**Time, History and Memory in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*:**

**Benjy, Disability and Temporality**

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

– *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene v, l. 18-27

In the *Sound and the Fury* and other novels, William Faulkner engages deeply with history both on a global and local level. He addresses the former by engaging with the overarching issues of temporality and modernity at large and by responding to writers and philosophers such as Henri Bergson. The latter he achieves by drawing inspiration directly from the world around him in small-town Mississippi, using his life, surroundings and even others’ plantation diaries from nearby plots of land as stimuli. According to Sally Woolf, Faulkner specifically draws on documents such as the Leak Diary¹, which details the life at an antebellum plantation, in order to generate some of his most powerful ideas and themes. Furthermore, she claims that some of his most impressive characters are drawn from real people, who were, in many instances, slaves on the Leak plantation (Wolff 3). This is consistent with the

¹ The Leak Diary is a shorter name for The Diary of Dr. Edgar Francisco III. Francisco was a friend of Faulkner’s father and lent Faulkner the diary detailing the life on a plantation for inspiration.
assertion many critics have previously made, namely that Benjy Compson’s status in *The Sound of the Fury* reminds one of the black slave’s position in the antebellum South. Like a slave, Benjy is stripped of his given name and reassigned a biblical one, he is castrated after being accused of assaulting a white girl and that his “domain” is a former plantation (Bering 3).

Benjy, however, also possesses other affinities with real life people of Oxford. John Blotner points out that the likely source of Faulkner’s inspiration was also his first grade teacher Miss Annie Chandler’s son, a disabled man called Elwin Chandler, who lived a few blocks away from the novelist (210). Elwin lived till the age of thirty in the care of his family until he died in a tragic fire accident. According to Arthur F. Kinney, Elwin had Down’s syndrome, and Faulkner took special interest in him, taking his niece to visit him every two weeks and observing him as he’d cut out paper shapes or run up and down the fence, as Benjy Compson would do in the *Sound and the Fury* (190). Often overlooked is another contemporary Oxford figure that could have also contributed to the formation of Benjy’s character, Eugene Hoskins, the distinctive black autistic savant, who liked to spend his time at the Oxford train station scribbling down numbers and memorizing engine numbers. Hoskins possessed an extraordinary memory and an unusual interest in trains, although his mental age was estimated at around eight or nine years, which lead to him being seen as a harmless eccentric by other citizens (Bering 3). Notably, he is also historically the first black person to whom autistic characteristics have been ascribed. Faulkner would have likely met the unusual Hoskins at the train station while carrying out his duties for the local university, although one can only speculate about the extent that meeting the black autistic man would have on the formation of disabled characters in his novels.
As Frederickson and others have pointed out, Benjy is also likely to have fictional roots in Wordsworth’s poem “The Idiot Boy,” Shakespearean fools and possibly even Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin from The Idiot. Significantly, Benjy is not the sole instance of a disabled character in Faulkner’s oeuvre. He reappears again in The Mansion and is accompanied by other figures such as Jim Bond in Absalom, Absalom! and Isaac Snopes in The Hamlet, underscoring Faulkner’s preoccupation with this type of an outsider in society. Aside from depicting the ‘idiot’ figure, Faulkner also incorporated physically disabled World War I characters in Soldiers’ Pay and A Fable, presumably as an outlet for his own war fantasies. Alice Hall notes that Faulkner himself created a personal myth of disability after he was rejected from the US Service for his insufficient height and instead joined the Canadian Air Force (20), suggesting a deep personal involvement with the condition, especially given the effort invested in the subsequent faking, or ‘performativity,’ of disability after returning from war.

However interested Faulkner may have been in fictional or real-life disabled people and the experience of disability itself, his discussion and portrayal of the Benjy character betrays a much more ambivalent attitude towards his condition. In an interview from 1956, Faulkner explains “I had already begun to tell [the story] through the eyes of the idiot child since I felt that it would be more effective as told by someone capable of knowing what happened, but not why” and “he was a prologue like the gravedigger in the Elizabethan drama. He serves his purpose and is gone. Benjy is incapable of good and evil because he has no knowledge of good and evil…He was an animal” (Meriwether and Millgate 235). Furthermore, in the final section of the novel Benjy is compared to a both a child and a bear:
[he was] a big man who appeared to have been shaped out of some substance whose particles would not or did not cohere to one another or to the frame which supported it. His skin was dead looking and hairless; dropsical too, he moved with a shambling gait like a trained bear. His hair was pale and fine. It had been brushed smoothly down his brow like that of children in daguerreotypes. His eyes were clear, of the pale sweet blue of cornflowers, his thick mouth hung open, drooling a little (Sound 171).

The description along with Faulkner’s extra-textual explanations have provided the foundations for the numerous links in Faulkner criticism relating to Benjy that link to animals, eternal children and ‘holy idiots.’ Typically, an uncritical attitude towards the term ‘idiot’ itself has been adopted and gone unquestioned, and Benjy has often been analyzed as a sub-human character, as if this was not problematic. Even as recently as a 2002, Jacqui Griffiths has argued for an association between Benjy and a dog in her psychoanalytical reading of the novel, denying almost completely Benjy’s status as a human being. According to her, “Benjy’s temporality means that, like many domestic dogs, he must learn the power of the Other through routine repetition” (174), completely disregarding the fact that routine and order are characteristic features of an autistic person’s life. In her view, “Benjy’s past tense narration signals that he need not be considered so much ‘present’ as ‘absent’” (175), a view which completely devalues the contribution of Benjy’s voice in the novel.

The dehumanizing and patronizing trend has only recently begun to recede. Benjy’s character has started to be reappraised in the wake of disability studies, beginning with early articles on the topic such as Sarah McLaughlin’s “Faulkner’s Faux Pas: Referring to Benjamin Compson as an Idiot” in 1987, which argues for dropping the term and instead suggests viewing Benjy as a person with autism, despite the fact the diagnosis would be anachronistic for Faulkner at the time of writing, given that autism was not diagnosed as an condition until 1943. Nonetheless,
despite some critical attention since, the significance of discourse of eugenics and idiocy in Faulkner’s works has nonetheless remained relatively unexplored (Hall 22). Only in the late noughties critics such as Jay Watson in “Genealogies of White Deviance,” Keith Gandal in Gun and the Pen and Alice Hall in Disability and Modern Fiction explore and acknowledge the significance of the heyday of eugenics and the higher levels of visibility of disabled bodies in the States following the First World War, Hall being the only one connecting the phenomenon to disability studies. One must, however, ask what this contributes to Faulkner studies and in what ways it can reshape the way the reader understands Benjy along with the rest of his family in The Sound and the Fury, and especially what bearing it has on the concept of time and memory in the novel, the cornerstones of Faulkner’s fiction.

Alice Hall argues that it is only by challenging the boundaries of disability studies through an exploration of intersections with critical gerontology, aesthetics, linguistics and history, that the discipline can continue to develop (14). In a similar vein, Maria Truchan-Tataryn points out that Faulknerian scholarship, regardless of its place in time or trend, persists in conflating the dehumanized images of Benjy with the lived experience of disability, thus perpetuating oppressive disability prejudice and limiting the richness of the character’s metaphoric potential. In her view, acknowledging this critical lacuna as well as historicizing and theorizing Benjy’s character from a disability perspective could lead to a deeper understanding of human experience (159). My aim is to elucidate the disability studies connection to The Sound and the Fury with particular regard to history and memory, and the ways in which such a focus can shift our critical understanding of Faulkner’s work, deepen our engagement with his characters as well as the ways in which it can reshape our understanding of the South. I argue that it is not only significant to view Benjy from
the point of view of a disabled person with autism, rather than an ‘idiot’, but also that such a view can enrich our understanding of the human experience overall, given his unique experience of temporality, which affords him access to a non-traditional view of the world, and which has affinities with a Bergsonian conception of time.

I ask, what does it add to our understanding of the novel’s temporality and Faulkner’s appraisal of modernity to see the world through Benjy’s eyes, rather than in what way does it limit our vision and impair our knowledge of events in the Compson family. This connects my disability studies argument with Peter Lurie’s historical materialist analysis of Benjy in Vision’s Immanence. Lurie sees the disabled character as Faulkner’s Adornian symbol of resistance against the hegemony of the visual focus of the cultural industry, highlighting Benjy’s synchronic multiple sensory experience of modernity as a privileged position, which is in direct contrast with what is lost when one is immersed in a visually dominant presentist discourse. Such an approach repudiates the ableist undercurrents that have characterized past scholarship on the ‘idiot’ character and aims to establish the disabled point of view as productive and rich, rather than subordinate and subhuman. Additionally, I argue that Benjy is in fact not alone in being disabled, given all of the ‘problem white’ Compson family possesses a plethora of ‘inabilities’ that in the context of the 1920’s eugenics movement could have possibly been seen as grounds for classifying one as “feeble-minded” or distinctively ‘white trash.’ Such an argument opens up larger questions regarding what constitutes disability, and whether, if at all, disabilities should be seen as deviating from the norm given their prevalence in society at large.

In thinking about disability in Faulkner’s Sound and the Fury, one first needs to define what this term encompasses before considering how it affects the reader’s perception of history and memory. Unsurprisingly, it is an extremely slippery term,
which almost defies definition, as one must constantly shift the borders of inclusion and exclusion. Where does disability begin and end? In Hall’s definition, the diversity of disabled experience can include mobility impairments, sensory deprivation, cognitive disorders, speech problems and ageing (13). For Thompson, disability is an overarching and in some ways artificial category that encompasses congenital and acquired physical differences, mental illness and retardation, chronic and acute illness, fatal and progressive diseases, temporary and permanent injuries, and a wide range of bodily characteristics considered disfiguring, such as scars, birthmarks, unusual proportions, or obesity (13). It is also a social construct that can be seen as a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control, identity and the attribution of corporeal deviance – not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do (Thomson 6). Above all, it is an almost all-encompassing category that has the potential to dislodge the conceptions of normalcy in order to provide a more inclusive and accepting way of perceiving the lived experience based on a broader understanding of humanity.

One of the pioneers in the field, Lennard Davis, sees disability studies as a lens for nearly all novels:

A disability studies consciousness can alter the way we see not just novels that have main characters who are disabled, but any novel. In thinking through the issue of disability, I have come to see that almost any literary work will have some reference to the abnormal, to disability, and so on. I would explain this phenomenon as a result of the hegemony of normalcy. This normalcy must constantly be enforced in public venues (like the novel), must always be creating and bolstering its image by processing, comparing, construing images of normalcy and the abnormal. In fact, one begins to notice, there really is a rare novel that does not have some characters with disabilities – characters who are lame, tubercular, dying of AIDS, chronically ill, depressed, mentally ill, and so on (12).
The concept of normalcy especially resonates with Faulkner’s time of writing *The Sound and the Fury* in the late 1920’s, as society at large was preoccupied with politically laden ideas hinging upon the construction of normalcy and how to perpetuate it through the means of eugenics, while ridding itself of those deemed unfit. Davis adds that while we tend to associate eugenics with a Nazi-like racial supremacy, it is important to realize that eugenics was not the trade of a fringe group of rightwing, fascist maniacs, but rather that it became common practice for many, if not most, European and American citizens (8). The practice has roots in the drafting processes for the World War I recruits, which sought to exclude the “feeble-minded” and even had its own committee – the Wartime Committee on Provision for the Feeble-Minded, according to which ‘idiocy’ “might as easily be considered a national [problem], for it has to do with citizenship in its large sense” (Gandal 154).

The issue came to further prominence two years before the publication of *The Sound and the Fury*, when the Supreme Court upheld compulsory sterilization of a female classed as an ‘imbecile’ on the grounds of eugenics and her alleged promiscuity. The case highlights the connection between ‘idiocy,’ gender relations and procreation. Racial and class considerations were, however, also among the primary concerns of the eugenicists of the time, as the United States was facing a large numbers of incoming immigrants that were seen as ‘contaminating’ the nation’s blood and were also largely linked to feeblemindedness. The stigmatization of the large group of whoever could be deemed as “feeble-minded” stemmed from the belief that they could definitely not be responsible citizens, and nativists argued in a similar manner that for this reason many aliens could not be assimilated into American citizenry (Watson 162). One can discern many examples of Faulkner’s engagement

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2 I am referring to the 1927 *Buck vs. Bell* case, which concerned Carrie Buck of the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded and which paved the way for further sterilization of those deemed unfit.
with various aspects of this issue in *The Sound and the Fury*. For example, following what is interpreted as a sexual attack on the Burgess girl, Benjy is taken to Jackson by his brother in order to be castrated, without the knowledge of their hypochondriac mother. It is explained the appendix that “[Jason] had himself appointed the idiot’s guardian without letting their mother know and so was able to have the creature castrated before the mother even knew it was out of the house” (213). From this follow Jason’s further incisions into his brother’s life, namely his decision to institutionalize Benjy in a state asylum in Jackson, which is often alluded to as the most appropriate way to deal with him: “They going to send you to Jackson, where you belong. Mr. Jason say so. Where you can hold bars all day long with the rest of the looneys and slobber” (35). The act itself isn’t actually carried out until 1933 following the death of Mrs. Compson, highlighting the eventual victory of Jason as the modern southern man over the more romantically family inclined members, who believe in keeping Benjy at home. Another example concerns Quentin in the mad frenzy preceding his suicide, as he encounters trouble with a quiet, small Italian girl near Boston and her violent brother who wants to “killa heem” (88). Quentin calls her “sister,” presumably because he automatically connects her inability to speak with the familiar muteness of Benjy. In this instance, *The Sound and the Fury* engages in the kind of conflation of the immigrant and the feeble minded that followed the war and involved a nativist reading of the Army Alpha test results (Gandal 164), as well as the gender considerations alluded to earlier.

The historical context of eugenics and forms of social Darwinism, in Truchan-Tataryn’s view, does not absolve Faulkner from unrealistically depicting the human being with disabilities, given that for her, Benjy’s character portrays an entrenched, derogatory stereotype of disability that has served both in fiction and in reality to reify
and oppress a large percentage of the human population (170). While undeniably the latter part of the argument appears valid, one must be careful in assessing Faulkner’s portrayal of Benjy as unrealistic. The term realism implies an ordered set of events, where linear histories unravel themselves in time and are seen as “beads of a rosary” in Walter Benjamin’s terms (398). This is in opposition to Faulkner’s modernist mode of representing temporality, which in Benjy’s figuration depicts time as fluid, synchronous and impregnated with varied sensory perceptions creating chains of memories and associations. The concept is close to Benjamin’s concept of jetztzeit, as for him “history is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time” (365), with the additional layer of fully fledged sensory experience that is denied ‘normal’ people. Therefore, while the other sections of the novel could be seen as unrealistically depicting a disabled character, it is the ‘unrealism’ of the Benjy section that contributes to opening up time and experience on a different level, something the other accounts cannot provide. While in Benjamin temporality pregnant with history and messianic time has revolutionary potential, in The Sound and the Fury the potential is more directed at a revolutionary way of seeing the world for the reader, one hitherto unseen and unexperienced. Its placement at the outset of the novel makes the view especially potent, as the reader is immediately plunged into a disorienting and unfamiliar deep end.

Additionally, one could see Benjy’s conception of temporality as intimately linked with Bergsonian notions of time. In Bergson’s view,

Pure duration is the form, which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from former states. … [it] forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another (100).
In an interview from 1952, Faulkner refers to Bergson in relation to his concept of time:

There isn’t any time … in fact, I agree pretty much with Bergson’s theory of the fluidity of time. There is only the present moment, in which I include both the past and the future, and that is eternity. In my opinion time can be shaped quite a bit by the artist; after all, man is never time’s slave (Meriwether and Millgate 70).

While critics from Cleanth Brooks to Paul Douglas have frequently argued about the extent to which Faulkner knew Bergson’s work and applied him to his novels, one can discern an affinity between this account of time and Benjy’s experience of time, perhaps more than in any other character in The Sound and the Fury. According to Douglass, for Faulkner as for Bergson, there are two kinds of knowing. One we call “perception” but it is actually “memory,” for as soon as we have visualized the present state it is gone. … the other kind of knowing cannot be rendered in visualized states. It lies in the fields of consciousness (128). Benjy’s conception of time is governed by fluidity of memory, which is concurrent with the memories he harbours in the objects he covets and which are triggered by visual stimuli. Benjy’s memory also takes shape in another way, namely his extraordinary ability to record and remember the dialogue around him, even if he does not fully comprehend its implications, for example when he recalls his father’s use of Latin, “Et ego in arcadia” (28). Benjy’s section of the novel, with its stream-of-consciousness punctuated by sections in italics, is arguably the most unbiased rendition of the events available, given he records and retells history without the need to dilute, explain or justify. This is the first kind of knowing Douglas alludes to. The other kind of knowing

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3 According to Books, “Faulkner never read Bergson very deeply or thoroughly” (255). In Douglas’s view, “no one can be sure” (118).
knowing is manifested in his intuition and sensory appreciation of the world. With regards to Benjy’s perception, one also needs to recognize that the section is rendered through the voice of the narrator who assumes Benjy’s mask, so to speak, forcing us to constantly ponder the relationship between them (Samway and Silver 6).

For Benjy, the experience of time is less restricted by real ‘clock time’ and the past, since he continually lives in the present. Experientially, past and future are the same for Benjy to the degree that each differs from the present (Burton 212). While he has some level of memory, he experiences the present more fully with senses other than mere sight, which occasionally lead him to recall instances in the past. When Luster mentions to him “you snagged on that nail again. Cant you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail” Benjy’s mind wanders to the time he did the same in Caddy’s presence “Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through. Uncle Maury said to not let anybody see us, so we better stoop over, Caddy said. Stoop over, Benjy. Like this, see” (Sound 3). Benjy co-locates the important time-filled events in his life into one timeless present, that in and of itself, achieves not timelessness, but a new and often unlocatable sense of time for the reader (Samway and Silver 6). It is this other way of being and seeing that has largely contributed to Benjy’s perpetually being referred to as an ‘idiot’. His account is foreign to most ‘normal’ human experience and therefore inspires a fear of the unknown and unknowable, as well as that of potential understanding, posing a threatening possibility given his disability and what identification with a disabled character would imply.

Benjy’s disability and conception of time arguably allows him to be less ‘time’s slave’ compared to his brothers, despite his manifest attachment to Caddy, who importantly, does not belittle or mistreat him. She is the only character who engages with him dialogically, recognizing his human side and need for interaction and
affection. Her caring is presented not only in Benjy’s echolalic recording of the myriad voices around him, where hers is clearly the only one attempting to comprehend and respond to him, but also in the prevalence of her presence in his memory. He feels so strongly about her that the only time when he describes the past while being in the present is connected with her: “She smelled like trees. In the corner it was dark, but I could see the window. I squatted there, holding the slipper. I couldn’t see it, but my hands saw it, and I could hear it getting night, and my hands saw the slipper but I couldn’t see myself, but my hands could see the slipper, and I squatted there, hearing it get dark” (46). Isolated from the others, Benjy is able to remember Caddy’s smell as he experiences the sensation connected with feeling an object once belonging to her. He is either unable or unwilling to separate the sensual sensations, as he ascribes vision to the feeling of his hands and hearing to vision. This recalls Gloucester’s remark in Act 4, scene vi of King Lear, when the blind man proclaims “I see it feelingly” (l. 142). For Benjy, recognizing the difference between the senses is insubstantial and unimportant. In some ways, the conflation of the senses mimics his conflation of the past and the present, further highlighting the concept of fluidity that governs his life. In this way, Benjy’s discourse hints at experience before it has been reified (Matthews 107). If he can be seen as stuck in the past with regard to his affection for her, it is only because it reminds him of the time he was treated as a human being instead of an eternal child or an animal. She comforts Benjy “You’re not a poor baby. Are you. Are you. You’ve got your Caddy. Haven’t you got your Caddy” (6). In clinging to her, Benjy clings to the possibility of being accepted as a full-fledged, legitimate person who is regarded as such and whose needs are addressed rather than dismissed. Benjy’s memories often revolve around Caddy, on whom he is entirely dependent for emotional support, affection and understanding.
Benjy also possesses an exceptional sense of intuition and insight, an attribute denied other characters in the novel. Roskus captures this when he and Frony have an exchange about whether Benjy knows his “own mammy’s name.” Roskus points out “he know lot more than folk thinks … he knowed they time was coming, like that pointer done. He could tell you when hisn coming, if he could talk. Or yours. Or mine” (29). Benjy can, for example, intuit death by the sense of smell, which is highlighted by the repetition of the word “smell” six times on a single page after Damuddy’s death to emphasize his heightened sense awareness. Similarly, Benjy is able to discern Caddy’s sexual adventures based on the change in her smell as she attempts to cover it with perfume. She tells him “Sweet. Smell. Good.” (27), but to him the best smell is when “she smelled like trees” (27). Rather than closing down communication, or ‘signifying nothing,’ the depiction of Benjy inspires a diverse variety of aural, olfactory and physical impressions, as well as complex web of intertextual echoes (Hall 40).

In *Vision’s Immanence*, Peter Lurie points out that Benjy and his place both in *The Sound and the Fury* and in Faulkner’s modernism show the meaningful differences between a fullness and a range of sense perception, and the singular emphasis we see in the thirties novels on sight and on vision’s political and economic uses. Benjy helps to see how sensory perception has been affected by shifts in technology, culture and social experience and may itself be historicized (162-163). According to him, the modern man’s visual sense is overstimulated while the rest of the senses are neglected. Benjy, on the other hand, relates to the world differently given that he experiences his surroundings and memories through touch, smell and hearing. Benjy represents an alternative to the modern increasing diminishment of individuals’ sensory capacity and emotional life. In order to try and keep Benjy quiet,
Caddy tells him “You can look at the fire and the mirror and the cushion too, Caddy said. You won’t have to wait until supper to look at the cushion, now. We could hear the roof.” What she does not grasp is Benjy derives pleasure from the feel of the red and yellow cushion against his hand, rather than mere sight of it. The cushion is also associated closely with Mrs. Compson, although it is debatable to what extent his attachment to it also stems from his emotional affection for her, given all mothering duties have been transferred to Caddy and Dilsey.

Matthews, also reading Faulkner alongside Bergson, suggests that Benjy deals with his limited verbal and conceptual ability by “translating raw change into a kind of topographic stability … so that the Compson grounds become a simple analogue for the memory, where every site opens immediate access to all of the moments that have ever occurred there” (65), which creates a sphere of memory-space wherever he goes. Such a view is supported by the earlier example of snagging on the nail and Benjy’s waiting by the fence. Additionally, the topographic memory also extends beyond the house. At the end of the novel, when Luster takes the wrong turn around the Confederate soldier memorial, Benjy’s sense of order is temporarily dismantled and he vehemently reacts to the change of ordinary routine. He moves from stasis to utter agony in a matter of moment, “for an instant Ben sat in an utter hiatus. Then he bellowed. Bellow on bellow, his voice mounted, with scarce interval for breath. There was more than astonishment in it, it was horror; shock; agony eyeless, tongueless; just sound, and Luster’s eyes backrolling for a white instant” (199).

Rather than driving to the left side of the monument as they usually do, Luster’s driving to the right tampers with Benjy’s need for order that results from his autism. As Winthrop Tilley suggests, he also connects turning this way with the
journey to Jackson when Jason had him castrated in 1913 (376), bringing back waves of painful memories he does not wish to have re-populate his present. Extrapolating from the map of Jefferson to the site of his own body, Benjy revolts against the imposed loss of his manhood and forced surrender of a part of his identity. Significantly, the episode takes place near the Confederate soldier memorial, juxtaposing Benjy’s loss of his genitals and the South’s loss in the Civil War. By comparing the South to the site of a disabled body, Faulkner problematizes how both relate to locations trauma and defeat in which they are submerged. As Davis points out, characters with disabilities are always marked with ideological meaning, as are moments of disease or accident that transform such characters (15). Passing the monument embodies such an accident. Reading the South as a castrated and disabled body highlights the breakdown of ideological norms and points towards the need to reconsider the way in which it is treated in history. For Faulkner to even suggest such a link signifies a move beyond the lines of hegemony or normalcy, as locating the South’s loss in a disabled body suggests he is using it as a vessel for articulating that which is inarticulable. As Thompson points out, the disabled body exposes the illusion of autonomy, self-government, and self-determination that underpins the fantasy of absolute-ablebodiedness (46). If one equates the disabled body with the South, one is able to discern such an effect on the ideological construct of the geographical area, which further destabilizes its status as an internal other.

Benjy’s affinity with the South is further accentuated by his change of name from Maury to Benjamin, and perhaps unbeknownst to his mother, signifies a move towards a more privileged meaning, despite the fact she changed it in order not for it to pollute her brother’s name. Whereas the name Maury means dark skinned or

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4 This is in line with Greeson’s line of argument in Our South, where she posits that “the South” first and foremost, is an ideological construct, rather than a geographical area (10).
Moorish, Benjamin\(^5\) means both “son of Right hand” and “son of the South,” further highlighting that instead of signifying nothing, Benjy’s character has a lot to say about the nature of the changing modern world around him and the ways of relating to it. Significantly, the novel ends with a reestablishment of the status quo based on Jason’s interference with Luster’s driving:

Ben’s voice roared and roared. Queenie moved again, her feet began to clop-clop steadily again, and at once Ben hushed. Luster looked quickly back over his shoulder, then he drove on. The broken flower drooped over Ben’s fist and his eyes were empty and blue and serene again as cornice and façade flowed smoothly once more from left to right, post and tree, window and doorway and signboard each in its ordered place (*Sound* 199).

The reinstatement of order is significantly tied to Benjy’s character and his innate need for routine and predictability. Sadly, it is only obtained after Jason’s anger spills over and he acts violently towards his brother, “he reached back and struck Ben, breaking the flower again” (199), rendering it highly problematic. Rainey argues that the order established by Jason, and by implication the ideology he represents, creates a social cacophony of isolated individuals all living in their own world. Now, with Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Caddy gone, only Benjy knows that everything needs to have a place, that society must have order for peace to exist (65). If Benjy is a reincarnation and representation of the old romantic agrarian plantation South, Jason’s violence towards him, contrasted with his acquiescence regarding Benjy’s wishes signifies the modern southern man’s plight in dealing with his memory while trying to reconcile it with the demands of modernity.

Caddy, with her promiscuity, running away from home and child out of wedlock, exemplifies another aspect of what was classed “feeble-mindedness” at the

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\(^5\) In Genesis, interestingly, Benjamin is initially named Ben-oni by his Rachel on her deathbed after she gives birth to him. Ben-oni means “son of my misfortune” (Hamilton 384).
time of Faulkner’s writing, alluded to earlier. Watson explains that by the 1920, feeblemindedness had come to be understood in highly gendered terms that often had little to do with intelligence: in a man, shiftlessness, lack of industriousness or other indications of unsuitability to labor could prompt diagnosis of feeblemindedness, whereas in women the focus was on promiscuity, prostitution, illegitimacy or other signs of sexual immorality (23). Jason shrewdly comments on the prevalence of versions of incapability within his family, extending the veil from Benjy to the rest of the Compsons, “like a man would naturally think, one of them is crazy and another drowned himself and the other one was turned out into the street by her husband, what’s the reason the rest of them are not crazy too” (Sound 146). The Compsons display a collection of defective attributes, including Mrs. Compson’s perpetual ill-health, hypochondria and self-pity, Mr. Compson’s and Uncle Maury’s alcoholism, Quentin’s increasing madness and abnormal, if not incestuous fixation on his sister and her virginity and finally young Quentin’s rebellious escapades and running away. Although described in the Appendix as “the first sane Compson since before Culloden” (Sound 212), Jason is also not wholly absolved of being included in the category, given he is a habitual thief and a liar, and could be classed a sociopath. Indeed, the Compson house looks more and more like a contemporary mental institution in its own right, with the novel’s opening view “through the fence” and its repeated attention to that fence over its first several paragraphs, evoking the inmate’s gaze past the perimeter of his confinement toward freer, greener pastures beyond (Watson 36).

Seeing the whole family through the disability lens helps dissolve the boundaries between Benjy and the rest of his clan and underscores how fine the line between ability and disability is. Construing normalcy is an act performed to ward off
fears of otherness and can be seen as wholly arbitrary. Correspondingly, it is the characters who can see past the differences that triumph in the novel and are able to propagate the family into the future. Caddy demonstrates undying love for Benjy and is subsequently the only sibling that is able to reproduce and continue the Compson line. While not a family member, Dilsey also demonstrates tenderness, love and affection towards Benjy, accepting him as a gift of god rather than a pest. Commenting on Benjy’s autism, Dilsey claims “de good Lawd don’t keer whether he bright er not. Don’t nobody but white trash keer dat” (178). Her appraisal of him is based on her religious faith, making her more accepting of difference than the members of Benjy’s own family.

Faulkner clearly realized the power of beginning *The Sound and the Fury* with the voice of a disabled character. In comparison with the other sections of the novel, Benjy’s discourse provides a wholly contradistinctive perspective on the experience of time and relationship to the outside world. While the author’s portrayal of Benjy is clearly steeped in the contemporary discourses regarding the feebleminded and ‘idiots’ and his depiction of the character “perpetuates constructions of disability” (Truchan-Tataryn 161), by utilizing such a view he at least gestures towards is worth and significance. As Douglas points out, Faulkner claimed that he was a failed poet, but he also said “my prose is really poetry.” One sees here how seriously he has sought the immediacy, compactness and freshness of verse in his novels. As seriously as he has pursued the continual elaboration of novelty, he has just as intently worked on the counterforces that give a shape to the seeming chaos and anarchy (139). Benjy encompasses both poles, as his hybridity and fluid sense of temporality embodies novelty simultaneously with paradoxically providing the main driving force behind reinstating the status quo at the end of the novel. Through Benjy’s cognition of the
world as an autistic person, Faulkner is able to get at a fuller expression of the human experience. By connecting a disability aware reading with Bergsonian views of time and a historical materialist assessment of Benjy’s role in the modern world, I have attempted to link several critical ways of seeing in order to surpass mere recognition of disability and disapproval of Faulkner’s dehumanizing approach to Benjy. Such an approach attempts to provide a nuanced way of reading, which is not merely applicable to Faulkner, but to other authors as well. Recognizing disability as a difference rather than a defect, theorizing its depiction and questioning what it constitutes offers a valuable mode of appraising literary work, one which values previously marginalized or misunderstood characters and brings them out of the shadows of social periphery. In the words of Lennard Davis, the “problem” is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the “problem” of the disabled person (3).
Works Cited


