tells us in his Portrait of an Antisemite, there are people who are attracted by the durability of stone. They want to be massive and impenetrable; they do not want to change: where would change lead them? This is an original fear of oneself and a fear of truth. And what frightens
them is not the content of truth, which they do not even suspect, but the very form
of the true—that thing of indefinite approximation. It is as if their very existence
were perpetually in suspension. They want to exist all at once and right away.
They want to adopt a mode of life in which [...] one never seeks but that which
one has already found, in which one never becomes other than what one already
was. (Kaufman 333)

Jewel does not recognize himself as a “thing of indefinite approximation,” that is, a being
of complete flexibility pending new decisions. Jewel is by far the most impenetrable
Bundren and the most animalistic. Cora’s friend Eula also mentions that women in the
area would be very disappointed if Jewel got married, suggesting Jewel is prone to sexual
passion as well, or at least emanates sexual passion. Even Darl’s odd and frequent
comment that Jewel’s mother is a horse seems to have some applicability in terms of
Jewel’s posited nature. Jewel is the contrast character to further develop Darl. He is a
seemingly solid being in essence. Darl indicates this difference quite bluntly in his
monologue: “I don’t know what I am. I don’t know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is,
because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not” (80). Darl lacks a
self-posited essence. Darl is fluid in not knowing what he is. Jewel is solid but falsely
so—because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not. Critic
Elizabeth Hayes explicates this quote, suggesting that Jewel is unaware that the question
of being even exists: “Jewel never questions who or what he is; moreover, he doesn’t
even know that a question exists” (56). Jewel is unaware that he is only the sum of his
actions—a fluid being who cannot wholly hinge on the past as his affirmation.

Darl is, in my opinion, the one truly responsible and authentic Bundren; however,
I would not term him heroic as he is constantly so wrapped up in his own observations
and insights that he engages in little action in the novel, functioning more as an observer
and passive analyst (Lester 44). One might infer from Darl’s lack of contribution to his
family’s plight that he considers their plight absurd and meaningless. However, he does
attempt to burn down Gillespie’s barn with his mother and the coffin inside—an
ambiguous gesture. Did he do this out of respect for his mother or in the selfish interest
of ending the absurd journey or burning up their burden in flames? Ironically, even
though the reader is given access to his thoughts, the reader still cannot discern the
motive for his actions. It would seem that with Darl the distance between thought and action is very great indeed.

Cash is the eldest son of Anse and Addie Bundren. He is referenced several times as a good carpenter, and all in all he seems by far the most level-headed of the Bundrens. Cash just seems to be ill-fated, almost powerless to combat the idiocy of Anse’s decisions. Cash broke his leg when he fell off of a church prior in time to when the novel begins. Then, perhaps a month or two later, he breaks that same leg while trying to get the wagon holding the coffin across the river. As Doc Peabody humorously notes, “If you [Cash] had anything you could call luck, you might say it was lucky this is the same leg you broke before” (240). One of the few specific faults I find in Cash in terms of his judgment was his willingness to allow concrete to harden over his leg. A handyman such as himself should certainly have known better. However, one might suppose that the pain from his broken leg could have attributed to his lack of judgment in this instance. After all, Cash needed something to steady his leg while riding in the wagon, or else he’d suffer unbearable pain with each movement of the wagon. What we find in Cash’s personality is simultaneously his weakness and strength. Cash displays a remarkable willingness to endure. This is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, he can swallow all of this misfortune and none of it seems to burden him. Even after he’s broken his leg, he won’t even admit that his leg hurts while Peabody strips the concrete off of his leg undoubtedly along with a layer of skin. He endures the pain caused by riding in the wagon with a broken leg without ever voicing the discomfort.

There is little moral ambiguity the reader may view in Cash. One of the few chinks in Cash’s armor one might infer is the fact that he sympathizes with Darl for burning down Gillespie’s barn with the corpse of his mother inside and Cash’s desire to purchase a gramophone while in Jefferson, supplying a personal motivation for the odyssey to Jefferson. Cash also kept silent knowing that Darl would be handed over to the police for burning down Gillespie’s barn rather than warn Darl; however, Cash had to do in this in light of Darl’s slip into madness. Darl sees this silence as a betrayal: “I thought you would have told me” […] “I never thought you wouldn’t have” (237). On the surface, Cash seems to have betrayed his brother, Darl. One critic goes so far as to call Cash a “Judas,” but I sincerely doubt we should accept Darl as the Christ-figure

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(Rossky 181). Darl burned down a barn and tried to burn up the corpse of his mother. Cash’s decision was lawful, and Darl’s continuance in the journey as a criminal could have threatened the entire journey itself and the security of the family. Cash made this decision in order to aid the family even though his own brother had to be taken away to an insane asylum. Cash believed that the insane asylum would be best for Darl: “But it is better so for him. This world is not his world; this life his life” (261). With the act of burning down Gillespie’s barn Darl proved he is both a danger to himself and others: “’It’ll be better for you, I [Cash] said. ‘Down there it’ll be quiet, with none of the bothering and such. It’ll be better for you, Darl,’ I said” (238).

Cash is the hero of the novel—an absurd and tragic hero but a hero nonetheless (Simon 107). In most every Western epic the hero has one major defining virtue. In The Iliad Achilles has his strength. In the Odyssey Odysseus has his intelligence and wile. In the Aeneid Aeneas has his pietas—devotion to the gods, duty, and family (in that order). We’re all well aware As I Lay Dying is no epic; however, it has been referred to by numerous critics as an odyssey and an odyssey needs a hero. Faulkner also had a classical motivation for the title of the novel, citing lines from the Odyssey spoken by Agamemnon to Odysseus in the Underworld, “As I lay dying the woman with the dog’s eyes would not close my eyes for me as I descended into Hades” (qtd. in As I Lay Dying 266). In this case, the hero is most certainly not the leader—Anse. The hero is Cash and his supreme virtue is his endurance in an absurd and humiliating world. Unlike Anse, Cash’s quality of endurance is noble because he is responsible in his suffering. Cash builds Addie’s coffin, gets it across the river at the expense of his leg and endures that torment all the way to Jefferson without voicing any amount of pain or discomfort. Even when Peabody has to strip the concrete cast off his leg and sentence him to a life of hobbling around, Cash endures it well, and he takes total and absolute responsibility for his own actions—never blaming outside factors for his misfortune as Anse does (ex: the road, his luck, etc.)

Nowhere in the novel does Cash make any utterance in the least out of pain, and he suffers the torment of breaking his leg and getting kicked repeatedly by Jewel’s horse at the river and having to ride many miles on a gyrating wagon. While Peabody operates
on him, stripping the concrete from his leg, he won’t even admit to any pain or discomfort:

“Don’t you lie there and try to tell me you rode six days on a wagon without springs, with a broken leg and it never bothered you.”

“It never bothered me much,” he [Cash] said. […]

“And don’t tell me it aint going to bother you to lose sixty-odd square inches of skin to get that concrete off. And dont tell me it aint going to bother you to have to limp around on one short leg for the balance of your life—if you walk at all again.” […]

“Does that hurt?”

“Not to speak of,” he said, and the sweat big as marbles running down his face and his face about the color of blotting paper.” (240)

Not only does Cash sacrifice himself, but he bears his sacrifice with astounding resilience. He bears it, and he bears it well. It seems only fitting that so many critics would consider Cash a Christ-figure, although I think likening Cash to Christ constitutes a grave oversimplification of his heroic nature. I think what is more relevant and productive than a Judeo-Christian look at the novel is an existential view of the novel—in particular a view afforded by the existential lens of Albert Camus.

Albert Camus (1913-1960), like Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), was a contemporary of William Faulkner (1897-1962). Camus referred to Faulkner as “le plus grand ecrivain contemporain” (Ciancio 69). As I’ve argued before, existential thought and philosophy easily permeated throughout the early twentieth century. Camus was certainly influenced by Sartre, and Sartre found a personal philosophical interest in Faulkner’s works somewhat akin to his own philosophy. In As I Lay Dying, I believe the application of Camus’ idea of endurance in an absurd world as expressed in his book, The Myth of Sisyphus, can aid our understanding of Faulkner’s novel, and in particular, greatly strengthen an argument for Cash as the hero of As I Lay Dying.

According to Camus, “Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing” (120). There are several myths as to why Sisyphus was condemned to torture in the underworld which Camus identifies in his essay—stealing
the secrets of the gods, putting Death in chains, and refusing to return to the underworld after Pluto allowed him a brief return to the world of the living in order to chastise his wife. In all three myths the method of torture is the same. Sisyphus is condemned to push a big boulder up the side of a mountain for all eternity. Once the boulder reaches the summit it merely descends to the bottom, and Sisyphus must repeat the process once again. Camus states that “[t]hey [the gods] had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor” (375). Yet, in this condemned character Camus manages to find something both heroic and tragic. The legends of Sisyphus’ life do not tend to focus on his work as a king but rather as the trickster father of Odysseus who managed to put Death in chains causing all mortals not to be able to die for a time until Ares the god of war freed Death from Death’s bonds. According to some legends, he is a highwayman—a thief (Morford 613). In the legends of Sisyphus, Camus finds nobility simply in his endurance as a useless passion regardless of his deeds in life, mentioning very little about Sisyphus prior to the Underworld.

Ironically, it is Sisyphus’ freedom that makes him heroic—the freedom of his mind. The rock is his burden: “All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols” (123). Camus tells us that we must imagine Sisyphus happy, and the only way we can interpret Sisyphus as a tragic hero is due to the fact that he is conscious (121). Sisyphus does have a purpose although that purpose is without meaning. His purpose is to push the boulder up the hill. The why of this task is completely arbitrary. He must push this boulder because it is his punishment and that is all. But ironically Camus envisions Sisyphus as happy in his work: “This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (378).

Sisyphus is happy because he does fulfill his purpose, and he completes his task time and time again. He reaches the summit time and time again, strives for the heights, and according to Camus, he always does this according to his own free will: “All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him” (378). The absurd hero can be happy apart from circumstance because humanity is always free. Humanity
is free to think whatever it will—humanity’s thoughts are always humanity’s own. An individual always has a choice whether or not to let his or her burdens break his or her spirit. Humanity has that which can endure and prevail. Faulkner himself said “I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.”

Cash is the absurd hero just as Sisyphus is the perfect Classical model Camus adopts as the absurd hero. It is in Camus’ interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus where we see that a hero can be absurd—as a being whose passions aim toward accomplishing nothing. The Bundrens live in an absurd and humiliating world. At the crux of the novel, at the climactic scene where the Bundrens attempt to ford the river, I find a powerful image, serving as a synecdoche for the absurd world—that of a bloated dead shoat (young, weaned pig) meandering down the flooded river. Man is a puny passion swept up at the whim of Nature. Two of Faulkner’s most commonly used adjectives are puny and toy-like when describing man’s machines such as trains or cars and the use of toy-like lends a carnivalesque air to scenery in Faulkner. To return to the absurd in As I Lay Dying, critic William Rossky sees the absurd manifest in As I Lay Dying, going so far as to title his essay “As I Lay Dying: The Insane World”:

As I Lay Dying is not only a testing of man but, like the novelist’s other most highly regarded works, a testing of the texture of existence. It is a probing which evokes a vision of existence as insane, absurd; of man as little and comic yet capable of a significant, if limited, Quixotic answer to the madness of life. (179)

Humankind is like a puny shoat swept up in a flood, and what can one do but laugh? Darl’s final response of laughter and affirmation (yes yes yes yes yes) thus appears as the only significant response to the absurd world. As I Lay Dying depicts an absurd world with Cash Bundren as the hero.

Cash is the most practical of the Bundrens, but I would not necessarily term him a materialist. He does offer insight into human nature on occasion: “Sometimes I aint so sho who’s got ere a right to say when a man is crazy and when he aint. Sometimes I

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14 There was a shoat come by, blowed up like a balloon: one of them spotted shoats of Lon Quick’s. It bumped against the rope like it a iron bar and bumped off and went on, and us watching that rope slanting down into the water. We watched it. 155.
think it aint none of us pure crazy and aint none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him that-a-way. It’s like it aint so much what a fellow does, but it’s the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it” (233). Ironically, as scholar William Rossky identifies, it is Cash’s tempered nature that makes him a sort of Quixotic hero:

Oddly enough it is the practical, sane Bundrens who, ignorant of the true nature of existence, live in a world of illusion, even of dream. And this limited vision, although it makes them comic, also makes them heroic: they are lesser Quixotes, whose illusions, like Don Quixote’s, not only help them to endure trials, but, even like the knight on his journey, to transform their world—to move the unwilling Tulls and Armstids and the whole horrified, outraged, nose-holding community to subserve their view and objectives. (186)

Cash’s practical world of illusions enables him, although it is also Cash’s belief in the spiritual pseudo-science of animal magnetism that enabled him to build a heavily reinforced coffin—one which could endure the taxing journey: “9. The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel. 10. You can see by an old grave that the earth sinks down on the bevel. 11. While in a natural hole it sinks by the center, the stress being up-and-down. 12. So I made it on the bevel. 13. It makes a neater job (83). A coffin with beveled seams is more able to withstand pressure: “A seam made on the bevel does have more gripping surface” (Franklin 27). One could argue that Addie’s coffin could not have survived the journey had Cash not reinforced it on account of this pseudo-science. Cash’s false belief in a sensible world enables him to endure it. According to Rosemary Franklin, “Cash’s use of animal magnetism is indicative of his character in general: he is able to fuse the philosophical and the practical, animal magnetism and carpentry, the word and the deed. This synthesis is analogous to his well-balanced personality” (26).

The application of The Myth of Sisyphus is obvious. Even the family name Bundren bears a striking resemblance to the word burden (Narcisi 4). The Bundren family odyssey is akin to the plight of Sisyphus—no more meaningful than pushing a boulder up a mountain. Addie has died. She cannot thank them for their labor. In no way does the ritual of the burial signify anything—at least to the living—because the one who would find meaning in being buried in Jefferson is dead. If the Bundrens sought to
give Addie a “proper” burial then they have surely failed. The corpse is badly desecrated by the time they reach Jefferson, and they can’t even bury her without borrowing a shovel. One critic even suggests that the imagery of *As I Lay Dying* “reinforces man’s predicament as it is portrayed in the book: man is a lonely anguished being in an ambiguous world” (Slabey 20). However, as Camus has shown us, the absence of purpose does not necessarily negate the presence of heroism. It is responsibility for labor which facilitates heroism. In the light a world seemingly shouting at Cash to be discouraged through his trials and pain, Cash still makes the choice to move forward and not be discouraged. I would therefore classify Cash as Faulkner’s neo-classical existential spin-off on the traditional hero type. Cash is the Sisyphean hero type because of his will to endure an ambiguous world. He moves with pride from one burden to another without pause or regret. His fate belongs to him. Cash breaks his leg falling off a church only to break it once again at the flooded river. But Cash won’t even acknowledge the pain—not even when Peabody strips the concrete cast off of his leg. He builds Addie’s coffin with pride, reinforcing it to suit animal magnetism. He is indeed the only Bundren endowed with sympathy, as he expresses regret for allowing Darl to be hauled off to an insane asylum. Faulkner stated in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech that “he [man] has that in him which will endure even beyond the ultimate worthless tideless rock freezing slowly in the last red and heatless sunset.” The Bundren family dramatize this well. Cash stands as their sacrificial lamb—the sublime representation of man’s eternal quality of endurance in an absurd world.
CHAPTER THREE

FAULKNER’S CLOSEST TO GOD IN THE SOUND AND THE FURY

Jean-Paul Sartre tells us that man yearns to be as solid as a thing. In order to understand more fully the implications of this statement we need to first define Sartre’s two modes of being: Being-In-Itself (en-soi) and Being-For-Itself (pour-soi) (Being and Nothingness 29-30). Being-For-Itself signifies the world of becoming or doing confined to human reality and Being-In-Itself signifies the world of being or having (Sowder 164). As Sartre tells us, the Being-In-Itself is the static being of objects. It is being that is unaware of itself. In essence it is pure positivity.15

The rock or table or chair exists in-itself—its being rests in itself. The en-soi represents phenomenological solidity, or thickness, if you will: “Being in-itself has no within which is opposed to a without and which is analogous to a judgment, a law, a consciousness of itself. The in-itself has nothing secret; it is solid (massif) (Being and Nothingness 28). The rock is not aware it exists. It is not conscious. The rock is in no tension with the world. It has no decisions to make and nothing for which to be held responsible: “the possible is a structure of the for-itself; that is, it belongs to the other region of being. Being-in-itself is never either possible or impossible. It is. This is what consciousness expresses in anthropomorphic terms by saying that being is superfluous (de trop)—that is, that consciousness absolutely can not derive being from anything, either from another being, or from a possibility, or from a necessary law. Uncreated, without reason for being, without any connection with another being, being-in-itself is de trop for eternity (Being and Nothingness 29). Should the rock break or melt it simply becomes something else. Matter cannot be created nor destroyed; it only changes forms.

15 Translator Hazel Barnes defines Being-in-itself succinctly in his glossary to Being and Nothingness as “Non-conscious Being. It is the Being of the phenomenon and overflows the knowledge which we have of it. It is a plenitude, and strictly speaking we can say of it only that it is” (800).
16 Sartre tell us in relation to the in-itself that “transition, becoming, anything which permits us to say that being is not yet what it will be and that it is already what it is not—all that is forbidden on principle. For being is the being of becoming and due to this fact it is beyond becoming. It is what it is. This means that by itself it can not even be what it is not; we have seen indeed that it can encompass no negation. It is full positivity.” Being and Nothingness 29
En-soi is not subject to time. It is outside of time and transcends it. Time requires consciousness to designate past, present and future. Being-in-itself is not conscious because it is what it is according to Sartre. Time is the realm of the possible and created.\(^{17}\) Whenever something is possible it is simultaneously posited what is not possible—this is the negation at the heart of human consciousness. I am conscious of being hungry. If I am hungry then that must mean I am not full. If I am full then I am not empty. The quality or state of hunger cannot exist in a vacuum. The affirmation of hunger is contingent on not-hunger. I am conscious of being lazy. If I am lazy then I am not productive. There exist other planes of possibility once human consciousness posits itself as something—always positioned against what it is not. Briefly, we will need to define the pour-soi mode of being—Being-for-itself.\(^{18}\) The pour-soi is the being of humankind. It is consciousness that is aware of itself—self-conscious. Consciousness requires negation; whereas, being-in-itself is pure affirmation. I, as a self-conscious being, must always posit what I am not in order to posit what I am. The structure of the pour-soi is translucent—luminous in a way. Pour-soi, as mentioned before, is solid. Because humanity is always in the realm of the conditional and the possible an individual will never know what one is. The only identity available to an individual comes from one’s past as the sum of one’s actions; and yet, a human being can never fully claim he or she is a coward or a hero or a narcissist—all of those traits hinge on decision, and humanity is always a capacity to become. Humankind has no essence or pattern of behavior. Human reality “is what it is not and […] is not what it is” (100). Negation is required for human consciousness and the core of this consciousness is nothingness. It must be so because a human being as an ever-potential if-conditional must have no ontological foundation in order to truly be conditional as a capacity to become. The for-itself is only the foundation of itself as nothingness. As Sartre tells us, “The for-itself, as

\(^{17}\) “From this point of view we shall see later that it [Being-in-Itself] is not subject to temporality. It is, and when it gives way, one can not even say that it no longer is. Or, at least, a consciousness can be conscious of it as no longer being, precisely because consciousness is temporal. But being itself does not exist as a lack there where it was; the full positivity of being is re-formed on its giving way. It was and at present other beings are: that is all” Being and Nothingness 29.

\(^{18}\) Translator Hazel Barnes defines Being-for-itself succinctly in his glossy to Being and Nothingness as “The nihilation of Being-in-itself; consciousness conceived as a lack of Being, a desire for Being, a relation to Being. By bringing Nothingness into the world the For-itself can stand out from Being and judge other beings by knowing what it is not. Each For-itself is the nihilation of a particular being (800).
the foundation of itself, is the upsurge of negation. The for-itself founds itself in so far as it denies in relation to itself a certain being or a mode of being. What it denies or nihilates, as we know, is being-in-itself. But no matter what being-in-itself: human reality is before all else its own nothingness” (138). This seems a reversal of Descartes’ famous “I think, therefore I am.” What one might say in light of Sartre’s theory is “I think, therefore I am not” (Ciancio 77).

It is the fictitious and contradictory synthesis of the en-soi substance of pure positivity of the object-universe with the consciousness of the pour-soi of human reality that Sartre expresses philosophically as God. In a Sartrean sense, God is not the traditional anthropomorphic deity or deities espoused by many religions. God is essentially the universe—both en-soi and pour-soi—out of tension and unified. In this way, and as one would expect, God cannot ever be expressed in human terms since Sartre’s philosophical God is not logically or rationally possible. The idea of God is transcendent. In light of Sartrean theory, a being can never be both pour-soi and en-soi unless the two terms suffer an equivocation which would unravel all of Sartre’s argument. God is somehow all positivity as en-soi and yet conscious as pour-soi, but Sartre’s definition of consciousness hinges on negation: human reality “is what it is not and […] is not what it is” (100). Sartre’s conclusion of God cannot rest on a logically or empirically supported hypothesis. Sartre merely hypothesizes that according to his theory the name of God may simply mean the union of en-soi and pour-soi: “Let no one reproach us with capriciously inventing a being of this kind; when by a further movement of thought the being and absolute absence of this totality are hypostasized as transcendence beyond the world, it takes on the name of God. Is not God a being who is what he is—in that he is all positivity and the foundation of the world—and at the same time a being who is not what he is and who is what he is not—in that he is self-consciousness and the necessary foundation of himself?” (140). Sartre wisely addresses the question of God as a question because God could only stand as a foundation of himself without proof and without needing proof because he is what he is. Humanity seeks to be God. God is unreachable and unachievable, but man may get closer to God through his passions—longing through instinct and passion to be is rather than is not—longing through instinct and passion to be as solid as a thing. We yearn, uselessly, to be
a contradictory God—a being that meshes freedom and lucidity with the fundamental impenetrability of objects—an en-soi and pour-soi synthesis (Kaufman 47). In the words of Sartre in the concluding chapter of Being and Nothingness,

Each human reality is at the same time a direct project to metamorphose its own For-itself into an In-itself-For-itself and a project of the appropriation of the world as a totality of being-in-itself, in the form of a fundamental quality. Every human reality is a passion in that it projects losing itself so as to found being and by the same stroke to constitute the In-itself which escapes contingency by being its own foundation, the Ens causa sui, which religions call God. Thus the passion of man is the reverse of that of Christ, for man loses himself as man in order that God may be born. But the idea of God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion. (784)

Thus in human reality the strive for en-soi, the strive to be as solid as a thing, is synonymous with the strive for God. Man is pour-soi striving for en-soi. The en-soi in itself is not representative of God. This is a crucial point. The object-universe is not what Sartre terms God—Nature or matter in general is not synonymous with God existentially. The theoretical God is produced in man’s image. God is an In-itself-For-itself metamorphosis that can only exist hypothetically; yet, man will always strive for this union (Sowder 164-165). In a sense, one might term Sartre’s God as an anthropomorphized object. But man can get or be closer to God which is the concern of this essay in relation to Faulkner’s characters. This essay sets out to prove that Quentin Compson and Benjy Compson from The Sound and the Fury demonstrate behavior or thought patterns that either exhibit their closeness to God or exhibit their drive to be closer to God.

In The Sound and the Fury Quentin Compson is haunted by time—anguished in light of the future and haunted by the past.19 Quentin is so obsessed with the past that his monologue shifts backwards in time about two hundred times. Benjy’s monologue shifts backwards only about one hundred times (Cowan 10). Quentin’s motive for killing

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19 Interestingly, Sartre’s discussion of temporality in Being and Nothingness utilizes the word haunt often in reference to the past in relation to the human being: “the Past is not immanent in the For-itself. It haunts the For-itself at the moment that the For-itself acknowledges itself as not being this or that particular thing” (200).
himself is to escape or transcend time, and it is the day of Quentin’s suicide—not necessarily the event of the suicide—in which Quentin has liberated himself, in part, from time as he has barred his future, removing his anguish in light of infinite possibilities. As William Sowder suggests, “Phenomenally, on this day, time was for Quentin not an encumbrance, as critics have maintained, but a mode of freedom” (“Quentin Compson and the Phenomenology of Time” 91).

Temporality, according to Sartre, requires human consciousness in order to exist: “Temporality must have the structure of selfness. Indeed it is only because the self in its being is there outside itself that it can be before or after itself, that there can be in general any before and after. Temporality exists only as the intra-structure of a being which has to be its own being; that is, as the intra-structure of a For-itself” (195). Existentially time cannot exist without man’s ability to distinguish between past, present, and future. Time is like a by-product of man’s consciousness. Therefore, when I refer to Quentin’s desire to escape time I am referencing time as an intra-structure of the For-itself.

Quentin tries so hard to convince himself that his future is barred that when he tries to express a future he uses a disoriented mix of verbs in the future tense (Lowrey 58). At no point in his monologue does Quentin express a hesitation to kill himself. He prepares a note and expresses satisfaction in his own upcoming inexistence: “A quarter hour yet. And then I’ll not be. The peacefullest words. Peacefullest words. Non fui. Sum. Fui. Non Sum.” (174). Quentin’s suicide, in his mind, is an almost complete inevitability. He has almost completely barred his future, but as we see in Quentin’s narrative, the past has swallowed up Quentin’s consciousness in the present. His thoughts frequently and neurotically reflect back upon the events surrounding his sister Caddie’s loss of her virginity.

Quentin’s desire to escape temporality is expressed through his endeavor to forget mechanical time, that is, enumerated time. Time is Quentin’s burden and due to the altercations of the past involving his sister he is thus tormented. He cannot come to terms with his incestuous feelings for his sister or with the loss of her virginity. Again and again we see Quentin reminded of time through his frequent observation of shadows, calling to mind the line ‘life’s but a walking shadow” from Macbeth. The shadow signifies Quentin’s death. The word shadow appears four times in a short passage when
Quentin is at the bridge where he eventually drowns himself: “The shadow of the bridge, the tiers of the railing, my shadow leaning flat upon the water […] the shadow of the package like two shoes wrapped up lying on the water. Niggers say a drowned man’s shadow was watching for him in the water all the time” (90). The position of the sun in the sky always haunts Quentin, reminding him of the impotence of avoiding time. The opening lines of the narrative are quite significant in that the stream of consciousness monologue immediately opens with an observation of the shadow of a sash on the curtains to his window and a mention of his grandfather’s watch which carries with it a nihilistic association passed down from his father—the advice his father gave him upon giving Quentin the watch:

When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight oclock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch. It was Grandfather’s and when Father gave it to me he said I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it’s rather excruciating-ly apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father’s. 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. (76)

It seems most likely that Quentin is just waking up, as to be out of time as opposed to in time and not dead must mean that Quentin was asleep. The sash immediately reminds Quentin of the temporal restriction of his own existence. In the next paragraph he conceals the watch face but is still in time because of the shadow of the sash which he can’t just seem to ignore. The watch carries with it the advice from Quentin’s father, who refers to it paradoxically as a “mausoleum of all hope and desire.” One would not expect hope to be in a mausoleum. There can be no hope or victory in an absurd world. Hope is the antithetic trait of the Absurd man. The watch is meant to remind Quentin of the world’s absurdity and uselessness of searching for meaning. The best man can do is experience and that is it. There are no philosophical conclusions to be drawn—none that have merit or proper foundation. In a sense, as soon as humanity discerns time into past, present and future, as through a watch, humanity is forced into the realm of possibility and our own being is nihilated. Once a future is perceived then existential anguish must
necessarily occur due to the instinctual fear of our own possibilities. The watch then signifies the brokenness of our being—the mausoleum of hope and desire—the lack of the *pour-soi*. All desire and hope and any belief are constituted as a lack. The watch signifies to Quentin the emptiness of his being and the continual haunting of his past, although ironically Quentin was given this watch in order to forget time now and again. The watch also signifies man’s desire to conquer time—as an impotent enumerated grasp at the instant—at the Present: “I began to wonder what time it was. Father said that constant speculation regarding the position of mechanical hands on an arbitrary dial which is a symptom of mind-function. Excrement Father said like sweating” (77). According the Sartre the present is only present as a negation: “It is impossible to grasp the present in the form of an instant, for the instant would be the moment when the present *is*. But the present is not; it makes itself present in the form of flight” (*Being and Nothingness* 179). Quentin’s watch signifies the unachievable present as well. The watch is an Absurd reminder. Quentin’s desire to escape time represents his strive for the *en-soi-pour-soi* synthetic contradiction Sartre calls God.

Quentin’s mentally handicapped brother, Benjy, whose section comes right before Quentin’s, is the only stream of consciousness narrative Faulkner ever gives his reader which can be appropriated as outside of time because Benjy’s mind lacks the ability to distinguish past from present, and he cannot fathom a future. Benjy cannot perceive of chronological time: “Lacking any sense of sequential time, devoid of the cognitive processes, and unable to make moral or social distinctions” (“Benjy Compson and the Field of Consciousness” 2). Paradoxically, we can infer from Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* that the simpler a human mind, as in a mind that is less in acute self-consciousness then the closer that being is to the *en-soi*—a being that simply *is*. But to be wholly *en-soi* is not to be God. God is only a hypothetically possible *pour-soi-en-soi* synthesis. Thus, Benjamin Compson, conscious to some degree yet having no means in which to express or comprehend mechanical time and as lacking the mental ability to question his being (as inferred by his narrative) represents Faulkner’s closest to God.

Benjy and Quentin’s narratives are similar in that they both switch without transition to the past as a sort of flashback. The difference is that Benjy cannot comprehend of mechanical time—the watch does not signify anything. Quentin can
recognize past from present from future. Benjy cannot distinguish. Benjy’s mind is on a plane of being outside of time. I would not call this phenomenological confusion since Sartre claims that temporality does not exist without man to perceive and designate it. Being outside of temporality is en-soi—a being of complete plenitude and positivity. Benjy’s narrative is written as an achronological jumble. Benjy has what may be termed “memory triggers.” For example, when he gets his clothes caught on a nail he then finds himself reanimating in his mind a prior time when his clothes were caught on a nail. To Benjy, this is not perceived as memory or reflection. Memory is not distinguished as in the past.

What is representative of phenomenological confusion in Benjy’s mind is his distorted perception of objects and places which appear into being without established relationships to other objects. Benjy is a passive participant in reality. The level of cognition we see in his mind is restricted only to immediate perception of the senses. He can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. He cannot articulate the phenomenon of pain. He cries frequently yet never understanding why he cries, although he can sense the loss of Caddy, and he could sense the loss of her virginity when her scent was altered after the deed. Benjy perceives the world as moving pictures where an object appears before him or leaves him. The motive or will that gives each object motion, such a spoon being placed into his mouth by someone’s hand, is never brought into consideration or understanding. Benjy cannot comprehend causal relationships except in rare circumstances.20 The spoon is only a spoon that goes in and out of his mouth regardless of the hand. The hand is not perceived as the propulsion by which the spoon enters his mouth. Benjy has no sense of his place in the world. As Sowder identifies, “space delivers the world from chaos. […] Benjy […] had as much difficulty focusing properly as he did hearing properly. For him vision was monocular, figure detached from ground. In this two-dimensional world, images floated vaguely in front of things, having no ‘real place’ in the world” (“Benjy Compson and the Field of Consciousness” 11). Rooms fall

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20 Critic Ted Roggenbuck cites an instance where Benjy notes that Quentin tried to catch Versh but “couldn’t.” This must indicate Benjy could establish the hypothetical catching of Versh by Quentin, that is, if Quentin jumped at Versh with his arms then Quentin would catch Versh. This I consider the rare peeking in of reason in Benjy’s mind, as the overwhelming majority of Benjy’s monologue indicates the absence of hypotheticals and possibilities. “The way he looked said Hush”: Benjy's Mental Atrophy in "The Sound and the Fury."
away from him, as if he were the standing object. Benjy has no perception of spatial relations. Trees *can be* on top of sky, and fire *can be* in mirrors, and shadows *can be* on grass. Spatial boundaries do not exist in Benjy’s world which is why Benjy had difficulty doing some of the simplest of tasks, such as walking. Benjy was “baffled by space” (12). Space gives the world distinction and keeps a conscious individual at a distance from other objects or people. Benjy cannot conceive of this distance—he is amongst objects and *akin* to them in this manner. As Sowder identifies, “Benjy cannot even comprehend himself as a being in the world among objects. When Benjy looks in a mirror, he does not identify himself as what he is looking at. Benjy’s reflected image is just another one of the objects flying in front of his field of vision—undistinguished and signifying nothing” (12-13). Nevertheless, this lack of identity and lack of a concept of space does not equate to a world of chaos. What instills chaos and horror in Benjy’s mind is going against convention and routine, as we see in the powerful and dramatic ending to *The Sound and the Fury*. Even a mind devoid of spatial understanding can establish stability and routine. As one critic points out, “Despite the prevailing mood of barely eased agony in the first section, Benjy has managed to stabilize his world. His terrible muteness—although it prevents a nameable knowledge of his loss—paradoxically blesses Benjy with serenity” (Matthews 86). For this reason I think we should, as Faulkner suggests, exclude feeling pity for Benjy since he may indeed be endowed with serenity as a result of his idiocy.

Benjy cannot reason in any mediocre capacity, and he is only capable of having “thought” in the loosest sense of the term, but these insights are always restricted to reflection and observation. Benjy is memory without reason. It is generally recognized by critics\(^\text{21}\) that Benjy does not show any form of intellectual growth beyond childhood; however, scholar Ted Roggenbuck points out that just because Benjy’s mind does not progress intellectually, does not mean his mind remains unchanged by his experiences (581). Benjy’s inability to reason is indicated by the absence of the hypothetic in his monologue. Never once does the word “if” or “because” appear aside from in the dialogue of others in his stream of consciousness narrative which means he cannot form

any conditionals nor establish relationships. Benjy cannot offer any theories or
conclusions. Even his articulation for objects and action is extremely simple. There are
few adverbs that he expresses in his narrative to provide any depth to any action. There
are few adjectives to give depth to his surroundings. Benjy’s world is simple and
reasonless. The following passage is typical of Benjy’s monologue, as he simply records
what he sees and experiences in very little detail:

Caddy and I ran. We ran up the kitchen steps, onto the porch, and Caddy knelt
down in the dark and held me. I could hear her and feel her chest. ‘I wont.’ she
said. ‘I wont anymore, ever. Benjy. Benjy.’ Then she was crying, and I cried,
and we held each other. ‘Hush.’ she said. ‘Hush. I wont anymore.’ So I hushed
and Caddy got up and we went into the kitchen and turned the light on and Caddy
took the kitchen soap and washed her mouth at the sink, hard. Caddy smelled like
trees. (48)

All verbs, aside from Caddie’s dialogue, are in the past tense. The only adjective to
provide depth to the scene is with “kitchen soap.” The only adverb is used irregularly:
“washed her mouth at the sink, hard.” Although one could speculate that the “so” in “So
I hushed” could operate as a “therefore,” it seems more plausible it’s utilized as a
conjunction like “and” given Benjy’s general habit of describing events using simple
conjunctions to compile clauses. Faulkner seems to suggest through the simplicity of
Benjy’s vocabulary and descriptions that Benjy’s perception of the world lacks depth.

We cannot say even that Benjy has free will because he never uses the future
tense. The word “could” appears in a few places, as the first line of his narrative, in fact,
but the word is not used to indicate purpose: “Through the fence, between the curling
flower spaces, I could see them him hitting” (3). In this instance could is utilized to
express past ability rather than possibility. “Could see” can just as well be “saw.” The
absence of purpose clauses indicates that Benjy lacks intention. If there is no perception
of a future, of one’s impact on the future, then there can be no choice. Benjy has no past
or future. He is outside of the temporal dimension of the pour-soi. Benjy simply is. Yet
reason alone is not what constitutes consciousness unless we mendaciously wish to posit
that all non-human living beings are unconscious, and it would be even more arrogant to
say that Benjy’s reality is of a lower order than cognizant humanity. Benjy’s perspective
on the world is just as valid as that of an ant or bird or ape or cognizant human when viewed within Benjy’s own personal context. Benjy is not conscious of being conscious, but he is conscious. He perceives, although he is not self-aware. His body interacts without his own motive in mind, as if it were simply an extension of the outside world (Kinney 148-149). Therefore, he most certainly is not pour-soi. Nor can he be en-soi because he is a conscious being and not an object. Faulkner claimed that “You can’t feel anything for Benjy because he can’t feel anything. […] Benjy wasn’t rational enough even to be selfish. He was an animal” (Meriwether and Milgate 245-246). If Benjy isn’t even rational enough to be selfish then the absence of Caddy in his life is not a true absence, unlike Quentin, because in Benjy’s mind the memory trigger objects signifying Caddy on April Seventh, 1928 completely resurrect the experience of Benjy and Caddy together time and time again (Matthews 86). It isn’t longing nostalgia. Memory really is to Benjy. Nor in this same sense can Benjy ever possess anguish for the future—an underlying fear of his possibilities at the root of self-consciousness. Benjy has thought—reflection and observation without cognition. He has no sense of identity because he is never conscious of being conscious. One must imagine Benjy serene as a whole—unanguished and blessed with idiocy. Benjy is Faulkner’s closest literary equivalent to a synthetic en-soi-pour-soi contradiction. Benjy is therefore Faulkner’s closest to God.
CONCLUSION

Humanity wants to be as solid as a thing. The future and its infinite possibilities in an absurd world condemn humankind to freedom, and many of Faulkner’s characters seek to evade the crushing responsibility for their actions in a variety of manners. This fundamental drive, this attraction to the impermeability of stone is manifest in so many of Faulkner’s characters. In some characters, such as Jewel, the sheer woodenness of his face and figure attests to this. In others, thing-desire is portrayed much more subtly, as in Dewey Dell’s game of the cotton in the sack as a justification for risking pregnancy. Quentin Compson’s desire to escape the future and its possibilities, somewhat akin to Darl’s desire to ravel out into time, also falls under the desire to be a thing. Anse Bundren blames the road for his problems, seeking to exteriorize his burdens. The only un-anguished character is the one who cannot fathom possibilities, the simpleton Benjy Compson. Through these other characters Faulkner has shown us the crushing price of reason and intellect which has not elevated these characters but rather soiled them, as Benjy Compson seems to be the most serene and pristine of them all. Nietzsche illustrates this point vibrantly in his essay “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” “the intellect is human, and only its possessor and progenitor regards it with such pathos, as if it housed the axis around which the entire world revolved. But if we could communicate with a midge we would hear that it too floats through the air with the same pathos, feeling that it too contains within itself the flying centre of this world” (Leitch 874).
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Aaron Moore received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Radford University, Virginia in 2006. A little over a month after graduation, he found himself pursuing a Master of Arts degree in Literature at Florida State University. There he was employed as a teaching assistant. His teaching interests include existentialism and Nine Inch Nails. Currently, he is the chief editor of *Floyd County Moonshine*, a literary and arts magazine localized in Floyd, Virginia (his home) and the New River Valley. He also struggles to find students as an official literacy volunteer of the New River Valley. In his much required break from academia, he would like to serve in the Peace Corps. His interests include virtually anything outdoors, including tennis, motorcycle mechanics, and barn restoration.