Finding Camus’s absurd in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying, The Sound and the Fury*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*

by

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Chapter One:  
A New Context for the Absurd

When literary critics speak of the absurd, they frequently do so in the context of those writers who developed and popularized the concept; the origins of the concept are European and are often traced back to Soren Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness unto Death*, published in 1849. Almost a century later, Albert Camus popularized the idea in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, though his is a largely secularized modification of Kierkegaard’s original formulation. Published in 1942, *Sisyphus* is often described as the most significant modern text concerning the absurd. Early in the text, Camus typifies the absurd in its most basic form:

> What, then, is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and the setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity (Camus 6).

In the wake of occasionally nihilistic early 20th century existential philosophy, Camus attempted to crystallize the notion of humanity’s struggle for meaning in the context of world wars, genocide and rapidly advancing but potentially dehumanizing technology and industry. Like many other existentialists before him, Camus concludes that while there is no essential “meaning” in life, the struggle to create that meaning is essential to survival and to an actualized life. Camus’ concept of the absurd is ultimately a positive one, at least when
compared to other philosophers: in the preface, he writes that *The Myth of Sisyphus* is, “amid the French and European disaster [a declaration] that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism” and that it should serve as a “lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert” (preface v). Thus, for Camus, the absurd, “hitherto taken as a conclusion, is considered in *Sisyphus* a starting point” (2).

Amid the widespread tensions about the future of humanity in the 20th century, the sudden popularity in literary scholarship focused on the absurd should come as little surprise. It is necessary, however, to differentiate between “absurdist” readings and literary criticism which contemplates the absurd in the specific context as laid out by Camus. The word “absurd” enjoys a wide range of usage, but in popular terms, it is typically employed to signify something meaningless or inscrutable. This is a somewhat reductive notion of the absurd and has little to do with the sort of existentialist psychology expounded by Camus. Thus, in this thesis I have attempted to make connections between notions of the absurd as an existential concept, using Camus as a framework, and its representations in the major works of William Faulkner, a writer often described in passing as one who incorporates elements of the absurd into his texts. For example, John K. Simon, writing at the end of a decade-long critical explosion in response to William Faulkner’s 1949 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, asserts that when Faulkner wrote *The Sound and the Fury*, he initiated “a certain tendency…in the modern novel to create, out of pure experience and seemingly inhuman observation, the juxtaposition of absolute and relative which represents the closed universe of absurdity” (111). This sense of the juxtaposition of absolute and relative is particularly relevant in the major works of Faulkner, which are well-known in part for Faulkner’s nearly
frenetic representations of hyper-subjectivity. That being said, he is not the only modernist writer who attempted to represent the subjective in ways hitherto unseen: notable masters like Woolf and Joyce, among others, experimented with this new form before Faulkner, and with, as many would argue, greater success. However, the works discussed in this thesis lend themselves to interpretation within the absurd context not solely because of their form, but because they contain thematic elements which run parallel with the absurd as articulated by Camus. The philosopher spoke often of Faulkner, and, aside from Melville, is “the only…American novelist to be singled out by Camus for consistent praise” (Couch 122). Camus adapted Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun* for the French stage, but oddly he never wrote about *The Sound and the Fury*, or *Absalom, Absalom!*—he did, however, briefly write about *As I Lay Dying* in the context of tragedy (Kennedy 125).

Offered for consideration here is the suggestion that Faulkner’s tendency toward heightened subjectivity in *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury/Absalom, Absalom!* (whose pairing is justified due to shared characters and themes) not only calls attention to the underlying absurdity of the circumstances found in each novel, but reveals the difficulties of manufacturing a stable identity and creating an assured mental space in the world, the latter of which forms the cornerstone of Camus’ absurd. The fragmented plots/structures of these texts, aside from being merely innovative, become necessary to convey the intense psychological unrest experienced by characters as they suffer through these crises of identity and sense of time/place. Faulkner’s novelistic forms, through their repeated contrasting of the relative and absolute, then work toward creating representations of the absurd not unlike
those articulated by Camus and others. Admittedly, however, his characters rarely transcend their crippling outlooks on life; for them, the absurd is the conclusion, not a starting point.

The first of the three texts that will be examined is *As I Lay Dying*, which emphasizes the breakdown of familial stability as conveyed through most members of the Bundren family. Elements of the absurd find currency in Faulkner’s perpetually skewed descriptions of the family, but more importantly in how the family itself conceives of “family.” Of course, these conceptions vary from person to person, but most have perverse senses of obligation and responsibility to the rest of their family. For many of the Bundrens, any interaction with another family member is predicated upon crises of individual identity, which are paradoxically linked to one’s self-identifying role in the family. The intensity of this paradox varies from one character to another, but when tallied together, forms a mosaic of dysfunction, though one often backgrounded by the structure/ostensible plot of the novel. The disjunction between the expected literary “journey,” and the various responses to and interpretations of that journey is the key to Faulkner’s representation of the absurd in *As I Lay Dying*. Many of the characters, through a variety of circumstances ranging from greed, to infidelity, to mental derangement, to simple youthful naïveté, experience what Camus describes as “exile without remedy,” as they are, in numerous ways, “deprived of the . . . hope of a promised land” (Camus 6). This is manifest in the novel’s physical journey to bury Addie Bundren as per her request: the family’s “promised land” is a gravesite, and each feel compelled to get there for reasons that might be considered absurd; certainly the circumstances of the journey and how each character deals with them are absurd. For example, Darl represents, as do many of Faulkner’s significant characters, the ratiocinative
would-be intellectual left with no choice but to wallow in dire and increasingly outrageous circumstances. This sort of Faulknerian character, according to Joseph R. Urgo, tends to suffer through a conflict that is largely intellectual and epistemological (11). In Darl’s case, meaning is produced through an interior drama that revolves around that very search for meaning (11). And, as with other Faulkner characters, we are witness to Darl’s gradual breakdown as he searches for that meaning, even as he remains the text’s most objective and persistent narrator. As one critic has noted, his gradual “breakdown as an individual does not invalidate his point of view of the Bundren family and their journey” (Simon 106). In fact, by the time Darl slips into a kind of insanity by the novel’s end, Simon postulates that Darl’s instinct is still to remain with his family, this despite the clearly negative impact they’ve had on him. Simon writes, “[O]n the contrary, it is Darl's personal dissolution, his ability to embody fully the absurd perspective of objectification [which] provides, in the midst of his apparently confused pattern of thought and hysteria, the clear, straight-faced image of the Bundren family” (106). This heightened awareness, working somehow in concert with an ever-decreasing grasp on his own sense of self, renders Darl a distinctly different person than his other family members, yet one still inextricably linked to and affected by them. At one point, Darl attempts to make sense of this dynamic, saying: “I don't know what I am. I don't know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not” (102). Darl’s statement is indicative of the complicated link between family and self-identity, while also revealing the relativity of one’s identity. Though other family members do not possess Darl's absurd perception, major features of their individual identities are, like Darl’s, formed in relation to the rest of their family. Like Darl, interpreting
those characters in this context reveals similarly confused states of self-identification. In any case, the underlying purpose for the family’s journey dictates that once their destination is reached, the travelers should simply turn around and return home. Structurally, then, *As I Lay Dying* revels in its absurdist dismantling of the archetypal personal journey toward growth.

Like *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* contain characters who, according to Donald Kartiganer, “are not so much single, separate persons as collective enterprises, the products and processes of family dramas apart from which the individual actor is scarcely intelligible” (381). This should not direct one’s attention solely to the functions (or dysfunctions) of the family, but instead highlight the process through which Faulkner’s characters are forced to conceive of their own identities and places in the world. In these particular novels the absurd is represented through both characterization and the highly fragmented narrative structures in ways not unlike *As I Lay Dying*, but here Faulkner expands his scope significantly. Rather than focusing on a single journey and the interpretations of that journey, each of the novels features as its central plot the process of making sense out of the past and the impact of the past on the present. Perhaps this is an inherently absurd endeavor; at the very least, it poses danger. In his introduction to William Carlos Williams’ *In The American Grain*, critic and poet Horace Gregory asserts that, “The desire to know history is a near relative of the desire to know truth, and that is where, for most of us, a pit lies waiting” (Williams ix). Some of Faulkner’s most memorable characters fall into that very pit, and unlike Camus’ Sisyphus, are unable to persist.
Quentin Compson, a major character in these two novels, embodies this struggle. Unlike Camus’ Sisyphus, who chooses to persist in a state of unending toil, Quentin of course commits suicide, which pushes his character into the grey area between absurdity and nihilism. *The Sound and the Fury* is particularly well-suited to being interpreted in this context, though the text contains at least two other characters worthy of examination: Benjy and Jason IV, both brothers of Quentin. Faulkner reinforces the futility of both Benjy and Jason IV’s situations in ways which are similar to Quentin's struggle. Because the absurd is essentially the result of one's subjective outlook on the world, both of these characters, and Quentin, are interpreted with an interest in what constitutes their subjective responses to the world. Without fail, we see their responses predicated on unavoidable and uncontrollable circumstances, much to the detriment of their individual spirits and well-beings.

If we can accept as true Abel’s claim statement that “Almost all members of the Compson household are severely influenced by the meaninglessness of their lives or by the desire to overcome the nothingness that surrounds them” (37), then *Absalom, Absalom!* may be read as an intensely detailed account of the process of attempting to overcome that meaninglessness, and the ultimate failure to do so. The dominant impression one takes from Quentin and Shreve’s conversations in the text is the impossibility of constructing history out of fragments of the past. The intensity of this task is linked to one’s own fascination with history; in this text, Shreve is an almost passive observer, as he has little to gain, whereas Quentin approaches the endeavor with what appears to be a life-or-death level of intensity. As we eventually see, Quentin’s struggle to recover some lost part of himself becomes increasingly absurd when taking into account the ambiguity not only of the past, but of what
the past can possibly mean in the present. As both philosophy of history and family drama, *Absalom, Absalom!* has as its foundation uniquely American concerns over a bloody past spilling into the present. While the reconstruction of Thomas Sutpen’s history responds to the subjective impulses of Quentin and Shreve, the likely “facts” of his history are distinctly American: an individual carving out his own space in a new, unclaimed land, indifferent to notions of conventional morality but inclined toward ambition and material accretion. Along with *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!* is more directly concerned with what may be considered traditional societal concerns (race and gender, for example), when compared to *As I Lay Dying*, but like Bundrens’ story, it ultimately returns to focus on family members’ interpretations of one another and of their own lives. In Quentin’s case, this familial dynamic has a paralyzing effect on his conception of the future. Sutpen, Caddy, and Jason Compson are the primary deconstructing forces on Quentin, as each creates a world-view which has no allowance for clarity or unobstructed meaning; or at least positive meaning.

Finally, I’d like to say a brief word about the ramifications of such interpretations of Faulkner. First, one may ask: does Faulkner share this view of humanity? Are his characters simply a nihilistic outlet or something more? Are these texts absurd for absurdity’s sake? As his popularity grew mid-century, critics often cast Faulkner as an excessively dark writer and insinuated he was a reactionary product of his time. In the essay, “America’s Conservative Revolution,” published shortly after Faulkner’s acclaim grew in the 1950s, writer Chadwick Hall observes in American society “the shift from a belief that man is inherently good to the idea that man is ‘capable of every insanity and atrocity’” (213). He attributes this shift to World War II, and one example of its artistic manifestation is what he calls “the popularity of
the violence-fiction of William Faulkner” (213). Hall is arguing in support of the New Deal, which leads him to connect the writings of Faulkner to American public policy. He writes: “The idea that man is bad is...a traditional justification of the principle of stability and status quo” (213). In other words, for Hall there exists a real danger in how people are represented, even artistically. Hopefully, the following readings of Faulkner’s most lauded and dark texts, in the context of Camus’ absurd, will preclude any simple moral judgment and should reveal the complexity with which Faulkner represents his characters: there is certainly violence, and there are bad people, but ultimately their concerns belong to all of us, regardless of ideology.
Chapter Two:

‘Something to Laugh at’: *As I Lay Dying’s* Absurdist Family Quest

Compared to most of Faulkner’s early novels, *As I Lay Dying* initially attracted little critical attention or acclaim. Some of the earliest reviews were in fact quite damning, not due to a lack of technical effort of Faulkner’s behalf, but because some felt the material fell short of the standard he created for himself. An anonymous reviewer for the *New York Times* wrote, “One comes away from *As I Lay Dying* with a commingled sense of respect for the author and an intense annoyance—emotional rather than intellectual—with him for spending his rich inventive faculty on such a witch’s brew of a family” ([Review] 6). Similarly, after sustained criticism of the novel which included labeling it “nonsense,” a reviewer for *The Observer* conceded, “It is only fair to add that there are dimly discernible in this book the makings of something worth writing; if it were not so…one would not waste time in criticizing Mr. Faulkner” (Gould 6). The reviews indicate that from its initial publication it has not been uncommon for readers to dismiss the tale of the Bundrens as trivial. Admittedly, unlike the novels which will be discussed in the next section, the structure of *As I Lay Dying* is remarkably simple: the story of the Bundrens’ journey to bury Addie, the family matriarch, constitutes most of the text and is told in chronological order with few deviations. Despite this superficial simplicity, Slaughter notes that criticism of the text “manifests the heterogeneity, the ambivalence, and the outright contradiction that characterize Faulkner criticism in general” (16). She points to the divide between “traditional” readings of the text which attempt to find stated meaning and those readings which take up issues of “time and space…memory and imagination [and] consciousness and
unconsciousness” (16). The consistent complicating factor in the text, regardless of the critical framework employed, is the novel’s large cast of narrators, over a dozen, who typically narrate a single chapter before Faulkner shifts his focus. Major characters include Addie and Anse Bundren, the mother and father respectively, and their offspring, from eldest to youngest: Cash, Darl, Dewey Dell (the only daughter), and Vardaman. The other child is Jewel, approximately twenty years of age, who was conceived between Addie and a local reverend; Darl and Addie are the only family members aware of this fact. The voice of each character differs dramatically from the others, but all perspectives focus on the journey at hand. Faulkner famously claims to have written the book straight through in six weeks without changing a word, which may account for its relative concision.

Despite its narrative simplicity, critics are often confounded when trying to create a cohesive reading of the text. In his book-length Faulkner study, *Quest for Failure*, Walter J. Slatoff summarizes one of the central issues with interpreting *As I Lay Dying*: “One is uncertain about the qualities of some of the important characters and about how to feel toward them; one is puzzled by the meanings of many of the events…and above all one is uncertain to what extent one has been watching an epic or tragedy or farce” (159). This confusion can be attributed to those constantly shifting viewpoints, which, rather than lending consistency to the narrative, create a panorama of subjectivities which contradict, confuse, or even ignore one another. Determining which speaker represents the central viewpoint thus becomes quite difficult, which in turn renders the journey and its underlying significance constantly filtered through different individuals.
The struggle to make sense of the journey has yielded impressive and varied critical responses, as mentioned above. However, none has attempted to interpret the novel’s characters on their journey using the framework of the absurd articulated by Camus. Some critics have commented on the structure of the text and argued that its construction is integral to the implied overall meaning, though such studies often emphasize the text's farcical or tragic qualities. Those elements are related to absurdity, but, again, not in the context as articulated by Camus (interpretations which emphasize the text's comedic elements will be given consideration later in this chapter). Nonetheless, these readings do support, at the very least, the idea of the text’s structural integrity, as opposed to those critics who argue, as initial reviewers did, that there is no meaning. I hope to demonstrate that an interpretation of the text through the framework of the absurd is predicated upon the text’s inherent structural and thematic coherence.

Establishing a structural framework for the text is a necessity for this interpretation, and a particularly relevant essay toward this end is Elizabeth Kerr’s “As I Lay Dying as Ironic Quest,” which uses as critical framework an inverted version of the quest romance (elucidated by Northrop Frye in his Anatomy of Criticism and frequently cited by Kerr). Since its publication in 1962, her essay has been frequently cited in criticism of the novel for its unified interpretation of the family’s journey. Kerr’s structural analysis emphasizes the conceptual antithesis of As I Lay Dying in relation to the standard aspects of the quest romance: the initial urge for wish-fulfillment, the idyllic settings, the archetypal characters who range from the sleeping beauty, to the enchanted knight, the sorcerer’s apprentice, etc.,
and of course the final dramatic resolution of the quest (9-10). Aspects of Kerr’s reading are
tenuous, particularly her readings of minor characters who, despite their role in Faulkner’s
supposedly inverted quest romance, fit into the cadre of characters found throughout
Faulkner’s canon. Kerr’s essay also understates the significance of the reason for the “quest”
in *As I Lay Dying*, as well as who partakes in it, instead focusing on the parallels that do exist
related solely to form. Her vital point is that the “consistency of the inversion would seem
incompatible with any sentimental or heroic concept: is it rather the essence of ironic
mockery” (Kerr 17). More than just a mockery of form, the text uses the familiar structure to
mock the familial relations that underpin the very reason for the journey. Critics of the novel
who insist on its meaninglessness overlook or ignore this aspect of the text and in turn are
unable to appreciate the novel’s ultimately absurd plot arc. The “meaninglessness” of *As I
Lay Dying* is nearly meta-, in that the reader is invited into the text to witness the relations
between family members and see how each one is, in various ways, irrevocably isolated from
the other. The characters are, despite their alienation from one another, members of the same
immediate family, and each embarks on the same ostensible quest to bury Addie. The close
proximity to one another on the journey seems to bring out latent problems within the family.
The burial of the matriarch is not just an inversion of the quest romance plot structure, but the
decaying body itself “serves as a metaphor for the family’s unspoken histories that have been
pushed aside but stubbornly refuse burial” (Baldanzi & Schlabach 38). The stubborn refusal
is manifest in various family members’ insistence on forward progress. They seem to be
compelled on their quest as its presupposed form dictates, rather than by some rational
purpose; they must push on because they must arrive at a conclusion.
In the context of Camus’ absurd, the very nature of the Bundrens’ journey (including how members of the family relate to one another while on it) violates what Camus believes is the key to living in good faith: One should “recognize the struggle, [must] not absolutely scorn reason, and [admit] the irrational” (37). Camus’ dictum implies that, those who to do these things will necessarily make an undesirable “leap before knowing”—which, for Camus, essentially means putting one’s will into something that appeases and soothes even as it creates an outlook based on self-deception. That sort of bad faith comes to typify the Bundrens and their journey. While despicable characters may account for negative critical opinions of the novel, they should not cause one to dismiss the work as a whole. For while most of the characters may suffer from a lack of meaningful relationships or purpose, that very absence forms the backbone of the novel’s meaning.

The novel begins with the passing of the family matriarch: Addie has been dead for nearly three days by the time the family starts out, and not long after, her corpse is mangled by nails driven through the coffin by Vardaman, her youngest son. Anse, the family’s impotent and pitiable patriarch, refuses his neighbor’s offer to spend the night and wait out a flood before crossing a river, and as a result her coffin is nearly swept away in the current. These circumstances would indicate that the family must be compelled for greater reasons than satisfying the wishes of the deceased Addie, reasons which are gradually revealed on the journey. Much may be said about the motivations of each family member (which range from seeking an abortion, to procuring new teeth, or simply being brought along for the journey), but the character who grants us the most insight into the family as unit is Darl Bundren.
Because he is the narrator of nearly one-third of the text, the workings of his mind are frequently on display and form the only consistent narrative voice in the text. In a novel of intense subjectivity, Darl is also perhaps the most objective, and he uses his powers of observation and intuition to convey information to the reader of which family members are not aware or choose to ignore.

Unfortunately for Darl, his ratiocinative tendencies produce no positive outcomes. He recognizes a struggle that his family members, in their various stages of self-involvement, are unable to see. Despite his desires for resolution, he often simply confounds himself further, and reaches various stages of crippling indecision and self-doubt. Out of every problem, Darl sees his own unending Sisyphean struggle. Most of the family members provide fodder for Darl’s anxiety, but two specific interactions with Dewey Dell and Jewel illustrate both his awareness of the journey’s underlying absurdity, and his convoluted state-of-mind, which makes coming to terms with the situation impossible.

As the journey progresses, it becomes clear that Darl’s struggle has less to do with the way he is treated by other family members than his own preoccupations with their motivations and thoughts. Though the instances are many, two in particular exemplify the struggle he has with the disjunct between his own highly ratiocinative mind and the intractablility of his various family members. They of course have their own reasons for their actions, but good or bad, Darl sees motives as an impediment to his own understanding of his family. The Bundrens do have their share of secrets and conceits, and these cause Darl
an increasing amount of agony, rendering what would be a meaningful journey into a rote
and hollow burial ritual.

Dewey Dell, Darl's sister, is certainly one of the least despicable Bundrens. She
narrates only a handful of chapters, enough to reveal her own secret motivation for the
journey: that she seeks an abortion from any willing doctor. Even before her mother dies,
Dewey Dell is confronted by Darl, who seeks an explanation for her odd behavior. Her
refusal to answer pushes Darl to anger, even before the family has started their catastrophic
journey: “‘You want her to die so you can get to town: is that it?’ She wouldn’t say what we
both knew. ‘The reason you will not say it is, when you say it, even to yourself, you know it
is true: is that it? But you know it is true now. I can almost tell you the day when you knew it
is true. Why won’t you say it, even to yourself?’” (274). Darl’s frustration here reveals a
sort of layered thinking that comes to define his growing mania. At this specific moment, he
is aware of the falsity of Dewey Dell’s projected self; in this case her feigned ignorance (“But
you know it is true now”). He also intuits the reason for her ignorance: that if she speaks the
truth, it brings into reality that which she otherwise wants to ignore (“when you say it, even
to yourself, you know it is true”). These observations help explain his anger over Dewey
Dell’s self-deception: if her motivations are obvious to Darl (and later in the text his
assumptions are proven correct) her unwillingness to acknowledge them cannot be due to a
lack of self-awareness. Rather, as Darl implies, her self-awareness is what causes her to
feign a lack of it. The unwillingness to divulge her thoughts seems a highly disadvantageous
choice given her unenviable situation: a young, pregnant and unwed woman with no formal
education, Dewey Dell would otherwise seem to be a person for whom family provides the only source of mental and physical sanctuary. Instead, she resorts to secrecy, using her mother’s burial as an opportunity to abort her own child.

Symbolically her plight has a tragic quality, which should not be understated; but in the context of the novel, her interaction with Darl is but one example of the disconnect that exists among family members. As the above interaction indicates, the communication ruptures in As I Lay Dying are necessarily presented through complex syntactic passages, and quite often from Darl’s hyper-aware perspective. His perspective is not singular in the Faulkner canon, but he is representative of Faulkner’s “contemplative style, which draws readers into the process of thought and evaluation” (Bunselmeyer 425). In the above passage, Darl’s evaluation of Dewey Dell is simultaneously fixated on what she is—that is, what he knows she is—and her reluctance to express what she is. As should now be apparent, though Darl provides readers with the only constant narrative voice in the text, for his own part he is “haunted by ontology and abstract verbalization” (Delville 63). The futility of his ruminations is underscored by the fact that in this particular situation, his obsession over a question of being is really a question of appearance, and answering it provides no solutions. In other words, Darl has no intention of helping Dewey Dell, he's simply fixated on whether she is embarking on the journey for the “correct” reasons—and ultimately he offers no assistance or reassurance, but instead redirects his consternation to another family member who causes him even greater feelings of alienation: his half-brother Jewel.
As someone conceived outside of the family, Jewel literally represents the family’s essential dysfunction: though his status as a half-brother is unknown to most of the Bundrens, it exerts an indelible and negative force on the family as a whole. His significant actions in the text highlight his emotional distance from the rest of the family, but also provide a semblance of motivation for that intentional distancing. One indicative example is the story of how he procures a horse. Darl recalls that a few years prior, Jewel had been skipping his chores on the Bundren farm and disappearing from his bed early in the morning. This went on for several months until the family discovered he had been helping neighbors with their own farms to earn sufficient money to purchase a horse. The chapter containing this story is structured around the speculations of Darl and Cash, and they assume that Jewel is having an affair with an older woman, which they believe is the only plausible explanation for his secrecy. As the family gathers early one morning to tentatively prod Jewel for the truth, Darl writes that, “It was as though, so long as the deceit ran along quiet and monotonous, all of us let ourselves be deceived, abetting it unawares or maybe through cowardice, since all people are cowards and naturally prefer any kind of treachery because it has a bland outside” (323-4). From Darl’s perspective, which as noted earlier becomes Faulkner’s dominant objective voice, it’s clear the family had already intuited or deduced Jewel’s ongoing dishonesty but refused to acknowledge it and instead feigned a calm ignorance. More troubling for Darl is the nature of their silence, to which he affixes a cynical platitude. The rationale behind his condemnation of humans as cowards is paradoxical: we know, as Faulkner’s multiple-perspectives reveal, that Darl's family is likely one that would rather pretend to be ignorant than to publicly confront an unpleasant reality. We also know, given Faulkner’s frequently
isolated characters, that Darl’s experience is narrow, and that any proclamation about humans as a whole is undoubtedly informed almost entirely by his family. We also learn that Jewel’s reluctance to tell his family was well-founded: Anse reacts with anger over the fact Jewel stole potential food from his family, and Addie quietly weeps later that night for reasons unexplained, with Darl as the sole witness. Faulkner makes it clear that the Bundrens are a family of cowards in many ways, yet their respective “unknowing” states make them less cowardly than Darl, if we are use his own standards.

Darl’s cowardice is nearly spelled out in his resentment of Jewel, present at the beginning of the novel but rendered with increasing intensity as the story progresses. The first chapter of *As I Lay Dying* begins with Darl observing Jewel not simply being, but acting: “Jewel and I come up from the field, following the path in single file. Although I am fifteen feet ahead of him, anyone watching us from the cottonhouse can see Jewel’s frayed and broken straw hat a full head above my own” (255). In addition to indicating Jewel’s height advantage, Darl’s first observation in the novel is primarily from the hypothetical perspective of another third-party observer. Granted, only a third person can accurately gauge the heights of two different persons, but Darl’s preoccupation with how a person sees him continues throughout the text; this concern presupposes a heightened sense of self-awareness, which Darl certainly possesses.

It seems logical then, as one critic points out, that Darl’s “antagonism toward Jewel is at least partly a result of jealousy for Jewel’s unquestioning, unconscious presence” (Simon 105). It is possible that Jewel’s self-consciousness exists and Darl simply doesn’t recognize
it, which would serve a novelistic purpose. Even that wouldn’t diminish but would, instead, reinforce the absurd elements of Darl’s identity and the text as a whole. Darl’s essential dilemma is that his sense of self is self-reflexive, but it is constantly subject to the whims of others who refuse or are unable to grant him access to their own subjectivities. His lack of relation to others also relates back to Darl’s underlying ontological dilemma, which in turn is related to the existential dilemma that creates an absurd world-view: Darl simply cannot determine what is or what is not, and having access to another person’s thoughts is perhaps the only means for him to gain a circumspective view of the world—or even just of his own family. He has little to gain from Jewel other than camaraderie and has received no indication that Jewel reciprocates such a need, yet in one of the novel’s most bizarre moments he suddenly confronts his half-brother in a way that is, for him, remarkably direct: “‘Jewel,’ I say, ‘whose son are you?’” (368). Jewel’s response is, “Goddamn you, goddamn you,” which reverberates throughout Darl’s mind for the rest of the novel. From his perspective, a rare moment of candor is met with the kind of hostility reserved for an enemy. While typical of Jewel’s personality, his reaction is a microcosm of the Bundrens’ breakdown as they approach the journey’s end. Only a few pages later, Darl burns down the barn temporarily housing Addie’s coffin in a desperate attempt to stop the trek; Cash’s leg, broken earlier and then cemented in lieu of a cast, has begun to rot yet he will not deign to ask for assistance; Dewey Dell seeks out a pharmacist to perform an abortion but is essentially manipulated into rape; Anse sells Jewel’s horse, seeks out a new wife unbeknownst to the rest of the family, and finally gets his false teeth. Vardaman, like Darl, seems perplexed and overwhelmed with the circumstances, feelings which are compounded when the family
decides, rather suddenly, that Darl’s mental state is irreparably damaged and he must be committed. As critics have argued, the destructiveness of these events subverts the typical novelistic progress toward growth and enlightenment. Whereas, according to Frye, the “quest romance is the victory of fertility over the wasteland,” Kerr writes that *As I Lay Dying* “represents the victory of death and sterility and infidelity” (Frye 193, Kerr 13). Kerr’s description is correct: there are no affirmations in the text and, as far as we can tell, no personal growth is derived from the adventure. But a word must be said about *As I Lay Dying*’s comic value, which exists despite the darkness of the text, and is rendered in a way which, like many other themes in the text, runs parallel to Camus’ absurd.

Camus once wrote that what humans learn, they learn “not from circumstance but only from the contact of their natures with circumstance” (Kennedy 125). This is in fact requisite to an absurd understanding of the world: the confrontation of one’s nature and rationale with the world itself. Similarly, for Faulkner, comedic value rarely resides solely in occurrences, but rather how those involved cause or react to occurrences. In an excellent essay examining Faulkner’s syntactic style, J.E. Bunselmeyer asserts that, “The comic occasion in Faulkner’s novels is often an occasion when action is taken without contemplation. In the contemplative passages, characters realize that no goal is ever achieved; in the comic passages, characters act without thinking of ultimate futilities” (438-9). This concise summation of Faulkner’s technique applies especially well to *As I Lay Dying*, as its cast of characters—almost without exception—fit into one of these two categories. Darl’s contemplative nature tends to dominate the text, but the other family
members serve as comic fodder in that they rarely consider, outside their own interests, the potential outcomes of their respective actions; they don’t consider what’s happening to be a struggle at all. Conversely, if we view the characters from another, practical perspective, a legitimate interpretation of the text is that other family members (Jewel, for example) are able to act, while Darl is simply ineffectual.

Camus has something to say on this matter, as he is concerned with how persons incorporate the absurd into their actions and thoughts. At this stage, having followed the progression and partial destruction of the Bundrens, it is also prudent to ask the question: is an absurd outlook necessarily nihilistic or destructive? Camus’ answer to that question is complex, but summarized well by Leon Seltzer:

It is necessary to keep in mind that for Camus the absurd man is the most admirable member of his species: he alone has the courage to liberate himself from the illusions which illogically subjugate most…It cannot be overemphasized that the absurd man is called so by Camus not because he is less reasonable than most men but because he is far more so. He is distinguished by a lucid intellection, which has in fact enabled him to understand his existence as absurd in the first place. (Seltzer 15)

Seltzer’s summary of Camus is in the service of an interpretation of Melville, but his statement can be easily applied to As I Lay Dying. Regardless of what judgment we assign to the Bundrens individually, the entire family embodies the absurd, but none ever reaches the desired stage of liberation. The family members and their various inclinations toward self-
deception are absurd, but as individuals they do not reach Camus’ almost sublime state of the absurd outlook—for most of the Bundrens, we see an excessive degree of looking only inward, understood largely through Darl, who’s “lucid intellection” has already been discussed. These characters are certainly comic, and scholars have felt comfortable laughing at them: both their actions and lack of forethought dictate such a response. They’re beyond the hope of being rescued from themselves, yet they “survive quite contentedly in the world…because they are simply unaware of the futility of their own conventions” (Schroeder 42).

Darl’s situation is more complex, however, for although he is involved in potentially comic situations, he often describes them with a sense of subdued horror and astonishment. He is saved from strictly comic readings because of his fate. His outlook on the world and his family becomes nihilistic in the novel’s last few chapters, and though he is distinct from family, he too is incapable of experiencing the strange affirmation of absurdity. Camus asserts that, “A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it…But it is just as natural that he should strive to escape the universe of which he is the creator” (31-32). Darl’s consciousness of the absurd leads to no metaphorical escape, but literal imprisonment: after he attempts to destroy Addie’s coffin, which was situated in a neighbor’s barn, the rest of the family must either pay for the destroyed property or send Darl away to an asylum. Cash momentarily reflects on the situation, and sympathizes with Darl: “It’s like there was a fellow in every man that’s done a-past the sanity or the insanity, that watches the sane and the insane doings of that man with the same horror and astonishment”
(384). Unfortunately for Darl, Cash’s nuanced view of psychology and insanity is outweighed by the reality of the situation as perceived by others, which leaves the Bundrens with no bargaining power: he attempted to destroy property, rendering all the motivations he had for doing so irrelevant.

Despite Cash’s misgivings about Darl’s imprisonment, he attempts a meager consolation: “‘It’ll be better for you,’ I said. ‘Down there it’ll be quiet, with none of the bothering and such. It’ll be better for you, Darl’” (384). The phrase “bothering and such” is in and of itself an almost absurd understatement: is Cash referring solely to the Bundrens’ circumstances? Or does he on some level understand Darl’s anguish, and believe that it can never be alleviated if he remains in the family’s company? The reader can’t know, but Darl’s eerie response casts doubt on the validity of the latter hypothesis: “‘Better,’ he said. He began to laugh again. ‘Better,’ he said. He couldn’t hardly say it for laughing. He sat on the ground and us watching him, laughing and laughing. It was bad. It was bad so. I be durn if I could see something to laugh at” (384). What his family sees as the potential for solace is for Darl a curse; what for his family is the most practical way to solve an economic problem, is for Darl the culmination of a series of events with no proper explanation or rationale. More than ever, he is bound to his thoughts with, as far as the reader knows, no hope of resolving them. Thus his response to this final misfortune is complete dissociation: after being sent away, his perspective oddly shifts, and in his final lines refers to himself in the third person: “Darl is our brother, our brother Darl. Our brother Darl in a cage in Jackson where, his grimed hands lying light in the quiet interstices, looking out he foams. ‘Yes yes yes yes yes
yes yes yes” (393). By referring to himself as what he is to the rest of the family, a brother, he completes the process of becoming an outsider and stranger even to himself. Through forced separation, he becomes a family member to himself out of necessity.

Cash, in spite of his final ambivalence toward Darl's fate, is the only family member who attempts to understand Darl's position, and one of his lines resonates with the absurdity of the Bundrens and their situation: “It’s like it ain’t so much what a fellow does, but it’s the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it” (380). Cash's fleeting observation points to the Bundren conflict between privacy and public life, depicted in their relations both to one another and to others in society. Critics Baldanzi and Schlabach have written that as Addie's body slowly decays, “The family’s private work of mourning quickly becomes a collective crisis for the communities through which it travels” (38-9). This doesn’t seem to get to the heart of the issue, however: though property is destroyed and a decaying body is wheeled through townships, Baldanzi and Schlabach contend that Addie Bundren’s body is a metaphor for those things kept secret by a society which chooses not to discuss them. However, on several occasions neighbors and townspeople offer help to the Bundrens, but the family, led by Anse, will not let it become a true crisis of community. Even Darl, with his desire for meaningful communion with another human being, fails to incorporate anyone outside the family into his life. When the family interacts with one of their neighbors, Vernon Tull, the results are unsatisfactory. Tull describes his interaction with Darl with a mixture of discomfort and alienation: “[Darl] is looking at me. He don’t say nothing; just looks at me with them queer eyes of his that makes folk talk. I always say it
ain’t never been what he done so much or said or anything so much as he how he looks at you.” Because of this disconnection, the Bundrens' isolation from outsiders begins to resemble their isolation from one another. This is the true crisis of the novel, one created by the Bundrens, and over the course of the novel their losses are immense because of it. By the time Addie is finally buried, it is impossible to ignore “the frightful circles of aloneness [and] the secret selfish dreams that forever cut each man from the other and that render what appears to be the faithful homage to the dead body of a beloved kin an empty ritual” (Wasiolek 388). With the understanding that the Bundrens are emotionally cut off from the others, it’s appropriate that the most well-intentioned family member is not present to witness the end of a sham burial.

After these events have come to pass, a final absurdity awaits the reader, figured by Kerr as the perverted culmination of the family quest. After disappearing for the night, Anse returns with a surprise for the remaining Bundrens. After discovering that their father has finally purchased his new teeth (which only Addie’s death made possible), they bear witness to another absurdity. Cash narrates the final sentences:

[The teeth] made him look a foot taller, kind of holding his head up, hangdog and proud too, and then we see her behind him, carrying the other grip—a kind of duck-shaped woman all dressed up…And there we sat watching them, with Dewey Dell’s and Vardaman’s mouth half open and half-et bananas in their hands…I would think what a shame Darl couldn’t be to enjoy [the graphophone] too. But it is better so for him. This world is not his world; this life his life.
'It’s Cash and Jewel and Vardman and Dewey Dell,’ pa says, kind of hangdog and proud too, with his teeth and all, even if wouldn’t look at us. ‘Meet Mrs. Bundren,’ he says. (396).

The Bundrens likely consider Darl’s imprisonment the nadir of their journey, but to an outsider this unexpected event is the final step which renders the burial journey utterly absurd. Even Anse, the most incorrigibly self-centered family member, displays a flicker of self-awareness by being unable to look at this family, presumably out of shame or embarrassment. Still, he gets a new wife and his teeth. His is the text’s only triumph, and it “belongs to selfishness and insensitivity” (Wasiolek 392), as the family stands around in silence, pondering the future joy of listening to their new graphophone while one of their own foams at the mouth in his prison. Though Cash is the narrator for the final chapter, his final observation is Darl’s hypothetical reaction to the journey: Cash correctly assumes that Darl would be unable to reconcile the intent of the journey with its outcome, in which his recently buried mother is summarily replaced by a new, strange woman. Cash’s declaration that “This world is not his world” calls to mind another tragic character that will be discussed in the following chapter: Quentin Compson. As is the case with Quentin, Darl “allowed awareness to defeat and debilitate... [his] problem remains his inability to bear absurdity” (Broughton 176). The final question is whether Darl created that absurdity out of nothing, or if he simply responded to an absurd situation in the way that any rational person would have done. Camus would likely contend that the answer is both: Darl’s divorce from his life and
from his setting is not unique but the logical result of reason confronting illogical circumstances, itself an unwinnable fight made more insurmountable by the singular obtuseness of Faulkner’s “witch’s brew.”
Chapter Three:

Absurd Americans: The Compsons’ Nihilistic Descent

If one concurs with Camus and his existential conclusion, the image of Sisyphus in perpetual and interminable toil should be interpreted as a symbol of perseverance in the midst of futility. Comprehending the underlying absurdity of his mission does not preclude the formation of existential meaning, but is in fact requisite for such a formulation. In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner’s primary narrator is all too aware of the absurdity of his mission, but is unable to formulate something meaningful out of that fact. Like the Bundren quest, the fundamentally arbitrary nature of Sisyphus’ unending task is responsible for bringing despair, which, Camus implies, is existential nihilism in its most pure form: if there is no apparent reason for a given occurrence, how then can a person consciously ascribe meaning to it? There are both religious and secular responses to such a question: Kierkegaard posits Christianity as the solution, while Camus’ answer is something akin to stoicism. In this thesis, however, the solution is less relevant than is finding these notions of the absurd in Faulkner. Indeed, those characters in Faulkner’s early works that can be most closely associated with the absurd are generally unable to find observable solutions to their states, a lack of will to which they react in various ways.

As a character who appears in two of Faulkner’s most well-regarded novels and expresses psychological turmoil in both, Quentin Compson is well-suited for interpretation in this context. One of the underlying assumptions of this thesis is that literary interpretations of the absurd must not examine a character as a static entity, but as a culmination of thoughts and experiences; the path itself is what constitutes an absurd conception of the world. This
assertion implies that the absurd is a reactionary state, one constructed solely out of responses to experiences. To appreciate how this reaction is represented in Faulkner’s text then requires, at least in part, an examination of the process as conveyed through structure. That being said, the structuring of Quentin Compson is complicated because chronologically *Absalom, Absalom!* occurs before *The Sound and the Fury*, though the latter was published seven years earlier (1936 and 1929, respectively). Multiple characters will be discussed later in this section, but any interpretations of Quentin will be based on a combined reading of his character as presented in these two texts. Cleanth Brooks’s disclaimer in his 1963 study of the Compson family is representative of critical thought on this matter, and later critics have followed his lead. He states: “[W]e must exercise caution in using the Quentin of the later novel to throw light upon the Quentin of the earlier. But Faulkner, in choosing the character Quentin for service in *Absalom, Absalom!* must have deemed the choice a sound one. He must have felt that the experience that Quentin was to undergo…would be compatible with, and relevant to, what he had Quentin undergo in *The Sound and the Fury*” (336). That relevant experience is largely related to the basic question of what it means to “know”: *Absalom, Absalom!* takes up this question in a nearly academic fashion, perhaps because its primary characters are both college students. The text is an exhaustive excavation of history which begins dispassionately and ends in confusion and personal turmoil. It will be discussed first, in order to create a context for understanding the three narrators in *The Sound and the Fury*—though Quentin will remain the primary focus in that portion of the chapter, his brothers Benjy and Jason can each be interpreted in the context of the absurd that
Absalom, Absalom! helps create: one that like As I Lay Dying is rooted in family, but also incorporates extensive societal and generational degradation.

More than the other texts discussed here, Absalom, Absalom! is also a novel about the difficulty of reconciling one’s American identity with an absurd worldview. Camus’ definition of the absurd makes allowances for social referent, as a person’s concept of home and place is tied to social belonging. In Faulkner’s novel, the reader witnesses Quentin’s gradual disillusionment with history and his own sense of belonging, which carries over (chronologically) into The Sound and the Fury. That text has distinct narrators, but as numerous critics have observed, each, “challenges the premise that one vantage point can ever claim to tell the ‘true’ story of a human experience” (Burton 610). The human experience related in The Sound and the Fury is largely the disintegration of a once-pride family. Though they contribute greatly to their own undoing, they too suffer through a collective crisis of identity, which provides another link between the two texts: through both the personal and the historical-political, Faulkner depicts people severed from connections that otherwise provide a stable worldview, which constitutes the world of the absurd as articulated by Camus.

Absalom, Absalom! focuses on the reconstruction of history, largely through the perspectives of Quentin and his roommate (and northerner) Shreve McCannon. The reader comes to understand that the impetus for Quentin’s preoccupation with the recent history the south can be attributed to a series of conversations with Rosa Coldfield, a local spinster, and Jason Compson, Quentin’s father. Each relates to Quentin stories about Thomas Sutpen, a legendary and infamous planter in Faulkner’s fictional Yoknapatawpha County. Stories about
Sutpen are always filtered through the perspectives of the storyteller, but a few facts do emerge which will facilitate an understanding of the themes in *Absalom, Absalom!* as they relate to this thesis.

The facts of Thomas Sutpen’s youth and upbringing create an image of the archetypal American success story. He was born to a poor family in what eventually became West Virginia. His family later moved to a region of Virginia where Sutpen first observed what may be understood as social and class stratification of the mid-19th century. Quentin imagines that prior to relocating Sutpen could have never “imagined… a land divided neatly up and actually owned by men who did nothing but ride over it on fine horses or sit in fine clothes on the galleries of big houses while other people worked for them; he did not even imagine then that there was any such way to live or to want to live” (179). Even these details are more intuited by Quentin than discovered, but that fact should not diminish the significance of his intuition, for his descriptions of Sutpen’s slow realizations serve several functions. First, they position Sutpen’s growing awareness of America in strictly material terms. There’s no mention of the innate constitutions of the people observed, but rather how they constitute themselves in relation to that which they can accumulate. One of the simple absurdities Quentin points out is the dynamic between ownership and self-identity, even among those who own little. He asserts that Sutpen, again, could never imagine “all the objects to be wanted which there were, or that the ones who owned the objects not only could look down on the ones that didn’t, but could be supported in the downlooking not only by the others who owned objects too but by the very ones that were looked down on that didn’t own objects and knew they never would” (179). Quentin’s formulation of the situation certainly
has a quasi-Marxist foundation, but he avoids positing alternatives or making quick moral judgments on what he believes to be true. This is in keeping with Quentin’s original reason for reconstructing Sutpen’s story, which is to understand the man and his motivations in the context of Southern history. As Quentin says, Sutpen’s “trouble was innocence” (178). His lack of experience with (then) modern American agrarian society made his discoveries even more disorienting, for they called into question assumptions he, in his innocence, held about how individuals arrange their lives. In this new place he discovered:

…country all divided and fixed with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own, and where a certain few men not only had the power of life and death and barter and sale over others, they had living human men to perform the endless repetitive personal offices…that all have had to do for themselves since time began and would have to do until they died (180).

This interpretation of American society alludes to an emerging class-based ownership system, and one which uses slavery to propagate its affluence. Quentin reimagines the young Sutpen’s response not as disgust, but as bewilderment which over time evolves into ruthless ambition. Here we see the juxtaposition of the relative, Sutpen’s interpretation of America, with the absolute—the circumstances which inform that interpretation. Sutpen, at least according to Quentin, does not assign moral value to what he observes, but can only compare it to what he has felt and experienced in his own life. Before living in Virginia, Sutpen had “thought that some people were spawned in one place and some in another, some spawned rich…and some not, and that… the men themselves had little to do with the choosing” (180).
This reveals a sort of fatalism not uncommon in Faulkner’s characters, but Sutpen is distinct in Faulkner’s canon because he comes to believe deeply in the popular notion of the American dream. Quentin’s belief that Sutpen “had hardly heard of such a world until he fell into it” refers to a world where one can fashion out of nothing a satisfactory material existence, no matter one’s background (180). Sutpen’s new outlook on life is, as far as anyone in the text can gather, an exercise in using any means to achieve a specific end. From that point on, Sutpen is concerned with gaining both land and material wealth. The reconstruction of his history is complex, but the important points are as follows: he moves to Jefferson, Mississippi and with the help of slaves and an architect, creates a mansion out of nothing. He later marries the daughter of a plantation owner in Haiti, but discovers she is of mixed race, leaves her, and eventually—in a completely improbable event—Sutpen’s son from a second marriage kills his interracial son from the first. Sutpen himself is later killed by Wash Jones, a squatter on Sutpen’s property, after having another child with Wash’s fifteen year-old granddaughter. Sutpen’s final goal of having a male heir is never realized, and his once-proud mansion and estate slowly crumbles.

While undoubtedly a Southerner by virtue of his location, Sutpen and his way of thinking has been interpreted as distinctly Northern, notably by Cleanth Brooks in his study of Yoknapatawpha County. In it, Brooks writes that Sutpen is: “a ‘planner’ who works by blueprint and on a schedule. He is rational and scientific, not traditional, not religious, not even superstitious” (306). Brooks goes one step further toward dissociating Sutpen from Faulkner’s typical Southern characters by asserting that Sutpen more closely resembles Flem Snopes than he does the Compson families: “Like Flem, [Sutpen] is a new man with no
concern for the past and has a boundless energy with which to carry out his aggressive plans’” (307). Brooks’ contrast is based on critically popular conceptions of the Compson's, who in various ways rely on the South as a historical-political relic for their identities and even well-being. By comparison, Sutpen and Snopes attempt to create new spaces for themselves using sheer force of will; they just, according to Brooks, happen to do so in the South. Brooks constructs a binary for the purpose of excluding Sutpen from it and thus strengthening his argument, but even if Sutpen is uniquely Southern, his drives resonate across artificial geographic borders. The motivation that comes to define Sutpen may be understood as one form of expansion that has significant and timeless power toward defining the American experience and American identity. *Absalom, Absalom!* complicates the meaning one can form from this shared history by attacking it at its core: Thomas Sutpen is essentially a frontiersman, and the space he carves out of nothing is what Quentin comes to understand as the foundation of his family's place in the world, and by extension, his own. Furthermore, the circumstances that surround Sutpen's rise to community prominence, as well as his subsequent destruction, are part of an American history whose cultural value even in the 20th century was open to interpretation. Indeed, it’s the very question taken up by Quentin and Shreve, and the question Quentin feels he must answer in order to form a stable identity: is there a positive meaning behind the history he can unearth, or does this relevant part of American history simply constitute a meaningless series of events, which would in turn render his own life meaningless? To help answer that question, a brief digression is necessary into the ways people other than Quentin have attempted to make sense of this historical dynamic.
Even as the literal frontier of America faded and was replaced by civilization, the abstract notion of the frontier remained a popular symbol in American culture. Its symbolic power is evident in any number of ways, from the ongoing success of films dealing with the subject, to the incorporation of its rhetoric in political speech and theater (and of course, texts like *Absalom, Absalom!*). The concept appears to be enduring, and its application has been deemed appropriate in a variety of contexts. For example, Richard Slotkin discusses John F. Kennedy’s 1960 acceptance speech at the Democratic National convention in the introduction to his extensive study of the American frontier myth, *Gunfighter Nation*. In the speech, Kennedy “asked the audience to see him as a new kind of frontiersman confronting a different sort of wilderness” (Slotkin 2). Kennedy attempted to create parallels between the actual frontiersmen, who “gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world,” and those who “stand on the edge of a new frontier…of unknown opportunities and paths, a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats” (2). Thus, though the physical space of the frontier no long exists in the 1960s, the “latent ideological power” of the frontier as a concept remained potent even then, and even for a man whose politics were identified with the eastern seaboard (2). The sort of frontier invoked by Kennedy contains not only nostalgia for a past filled with adventurous heroes, but also the ability to organize the collective thoughts of a people around a central goal. Politically speaking, though, the more contemporary notions of the frontier may be cynically regarded as a chimera, or a myth in a pejorative sense. The word conveys vague notions of movement, progress, and expansion for the better of citizens at large, but if the symbol of the frontier as motivation for progress was codified around a static group of principles, political and social conflicts could
be easily remedied. As it is, both conservatives and liberals have conceptions of what the frontier entails, and myriad responses to how it should be explored.

Slotkin alludes to the polyvalent nature of historical re-interpretation in his discussion of the sudden emergence of the American Western in the late 1930s. In the midst of fascist and totalitarian takeovers in Europe and controversies over domestic New Deal policies, the Western as popular culture emerged as a means of conveying a “countervailing perspective that would deliberately focus on the positive elements of our history” (Slotkin 280). Slotkin traces the origins of this project to Howard Mumford Jones’ 1938 Atlantic Monthly article titled “Patriotism—But How?” In order to fashion a positive narrative about American history—and to foster a positive patriotism to counter dangerous nationalism abroad—Jones wanted writers to seek out “thrilling anecdotes” and “glamorous” episodes of American heroism and history (280). One may infer that Jones found a trade-off necessary, and that ensuring a positive image of American identity was worth subsuming the ugly portions of our history.

Unfortunately the project was doomed from the start, as Slotkins points out: throughout the ‘30s modernist writers had been reimagining our history in a much different context than the one posited by Jones. Absalom, Absalom! was published in 1936, and along with other eminent works of the decade, powerfully represents an image of America largely free of nostalgia and glamorous episodes. The thrilling anecdotes in these texts never valorize a positive American half-history, but re-imagines the frontier as a place of intellectual and even spiritual uncertainty. Slotkin writes that Absalom, Absalom! “inaugurated [Faulkner’s] ‘myth of the South’ by rooting the fabled plantation culture in a
legend of wilderness conquest” (280). Slotkin is accurate in observing the aspects of wilderness conquest in *Absalom, Absalom!* but that portion of the text is limited to Sutpen’s history, which is of course constructed by a modern Southerner and Canadian. The conquest plot forms a substructure in a text otherwise concerned not just with the myth of the South, but with how our relativistic perspectives on history shape subjectivities—in ways which come to represent absurd conceptions of the world. Quentin tries to account for his own confusion by arguing that, as a Southerner, only he can understand what has occurred. He tells Shreve: “Gettysburg…you can’t understand it. You would have to be born there” (289). Shreve then asks if Quentin actually understands it, to which Quentin replies “I don’t know…of course I understand it…I don’t know” (289). His uncertainty indicates an essential difference between Shreve and Quentin: neither of them can rationally make sense out of what has occurred, but Shreve doesn’t feel the need to do so; he is satisfied, it appears, with being in a sort of communion with Quentin simply by sorting through the past. Quentin, conversely, feels compelled to make sense out of it by constructing a satisfying and logical narrative. This deepens his feelings of hopelessness, for rather than beginning and ending with his family, Quentin’s despair now begins to extend to the past; history has undermined him, and he has fallen into its pit.

As *Absalom, Absalom!* draws to a close, the divorce between Quentin and the world around him becomes more pronounced. This is not true of Shreve: the distance from the subject allows him a clearer insight, as he is able to speak of the events of the past in a concise way that escapes Quentin. When Shreve attempts to conceive of Quentin’s home and the effects of the civil war and slavery, he phrases his accurate observations in the form of
question: “What is it? Something you live and breathe in like air? A kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago?” (289). Shreve cannot feel what Quentin feels, but he can surmise that coming from such a place must simultaneously place burdens on a person’s past and future, and that Quentin's hopes are determined by failures which have nothing to do with him. Shreve wonders if Quentin will always feel that “as long as your children’s children produce children you won’t be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett’s charge at Manassas?” (289). As The Sound and the Fury reveals, Quentin would never have the chance to find out, but even by the close of Absalom, Absalom!, when he manically reiterates that he doesn't hate the South, his fate seems already determined.

The reconstruction of history undertaken by both students, but more solemnly by Quentin, can be read as a response to the American ideal through the eyes of a young man coming from a defeated Southern family. We learn in The Sound and the Fury that Quentin’s family has disintegrated, and it is likely that Quentin’s earlier attempt to re-interpret Sutpen’s past is a response to the familial and societal decay experienced in his young life. The influence of his father, Jason Compson, cannot be understated—as with Darl's relationship with the rest of his family in As I Lay Dying. Quentin and his father represent two different ways of viewing one's place in the world, and as in As I Lay Dying, the effect the father has on his son is immense. Though Jason provides some of the spark for Quentin's excavation of history, he has managed to consign the past to nihilistic oblivion; it appears that his investment in its reconstruction begins and ends with Quentin, as his own identity is remarkably self-contained. Conversely, Quentin is not satisfied with the patterns of his own
conjecture, but seeks to make sense of that which informs his life. For Southerners and Americans as a whole, as scholars like Slotkin have argued, turning to the past and applying its lessons has been an integral part of how Americans formulate an identity. Reliance on the past is inevitable when one's individual history has been shaped by larger political circumstances, which is certainly true of Quentin and the Compsons. There are inescapable parallels between Sutpen's mysterious rise to and fall from prosperity and the South in general, so it should come as little surprise that Quentin conflates them with the hope that “solving” the Sutpen mystery will solve his own crisis of identity.

Writing about the 20th century South as represented by Faulkner, one critic asserts that, “Under the spur of the Civil War defeat, the Southerner’s need to believe in the aristocracy of his ancestors and in the superiority of his tradition hastened the spread of the Southern legend” (Backman 598). In this light, Quentin's conflict is deepened, as he can no longer believe in the aristocracy of his family. While history is the focus of Absalom, Absalom!, the Compson's family's dysfunction is described in The Sound and the Fury in a way that leaves no pretense for their supposed superiority: their fortune has diminished; the parents are distant (either due to alcoholism or neurotic behavior); the children encounter their own obstacles which result in the banishment of Caddy, the family's only daughter; and of course Quentin eventually commits suicide. Perhaps worst of all is that by the close of the novel, the most powerful and capable Compson family member is Jason Compson IV, Quentin's younger brother, who also happens to be incorrigibly greedy, nihilistic, racist and sexist. Given the facts of the Compson family, one can sympathize with Quentin's need to
believe in, at the very least, the Southern tradition and its legends. Both he and his family are people without a future, and they reside in an inescapably unpleasant present.

In Camus’ absurd world, however, this state of living makes the Compsons typical, rather than an exception: they’ve simply been forced to confront problems of identity and belonging on both personal and societal levels. Again, Camus, like most existentialists, takes as a given that “This world in itself is not reasonable,” but goes a step further to assert that, “what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrationality and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (21). Thus being aware of the absurd, for a person with no “blinders,” as Camus calls it, is inevitable (55). What matters for Camus is not simply the belief that the world is irrational. That conviction can be held by the most religious and least religious persons, the most joyful and most hate-filled persons. But what determines whether an individual can transcend the absurd or descend into nihilism is how they respond to it. He incorporates the theory of permanent revolution into his ideal response. That system seeks to achieve political circumspection through constant awareness and amendments, and for Camus this notion can be “carried into individual experience. Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it…the absurd dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity” (54). A person can fail to confront the absurd in any number of ways: in *As I Lay Dying*, family members are typically too concerned about their own well-being, something they are able to decontextualize from the absurd. Granted, their collective mission *is* absurd regardless, but only Darl is ready to acknowledge and confront that fact. Cash attempts to
understand his brother’s viewpoint, but in the end feels that concordance with local
ownership mores is a more desirable path than revolt. If *Absalom, Absalom!* is mostly
concerned with elaborating on the process of reaching the absurd, the *The Sound and the
Fury* could serve as a guidebook for ways in which people can fail to sustain it—and
therefore fail to overcome it.

As with *As I Lay Dying*, the meaning of the *The Sound and the Fury* is conveyed by
the text’s form as much its content; or rather, the content creates the necessity for such a
form. In both texts, Faulkner depicts isolated events refracted through multiple
consciousnesses, and, in *The Sound and the Fury*, through different temporalities. *Absalom, Absalom!* creates a historical background through which to consider the Compsons and their
collective fates, and in *The Sound and the Fury*, we see the individual fates of family
members carried out. And, again we see characters acting out of desperation and self-
ignorance, wallowing in their various states with little hope of overcoming them. The novel
is in turn told from a variety of perspectives: Benjy, the mentally handicapped fourth
Compson child; Quentin; and Jason Compson IV, the third Compson child. The novel’s
fourth section is told from the third-person perspective. The text’s individual sections
contain their own stories but also feature overlapping segments of the Compson family
history. Together, a clear picture of their past emerges, but the meaning behind it is unclear,
as each family member is in some way disconnected from the others and lives in a state of
“isolation nearly unmitigated by communion” (Kartiganer 619). Benjy has the most
irreconcilable issue, and his thoughts consist of barely-linked memories which are recalled
whenever an object prompts him to remember. Quentin is highly neurotic and still dealing
with the crises of identity experienced in *Absalom, Absalom!* and Jason IV simply hates everyone. Faulkner is able to sustain this sense of isolation even in the third-person portion of the book. Though Faulkner's fourth narrator is seemingly omniscient, rather than highly subjective, critics have still been unable to find a basis for textual unity in the concluding quarter of the novel. One of the first published reviews of the novel alludes to this, with the writer commenting that, "one's only criticism [is] that the author gives no clue [concerning] what he is attempting to describe" but the text nonetheless "compels attention" (Patmore 114). This disunity is not due to a lack of design, but rather how each character is constituted: the very pattern of their lives and thoughts precludes any shared unity. And if the characters cannot be unified, it follows that the larger text will suffer the same fate. Even the novel’s titular reference to *Macbeth* bears relevance to its major characters and connects them to the themes of the absurd. Shakespeare’s famous lines read: “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” (V.v.24-8). Shakespeare's words evoke a futile struggle with no meaningful outcome, and for the most part, *The Sound and the Fury* fulfills that description. At least two of its main characters strut and fret their way to nowhere in particular, and the narrator of the first section, Benjy, fits the anachronistic label of an “idiot.”

That first section, told from Benjy’s perspective, is exceedingly difficult to navigate but thematically straightforward, at least in the context of the absurd. Much of his section can be characterized as rote observation punctuated with related flashbacks to typically unpleasant events. His two modes of thinking overlap and intertwine to the extent that
without italicized text, separating the two would be nearly impossible. What distinguishes Benjy from the typical conscious human being is that his memory “does not really influence perception, and in fact he does not seem aware of the difference between them” (Kartiganer 621). His memory is not part of the process which informs the comprehension of present existence but is instead intermittent recollections of pure experience; in other words, he does not intentionally conjure memories that have a meaningful link to his present experiences. Instead, hearing a single word can send Benjy into the past: for example, overhearing a golfer utter the word “caddie” leads to a reverie about his sister Caddy, who we learn was his most caring family member prior to leaving. Many of the memories expressed by Benjy revolve around Caddy and her complications with the family, but they are always divested of both time and genuine reflection. The reader knows Benjy values the memory of Caddy, but only because he expresses his memories as they occurred, not because he expounds on their relevance to his present mindset. Benjy remembers Caddy because a coincidental word or situation in the present shares a quality with her, whether it is a sight, color, or smell. In one instance, when walking outside with his reluctant guardian Luster, Benjy describes his present-moment observations in a straightforward way, before being reminded of Caddy: “I went along the fence, to the gate, where the girls passed with their booksatchels. 'You, Benjy.' Luster said. 'Come back here.’” (47). Benjy then instantly recalls a similar memory related to Caddy, this time in the presence of another guardian, which Faulkner indicates with italics: “You can’t do no good looking through the gate, T.P. said. Miss Caddy done gone long ways away. Done get married and left you. You can’t do no good, holding to the gate and crying. She can’t hear you” (47). In addition to being Faulkner's primary method of conveying the
Compson family history in this section of the novel, Benjy's interconnected memories indicate that Caddy represents something both emotionally powerful and unaffected by the passage of time; this despite the fact that the conjuring of his memories appears instinctual rather than intentional.

A possible explanation for Benjy's seemingly automatic responses is the fact that he possesses an extreme objectivity far surpassing what the normal human mind is capable of achieving. He can only recall specific situations rather than imagine them in the context of the present. What Faulkner implies in the Benjy section “is that truth cannot emerge without the imaginative venture, without that active engagement of the mind with reality that somehow brings what we recognize as truth into being” (Kartiganer 624). Nothing is brought into being for Benjy, not even his own self. It isn’t until the fourth section of the novel that we fully comprehend Benjy’s isolation, when he is described by the outside narrator: “Then Ben wailed again, hopeless and prolonged. It was nothing. Just sound. It might have been all time and injustice and sorrow become vocal for an instant by a conjunction of planets” (213). It's obvious when we see Benjy from the outside that nothing he can “will” signifies anything, just as his memories signify nothing other than their own existence and surface similarities to present situations. Of course, one would be remiss to neglect mentioning that for Benjy this is not a choice, and he is a more sympathetic figure than a pitiful one: he has always been divorced from his life and surroundings, and always will be. He has no capacity for self-deception, and thus cannot, to use Camus’ terms, shy away from philosophical revolt.
Aside from being a technical marvel, Benjy’s section serves another significant function to the overall text by creating a counterpoint to the subsequent Quentin and Jason IV sections. Benjy represents pure intuition and observation, while both Quentin and Jason IV represent subjectivity taken to dangerous levels: each, like Benjy, clings to remnants of the past, but both Quentin and Jason make the choice to do so, and both suffer for that choice. Not that the two brothers are entirely similar: as Marco Abel points out, each represents one part of the quote from *Macbeth* mentioned earlier: Quentin is the fool who lighted to death, while Jason is the actor, a comedian, who “tries to deceive his surroundings but only ends up deceiving himself” and finally disappears into those surroundings never to be heard (48). Keeping with the chronology of the novel, Quentin will be discussed in this context, followed by Jason IV.

If we consider *Absalom, Absalom!* the thematic precursor to *The Sound and the Fury*, then we know Quentin has already dabbled in the absurd and laid the groundwork for deep nihilism before the latter novel begins. Nonetheless, the opening page of Quentin’s section sets an even more mean-spirited nihilistic tone that endures throughout. He recalls receiving a watch from Jason, his father, which has been in the family for multiple generations. Upon presenting the gift, Jason told Quentin, “I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it’s rather excruciatingly-apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience” (64). Jason paradoxically *hopes* the watch will help Quentin forget about time and not attempt to conquer it, for from Jason’s perspective, “no battle is ever won…They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools” (64). Jason’s language is
rich with references to concepts that resonate with Quentin, although one hopes the father did not intend to set his son on the path to suicide. By referring to the watch as a “mausoleum,” Jason draws a comparison between an inanimate family heirloom and the Compson’s unfortunate past: by passing on an item that he received from his own father, who precipitated the family’s decline, Jason effectively passes on the family’s burdens to Quentin, who is woefully unprepared to handle them.

Jason’s second quotation regarding the “battle” is arguably metaphorical, but it can also be read as an allusion to the civil war. The war itself is not discussed in depth in either *The Sound and the Fury* or *Absalom, Absalom!*; but the latter text does contain references to the build-up. For Jason Compson, who as far as the reader knows spends most of his time drinking whiskey on his porch, the war really was *not* fought, as even he lives only in its aftermath. What he does know, however, is the field of war; that is, who constituted each side, and why and where the war was fought. But as a southern man living out his remaining days in isolation, the facts of the war, which once inspired citizens from the north and the south to kill, can only provide insight into folly and despair. And this is nothing new: it’s essentially a confirmation of what Quentin learned throughout *Absalom, Absalom!* The young man is already at a point where he sees little positive value in his society’s larger history, and the effects of that disillusion are great. At this point, shortly before his suicide, Quentin embodies the notion that “when a cultural myth can no longer be believed, the resulting loss of structure and of any points of reference brings man to a confrontation with nothingness” (Foster 99). The only structuring device Quentin possesses is his father’s watch, and even that is handed over with a disclaimer espousing its uselessness.
His growing belief in the meaningless of time along with his perpetually unhealthy relationships make Quentin a character on the precipice of intellectual and spiritual death: “He has no bond to humankind, and this lack of community in life is a symbol for his lacking the will to power—that is… the will to live” (Abel 47). Indeed, in his section of the novel Quentin is apparitional, methodically and stoically preparing for suicide while dwelling on the memories and voices to which only he has access. When he is forced to interact with strangers, he seems slight and unassertive. At one point he is mistaken for a kidnapper, and after being told that he may be charged with criminal assault, reacts in a way that recalls Darl’s final breakdown in As I Lay Dying: “’Oh,’ I said. Then I began to laugh…I tried to stop the laughter but I couldn’t” (109). One of Quentin’s accosters voices what the reader may have inferred throughout section II and warns his friend, “’Watch him, Anse, he’s crazy, I believe” (109). Then, from Quentin’s perspective: “the laughter ran out. But my throat wouldn’t quit trying to laugh, like retching after your stomach is empty” (109). Whether his actions are sheer insanity is unknown, but here Quentin describes his body as autonomous from his brain, as though it is reacting to something which his intellect cannot (or has not yet). Darl’s laughter signaled the end of his rational mind, and the same could be true of Quentin. Camus writes that, “We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking. In that race which daily hastens us toward death, the body maintains its irreparable lead” (8). Bodily senescence is indisputable and not open for interpretation, whereas the mind is fickle and always shifting. At this point in the novel, Quentin temporarily loses control over his body as it tries to express what it feels, even before Quentin can express what his mind knows.
As his chapter (and life) draws to a close, Quentin recalls a conversation with his father which Faulkner expresses with a torrent of non-punctuated and continuous exchanges separated only by “and i” or “and he.” In this conversation, Jason seems to sense the above distinction between awareness and knowing. Jason correctly assumes that his son is tortured by a memory, in this case that of his sister Caddy, and he realizes Quentin is considering suicide as a permanent solution to the problem. Despite his otherwise harmful nihilism, Jason's summation of Quentin's thoughts is accurate, and strikes a similar note as Camus' thoughts on the suicide, which he views as the ultimate philosophical failing. He tells Quentin: “you are not thinking of finitude you are contemplating an apotheosis in which a temporary state of mind will become symmetrical above the flesh and aware both of itself and of the flesh it will not quite discard you will not even be dead” (136). The only response Quentin can muster is to repeat the word “temporary,” expressing disbelief that his misery could not last forever. Juergensen writes that, with “time defined by his father as absurd…Quentin has arrived at the conviction that sound in time really does signify nothing and that silence, outside of time and death, is preferable to it” (Juergenson 120). Here an important distinction must be made: Quentin has accepted the absurdity of time, according to Juergenson, but the consequence of that supposed acceptance is, according to Camus, *not* actually acceptance at all, because his ultimate decision is suicide. In Camus’ words, Quentin has chosen to “settle” the absurd: “Suicide, like the leap [mentioned earlier in the *As I Lay Dying* chapter], is acceptance at its extreme…In its way, suicide settles the absurd. It engulfs the absurd in the same death. But I know that in order to keep alive, the absurd cannot be settled” (54). Camus’ philosophy rings true with Quentin, for as soon as the young man
believes he has reached a conclusion about, in this case, the absurdity of time (as well as the previously established issues of home and place), his choice is the repudiation of life—and simultaneously, a rejection of the absurd, for the absurd can only exist in the consciousness of a willing individual as he or she interacts with the world; negating one necessarily negates the other. In the context of the absurd, Quentin Compson is then perhaps Faulkner’s most tragic character, as he is the only one who outright rejects its very existence, along with his own.

There are clearly essential differences between Benjy and Quentin, but for each, as Kinney posits, “the external world is composed only of stimuli which awaken and confirm the foregone conclusions of their recollected pasts” (307). Quentin is of course highly conscious of this, and at every opportunity relives the past whether or not his present situation warrants it. Benjy simply reacts to stimuli with what he knows: his memories. But there exists a third character crucial to this reading of *The Sound and the Fury*, and one who is perhaps the least capable of earning sympathy, yet also comes the closest to prevailing. By the time his story is told, Jason IV is the head of the Compson household: the eldest Jason and Quentin are both dead, Mrs. Compson is bedridden and Caddy has long since disappeared, though her daughter, Quentin II, has returned to live in the Compson home. Most of his section consists of chasing after Quentin II when he suspects she has run off without permission, a mission he undertakes with a mixture of hatred and excitement that typifies Jason’s view of the Compson family: he feels burdened by the responsibilities conferred upon him by virtue of being the last surviving somewhat-competent male Compson, but being the head of the family simultaneously fulfills his instinct “to insult or
control weak or apparently weak persons” (Folks 41). He acts always out of self-interest but fails to realize that he unwittingly re-enacts the past failings of his family, or worse, he directly contradicts his own ideals without realizing he’s doing so. This points to the cause of Jason’s undoing: his lack of self-awareness concerning his own thinking, which places him closer to the Bundrens’ end of the absurd spectrum than to the side occupied by Quentin or Darl.

One of his many deceptive actions is hoarding money intended for Quentin II. He goes so far to convince his mother that she’s burning every check received from Caddy, but Jason is simply depositing the actual check for himself. At one point he is confronted by his accountant, who warns Jason to be more discrete about spending stolen funds. Jason essentially tells him to mind his own business, and in his characteristic way, manages to rationalize a situation that an honest mind couldn’t rationalize: “I never said anything more. It doesn’t do any good. I’ve found that when a man gets into a rut the best thing you can do is let him stay there…I’m glad I haven’t got the sort of conscience I’ve got to nurse like a sick puppy all the time” (171). This statement is doubly ironic, as Jason is the one stuck in an intellectual rut and refuses to let anyone assist him. At the same time, while he has little trouble denying that he possesses a conscience, his most prevalent complaint is that others fail to exercise theirs. He excoriates “the Jews” for controlling and manipulating his money, even as he invests money intended to support his niece. He resents having to take care of his family without being properly reimbursed, yet he subsists in a home and on finances earned by his father. He resents his parents’ irresponsibility and lack of foresight, and then misses an investment opportunity while he is aimlessly chasing Quentin II.
Critical commentary on Jason IV has often commented on the extreme degree to which he, rather than all of those around him, is actually stuck in a rut. Rick Wallach has noted that by constantly deferring responsibility and attributing his shortcomings to the defeats of his family and the squalor of his town, “Jason represses his cognizance of the similarity between his own blunders and those of his ancestors, wishfully distinguishing himself from them, instead of trying to come to terms with the habits of thought and behavior that actually bind him to the same fate” (Wallach 81). Setting aside his family history (which Jason despises), he also overlooks his similarities to his brother Quentin. Like Quentin, Jason ultimately centers his thoughts on “the grotesque absurdity of death” (Folks 41). More importantly, though, Jason “is as self-centered as [Quentin and Benjy] are, caught up by his memory of the past and haunted by a sense of persistent personal loss” (Kinney 308). The difference is that Quentin looks inward: he moves through public spaces rarely interacting with a human and acting passive when he does. Jason, on the other hand, takes the decay of his family and the pain it has caused him and turns it on other people, creating the artifice of vitality that sustains him. According to Camus, suicide is the ultimate failing as it constitutes a meaningless abnegation of life, but Jason's way of living is in its way a perverse abnegation as well—and he manages to affect everyone around him in completely negative ways.

Like the outward-looking Quentin of Absalom, Absalom!, Jason finds little solace in his family, or his home—in this case the town of Jefferson. His perception of his place in time is such that his family and town/society “both demand only that he contribute to situations established prior to his time” (Kinney 308). Reactions to this state of mind are myriad, as Faulkner has already demonstrated, and Jason's is particularly futile. He believes
it impossible for his ideals to flourish in his environment, but rather than turning inward to confront that fact, he unconsciously conflates his emotions with his finances: his primary concerns are “investments, projected income, hoarded savings, and Wall Street speculations” (308). He cares about his family insofar as they affect his financial state. The irony is that Jason is as pathetic an investor as he is family member, and he fails at each, perhaps because the market forces that he ostensibly believes in “operate beyond his ken or control [which in turn] models his subconscious, reflecting back to him his disassociated selves while exacerbating his self-destructiveness” (Wallach 80). Jason's entire section can actually be read as the merging of his financial and familial incompetencies into one self-destructive event: his rage-filled chase after Quentin II distracts him from a fluctuating market, causing him to ignore a neighbor's advice and thus losing his investment in addition to not solving his family crisis. By the end of his tale, it is apparent he will forever be resigned to this sort of behavior, for its structure is a microcosm of his life. It begins and ends with his hatred of Quentin II, saying “once a bitch always a bitch,” another instance of unintentional irony as he projects his own static self-hood onto another person (196). In another instance of unconscious insight, Jason uses a younger member of the family on which to place blame, which unwittingly replicates the generational decay that has put him into his situation, as his actions toward younger family members all but ensure the continued downfall of the Compsons.

But perhaps that is unavoidable for the Compsons; this is one of the unpleasant impressions one takes from The Sound and the Fury. Quentin discovered his own doom through his father and the south's stories, Benjy through his own mental deficiencies, and, as
Wallach argues, we can interpret “Jason’s obsessive and blundering transpositions of emotional values into financial terms against the equally delusory sensibility of southern capitalist culture,” the facts of which are unavoidable (Wallach 79). As critics have noted, these elements of the novel form a sense of endless repetition, and even the three sections discussed all begin and end similarly. What's more is that the concluding and omniscient fourth section ends the novel on the same note, which is one of the most explicit aspects of the absurd in *The Sound and the Fury*: a physical journey has taken place, as it did *As I Lay Dying*, and the same sense of isolation from others and the impossibility of creating a meaningful life is conveyed. After Luster, Benjy's driver, starts on a different path toward the graveyard on one of their customary visits, Benjy begins to bellow. Luster gives Benjy a flower and amends his path, and the final sentence of the novel proper reads: “The broken flower drooped over Ben's fist and his eyes were empty and blue and serene again as cornice and facade flowed smoothly once more from left to right, post and tree, window and doorway and signboard each in its ordered place” (237). In Benjy’s case, the placating “ordered place” signifies nothing but a return to a sense of normalcy, which, for a person of limited mental capacity, has no value outside of familiarity. John V. Hagopian, in his study of *The Sound and the Fury*’s fourth section, writes that “the false order that ironically soothes [Benjy] dramatically frames the entire novel in the same way that Mr. Compson's sophisticated commentary frames the Quentin section” (205). Indeed, just as Jason's gift to his son related the absurdity of time, the final image of the temporarily pleased Benjy offers no meaningful solution to the problems—both existential and physical—encountered by characters who always live up to Faulkner’s famous title.
Chapter Four:
Making Sense out of Absurdity

In the closing pages of The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus elucidates the connection between the absurd and hope, and acknowledges the apparent contradiction between the two:

It is strange in any case that works of [absurd] inspiration like those of Kafka, Kierkegaard, or Chestov—those, in short, of existential novelists and philosophers completely oriented toward the absurd and its consequences—should in the long run lead to [a] tremendous cry of hope. They embrace the God that consumes them. It is through humility that hope enters in. For the absurd of this existence assures them a little more of supernatural reality. If the course of this life leads to God, there is an outcome after all. And the perseverance, the insistence with which [absurd heroes] repeat their itineraries are a special warrant of the uplifting power of that certainty. (Camus 134-5).

After discussing As I Lay Dying, The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom! in the context of an absurd framework, one may be struck with the notion that in these works Faulkner is hopelessly nihilistic, especially when compared to the ultimately affirmative absurd outlook offered by Camus and exemplified by the myth of Sisyphus: he perseveres for the sake of perseverance while Faulkner’s major characters—most of the Bundrens and most of the Compsons—toil not in the name of perseverance, but out of habit, spite or hatred. We are witness to suicide, incest, madness and deception, rather than uplift. Faulkner structures the novels around that very lack of hope: the pointless and falsely-motivated journey in As I
Lay Dying, the circular and recurring tragedy of The Sound and the Fury, and the impenetrability of a sordid past in Absalom, Absalom!

The inability to find superficial affirmation in these works should not preclude artistic appreciation; it may even enhance the way we understand Faulkner. To be certain, he’s not a singular writer for his obsession with alienation and despair, or for his fragmented narrative styles: others before him, from Joyce to Proust, Woolf to Conrad can be counted among those artists who experimented radically with form and who saw existence “as a presence of fragments often moving to no particular end or recognizable rationale” (Kartiganer 614). But Faulkner, as does Camus in his philosophy, attempts to take that lack of direction and rationale and create out of it his own fragmented world with its own rationale. It’s a world in which isolation grips the vulnerable, separating them from family and community; where a person's sense of self is occupied with what has occupied, and still occupies, others. In short, it’s a world familiar to all yet strange and discomfiting when confronted artistically. Yet his art is not simply mimetic. Instead it forces all observers to fragment his or her own thoughts, to regard the text not as a narrative monologue but as a multiplicity of voices; and from those voices, construct a largely inferred meaning.

But, aside from those characteristics, what distinguishes Faulkner from others are his characters. His fictions can be summed up as “the histories of characters whose very sanity seems to ride on the truth of their perspectives” (Kartiganer 618). In the world Faulkner creates, his characters are at once familiar yet off-putting: the Bundrens are full of unsurprising human flaws, but variously take opportunities to care for one another while rejecting the help of any outsiders; they are the rugged individuals who fail at being rugged
and barely qualify as individuals. The Compson family ceases looking to the future and decays slowly, yet continues to structure their world around the very ideas and value that brought about their failure. To say the least, it becomes a difficult task to put a positive spin on these characters, which can make venturing into these texts a daunting if not depressing experience. The lack of an intermediary or controlling voice shifts even more focus onto the flawed characters and the contradictions within their lives, complicating popular conceptions of the sort of role the modern author should play in his or her text. Michel Foucault asserts in “What is an Author?” that the modern writer “serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts” and provides “a point where contradictions are resolved, where incompatible elements are at last tied together” (111, 119). In Faulkner’s texts, contradictions are not resolved but collapse into nihilism and other ailments of the spirit. His incompatible elements, at least in these works, tend to be family members who are tied together to the detriment of the parties involved.

Recent Faulkner criticism has found ways not to gloss over his often contemptible major characters, but to incorporate them into visionary readings regarding sexism and racism. Scholarly work on *Absalom, Absalom!* has recently focused more on the edges of and spaces within the text. The intricacies of conversation between dominant white male characters have been pushed to the side and instead the recurring othering of black or interracial characters has been examined. Rather than being only another lens with which to view the text, these sorts of readings do their part to solve the problems within the novel itself. Barbara Ladd’s essay “The Direction of the Howling,” discusses the underlying impact racism has on how Americans conceive of our society, which is Quentin Compson’s
main struggle. She writes that Faulkner’s frequent use of the interracial black male in *Absalom, Absalom!* signifies this particular ‘other’s’ “capacity to delineate the political and cultural repressions and displacements, the submerged or forgotten history that underlies the dream of U.S. national unity” (Ladd 526). Her essay allows us to see a character like Quentin Compson as only one person amidst a vast exchange of historical and political information. While one should hesitate to attribute all of the text’s unanswered questions to the haunting remnants of slavery, its one example of how out of hopeless individual circumstances, a deeper understanding of ourselves emerges.

Finding affirmation in the face of despair is also possible by applying contemporary feminist thought to Faulkner. Numerous essays have examined the presence of Caddy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*: she is the only daughter in the Compson family, and none of the novel is told from her perspective, but, as feminist critics have argued, she has an immeasurable impact on the rest of the Compson family. Because she is an archetypal “fallen woman,” the male characters consider themselves through her, though she is never able to speak. The estrangement from her family is largely due to the fact that she became pregnant while unmarried: in another society, such an impediment could be overcome, but in the one Faulkner created, it leads to misery for everyone—except perhaps for Caddy, who escapes her family and leaves them to wallow in their self-imposed moral prison. Caddie's situation in relation to the rest of her family has parallels to feminist readings of Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*: allotted only one chapter, from the after-life no less, Addie’s cynical perspective on her own mothering provides an interesting counterpoint to every other
character in the novel who appears to be mourning her: the joke appears to be on them, as she expresses anger at what her life was forced to be, and to whom she was forced to yield.

The above examples are representative of contemporary readings of Faulkner's otherwise dour texts, but in the context of the absurd, perhaps no stronger counter-example exists than Dilsey, the matriarch of the Compsons' black servant family. She is mostly relegated to *The Sound and the Fury*’s fourth section, and otherwise appears as a subtle contrast to the ultimately fruitless ruminations of the Compson brothers. She lives her present life in the material consequences of a past that can only affect Quentin intellectually, yet provides opposition to what Davis calls “the erosion of morals, values, and meaning” so prevalent throughout the text (109). According to Davis, the church service Dilsey attends near the of the novel provides a uniquely black “alternative vision” which undercuts the nihilism experienced by Faulkner's white male creations (109). Faulkner’s focus on these men should not be taken as an endorsement of their views, for in Faulkner’s “extremely relativistic view, wherein God truly is an active for reality for those who believe in him and a mockingly hollow absence for those who do not, what is ludicrous and absurd to Quentin in his experience of life may be real and vital to Dilsey in hers” (Palumbo 144). Even Faulkner’s later works show signs of breaking free from darkness and focusing more explicitly on people who are able to overcome their problems: fifteen years after its original publication he added a final chapter to *The Sound and the Fury*, which ends with the well-known phrase, “They endured,” referring to the novel’s remaining characters. *Go Down, Moses* was published in 1942, five years after *Absalom, Absalom!* and takes up many of the same issues. In this novel, rather than succumbing to a world which has no rationale, the
main character is able to abnegate those things which have confounded him, and continues on in spite of them. He endures as well.

When Albert Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he was in part responding to philosophers who were committing, as he saw it, “philosophical suicide”—that is, philosophers who took up questions of existence and, rather than simply feeling awe and wonder at the nature of the question, transcribed their thoughts into, among other ills, extremist political thought or utter nihilism. For Camus, many had hit the figurative wall and regressed, unable to find meaning in the ostensibly meaningless; for how can a person simply exist if he or she finds no value in existence?

In his previously discussed novels, Faulkner presents similar observations through his many failed characters. This is not to say that he set out with the absurd in mind, or with a unique conception of the absurd; it’s a simple idea that has worked its way into our popular culture. But for some people and situations absurdity turns into despair and tragedy. That progression has been a literary convention for centuries, but Faulkner’s way of showing it anew is noteworthy. He represented the state as it exists: in the self-aware mind, which must continuously grapple with it. At the same time, in his hands, the difficult and overly abstruse problems of modern philosophy become familiar and relatable: the problems of how one belongs or doesn’t belong in a family or a country, and the effects of such ambiguity. Many of his creations don’t survive, but their stories become our stories, and as ongoing Faulkner scholarship demonstrates, choosing to endure through them livens and lightens even the darkest corners of our minds and our pasts.
Bibliography


