

## ***Water Motif in William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury***

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### ***Abstract***

William Faulkner (1897-1962) is one of the great American novelists during the twentieth century, born at New Albany, Mississippi, and his family later moved to Oxford, Mississippi. Faulkner's subject is mankind in his county, and he wrote about particular men in a particular place. So "most of his novels are set in the rural South and explore the conditions and particularities of Southern life, which can be viewed as a microcosm of the greater world outside" ( Ferster , 980 ). The place is Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. Faulkner carried the human issue of this county from one novel to another. He showed the friction between Negro and white, and the corrupting influence of women from which the explosive sin is doomed. Faulkner wrote many novels like; Light in August, Sanctuary, As I Lay Dying, The Sound and the Fury, Absalom , The Wild Palms , The Hamlet , Go Down , Moses , and other novels . In 1949, Faulkner received a Noble prize for literature; this is the highest prize, which is awarded to a writer. Throughout The Sound and the Fury different motifs appear and water is considered one of the important motifs. This research aims to show the significance of water motif in the novel and the function of water according to each character.

Faulkner said that *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is the book that caused him “ the most grief and anguish” ( Quoted in Salami , 472 ) , and in an interview with Jean Stein in 1956 , Faulkner claimed that his feelings for *The Sound and the Fury* resembled those of “ the mother [ who ] loves the child who became the thief or murderer more than the one who became the priest” ( Quoted in Cowan , 16 ). Later on when he was asked about how he wrote the story Faulkner signified that :

The *Sound and the Fury* began with a picture in his mind . Four children ,a girl and three boys , are playing in a stream near their house . They have been told to stay outdoors , although they do not know why . In fact , their grandmother , who has been very sick , has died , and the grownups are holding a funeral . the girl ,more adventurous than her brothers , climbs a tree to catch a better view of what’s going on in the house . Watching her from below , the boys notice that she has gotten her underpants muddy( Quoted in Salami , 469 ) .

*The Sound and the Fury* is a story divided into four sections , each section is told by a different character , and a different day . Section One is told by Benjamin , this section takes place on April 7 , 1928 , Saturday before Easter Sunday . Section Two is told by Quentin on June 2 , 1910 , the day he commits suicide . Section Three is told by Jason on April 6 , 1928 , on Good Friday . While Section Four is narrated by the author on April 8 , on Easter Sunday . So , each of the three sections is told by one of the Compson’s sons , and when Faulkner was asked by Jean Stein why he did not have a section for Caddy ( the Compson’s daughter ) to express her views or impressions of life he says :

The story began with a picture of the little girl's muddy drawers , climbing that tree to look in the parlor window with her brothers that did not have the courage to climb the tree waiting to see what she saw . And I tried first to tell it with one brother , and that wasn't enough . That was Section One . I tried with another brother , And that wasn't enough . That was Section Two . I tried the third brother , because Caddy was still to me too beautiful and too moving to reduce her to telling what was going on , that it would be more passionate to see her through somebody else's eyes I thought . And that failed and I tried myself – the fourth section – to tell what happened and I still failed ... ( Quoted in Cowan , 18 ) .

The story begins with Benjamin celebrating his thirty-third birthday . He is an idiot , he has the mind of a child and does not understand the connection of things around him . He is “capable of knowing what happened but not why” ( Kar and Ramakrishna , 464 ) . He remembers nothing and according to him the past is always present for he has only body memory . Throughout Benjamin section the word ‘water’ appears twenty-three times . During these times , Benjamin remembers when he was playing in the branch that was in 1898 , he was only three then and his sister Caddy got her drawers wet and muddy . Versh teases Caddy by telling her that her daddy is going to whip her for getting her clothes wet , so she takes off her dress in order to let it dry . Quentin slaps her for doing so , and this time she falls in the water . Benjamin cries and Caddy threatens to run away . They return home when Roskus tells them to come to supper . It is through this scene that we can have a clear impression on the fate of the characters in their later life . First of all Caddy falls and gets

“ her drawers muddy” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 37 ) , which signifies her later sexual promiscuity . When Quentin slaps Caddy for taking her dress off this signifies that Quentin is partially responsible for Caddy’s sin and that he is more concerned with Caddy’s action and behaviour than with his own and when all the children returns home for supper he remains behind throwing stones into the water , this in return signifies that he cannot take the role of being a protective brother . When the children later get undressed Dilsey notices Caddy’s dirty drawers and that the dirt has “ soaked clean through onto you” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 93 ) . Caddy will have to stay dirty because she is not going to get bathed and Caddy is only concerned about her mother and she asks “ Is mother very sick ?” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 94 ) , but later it is her mother who turns violently against her , and forbids her from entering the house anymore or even mentioning her name in the house . While Benjamin howls and cries when he sees Caddy’s back muddy this shows that he will sense her immortality and again he will cry about it .

In 1909 , when Caddy is fourteen , she is still a virgin , she starts using perfume and going out on dates . When Caddy returns home and Benjamin smells Caddy’s perfume for the first time , he cries for he “ couldn’t smell tree anymore” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 59 ) , and he follows her to the bathroom where she enters in order to wash herself from this perfume . Benjamin hears the water running in Caddy’s bathroom . When she comes out , Benjamin is happy because according to him “ Caddy smelled like trees” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 61 ) . Caddy gives her battle of perfume to Dilsey because she is not going to use it anymore .

Benjamin walks towards the swing and to his disappointment sees Caddy and Charlie kissing . Benjamin howls louder , this gives Caddy a sense of guilt in which she tells Charlie to go away and she walks to the house with Benjamin . She enters the kitchen , trying to satisfy Benjamin she “ took the kitchen soap and washed her mouth at the sink hard” ( *The Sound and the Fury* ,

67 ) . Benjamin stops howling and Caddy promises that she will not do it again . water signifies a cleansing and purifying agent and through it Caddy is able to wash away her guilt and satisfy Benjamin .

In 1910 , Caddy returns home after her first sexual experience with Dalton Ames and she is no longer virgin , she tries to avoid Benjamin's eyes because the sense of guilt also evokes in her for she came to the door and ...

she opened the door to her room , but  
I pulled at her dress and we went to the  
bathroom and she stood against the door ,  
looking at me . Then she put her arm  
across her face and I pushed at her ,  
crying ( The Sound and the Fury , 88 ) .

Benjamin pushes her to the bathroom but she only stands on the door looking at him because she knows what she has done this time cannot be washed and purified easily with water . Benjamin depends on caddy and he is afraid that he will be separated from her later on therefore he howls and cries .

For Quentin the situation is different for water is always in his background or in his thought . Water plays an important aspect in his life and throughout his section the word 'water' appears about seventy-three times . Quentin takes a streetcar until he reaches the water and a drawbridge where he gets off . He crosses the bridge and leans over the rail , later he sits on the bridge and watches the water hit against the shore and the bridge . Suddenly he sees a tug-boat coming down the river . This reminds him of Gerald Bland who once received a shell in which to row on the river . He remembers how Gerald's idea of women is the same as Dalton Ames for they both think that " they're all bitches" ( The Sound and the Fury , 111 ) , and both of them have no sisters . Later , Quentin walks across the bridge trying to trick his shadow

into merging with water or may be with other shadows , and also his death plunges fusion with his shadow for “ Niggers say a drowned man’s shadow was watching for him in the water all the time” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 109 ) . Faulkner makes use of the fact that Quentin’s initial experience on a bridge , over the Charles River in which he stands on the bridge contemplating his own shadow , mirrored on the surface of the water below . “ The shadow of the bridge , the tiers of railing , my shadow leaning flat upon the water , so easily had I tricked it that it would not quit me” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 104 ) . Later , on another bridge , Quentin also contemplates about another symbolic shadow ,

I could not see the bottom , but I  
could see a long way into the motion  
of the water before the eye gave  
out , and then I saw a shadow hanging  
like a fat arrow stemming into the  
current . Mayflies skimmed in and out  
of the shadow of the bridge just above  
the surface ( *The Sound and the Fury* ,135 ) .

Quentin later notices three boys fishing . “ Three boys with fishing poles came onto the bridge and we leaned on the rail and looked down at the trout” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 136 ) . They are trying to win a twenty five dollar prize by catching a huge trout . Quentin listens to them , each one saying what he will do with the prize money , he asks them the distance to the nearest town , and wishes them good luck in catching the fish . When Quentin sees the fish , he immediately thinks of death , and as Louise Dauner claims that it is “ of the disintegration of the body in water , and of the Resurrection of the dead” ( Dauner , in Cowan , 80 ) . It is only in the maternal waters of death that Quentin will find peace and reality , therefore water is a dominant motif with its “ psychological and mythic implications as the unconscious , or the waters of death and rebirth , into which he [ Quentin ] escapes in a final ritualistic purification” ( Dauner , in Cowan , 75 ) . Quentin’s character is quite similar to Edmund’s

character in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1940), for both characters are "Obsessed with the past, unwilling to live in the present, and incapable of thinking about the future" (Wilkins, 4). Both of them are all thoughts but no action. Quentin's repeated thoughts of water, "that element which suggests dissolution, timelessness, and – most of all -- oblivion" (Wilkins, 5), the same sensation that characterize Edmund's experiences on the sea. Quentin's death by drowning is parallel by Edmund's attempted suicide. Sometimes Quentin mentions gulls which symbolize oxymoronic motionless movement that is so characteristic of Faulkner. Quentin relates "I could smell water, and in a break in a wall I saw a glint of water and two masts, and a gull motionless, in midair, like on an invisible wire between the masts, ..." (*The Sound and the Fury*, 108). Quentin is so fascinated by the trout which can't be caught like the gull, hanging "delicate and motionless" (*The Sound and the Fury*, 136), suspended in the water just like how the bird in the air. "Quentin envies the "sense of place" that the gull and fish possess, they are sure of their elements" (Wilkins, 5), unlike Quentin and Edmund who are sure of nothing, for Edmund claims that :

It was a great mistake, my being born  
 a man, I would have been much more  
 successful as a sea gull or a fish. As it  
 is, I will always be a stranger who never  
 feels at home, who does not really want  
 and is not really wanted, who can never  
 belong, who must always be a little in love  
 with death! (*Long Day's Journey into Night*,  
 153 –154)

In the arrested motion of gull and trout, Quentin finds timelessness, while Edmund finds a sense of eternity on the sea "I became drunk with the beauty and singing rhythm of it, and a moment I lost myself .. actually lost my life. I was set free! I

dissolved in the sea ... I belonged , without past or future ...”  
( Long Day’s Journey into Night , 153 ) .

When Quentin sees a little Italian girl at the bakery shop , he offers her a loaf of bread and the little girl follows him . She reminds him of Natalie , a girl whom Quentin used to know . When Quentin sees Caddy kissing a boy at the age of fifteen , he rubs her face in the grass . Later , she reminds him that she watched him kissing Natalie , being humiliated and ashamed of himself he throws himself into the hog wallow , and tries to explain to Caddy what has happened . She leaves him but he manages to grab her , knock her down , and smear her with the mud from his body . Later , Caddy apologizes for scratching Quentin’s face and together they wash themselves in the creek ( Deedari and Mansuri , 234 ) . Quentin calls the little Italian girl ‘ sister’ , they walk by the river and they come upon some boys swimming “ Hear them in swimming , sister ?” Quentin says “ I wouldn’t mind doing that myself ” (The Sound and the Fury , 155 ) , it is the same river in which Quentin later drowns himself . The boys are embarrassed by their nakedness and shout : “ Take that girl away ! What did you want to bring a girl here for ? Go away !” ( The Sound and the Fury , 156 ) . It is here that Quentin wants to join Caddy , “ naked in waters of death , to rejoin her in the mud of the river , in the branch of childhood” ( Matthews , in Bloom , 59 ) . The boys splash water in Quentin and the little girl and her loaf becomes wet , he looks at “ the half]naked loaf clutched to her breast” ( The Sound and the Fury , 157 ) , he tries to “ wipe the loaf but the crust began to come off , so I stopped” ( The Sound and the Fury , 157 ) . Quentin’s “ gesture seem[s] to resign custody of the phallus to the little girl and to accept its erosion by water” ( Matthews , in Bloom , 59 ) , so this may signify the ‘ mutilation’ and ‘ castration’ that Caddy’s loss meant to Quentin . Later , he hears “ a bird somewhere in the woods , beyond the broken and infrequent slanting of sunlight”(The Sound and the Fury,154) , he remembers another time while standing on the bridge over the water symbolizing “ Caddy’s sexual sin and his

own death impulse” ( Hunt , in Cowan , 85 ) . When “ the sun slanted and a bird [was] singing somewhere beyond the sun” ( The Sound and the Fury , 179 ) .

When Quentin goes to look for Caddy thinking that she is with Dalton Ames , he finds her lying on her back in the stream .

I ran down the hill in the vacuum of  
crickets like a breath traveling across a  
mirror she was lying on her back in the  
water her head on the sand spit the  
water flowing about her skirt half  
saturated flopped along her flanks to the  
water motion in heavy ripples going  
nowhere ( The Sound and the Fury , 168 ) .

Quentin tells Caddy to get out of the water for he says : “ get out of the water are you crazy”(The Sound and the Fury , 168 ) , this shows that Caddy feels the need for purifying herself because she has a desire to be pure again . Caddy climbs up the bank with her wet dress and later she wrings out her dress and sits upon the branch where they talk about Dalton Ames . Quentin asks Caddy if she loves the man she has had sex with , she says : “ I don’t know” ( The Sound and the Fury , 176 ) . Later , it is Caddy who asks Quentin about his sexual experience and he lies and says that he has had sex “ lots of times with lots of girls” ( The Sound and the Fury , 170 ) . Quentin also reminds Caddy of the day when Damuddy died and how she fell in the water and got her drawers muddy for he says : “ do you remember the day damuddy died when you sat down in the water in your drawers” ( The Sound and the Fury , 170 ) . Quentin later tells Caddy “ I wish you were dead” ( The Sound and the Fury , 176 ) , and he is aware in the gray light of “ shadows of things like dead things in stagnant water” ( The Sound and the Fury , 176 ) . Later , Quentin goes to see Dalton Ames and asks him to leave town , during their argument Quentin :

heard the bird again and the water and  
then everything sort of rolled away and  
I didn't feel anything at all I felt  
almost good after all these days and  
the nights with honeysuckle coming up out  
of the darkness into my room where I  
was trying to sleep (The Sound and the Fury ,  
180-181)

The man pulls out a pistol and he drops some bark into the water and shoots the bark three different times . After reloading it he asks Quentin to try himself , while the man is holding Quentin he faints like a girl this shows his inability to “ bestride the waters of sex and time , and dooms him to flight” ( Matthews , in Bloom , 59 ) , this signifies that everything Quentin attempts to do is a failure . Quentin is idealistic , he is obsessed with tradition , purify , and above all death . Quentin computes his suicide “ The displacement of water is equal to the something of something . Reducto absurdum of all human experience , and two six-pound flat-irons weigh more than one tailor's goose” ( The Sound and the Fury , 109 ) . Personal human experience is a public objective fact which is natured by Mr. Compson's formula that man is “ the sum of his misfortunes” ( The Sound and the Fury , 123 ) . The point that Faulkner wants to show is that a human being tries “ to find or create values in the mechanical round of experience” ( O'Connor , 135 ) , as in Quentin's case when he tries to persuade his pregnant sister to confess that she has committed incest with him . Quentin is “ obsessed by memory compelled by suicidal drives” ( Deedari and Mansuri , 230 ) . Quentin deliberately claims that he has committed incest because he cannot face reality and the fact that he “ has not committed incest with Caddy , that she has several lovers , that she is pregnant with one man's child and married to another a ‘ blackguard’” ( Kartiganer , in Bloom , 19 ) . For all of Quentin's “ subsequent recollection spiral outward from their primal stain upon his sister's purity” ( Deedari and Mansuri , 234 ) . Quentin demands that they must take revenge for Caddy's

virginity from the one who seduced her ; his father only says : “ Women are never virgin . Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 135 ) . Life must proceed , even if man has sinned because God created sin . Therefore Faulkner’s novel is a silo of compressed sin , from it life emerges as fermentation . Quentin even does not take his father’s words that “ no man ever does that [ commit suicide ] under the first fury of despair or remorse or bereavement” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 196 ) . For Quentin water is “ associated with cleansing , redemption , peace , and death” ( Warren , 94 ) . While the honeysuckle is associated with warm Southern nights . Quentin sees Caddy at twilight , sitting in the cleansing water of the branch surrounded by the honeysuckle therefore Caddy’s passionate sexuality is so twilight “ that quality of light as if time really had stopped for awhile” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 187 ) . Quentin’s mind becomes confused with the scents of water and honeysuckle until “ the whole thing came to symbolize night and unrest” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 188 ) . When Quentin is walking in the country in the afternoon of his death , he senses the nearness of a river and also the smell of the water which evokes his memory to a desire for his sister and for death also . “ The draft in the door smelled of water, a damp steady breath” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 188 ) . Quentin reports that he “ could smell the curves of the river beyond the dusk” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 188 ) , and could see “ the last light supine and tranquil upon tide flats like pieces of broken mirror” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 188 ) . For Quentin there is always a connection between Caddy and the river, we either see him fighting with Dalton Ames on a bridge over a river, because of Caddy or he is thinking about his memories with Caddy near the river, near their home, or he is fascinated by the river. Quentin’s final attempt to commit suicide by drowning himself in the water, just before doing so he realizes that “ the road going on under the twilight, into twilight and the sense of water peaceful and swift beyond” ( *The Sound and the Fury* , 187 ) , and at this moment we realize that Quentin is half way “ between sanity and madness but precisely poised between waking and

sleeping , between life and death” ( Warren , 95 ) . Faulkner wants to play on the “ idea that a drowning man sees his life pass before him” ( Warner , 102 ) , and this is clear through the last day of Quentin’s life which is a kind of suspended moment before death for throughout this day different unusual incidents occur – like having two fights , being arrested , a court-hearing , and many other encounters . The only place where Quentin can isolate himself “ out of the loud world” and let the world “ roar away” ( The Sound and the Fury , 195 ) , is in the peaceful water of the river where he seeks silence of non-being . Quentin wants to say to Caddy and to the world , “ I’m stronger than you” ( The Sound and the Fury , 172 ) , for he wants to believe that he is a “ ‘man of courage’ who is faithful enough to his ideals to be willing to die for them” (Stonum , in Bloom , 30 ) . Quentin tries to dramatize an obsessive love for negative values which are “ life-injuring , life-destroying , which in turn , are nicely symbolized by his a elaborately planned act of suicide by drowning” ( Warren , 114 ) . Quentin’s final acts before drowning is that he removes blood stain which is on his vest , washes himself in the bathroom , cleans his teeth , and brushes his hair ( Kartiganer , in Bloom , 19 ) . While doing so, Quentin wishes that if only “ I’d just had a mother so I could say Mother” ( The Sound and the Fury,190 ) , so , Quentin believes his mother is responsible for what has happened to them because she has neglected them . Quentin tries to find meaning in life but he cannot; therefore , he kills himself by drowning in the sea and his shadow rises up from the water beneath him . So , Faulkner shares the same view of life as Shakespeare’s Macbeth ) , that life is without meaning and that time brings only defeat ( Salami , 484-485 ) . Faulkner’s title of The Sound and the Fury, is taken from Shakespeare’s play Macbeth :

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 V , Scene V ,  
867-868)

For Faulkner the title “ echoes the most famous protest against a life without climax” ( Stenoum , in Bloom , 36 ) , and also part of The Sound and the Fury is a tale told by an idiot , Benjamin Compson and the whole tale is full of sound and fury .

Jason is different from the other Compson's children for him water is not important because he dose not feel or sense sin or shame or even the need to be purified . From the branch scene in 1898 , Jason is seen playing in the water but he is “ by himself further down the branch” ( The Sound and the Fury , 38 ) , this signifies that he has no feelings towards the others and therefore he is isolated and rejected of all the family ties . Jason tells on Quentin and Caddy for throwing water at each other and getting wet . Jason recalls with bitterness , the selling of pasture in order to send Quentin to Harvard and later on his suicide . According to Jason , Quentin's suicide is hardly an event worth of pathos :

I says no I never had university  
advantage because at Harvard they  
teach you how to go to swim at night  
without knowing how to swim and at  
Sewanee they don't even teach you  
What water is ( The Sound and the Fury ,  
213-214).

Dilsey is the dominant figure in the fourth section . She is the only one who is able to bring order out of the disorder created by the Compsons . There is no indication to the water motif in this

section although the word 'water' appears eleven times but with no function , each time Mrs. Compson asks Dilsey to prepare her some hot water to put in the water bottle .

## *Conclusion*

William Faulkner aims to show throughout his novels man's position in the modern world . He uses different techniques , styles , and motifs in order to express such ideas . Throughout *The Sound and the Fury* different motifs appear like ; time motif , shadow motif , and water motif . Each motif has its own significance and carry a unifying idea or thought . Since water motif is the main subject in this study , our aim is to show how this motif affects on each character and its function whether it is used as a purifying or cleansing or even a function in which it is used so that the others will be satisfied as in Benjamin's case . Throughout the times Caddy uses water to wash herself after using perfume or washing her mouth after being kissed by Charlie , so she does these things not only to purify herself but to satisfy her brother Benjamin . Later , she lies on her back in the stream letting the water flow on her hips this signifies her desire to be purified aging and she knows that through water she can purify herself because she has this desire inside herself to be pure again .

For Quentin water is a symbol of womb and death . Water is a symbol of womb since Quentin has never been able to establish a meaningful relationship with his mother . It is a symbol of death since Quentin commits suicide by drowning because it is water that cleanses Quentin of all responsibility of having to live with the knowledge of Caddy's sin . Quentin is a weak creature , he finds no meaning in life and through him Faulkner aims to show with despair man's position in the universe .

Jason is different from the other Compsons children , for him water does not signify anything because he believes that he is right and has no sins so there is no need to be purified .

There is no function or significance of water motif according to the other characters .

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