

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Benjy Compson Most Likely Suffers from Autism

Patrick Samway, S.J.  
Gentry Silver

Stating that Benjy Compson most likely suffers from autism in *The Sound and the Fury* introduces methodological concerns never before seen in Faulkner criticism, insofar as ongoing information concerning an actual neurological disorder is used to diagnose a completely fictional character. To a great extent, the possibility of such a diagnosis supposes Benjy to be a genuine candidate for a neurological/psychological case study, a supposition that, admittedly, needs to remain speculative, but which nevertheless has value in identifying more exactly why he acts as he does. As in any neurological/psychological case study, a review of earlier opinions by literary critics can bring to light how Benjy has been perceived to date, which, when linked with precise textual evidence from the novel and recent neurological theories, will allow for a more coherent explanation of his condition.

*Given His Physical Condition and Mental Limitations, Should Benjy Be Called an "Idiot" or Would "Autistic" Be More Appropriate?*

Due in large part to the "idiotic" or "lunatic" ways in which Benjy perceives and relates the world around him, literary critics and Faulkner himself have preferred to call Benjy an idiot, though they often discuss the nature of his idiocy in different ways (see, for example, *The Most Splendid Failure*, 67, 71, 88, 178-9; "The Ordeal of Consciousness," 175; "Nihilists and Their Relations," 93; "Faulkner, Childhood, and the Making of *The Sound and the Fury*," 381; "Idiocy and Idealism," 101; "'Where you want to go now,'" 4; *Faulkner's Inexhaustible Voice*, 171; "Searching for Jason Richmond Compson," 185; *The Fool: Character as Technique in the Novels of William Faulkner*, 51; "'Trying to Say,'" 40; "A propos de 'Le Bruit et la Fureur,'" 1058). Only once in the novel is Benjy actually called an idiot, by an angry Mrs. Patterson after he has been caught by her husband with the letter written by Uncle Maury (13). With no relationship to Dostoyevsky's idiot/hero, Prince Leo Nikolayevich Myshkin, in *The Idiot*, nor the idiot so loved by his mother in Wordsworth's poem, "The Idiot Boy," the title of Faulkner's novel, chosen by Faulkner from Macbeth's soliloquy (V.v.), underscores not only a fundamental compatibility between psychology and literature, but

gives incalculable authorial weight to the role of the idiot in this novel. Faulkner noted that while the original title applied to the Benjy section, the more he “worked on the book, the more elastic the title became, until it covered the whole family” (*Faulkner in the University*, 87). Faulkner’s own assessment of Benjy as an idiot, as mentioned explicitly in the Compson Appendix (1141), in letters to Ben Wasson and Malcolm Cowley (*Selected Letters*, 55, 255), and to the cadets at West Point (*Faulkner at West Point*, 109), has undoubtedly impelled many critics not to question his choice of this word. While in Japan in 1955, Faulkner linked the notion of innocence with the idiot: “So the idiot was born and then I became interested in the relationship of the idiot to the world that he was in but would never be able to cope with and just where could he get the tenderness, the help, to shield him in his innocence. I mean ‘innocence’ in the sense that God had stricken him blind at birth, that is, mindless at birth and there was nothing he could ever do about it” (*Lion in the Garden*, 146; see also 222). “To that idiot,” Faulkner added upon further reflection, “time was not a continuation, it was an instant, there was no yesterday and no tomorrow, it all is this moment, it all is [now] to him. He cannot distinguish between what was last year and what will be tomorrow, he doesn’t know whether he dreamed it, or saw it” (*Lion in the Garden*, 147-48). In addition, Faulkner’s telling interview with Jean Stein vanden Heuvel in 1956 nuances even more his thoughts about Benjy:

I had already begun to tell it 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....The only emotion I can have for Benjy is grief and pity for all mankind. You can’t feel anything for Benjy because he doesn’t feel anything. The only thing I can feel about him personally is concern as to whether he is believable as I created him. He was a prologue like the gravedigger in the Elizabethan dramas. He serves his purpose and is gone. Benjy is incapable of good and evil because he had no knowledge of good and evil....Benjy wasn’t rational enough even to be selfish. He was an animal. He recognized tenderness and love though he could not have named them, and it was the threat to tenderness and love that cause him to bellow when he felt the change in Caddy. (*Lion in the Garden*, 245-46)

In a similar vein, Luster states that Benjy was born a “looney,” a popular term that carries minimal medical or psychological information, but which suggests antisocial behavior and limited cognitive inability—in short, a code word for mental retardation and moronic comportment (53). The figure of the idiot, also referred to as a “loony” in “The Kingdom of God,” serves as a definite prototype of Benjy (48, 46). He shares some of the exact same features as Benjy: “The face of the sitting man was vague and dull and loose-lipped, and his eyes were clear and blue as cornflowers, and utterly vacant of thought; he sat a shapeless, dirty lump, life without

mind, an organism without intellect. Yet always in his slobbering vacuous face were his two eyes of a heart-shaking blue, and gripped tightly in one fist was a narcissus”(45-46). Is it possible, we ask, to give a more technical psychological appellation to Faulkner’s recurring characterization of Benjy? Do the generic terms “idiot” or “looney/loony” describe Benjy with the accuracy found in the novel?

While the novel points inwards on itself to the ongoing drama it presents, it also points outward to a larger world that Faulkner, as author, could name with historical specificity: Harvard (77, 85, 92, etc.), New London [Connecticut] (77), Saint Louis Fair (80), Garabaldi’s [Giuseppi Garibaldi] (82), Parker’s [Parker House in Boston] (83), [Hernando de] DeSoto (88), French Lick [Indiana] (95), Princeton (97), [Babe] Ruth (252), and Beale [Street in Memphis, Tennessee] (264). Except in a very limited way, Faulkner has chosen not to use specific medical terms in this novel. Were it not for the increasing prevalence today of autism, a specific lifelong disorder with a neurological basis in the brain first known to the public in the mid-1940’s due to the groundbreaking article, “Early Infantile Autism,” by Leo Kanner, M.D., a Johns Hopkins University psychiatrist—and thus not part of Faulkner’s vocabulary when *The Sound and the Fury* was published in 1929—it might not be possible to suggest that Benjy suffered from autism.<sup>1</sup> Faulkner simply never heard this word in 1928. But why look to a scientific basis for Benjy’s physical and psychological profile outside the text of the novel itself? Faulkner, himself, has provided the key: he wrote a number of para-historical texts about this novel in which he steps forward not as *literary author* but as *historical guide* whose own knowledge of the actual world about him provides valuable commentary about the novel. In fact, he took a most unusual step in giving some additional background not only on specific characters in the novel, but on the history of the Compson family in general. After the first publication of the novel in 1929, and the confusion experienced by almost all of the novel’s readers in trying to understand the Benjy section, Faulkner added further thoughts, ideas, and data not intrinsic to the novel, but which can be used as aids in interpretation, the most notable being the “Compson Appendix: 1699-1945,” published much later in *The Portable Faulkner* (1946).<sup>2</sup> Had Faulkner continued writing para-historical information about the Compsons, and had he read in the 1950’s some psychological and medical journals, one can well ask if he would have changed the way he discussed and described Benjy—even possibly calling him autistic?

For us today, contemporary data about autism reveals how common it is. For children ages 6-22, the statistics (1993-2006) from the Center for Disease Control show that the cumulative growth rate of autism has increased 1,342 percent, or now about 1 in 166 children, more than three times the number with juvenile diabetes ( [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)). While no one definition of autism will satisfy all specialists in the field, autism, as defined by Professor Lori Ernsperger of Indiana University, refers “to neurologic disorders involving serious impairment of abilities to interact and communicate socially, and repetitive and restricted interests and activities” and usually can be recognized in the first three years of life (3). Males today are four times more likely to have autism than females.<sup>3</sup> In short, those who are autistic suffer from deficits in language, communication, and social behavior and respond abnormally to their physical environments, often exhibiting repetitive patterns of behavior.

To date, no specific biological markers are recognized as being genetic indicators of this disorder. According to the Autism Society of America, persons with autism may exhibit some of the following traits: resistance to change; difficulty in expressing needs, using gestures and pointing instead of words; repeating words or phrases in place of normal, responsive language; laughing and/or crying for no apparent reason; an aloof manner; tantrums; difficulty in mixing with others; not wanting to be cuddled; little or no eye contact; unresponsive to normal teaching methods; sustained odd play; obsessive attachment to objects; apparent over-sensitivity or under-sensitivity to pain; no real fear of danger; noticeable physical over-activity or extreme passivity; uneven gross/fine motor skills; non-responsive to verbal cues, and acts as if deaf, although hearing tests are in normal range ( [www.autism-society.org](http://www.autism-society.org)). In one degree or another, many of these traits can be applied to Benjy, who is perhaps based on Edwin, the brother of Miss Annie Chandler, Faulkner’s first-grade teacher. In his biography of Faulkner, Joseph Blotner notes that Edwin was “retarded,” could be seen playing in the family’s front yard “behind a high fence,” and “lived past the age of thirty” (21). Once, as Faulkner was reading the novel to Phil Stone, his friend automatically connected Benjy with Edwin Chandler (*Faulkner: A Biography*, 219). Since Faulkner never alluded to Edwin’s medical or psychological histories, the question of source remains somewhat moot, though it does not cancel out the possibility that Benjy suffered from autism.

A handful of literary critics have linked Benjy and autism, but not in any systematic way that relies on the findings of psycholinguistic or neurological evidence. André Bleikasten, for example, makes a general allusion to this disorder, but never explains it with precision: “Contrary to Quentin’s extreme estrangement from society (not to speak of Benjy’s autistic isolation), Jason’s relation to it is a very odd mixture of rebellion and conformity. His paranoid resentment is surely boundless, and for his ever-ebullient malice any available target will do” (*The Most Splendid Failure*, 155). Since “Benjy’s world hardly seems bigger than the sphere of a single organism,” John Matthews maintains, “we might be tempted to read his predicament narrowly as the result of an individual mental deficiency, or at most as the outgrowth of a particular family’s pathology. But Benjy has never fit clinical definitions of mental retardation or autism (though he may have been modeled on an impaired townsman Faulkner knew, the brother of his beloved first grade teacher). Rather, the literal traits of the Compson family serve...more as emblems of a whole class’s values and behavior” (*William Faulkner: Seeing Through the South*, 83). On the other hand, Sara McLaughlin’s 1987 exploratory essay, entitled “Faulkner’s Faux Pas: Referring to Benjamin Compson as an Idiot,” raises the issue of Benjy being autistic, looking primarily at a limited number of Benjy’s speech patterns; unfortunately she never plumbs the depth of her insight: “Regarding speech, for example, many autistic children are mute; they produce no recognizable words. Others’ expressive speech is minimal. Benjy was mute, though the reader gets the rare opportunity to read Benjy’s mind in a sense, in the chapter he narrates figuratively. This device enables readers to see how Benjy might talk if he could” (35). Ineke Bockting’s psycholinguistic evaluation of Benjy’s “mind-style” as a way of diagnosing his situation points to the medical basis of why Benjy speaks and acts as he does. She acknowledges in a footnote that Benjy shows many characteristics of autism (no awareness of the feelings of others, no comforting seeking with others in time of distress, no imitation play, no verbal, para-verbal or nonverbal communication, echolalia, and attachments to unusual objects), adding that mentally retarded people relate to others in accordance with their mental age, whereas autistic people do not (5). She correctly avoids a common pitfall: equating those who are mentally retarded with those who are autistic. The first shows relatively even skill development, whereas autistic individuals exhibit uneven skill development especially in certain areas. At the same time, it should be noted, those with autism can and do manifest some behavioral patterns of those who are mentally retarded.

Even though readers of *The Sound and the Fury* observe and understand Benjy, the youngest of the four Compson children, through the eyes and actions of the other characters in the novel, he relates, for the most part, his own story, however confusedly, without the help of others. Thus evidence of Benjy's autism is derived principally from his monologue. Like the intersecting threads of a web, many of the characters discuss others in the novel, who, in turn, have feelings and observations they feel compelled to share in language appropriate to their personalities. Though Benjy, himself, cannot communicate with others through vocal speech, his monologue, lacking any genuine nuancing, reveals the voice of the narrator who assumes the mask of Benjy, forcing us to constantly ponder the relationship between them. And especially in the backlooping, manneristic style of the first two sections, the past is absorbed into the present and vice versa, achieving in the end a remarkable synchronicity. "Every site of Benjy's domain opens immediate access to all the moments that have ever occurred there: to duck through the 'broken place' in the fence with Luster in 1928 is to emerge with Caddy two decades earlier" (*The Play of Faulkner's Language*, 65). Before long, we become so accustomed to bilocation that initial feelings of dislocation disappear, and we soon marvel at the malleability of the landscape/mindscape.

Benjy unwittingly serves as a guide and participant, especially given his mental and physical condition, into what might be called from his perspective his family's "dumbshow." His uncooperative body rarely acts in sync with his racing mind. Ironically, as Cheryl Ware observes, Benjy's section, seemingly chaotic and meaningless, "contains all the necessary information the reader needs" (63). While all four sections of the novel have specific dates, giving the illusion that the past actually enfolds into 1928, the present time in the novel, Benjy, in fact, never uses the present tense. Motivated instead by pleasure or pain, Benjy reacts on an elementary sensory level, devoid of moral evaluations that deal with possibilities, probabilities, and statements of ultimate value. In doing this, he 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 unlocateable sense of time for the reader. "Faulkner thus achieves the effect of cinematic montage and he is able to juxtapose significant episodes in the Compson family history simply by alternating between episodes—his encounter with Caddy and Charlie in the swing, for example, is intertwined associatively with a similar, later, encounter with Miss Quentin and

her boyfriend in the same swing; Caddy's wedding and Damuddy's funeral are intimately intertwined in this same way," Noel Polk notes. "Through these juxtapositions, these comparisons and contrasts of scenes, Faulkner creates meanings, hierarchies of emotions and significances that Benjy cannot. At the top of the hierarchy is, of course, his loss of Caddy, which registers most powerfully and most constantly—on himself and on everybody else" (*Children of the Dark House*, 109). In short, the intertextual voids comment in revelatory fashion on one another—especially when the often haphazard patterns of texts-intertextual voids repeat themselves, not programmatically but nevertheless with a sense of predictability.

The gaps the narrator creates in portraying Benjy's conscious mental activity have significance; they transform a small nothingness, a space or void, into a quest for seeing and articulating connections. Yet, as Robert Dale Parker observes "the concepts of an extra-linguistic ontology, of Benjy as teller his story, and even of Benjy—a fictional character—having an actual consciousness of the sort we attribute to people outside novels are all suspect at the least..." (16). Parker's caveat merits considerable attention because no fictional antecedents exist for Benjy, and thus traditional critical discourse must cede to multilateral forays in an attempt to do justice to this novel and supply meaning to a fictive world that no literary critic, as far as we know, has ever experienced.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, readers are forced, willy-nilly, to co-create with the author and Benjy, both of whom supply the reader with unevaluated interlocking episodes or events for which, alas, Benjy cannot make sense or integrate within himself—with the unanticipated result that, in the spirit of some of Wallace Stevens' poetry, Benjy's section embodies and dramatizes a commentary on the very nature of art itself—an observation affirmed by Arnold Weinstein who notes that Faulkner's task was "to fashion a story of brutal losses (pasture, sister, genitals) in such a way that the reader is virtually trapped within the character's orbit. We too are now seeing through the fence. And the world is thereby metamorphosed, personalized into the private calvary of an idiot for whom every event recasts the presence and loss of his sister. Finding a language that captures the feeling and pathos of this story is what Faulkner means by 'trying to say'" (40). Both André Bleikasten and John Matthews, as they try separately to find the axis upon which the novel rotates, underscore the importance of these three words, repeated by Benjy running along the fence seeking Caddy (*The Ink of Melancholy*, 66-67, and *The Play of Faulkner's Language*, 71). Unfortunately, Benjy does not realize that he

has not communicated anything to anybody—except incredible anguish and despair. Indeed, as Harold Bloom infers, the world is too much for Benjy and, at the same time, without Caddy, never enough. Benjy's unpredictable, symbolic-laden, fragile, non-linear world cannot be reduced to outline form, since much of what transpires there does so precisely in the tensile spaces-in-between.

Yet, Benjy remains a perennial three-year-old child, the age when autism is normally detected: “‘He thirty three.’ Luster said. ‘Thirty three this morning’.” To which an unnamed friend replies: “‘You mean, he been three years old thirty years’” (17). His fragmentary thoughts, easily interrupted, emerge from a linguistic center within him, as filtered by the narrator, which makes free association essential to his ability to express himself. Naively, Benjy never thinks that he will not be understood or that others will misunderstand his intramental spoken English. Above all, he has an amazing capacity to hear and repeat the conversations around him, rendering his section the most unbiased of the four, since he never provides any personal reflections or commentary. When he says, “the dark tall place on the wall came and I went and touched it. It was like a door, only it wasn't a door,” Benjy knows that the empty space once contained a mirror that had been removed, but he does not go beyond the evidence to try to name it (61). And when he sees an obscure figure descending from Miss Quentin's window because it is dark, he does not guess at the identity of this person. Given the monologue's intricate nature, André Bleikasten provides a sharp focus to its overall profile: “Not that the novel's opening section confounds comprehension. Most sentences in it are perfectly grammatical and taken one by one, nearly all of them make sense. Moreover, reported conversation, developing into scenes or at least scene fragments, occupies more than half of Benjy's monologue—a monologue that, strictly speaking, is no monologue at all but rather a polylogue, a patchwork of many voices seemingly recorded at random by an unselective mind” (*The Ink of Melancholy*, 57). Benjy never poses the “why” question, nor does he project imaginatively his needs. “Things and persons come and go, materialize out of nowhere and vanish with magic suddenness: the jimson weed is there or gone, and it is the same with the cushion (78), the bowl (86), or any other object. Which is to say that there is at least one distinction registered by Benjy's mind: the opposition of presence and absence. They are the two categories into which his whole universe is divided, and they make all the difference” (*The Most Splendid Failure*, 73). In short, Benjy's “idiolect” relates what is happening around



him but makes no effort to provide explanations; he speaks to himself constantly as if he had a listener inside his own mind.

With limited lexical variation and basic sentence structures, Benjy's discourse reveals unsophisticated mannerisms of speech, which are pleasantly fresh and appealing. In his research, L. Moffitt Cecil has discovered that Benjy has a working vocabulary of about 500 words, including 210 different nouns, 175 verbs or verbals, 61 adjectives, 37 adverbs, 25 prepositions and 13 conjunctions of one sort or another (*A Critical Casebook*, 69-70). Though mute, Benjy—as a thinking/speaking character in a novel—needs a vocabulary if he is to express himself at all, and his working vocabulary would signify that it is very limited indeed. While not always following the rules of grammar, he does not speak gibberish, nor use baby-talk; sentences flow naturally, if often idiosyncratically, but with the effect of a sound track whose editing has lacked key transitions, revealing an openness to listen and absorb the language of the people around him. “Things seem to reveal themselves of their own accord,” Noel Polk remarks, “unchosen, uncontrived, as if to an innocent eye unwilling or unable to impose any imaginative pressure on them...” (*New Essays on “The Sound and the Fury,”*79). In addition, as Ineke Bockting points out, when Benjy speaks without transitive constructions (“‘Here, caddie.’ He hit.” [3]), it is easy to sense that most, though sometimes not all, of the linguistic elements convey meaning, usually devoid, however, of notions of responsibility, authority, incentive, submission or cause and effect (45). Finally, because of the haphazard nature of his discourse, one that repeats words from the past, but which do not originate from Benjy's memory (can we say he really has one?), the reader is beckoned to reread his section after completing the entire novel to rediscover what has always been there—thus intensifying his or her appreciation of the novel's brilliance.

Some examples of Benjy's autism based on his language:

1. *Benjy's use of echolalia can be linked at times to the difficulty he has in expressing needs, particularly his need for Caddy.*

Benjy has a remarkable ability to repeat almost unconsciously exactly what others have said. He can repeat Latin correctly (“Et ego in arcadia” [44]), something Quentin had difficulty doing (“reduct[i]o [ad] absurdum” [76]) and write the Mississippi dialect with convincing authority: “ricklickshun” (recollection),

“gizzle” (gizzard), and “rinktum” (rectum) (295, 65, 70). The most striking example of echolalia occurs after his name change, when Benjy started sleeping alone. Mrs. Compson insisted that her side of the family was as good as the Compson side, and that Uncle Maury suffered from bad health, to which Mr. Compson replied: “Bad health is the primary reason for all life. Created by disease, within putrefaction, into decay” (44). Benjy could not have either initiated this type of thinking nor chosen and structured this type of vocabulary. Though there is likelihood that Benjy might have overheard Mr. Compson speak these words to Quentin when Quentin returned home for Christmas in 1909 from Harvard (and subsequently associated them with Uncle Maury’s sickness), it is more likely that he recalls them and places them in their original context where they fit.

Though Benjy’s ability to repeat words and phrases exactly without distortion can be disingenuous, he cannot make distinctions even with fairly ordinary words, such as associating the action of the golfers with the game of golf itself. Although golfers and golf balls have distinct identities, Benjy does not favor one over the other. Rather he allows a word he repeats to be as it is. Since he does not understand the difference between “caddie” and “Caddy,” uncontrollable floodgates of emotion are released when he hears the word “caddie,” as he once again longs for his missing sister, a response beyond Luster’s comprehension: “‘Hush up.’ ‘What he moaning about now.’ ‘Lawd knows.’ Luster said. ‘Hush up.’ ‘He just starts like that. He been at it all morning. Cause it is his birthday, I reckon’” (16-17). Elisabeth Hill and Uta Frith note that when a group of autistic people were tested using homographs (words with one spelling but two meanings, such as tears in the eye or in a piece of fabric), the results were that individuals with autism “did not appear to integrate the sentence context when performing this task...” (285).

## 2. Benjy repeats words or phrases in place of normal, responsive language.

When Benjy and Caddy were delivering Uncle Maury’s letter to Mrs. Patterson, Benjy repeats a phrase rather than replying directly to Caddy’s concern about the grunting pigs: “*The ground was hard. We climbed the fence, where the pigs were grunting and snuffing. I expect they’re sorry because one of them go killed today, Caddy said. The ground was hard, churned and knotted*” (4). In two other examples, Benjy resorts to repeating certain words in staccato fashion, rather than giving a full response to the nature of the situation at hand: “*She was trying to climb the fence. Give it to me, she said, Give it to me. Mr Patterson climbed the fence. He took the letter*” (14). “When she got up she began to splash water on Quentin and Quentin splashed water

on Caddy...and then Quentin and Caddy began to splash water at Versh” (18). Later, when Caddy and Frony are discussing death, Benjy does respond to them, but deals with the topic obliquely and repetitiously: “The bones rounded out of the ditch, where the dark vines were in the black ditch, into the moonlight, like some of the shapes had stopped. Then they all stopped and it was dark, and when I stopped to start again I could hear Mother, and feet walking fast away, I could smell it. Then the room came, but my eyes went shut. I didn’t stop. I could smell it” [repetitious words: ditch/ditch; stopped/stopped/stopped/stop; dark/dark; smell/smell (33-34)].

Some examples of Benjy’s autism based on his behavior:

1. *Crying and having tantrums for no apparent reason.*

Countless critics have commented on Benjy’s habit of crying, since it is one of his dominant personality traits. André Bleikasten has written, for example, “His cries and whining—made haunting through the repetition of ‘crying’, ‘wailing’, ‘whimpering’, ‘slobbering’, ‘bellowing’—supply what might be called the basic soundtrack of the section. Never articulated as speech, scarcely human, Benjy’s cries are the abject and pathetic expression of his nameless and unnamable suffering” (*The Most Splendid Failure*, 189). When asked what he does when Benjy starts “bellowing,” Luster simply replies, “I whips him” (15). Two other examples give a good indication of this pervasive trait, which can be triggered at almost any moment, though, admittedly, in these cases there are extenuating circumstances (alcohol and fear). Yet, Benjy seems out of control in both cases. The first occurred during Caddy’s wedding reception: “I wasn’t crying, but I couldn’t stop. I wasn’t crying, but the ground wasn’t still, and then I was crying” (20). The second when he sensed that Charlie was Caddy’s boyfriend, and thus a potential threat to him: “Charlie came and put his hands on Caddy and I cried more. I cried loud” (47).

2. *Little or no eye contact.*

First, there is never a suggestion in the novel that Benjy cannot hear others speaking or addressing him, as is evident when he follows Caddy’s directive to put his hands in his pockets as they deliver the letter from Uncle Maury to Mrs. Patterson at Christmastime. Second, he seems comfortable looking at certain individuals, such as Caddy, and having Caddy look at him. “Caddy was still looking at me....She stopped against the wall,

looking at me and I cried and she went on and I came on, crying, and she shrank against the wall, looking at me” (69). On the other hand, he is alienated from his mother and takes no direction from her, especially when she directs him to take the cushion away from her bed. “‘Look at me.’ Mother said. ‘Benjamin,’ she said. She took my face in her hands and turned it to hers” (64).

### 3. *Obsessive attachment to objects.*

Benjy has collected a number of objects that remind him of Caddy, such as her slipper and a cushion. In addition, he carries around a jimson weed, here associated with death. Like many autistics, he takes notice of fire and brightness: bright grass (3, 4), bright shapes (11, 53, 57, 64, 75), and the box full of jewelry (“stars” [41]). Finally, certain repeated objects or places serve as facile metonyms: bird, fence, flag, flowers, garden, grass, mirror, pastures, shadows, table (where the golfers sink their balls), trees.

### 4. *Extreme passivity.*

There is hardly a moment on April 7, 1928, when Benjy is not led around by Luster, who lethargically complains that his role in life is to shepherd Benjy about. Benjy acquiesces for the most part, never presenting an alternative on his own. Dilsey is so upset about Luster’s apparent inattentiveness that she even considers having Versh strike Luster with a stick (57-58).

### 5. *Non-responsive to verbal cues.*

Tired of the monotonous routine, Benjy at times does not respond well to authority or quasi-authority figures. “*I kept telling you to hush, Luster said. What’s the matter now, Jason said. ‘He just trying hisself.’ Luster said. ‘That the way he been going all day’*” (65). “Hush” becomes such a constant refrain in the novel, as Ted Roggenbuck noted in the title to his essay, that the reader might feel that it is addressed to him or her, suggesting that one needs to quiet down in reading this novel, and not speed through it.

### 6. *No real fear of danger.*

Benjy never really shows fear as he delivers the letter from Uncle Maury to Mrs. Patterson; he just becomes upset and cries, even though Mr. Patterson thought a murder might take place. “‘Maury said he’s

going to shoot the scoundrel.’ Father said. I told him he better not mention it to Patterson before hand” (43). Another time, he touches the hot oven door, never realizing or fearing that it might burn him. “I put my hand out to where the fire had been,” he says (58). Similarly, he does not sense he will get frostbite if he does not put his hands in his pockets, though Caddy might have slightly exaggerated the effects of a Mississippi winter (12).

While Benjy does not fit neatly into every category for judging whether or not a person is autistic—as if Faulkner knew himself—there is sufficient linguistic and behavioral evidence to begin considering a positive judgment.

#### *A Medical Evaluation of Benjy Compson*

By the time of Benjy’s 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday on April 7, 1928, he appears, from all accounts in the text, abnormally large compared to his family and others with whom he comes into contact. According to the Compson Appendix, Benjy, born in 1895, is described as three times Luster’s size and twice his age, though Luster is more likely 17 or 18 (1141).<sup>5</sup> Benjy recognizes his size when he says matter-of-factly (and in a fashion the reader will soon realize has important symbolical overtones), “My shadow was higher than Luster’s on the fence” (4). Dilsey presents a softer, more sympathetic image of Benjy’s adult composure: “Ben sat in the chair, his big soft hands dangling between his knees, moaning faintly” (285). Yet, the most startlingly image of Benjy is recorded in the fourth section of the novel by the narrator who relates what Dilsey perceived (a writer-within-the-observer): “She heard the feet cross the dining room, then the swing door opened and Luster entered, followed by a big man who appeared to have been shaped of some substance whose particles would not or did not cohere to one another or to the frame which supported it. 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 upon his brow like that of children in daguerrotypes. His eyes were clear, of the pale sweet blue of cornflowers, his thick mouth hung open, drooling a little” (274). The narrator uses two exact words he had employed in depicting Dilsey in the opening of the first section (“particles” and “dropsical”), which show an authorial identification between these two characters, implying perhaps that both have some human qualities within them that should not be overlooked or discounted (265).

Since it should be remarked that Faulkner rarely feels comfortable allowing one image or one identification to carry the full weight of an observation, he sometimes shifts or transposes one image to another, thus revealing ongoing relationships whose realities exist not in some external world rooted in objective metaphysics but in the evocative power of language. From his perspective, Jason says that Benjy looks like a cow (253), in this case reminiscent of Dewey Dell Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*, though one should not discount Ike Snopes' amorous fascination with a cow in *The Hamlet*. The narrator states additionally that Benjy resembles a "trained bear," an animal that would assume more and more cosmic mythological importance in "The Bear," thus linking, in curious ways, the fates of these two creatures (274). In general, however, Benjy's physical appearance in the present has little variation. On her way back from the Easter services, to cite but one example, Dilsey describes Benjy as shambling behind her as they return to the Compson residence (297, for other descriptions of Benjy, see 9, 285, 315). Benjy's hulking physique serves to make his movements awkward and plodding, so unlike what is taking place in his mind.

In describing Benjy's body in the Dilsey section, François Pitavy notes that "here is obviously an emblematic body, whose coherence signifies that of the subject possessed solely by itself—and thus, ultimately, dispossessed" (100). In brief, Benjy appears on his birthday as a hulking, simple-minded, not evidently schizophrenic, aging Neanderthal with a drooping mouth whose saliva he cannot control; he has the appearance of an obedient and trained animal whose blue eyes, at times, reveal an unplanned, tranquil inner peace. One might *fear* Benjy's bulk, but *be charmed*, at the same time, by his apparent timidity whenever a blank, dazed, and melancholic expression stretches across his face. When his need for routine is respected, Benjy's cornflower-blue, tranquil eyes reveal an untroubled existence: "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 to tree, window and doorway and signboard each in its ordered place" (321). When order, based on familiarity and repetition, is re-established, in this case as the surrey's goes to the right around the monument, Benjy's world finally returns to the familiar, "as cornice and façade smoothly once more from left to right" (321). One can almost see Benjy looking into a distance that will remain, for him, marvelously static, providing the novel with a type of closure that could, alas, erupt again should his "normal" world change in the slightest. (Winthrop Tilley suggests that the carriage might have gone to the left of the monument when Benjy

was taken earlier to Jackson to be castrated, providing an explanation of his horror of going in this direction again [376]). The basic question needs to be asked: can we find medical answers that explain Benjy's abnormally psychological behavioral patterns?

As a starting point, it is worth asking what accounts for Benjy's general physical appearance, especially his dead-looking, hairless skin, unusual for a 33-year-old male, unless his body had undergone uncharacteristic hormonal changes. In addition to a seamless parade of traumatic familial situations in his life, which undoubtedly had psychosomatic effects, two medical episodes in Benjy's life, possibly linked to fetal alcoholic syndrome, provide some insight into his physical appearance: a possible bout with measles and his castration.<sup>6</sup> One can discount Versh's description of Benjy as a "bluegum," here a metaphorical reference to Negroes whose blue gums give them strange characteristics, though there could be an underlying hint that Benjy at birth lacked sufficient oxygen in his system, thus partially accounting for his mental retardation (69). Caddy infers that the only childhood disease Benjy might have had, along with his siblings, as well as T.P. and Frony, is measles (38): "This is where *we* have the measles" (73; emphasis ours). Caddy probably would not have mentioned this unless she thought that Benjy had some recollection of having had this illness.

Later, after her wedding on April 25, 1910 (she was 18 then), Caddy goes away on her honeymoon. Benjy, thinking she is still attending school, desperately searches for her by the fence along the Compson property. While some in Jefferson believe that he was actually pursuing the Burgess girl, with the unlikely consequence of raping her, he is subsequently sent to the Mississippi State Insane Asylum and castrated. In his section Benjy describes the episode, although it is very hard to tell what exactly is going on; we do know however that he was preoccupied with searching for an explanation for his actions, which are directly linked to trying to his efforts to remove the ether mask during the 1913 castration operation: "I opened the gate and they stopped turning. I was trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say and trying and the bright shapes began to stop and I tried to get out. I tried to get it off of my face, but the bright shapes were going again. They were going up the hill to where it fell away and I tried to cry. But when I breathed in, I couldn't breathe out again to cry, and I tried to keep from falling off the hill and I fell off the hill into the bright, whirling shapes" (53). Rather than focusing on Benjy's surgery in this passage, Arthur Brown

would have us focus on the boundary situations in Benjy's life: "The fence acts as a necessary boundary not only between Benjy and the pasture but between Benjy and us. As a physical reality for Benjy and a fictional construction for us, it establishes the difference between his world and ours. At the same time, it is the point of contact between his dramatic condition and our own. We make this contact in the presence of death. The shadows on the fence, the exclusion it marks from the garden, the nail Benjy snags on the instigates the substitution of the past for the present—disrupting our ability to follow along and at the same time materializing Caddy's absence—everything to do with the fence intensifies the agency of death" (414). Years later, on Holy Saturday 1928, Benjy, using the "I" pronoun, which shows his primitive form of self-identity, is aware of his bodily change due to the castration: "*I got undressed and I looked at myself, and I began to cry. Hush, Luster said. Looking for them aint going to do no good. They're gone. You keep on like this, and we aint going have you no more birthday*" (73). With less psychological interpretation, Jason describes what happened to Benjy, linking it directly to the gate scene: "I often wondered what he'd be thinking about, down there at the gate, watching the girls going home from school, trying to want something he couldn't even remember he didn't and couldn't want any longer. And what he'd think when they'd be undressing him and he'd happened to take a look at himself and begin to cry like he'd do" (253). Clearly Benjy realizes that his body—and spirit—have undergone diminishment, though he, unlike the community, will never suspect its full impact.

Gary Taylor and others have observed that eunuchs, with a decrease in levels of testosterone, often experience a regrettable transformation of their bodies, notably in their metabolism and a reduction of muscle mass, which means a concomitant increase in weight, so evident in Benjy (174). Sometimes body hair becomes softer and finer after castration, with the illusion that it has disappeared altogether. Curiously castration can prevent male pattern baldness, if it is done before the hair is lost; it does not, however, decrease hair growth once male pattern baldness takes place. Bone size does not shrink, which partially explains why Benjy has not diminished in size over the years, though eunuchs can experience a decrease in bone density. Nor does the voice lose its pitch and go higher, if castration is done after puberty has set in. With a dash of cruel wit, Jason calls Benjy the "Great American Gelding," after having thought previously of the Army's need of geldings, or perhaps mules (263; see also 196). Jason reinforces a definite connection between the gate incident and the castration. "*I'll reckon you'll send him to Jackson, now. If Mr Burgess don't shoot him first*" (52), an



observation echoed by his brother Quentin: "He needs to be sent to Jackson, Quentin said. How can anybody live in a house like this" (69)? Jason also sardonically notes that he cannot afford "a kitchen full of niggers to feed and robbing the state asylum of its star freshman" (230). Undoubtedly, castration would have altered Benjy's physical appearance, but other than what has been noted, determining the specific degree is problematic, because Faulkner has not supplied us with any of Benjy's recorded medical data.

At the time that Faulkner was writing this novel in 1928, the State of Mississippi, after years of deliberation throughout the entire South, passed statutes concerning sterilization. Earlier in the century, during the "Golden Age of American Eugenics," as it was euphemistically termed, Mississippi gradually built facilities for those it thought might benefit society by some form of eugenics, especially for whites, though not exclusively, since white governmental officials, aided by strict anti-miscegenation statutes, felt that the black community should take care of its own feeble-minded (see Larson, 93, 116-18, 123; subsequent references will be to this book). Because of the focus on segregating whites from black, the total patient population in such mental asylums in the Deep South by 1922 was only 345, as compared with 45,000 in other parts of the nation (91). The aim of the eugenicists, contrary to those who advocated personal freedom and equality, was to prevent by sterilization and vasectomy, for the most part, certain individuals from reproducing and thus transmitting their immoral, and sometimes criminal, behavior.<sup>7</sup> One mental health expert in Mississippi declared in 1912: "The societies of eugenics are trying to teach us, under the Mendelian law, how we may do for the human race...what stock breeders are doing in evolving thoroughbred horses" (2). The sterilization debate became so heated, with many constituents adding their disparate views, that in 1927 the U.S. Supreme Court approved the procedure, leading to the enactment of new or revised sterilization statutes in 17 states (119).

In 1848, the Mississippi Legislature appropriated funds for the Mississippi State Lunatic Asylum, which opened in 1855 at the present site of the Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson and which was subsequently renamed in 1900 the Mississippi State Insane Hospital. (It was relocated to Whitefield in 1935 and renamed the Mississippi State Hospital.) Unfortunately, the archives in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson have only the hospital's admission records, but no policy books. (The archivist could provide no further information about the hospital's holdings.)<sup>8</sup> But one can gather a definite impression

of the vision behind this movement. Alabama was the first of the states in the Deep South to engage in eugenics. In 1901, John E. Purdon, a spokesperson for a local medical group, reported in his address to the Medical Association of the State of Alabama on the “proven fact” that criminals, the insane, and epileptics, in addition others having any manifestations of inherited and degraded nerve tissue, should become the charges of the state in order to restrain the procreative powers of the unfit. “Emasculation,” he declared, “is the simplest and most perfect plan that can be adapted to secure the perfection of the race” (50; see also 116). When Theodore Bilbo resumed the governorship of Mississippi in 1928, he made sure that his state enacted the first comprehensive eugenic sterilization law in the Deep South, though castration was forbidden by Section 6957 of this statute; by the middle and late 1930’s, this law affected 500 patients per year (115, 122). Section 6907 states that “mere idiots” shall not be accepted into Mississippi’s institutions for the insane (Tilley, 377). As compulsory sterilization became a service to the state in the same year that Faulkner was writing *The Sound and the Fury*, he would have been aware of its impact on the political atmosphere of white Southerners.

Even if he had no specific evidence that castrations were occurring in Jackson in 1913, Faulkner could easily have imagined so in retrospect, and, as a result, put Benjy’s operation into what he would have considered a proper time framework. (Faulkner’s depiction of the castration of Joe Christmas by Percy Grimm in *Light in August* [1932] is undoubtedly the most horrific scene in the book.) After Quentin took off with her boyfriend from the carnival, Jason persuaded his mother to send Benjy to Jackson a second time. At his mother’s insistence, Benjy was brought back home and in less than two years he burned down the family home and died in the fire (see *The Mansion*, 322). Since the final disturbing image we have of Darl Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* is of him being taken by train to the mental asylum in Jackson, one can only imagine, had they met, what Darl would have said to Benjy and how Benjy would have reacted. An incredible interchange! When entering into the white/black world of sleeping on the operating table, Benjy, in one key moment in his life, lost a tremendous source of his masculinity, about which he could not articulate, but one he terribly missed.

#### *Non-Supportive and Supportive Interventions of Benjy by the Compson and Gibson Families*

The Autism Society of America acknowledges, in order for an autistic person to grow developmentally, there is an intimate link between the time one is diagnosed as being autistic and time when an autistic person

receives supportive intervention: “Research indicates that early identification is associated with dramatically better outcomes for individuals on the autism spectrum. The earlier a child is diagnosed, the earlier the child can begin benefiting from one of the many specialized intervention approaches to treatment and education.” Time and time again, physical therapists and physicians stress the importance of early intervention for someone learning to adapt to this disorder. Without such intervention, both physical and moral, the individual often declines into a world that is sometimes impenetrable. Benjy’s two families, one white and one black, initially coexist with each other, though by Easter week of 1928, and it would seem for many years before, the Gibson family has almost totally embraced Benjy, as the fading aura Southern aristocracy becomes a long-forgotten memory. While the Compson-Bascomb family can trace its roots back to the Civil War and before, they cohabitate in the present time with a black family who perform their menial tasks of survival.

Mrs. Compson, narcissistic and hypochondriacal, is absolutely ashamed of having a five-year old son whom she believes to be mentally retarded. It would seem that Mrs. Compson had denied Benjy’s lack of intellectual development for a number of years after his birth, perhaps praying that it would change with time.<sup>9</sup> For her, Benjy is a two-fold “punishment”—for her sins and for putting aside her pride and marrying a man who held himself above her (103). Likewise, Frony, Dilsey’s daughter, is embarrassed by Benjy. As she walks to the Easter service, she says to her mother: “I wish you wouldn’t keep on bringing him to church, mammy...Folks talkin’” (290). The novel provides little professional or anecdotal evidence, either positively or negatively, of the various stages of Benjy’s developmental growth, though we have first-hand evidence that Benjy was incapable of speech; instead he resorts to primal bouts of bellowing and moaning, not expressive so much of human need as of human loss. Roskus says, as Dilsey is trying to get Quentin ready for bed, ““They aint no luck going to be on no place where one of they own chillen’s name aint never spoke”” (31). “Just sound,” the novel’s narrator comments, “It might have been all time and injustice and sorrow become vocal for an instant by a conjunction of planets” (288). Except for his black companions, particularly Luster, Benjy has no friends, has never had any formal education, and has most likely not traveled away from home. We never find out if he has ever seen a doctor, though we know from *As I Lay Dying* that Doc Peabody lived and worked in the area. While the death and funeral of Damuddy temporarily change Benjy’s play time with his siblings, he most likely thought of Damuddy’s funeral, as did Caddy, as a party of some sort. But more is at stake

concerning Damuddy's funeral: "The conflation of Damuddy's funeral, Caddy's muddying, the wedding and Mr. Compson's funeral confirms the fact that Caddy can be remembered only as already contaminated by the process of change and impending absence. So far as I can tell, Benjy never remembers a moment of untroubled, blissful intimacy with Caddy" (*The Play of Faulkner's Language*, 70). Certainly Caddy's promiscuity envelopes Benjy, though he cannot articulate or imagine its significance, except for a profound sense of loss when she leaves home or disguises it by putting on perfume. In addition, Benjy seems oblivious to Quentin's suicidal tendencies and neurotic, incestuous obsessions, observing just the effects they had on the members of his family. Jason's flippant preoccupation with money and women and his disregard of his mother are only tangentially present to Benjy as he goes about searching for some quarters to go to the local circus. Accepting and unchallenging, Benjy, in the midst of incredible drama, dutifully does for the most part what is expected of him.

In short, except for the affection shown to him up to her late teens by Caddy, clearly a mother substitute, and the diligent care given him by Dilsey and the indifferent treatment of him by Luster, Benjy remains emotionally marginalized from his family, who have given him barely more than a heritage marked by absence and death, neither of which he cognitively grasps. Uncle Maury assures his sister that Benjy has no concept of death: "It's better so. Let him be unaware of bereavement until he has to"—a variation of Mrs. Compson lament: "Poor little boy. He doesn't know. He cant even realise" (197). Though the immediate landscape of the Compson household has little impact on Benjy's mindscape, three situations in this novel (at least) reveal moments of familial non-supportive and supportive intervention that would have impacted Benjy's mental condition for worse or for better: his name change, sleeping alone for the first time, and listening to Reverend Shegog's Easter sermon.

Benjy's name change occurs after his mother, overcome with guilt when she tries to explain its import to Benjy and Caddy as they sit in the kitchen, refuses to accept her son as he is. Quentin, who died on June 2, 1910, vividly remembered this name change in a comment by one of the unidentified members of the Gibson family: "What they change his name for then if aint trying to help his luck" (89). Nor does Dilsey understand this change of name especially as Benjy has not "wore out the name he was born with yet" (58). Names for her

do not either bring good luck or take it away. Still and all, Benjy is robbed of his identity as a member of the larger Compson-Bascomb family and relegated to the last of the tribes of Israel. Benjy's new name refers to Benjamin, the 12<sup>th</sup> and last son of Jacob, whose wife Rachel died in childbirth. Fittingly, Jacob's son was called Ben-oni, "son of my sorrow," but later Jacob changed it to Benjamin "son of my right hand" or "son of the south." When Joseph, one of Benjamin's brothers, who became a political leader in Egypt, put his brothers to the test concerning their love for Benjamin, all the brothers united in support of one another. What is worth noticing is that Benjamin is the last of the 12 tribes of Israel and that it is through Jacob's line that Jesus can trace his ancestry (Gospel of Matthew: 1:1-2). Not only has Mrs. Compson denied her son, but she has abused one of the important tasks of a parent, made all the more terrible because she did it to a five-year-old child without his consent. As the years progress, Benjy will be forced to accept the sound of his new name, but not interpret its religious significance. In the novel, Benjy in fact never uses his own name. Ironically, his name change, framed by childish squabbling between Jason and Caddy and as viewed by Benjy through a mirror, is enfolded into a conversation that takes place on his 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday. Mrs. Compson insists that her two children with nicknames be called by their proper names: Benjamin and Candace. No younger members of the Compson or Gibson families pay any heed to this rule.

By the time he is 13, Benjy starts sleeping alone, initially in Uncle Maury's room, who is still alive, though probably sleeping elsewhere because of a black eye he received from Mr. Patterson. In any case, most likely these roommates had two separate beds. Because Benjy was traumatized by sleeping alone for the first time without his older sister, Caddy, wearing her bathrobe, jumps into bed with Benjy, though she lies between the spread and the blanket—in effect not physically touching Benjy's body. When the darkness of the room came, Benjy notes "*Caddy smelled like trees*" again (44). His eventual separation from her deepened his sense of rejection and loss as the pseudo-mother/son bond was gradually weakened. "Caddy took me to Mother's chair and Mother took my face in her hands and then she held me against her. "'You're not a poor baby. Are you. Are you. You've got your Caddy. Haven't you got your Caddy'" (9). Caddy, indeed, has asked one of the novel's key questions. It is good to recall that, once married, Caddy ultimately abandons Benjy and denies him her loving presence. He intuited this when she first lost her virginity, but could not give a name to it. Tragically,

Benjy never transfers his love for Caddy to her infant daughter, who grew up, at least in her teen-age years, in the Compson household.

It should be said that Benjy's world, however, is not one of total losses and rejections; a specific episode in the novel beautifully indicates Dilsey's enduring love and concern for Benjy. Unfortunately, it comes late in his life, during the present time, and thus cannot serve as a concrete example of early supportive intervention. At the same time, it shows that deep within Benjy is a place he has reserved for moments of peace and stability, seen at times in tranquility of his blues eyes. The slow build-up to the Easter service, filled at first with a description of Dilsey, is as refreshing as the seemingly objective, almost shocking, description she is about to give of Benjy. It reaches its fulfillment in the sermon by the Reverend Shegog, a substitute preacher who had been imported, much to the chagrin of some of the parishioners, from Saint Louis. As Dilsey, whose "expression is at once fatalistic and of a child's astonished disappointment," steps out of her doorway to check the weather, we sense the world, at least her world symbolized by the five raucous jaybirds, is about to undergo a change, some recommitment to the values she hold so dear as she prepares for the Easter services (265). While the plot-line advances with its mundane twists and turns, the narrator's elaborate and brocade style at the beginning of this section alerts the reader to be ready for some transforming moment. In fugue-like fashion, her second exit from her cabin reveals her in "the maroon cape and the purple gown," with elbow-length soiled white gloves—her own version of the habiliment of a royal person (287). Once inside the church, the parishioners could not help but stare at the imported preacher's "wizened black face like a small, aged monkey" (293). But his physique does not fool Dilsey, never deceived by outward appearance. The preacher's voice captivates the entire congregation, waking them from a collective indifference. Though supposedly an Easter sermon, Reverend Shegog relates part of the Nativity story (*alpha*) with the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ (*omega*) but with such force and power that Dilsey sits bold upright with her hand on Benjy's knee. "Two tears slid down her fallen cheeks, in and out of the myriad coruscation of immolation and abnegation of time" (295). Benjy becomes at that precise moment like the suffering baby Jesus, whose "po mammy" needs "de salvation en de word of God" (296). Believers, the preacher maintains, will rise from the dead if they have "de blood en de ricklickshun of de Lamb." And then the epiphany occurs: "In the midst of

the voices and the hands, Ben sat, rapt in his sweet blue glaze.” Dilsey says in a mystical vein, “I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin” (297). As their normal patterns of life continue, Dilsey in the present moment accepts the saving power of the words and actions of the person at the center of the Christmas and Easter events. In effect, she reaffirms for the reader that the voice of the preacher, like the voice of the novelist or the poet, provides an entrance into the holiest of mysteries that even Benjy, transfixed in this sacred space, might just grasp and repeat later to himself, as he is so capable of doing, recalling this moment as one of supreme happiness. Most of all, this episode symbolically suggests that Benjy, whom Frony infers has attended church services with Dilsey in the past, has had similar experiences in the past, precisely because he knows how to react to it.

From what we know from the text, Benjy did not have early supportive intervention that would have allowed him to alter his behavior so that he could become more socially responsive over the years—in fact, the evidence is to the contrary. In addition, the church services he attended with the Gibsons no doubt gave him some type of solace, but his passive participation in these services never sufficiently pulled him out of his autistic world so that he could respond to others and comment one way or another on the nature of this experience. Most likely born autistic—and noted to be totally different from others when three years old and then exhibiting the linguistic and behavioral traits of an autistic person as he grew older—Benjy incorporates many character flaws and human deficiencies that render him of little consequence to the Compson family. Dilsey, in her wisdom, judges otherwise, thus cautioning us to reflect on our understanding of what it means to be a human being. Even if she had known the word autism and was consciously aware of the ways this particular neurological disorder affected Benjy, Dilsey probably would not have dealt any differently with Benjy than the way she did. At the same time, she might have had consolation in knowing that individuals with autism, though they suffer from a condition that affects their entire bodies, not just their minds, have insights, feelings, and capabilities. These individuals are “trying to say” they are *extraordinary*. They want to speak out and reveal their concerns and acumen, even when their behavior makes others in their company uncomfortable.

## Works Cited

- Bleikasten, André. *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner's Novels from "The Sound and the Fury" to "Light in August."* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Most Splendid Failure: Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury."* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *William Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury": A Critical Casebook.* New York: Garland, 1982. Print.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *William Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury": Modern Critical Interpretations.* New York: Chelsea House, 1988. Print.
- Blotner, Joseph L. *Faulkner: A Biography.* 1 vol. New York: Vintage, 1991. Print.
- Bocking, Ineke. *Character and Personality in the Novels of William Faulkner: A Study in Psychostylistics.* Lanham, NY: UP of America, 1995. Print.
- Brown, Arthur A. "Benjy, the Reader, and Death: At the Fence in *The Sound and the Fury*." *Mississippi Quarterly* 48 (1995): 407-20. Print.
- Cecil, L. Moffitt. "A Rhetoric for Benjy." Bleikasten *William Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury": A Critical Casebook.* 65-77.
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *The Idiot.* New York: Modern Library, 1942. Print.
- Ernsberger, Lori. "What is Autism?" *The Official Autism 101 Manual.* Ed. Karen L. Simmons. Autism Today: Sherwood Park, Alberta, Canada, 2006. 3-5. Print.
- Fant, Joseph L. and Robert Ashley, eds. *Faulkner at West Point.* New York: Random House, 1964. Print.
- Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying: The Corrected Text.* New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Bear." *Go Down, Moses.* New York: Vintage, 1990. 181-315. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Hamlet.* New York: Random House, 1940. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "An Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*." *A Faulkner Miscellany.* Ed. James B. Meriwether. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1974. 156-61. Print. "An Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*," ed. James B. Meriwether. *Southern Review* 8 (1972): 705-10. Print. See also "A Prefatory Note by Faulkner for the Compson Appendix." *American Literature* 43 (1971): 281-84. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Kingdom of God." *Mirrors of Chartres Street.* Rpt. in *Faulkner Studies* (Minneapolis, Minnesota), 1953. 45-51. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Light in August.* New York: Random House, 1932. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Mansion.* New York: Random House, 1959. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Sound and the Fury: The Corrected Text.* New York: Vintage, 1990. Print. Rpt. In New



- York: The Modern Library, 1992, that contains a new text of "Appendix: Compson: 1699-1945," 1127-41. Print. See also *The Portable Faulkner*. Ed. Malcolm Cowley. New York: Viking, 1946. 704-21. Print.
- Gresset, Michel. "The Ordeal of Consciousness: Psychological Aspects of Evil in *The Sound and the Fury*." *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Faulkner Family*. Ed. Arthur F. Kinney. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. 173-81. Print.
- Gwynn, Frederick L. and Joseph L. Blotner, eds. *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1959. Print.
- Hill, Elisabeth and Uta Frith. "Understanding Autism: Insights from Mind and Brain." *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 358 (2003): 281-89. Print.
- Kanner, Leo. "Early Infantile Autism." *Journal of Pediatrics* 25 (1944): 200-17. Print.
- Larson, Edward J. *Sex, Race and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. Print.
- Liu, Jun. "Nihilists and Their Relations: A Nietzschean Approach to Teaching *The Sound and the Fury*." *Approaches to Teaching Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury"*. Eds. Stephen Hahn and Arthur F. Kinney. New York: MLA, 1966. 89-95 Print.
- Matthews, John T. *The Play of Faulkner's Language*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *William Faulkner: Seeing Through the South*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. Print.
- McLaughlin, Sara. "Faulkner's Faux Pas: Referring to Benjamin Compson as an Idiot." *Literature and Psychology* 33 (1987): 34-40. Print.
- Meriwether, James B. and Michael Millgate, eds. *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner (1926-1962)*. New York: Random House, 1968. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Textual History of *The Sound and the Fury*." *Meriwether Studies in "The Sound and the Fury"*. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill, 1970. 1-32. Print.
- Minter, David. "Faulkner, Childhood, and the Making of *The Sound and the Fury*." *American Literature* 51 (1979): 376-93. Print.
- Parker, Robert Dale. "'Where you want to go now': Recharting the Scene Shifts in the First Section of *The Sound and the Fury*." *Faulkner Journal* 14 (Spring 1999): 3-20. Print.
- Pitavy, François. "Idiocy and Idealism: A Reflection on the Faulknerian Idiot." *Faulkner and Idealism: Perspectives from Paris*. Eds. Michel Gresset and Patrick Samway, S.J. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1983. 97-111. Print.
- Polk, Noel. *Children of the Dark House: Text and Context in Faulkner*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *New Essays on "The Sound and the Fury"*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Stephen M. Ross. *Reading Faulkner: "The Sound and the Fury"*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996. Print.

- Roggenbuck, Ted. “‘The way he looked said Hush’: Benjy’s Mental Atrophy in *The Sound and the Fury*,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 58:3-4 (Summer, Fall 2005): 581-93. Print.
- Ross, Stephen M. *Faulkner’s Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1989. Print.
- Samway, Patrick, S.J., “Searching for Jason Richmond Compson: A Question of Echolalia and a Problem of Palimpsest.” *Intertextuality in Faulkner*. Eds. Michel Gresset and Noel Polk. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1985. 178-209. Print.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. “A propos de ‘Le Bruit et la Fureur’: La Temporalité chez Faulkner,” *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 309 (1939): 1057-61. Print.
- Selected Letters of William Faulkner*. Ed. Joseph Blotner. Franklin Center, Pa.: The Franklin Library, 1976. Print.
- Taylor, Gary. *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Tilley, Winthrop. “The Idiot Boy in Mississippi: Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*.” *American Journal of Mental Deficiency* 59 (1955): 37-44. Print.
- Ware, Cheryl Lynn. *The Fool: Character as Technique in the Novels of William Faulkner*. Dissertation: Texas A & M University, 1983. Print.
- Weinstein, Arnold. “‘Trying to Say’: Sound and Silence, Subject and Community in *The Sound and the Fury*.” Hahn and Kinney, *Approaches to Teaching Faulkner’s “The Sound and the Fury.”* 38-43.
- Wordsworth, William. “The Idiot Boy.” *The Poems of William Wordsworth*. Vol. 1. Ed. Nowell Charles Smith. London: Methuen, 1908. 197-208. Print.

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors are most grateful for the wise counsel of Michelle Rowe, Ph.D., director of the Kinney Center on Autism Education and Support at the Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia. They also wish to acknowledge the insights of two Saint Joseph’s alumnae, Lauren Barnhardt and Molly McCarthy, concerning the possibility that Benjy might have autism.

<sup>2</sup> As James B. Meriwether explains, Faulkner, for a new edition of *The Sound and the Fury* to be published by Random House, wrote an introduction in the summer of 1933 that exists in several partial and complete manuscript and typescript drafts, one of which was published in *The Southern Review* (Autumn 1972). Meriwether then published in 1974 in *A Faulkner Miscellany*, a longer, quite different version, “and it is at least possible that it was written later, rather than earlier, than the one that has been published” (156). See also his *The Textual History of “The Sound and the Fury.”*

<sup>3</sup> A form of autism, called Asperger’s Syndrome, also first recognized in the 1940’s, is not usually associated with delayed language, cognitive development, or social self-help skills. Those with Asperger’s Syndrome are said to have different, but not defective, ways of thinking, often expressed in various forms of creativity—certainly not evident in Benjy.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Bloom’s depiction of Benjy has elements of unacceptable and too-easy dichotomies that, nevertheless, beg for larger contextualization: “To be immersed into Benjy’s perspective, which reduces everything to an unqualified opposition (Caddy and not-Caddy), is our proper introduction to the Compson experience of life.

---

As in the novel's first scene, the mental landscape is without middle ground or nuance—there is only this side of the fence or that side of the fence. Yet Faulkner consistently evokes a luxuriant polysemous wealth. Aside from Benjy's lack of normal organic development, his mental processes differ from those of the rest of the family only in degree, not in kind of simplification. In a sense his schematic is larger than life, but it shows what is in the life" (61).

<sup>5</sup> We are following in general the time sequencing as determined by Polk and Ross in *Reading Faulkner: "The Sound and the Fury."*

<sup>6</sup> What triggers autism has been a subject of much controversy: "Many of the heated debates that occur in the public domain relate to putative environmental triggers [for autism], among them the so far unsubstantiated claim that measles, mumps and rubella vaccination is a contributory cause. Similar claims relate to the measles virus in conjunction with gastric inflammatory disease" (Hill and Frith, 282).

<sup>7</sup> At times, it is not always clear from general reports and comments in *Sex, Race, and Science*, a classic reference text in this field, whether castration is assumed under the category of sterilization, though in some instances it probably is, especially when murderers, pyro-maniacs, sexual perverts, thieves, the insane, and the mentally retarded are lumped into a general sterilization category, though most likely those whose activities threatened the common good were treated more harshly at times (45). Easily excluded were immigrants who reportedly came from inferior stock.

<sup>8</sup> Reported to us by Hunter Cole of Blandon, Mississippi.

<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Compson makes no reference to Benjy having the noticeable features of a Down Syndrome child or of being deaf, as Luster says (49).

\*\*\*\*\*

Patrick Samway, S.J., is professor of English at Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.  
Gentry Silver is a graduate student in history at Villanova University in Pennsylvania.