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A Reconceptualization of Faulkner's Dilsey

Regarding the character of Dilsey, William Faulkner writes in his "Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*," "There was Dilsey to be the future, to stand above the fallen ruins of the family like a ruined chimney, gaunt, patient, and indomitable."¹ Diametrically opposed to the Compson family in every significant way—racially, morally, mentally, spiritually—Dilsey serves as a foil for their obsolete, aristocratic, Southern values. She provides an elevated, chimney-like perspective, far more clairvoyant in both time and perceptiveness than that of the Compson children's narrations. Early critics of the novel correlate her lucidity with the intersection of two overarching motifs, religion and time—designating Dilsey to be instrumental in understanding Faulkner's views on temporal space.² In becoming what these critics have frequently called an Alpha and Omega,³ Dilsey fuses her faith with her perspective of time, thus enabling her to distinguish "neither the past nor the future nor the present ... [but] all aspects of eternity" (Brooks 330). However, the effect this insight has on her personal identity has been ignored; I propose that, in consideration of the novel as a whole and Faulkner's fifth narration, his "Appendix," Dilsey not only demonstrates her dynamism as a character, which is often disputed,⁴ but a departure from her tractable subservience to the degenerate Compson family. Her newfound temporal vision does not result in some sort of Christ-like altruism: she is no saint.⁵ Rather, Dilsey's timeless perspective ultimately transforms her selflessness into censure of the Compson family, permitting her to render a definitive final judgment upon them while reconceptualizing a new pluralistic identity with Southern blacks en masse.

¹Faulkner, "An Introduction to *the Sound and the Fury*." *The Sound and the Fury*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994; 231.

²In his 1974 essay "The Problem of Time in *The Sound and the Fury*: A Critical Reassessment and Reinterpretation," Douglas Messerli parallels religion and time: "The religious imagination embodies a faith which 'resists the passage of time by the paradox of never struggling against it.' Dilsey, through her religious love, ... 'protecting [her] against the passage of time,' is with the preacher (Shegog) the embodiment of Faulkner's moral order." He then returns from religion to time and inextricably links the two in saying, "Dilsey transcends time while Quentin seeks time's extinction" (22-23). Similarly, in his 1963 essay, "Man, Time, and Eternity," Cleanth Brooks joins the two themes by arguing that Dilsey's religious "vision of eternity ... gives meaning to time ... wip[ing] away all tears in a final vindication of goodness and in full consolation of those who mourn" (Brooks 345).

³See Arthur Geffen's "Profane Time, Sacred Time, and Confederate Time in *The Sound and the Fury*." There he writes, "[Dilsey's] language duplicates that of the Book of Revelation [1.8; 22.13]: 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending'; 'I am Alpha and Omega . . . the first and the last' (185). Compare Giles Gunn's "Faulkner's Heterodoxy: Faith and Family in *The Sound and the Fury*," 168, Joseph Adamson's "The Rising Of Dilsey's Bones: The Theme Of Sparagmos In *The Sound And The Fury*," and Thomas Merton's *Opening the Bible*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986, 58.

⁴Philip Dubuison Castille argues that immediately after her Easter revelation, Dilsey "evidences a new attitude and purpose" (Castille 428), whereas Margaret Walker Alexander states, "Dilsey as a character is a flat, mindless stereotype" (Alexander 113). The debate over whether Dilsey is different at the end is on-going; however in this essay, I will take Castille's assertion and expand upon the degree of her dynamism. As for the "Appendix" being the fifth narration, consider Faulkner's own quote, "I wrote [*The Sound and the Fury*] five separate times trying to tell the story" (Meriwether 244).

⁵See Michael P. Dean's "Faulkner's Dilsey: A Saint for Our Century."

Before touching on the larger issues of time, religion, and identity, any commentary on *The Sound and the Fury* must come to grips with the problem of communication as presented in the novel. In so doing, Dilsey becomes integral to solving the problem of communication. Faulkner's concern over the inability for humans to truly communicate with one another in absolute clarity is a common theme in modern literature.⁶ Critic Olga Kuminova calls Faulkner's novel "a very intense, even desperate attempt at communication, reaching out toward some ideal interlocutor who would comprehend the whole mental and emotional reality from which the text emerges" (Kuminova 44). The mental state of the Compson boys presents the initial hindrance to "comprehen[sion of] the . . . reality" of the text. Consider Benjy's gleanings of events. Instead of providing a standard narration of events in chronological order, Benjy provides the reader mere primordial depictions, paintings on cave walls as it were, filled with sounds and scents, images, and interruptions from which the reader must attempt to grasp the key events in the narration, which may not take place until the conclusion of the novel. Following this is Quentin, whose mental state at first comes as a welcome relief from Benjy's narrative shards. But Quentin's narration quickly degrades as his delirium sets in and he becomes more despondent. Towards the end of his narration, Benjy's unadulterated insights are frequently more cogent than Quentin's mad babble. Yet, the irony in both these attempts at communication is that readers find a sense of relief in the following section, Jason's attempt to dominate time and communication, resulting instead in spewed hatred, self-righteous vindication and retrospection. Though much more could be said about the problem of communication in the novel, the readability and rational narration in what is referred to as Dilsey's section is quintessential to the clarity with which we see the Compson family's general enmity with time. In Dilsey's section, the plot and themes come into focus, thus solving the problem of communication—but not of time.

This is why criticism on *The Sound and the Fury* cannot help but also discuss the treatment of time. From Benjy's absolute (and unbiased) fusion of present and past, to Quentin's neurotic regard and feigned disregard, to Jason's brutal sardonicism, time haunts the Compson family. Quentin articulates it best when he, at the beginning of his narrative, abruptly states, "I was in time again, hearing the watch" (76).⁷ Being violently snapped into time, Quentin expresses the general Compson family relationship with temporal space. Mr. Compson, too, cynically voices this antagonism with time when giving Quentin what ought to have been a treasured gift: "I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire" (76). The gift, Quentin's watch, becomes the nexus of his obsession and, by extension, the Compson's family projected hatred toward temporal restrictions. Faulkner juxtaposes these characters trapped in their limited perceptions of time with Dilsey, whose temporal experience is the absolute inverse of that of the Compsons in that she not only endures time but transcends it.

In his comprehensive essay on the meaning of time in the novel, Douglas Messerli directs readers to the issue raised by these two incommensurate perceptions of time: "The problem of time in *The Sound and the Fury* then has not yet been solved" (26). He then attempts to provide an adequate explanation for the dichotomy of the two very different relationships with time that are present in the novel. With the entire plot revolving around a few key scenes and fractions of perceptions on those key events, the novel, in essence, becomes a broken kaleidoscope that the reader must mentally realign, even if it takes four readings.⁸ The pivotal events of the novel, Caddy's muddy drawers, Caddy's promiscuity, and Caddy's wedding, form the image the reader must alchemize through the course of the first three

⁶Robert Warshow sums up the modernist concern with ideal communication well:

The writer who attempts a true re-creation of life is forced to invent the meanings of experience all over again, creating out of his own mind and sensibility not only the literary object but also its significance and its justification—in a sense, he must invent his own audience. This is the source of the problem of communication in modern literature—which is a problem not only of communicating the quality of experience to a reader, but also, and more deeply, of making it possible for the writer himself to have a meaningful experience in the first place. . . . The problem of experience and the problem of a language for experience are for him one problem. (Warshow 9)

Faulkner's concern with conveying, not the artifice of thought, but actual, live, and uncensored ruminations offers both a hindrance to and transcendence above common human understanding.

⁷Citations to *The Sound and the Fury* will be from the Vintage International, 1990 edition and hereafter will be cited parenthetically in text with page references alone.

sections of the novel. As critic Olga Vickery articulates, "Each of the first three sections presents a version of the same facts which is at once *the truth* and a *complete distortion* of the truth" (emphasis added, 41). In short, Vickery asks readers to differentiate between "the act and man's apprehension of the act," or even more precisely "between the event and the interpretation" (41). Yet, this conclusion does not provide sufficient latitude for Dilsey's perspective to take a greater significance; through Dilsey, Faulkner presents, not a biased interpretation, but a comprehensive reconciliation with past, present, and future. The problem of time cannot be solved through analysis of events or their direct repercussions in the novel, but through an inclusive transcendence beyond the realm of singular, temporal events—which Dilsey provides.

Being limited to Benjy, Quentin, and Jason's perceptions, conversely, would severely impair a reader's interpretation. However, Faulkner provides the character of Dilsey, intrinsically linked and yet impartially distant from the Compson family. Dilsey "deals with [the past] as it is caught up in the present without attempting to perpetuate . . . or to circumvent it," thereby demonstrating the unsullied temporal acuity Faulkner wishes to engender in his readers (Vickery 51). In bestowing Dilsey with this timeless objectiveness, he follows a pattern found in many of his works, which Cleanth Brooks refers to as part of the reality of Faulkner's women: "In the Faulknerian notion of things, men have to lose their innocence, confront the hard choice, and through a process of initiation discover reality. Women are already in possession of this knowledge, naturally and instinctively" (Brooks, "Vision" 313). Brooks goes on to reason that Mr. Compson's misogynistic condemnation stems from women's instinctive comprehension of reality, a reality from which Mr. Compson tried desperately to escape through alcohol. Yet, Dilsey is not the only woman in *The Sound and the Fury* who possesses this instinctive Faulknerian female knowledge of reality.

The central female figure in the novel, Caddy, too has a reliable perception of time, albeit obscured by her lack of agency in the novel. Caddy, upon seeing her dead grandmother, recognizes her inexorable death, which awakens what is innate inside of her—an understanding of the reality and eventuality of all humans. She doesn't share this newfound revelation with her brothers but instead, from that moment on, becomes a character raging against her doom, our doom. On this subject, Messerli writes:

The important thing here is not just that she recognizes the evil, but that she reacts to it. As Faulkner says of her in the appendix she was 'doomed and knew it, accepted the doom without either seeking it or fleeing.' ... What I am saying is that Caddy in seeing death recognized her doom; as in the garden of Eden she gained the knowledge of herself, recognized that if that grandmother lying rigid on the bed was death, and that she who was still living was doomed to die, to become rigid, then life was not rigid, living was dynamic as opposed to this stasis of death. (38)

Thus, from this crucial moment in the story, in addition to Caddy muddying her shorts as a symbol of her new fatalistic perspective and a foreshadowing of her living dynamically (read promiscuously), time not only haunts the Compson children but curses them. The first to suffer at its cruel hand is Quentin, but as Faulkner explains in his "Appendix," not a Compson is left to endure. Caddy preemptively reacts before the death and evil she foresees disintegrates the Compson men. Simply speaking, when confronted with the brevity of life, Caddy reacts impulsively and sexually, while Dilsey acts comprehensively and spiritually.⁹

⁸When asked what readers who, after reading the novel two or three times, could not grasp the meaning should do, Faulkner tersely suggested reading it four times. See James Meriwether and Michael Millgate's *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner*, 244-46.

⁹This brevity is most clearly alluded to in the novel's title, as taken from MacBeth's soliloquy:
... Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. (Macbeth 5.5.23-26)

While Caddy and Dilsey share an inherent reality of time, their reactions to inevitable human doom are diametrically opposed. While Dilsey is often read to be different merely because of the color of her skin, this concurrent similarity to and divergence from Caddy provides a basis for an alternate critical reading of temporal space and its relevance to characters in the novel. Caddy reacts to the future; Dilsey acts in accordance with the demands of her quotidian life, carefree about the anxieties tomorrow may bring. This easygoing attitude is the first of many ways in which she parallels Christ, who teaches, "Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (King James Version, Matt. 6.6). In Dilsey, readers find a "patient preoccupation with the present, which is the only possible way of living with time" (Vickery 51). Her "patient preoccupation" with the "sufficient" "evil" of each day, unlike Caddy's perpetuation of the Compson antagonism with time, essentially solves the temporal problem in *The Sound and the Fury*. Messerli concludes in his essay by saying, "[Dilsey] is Faulkner's moral order, representative of all the potentialities of man, of man's capacity to endure and prevail ... She is the link between all of the characters who struggle in all their various attempts to order" (Messerli 41). Dilsey's blithe attitude towards the three dimensions of time present a clear imperative from Faulkner—not merely to be concerned with the humdrum of the present but to gain mastery over our temporal perspective. Yet, Dilsey's ability to exemplify this precept doesn't address the greater existential questions posed in the novel.

Nihilistic readings claim that Dilsey's mastery over time is merely an opiate and a refusal to deal with existential issues. They also argue that her spirituality is tantamount to "existential nothingness" (Castille 423).¹⁰ Regardless of the theoretical school to which one adheres however, Michael Dean's statement on Dilsey is almost universal: "Readers have always admired Dilsey" (Dean 352). Faulkner himself says that she could hold a "decaying" family together, at least for the duration of the appendix-less novel, "with no hope of reward, except that she was doing the best she could because she loved that poor ... idiot child" (Meriwether 126). But Dilsey's goodness cannot be traced to pure altruism. The ethos of Christianity, if not all religions, is embodied in Dilsey's piety: do good now, get rewarded later. Dilsey herself expresses anticipation for her well-deserved compensation in the hereafter: "[My name]'ll be in the Book, honey, ... Writ out. ... They'll read it for me. All I got to do is say Ise here" (58). Through this simple interchange with Caddy, Dilsey links her mastery over time with her faith, thereby yielding her absolute confidence in divine providence. In turn, with her role on earth fixed and salvation in heaven secure, Faulkner endows her with the moral rectitude necessary to measure where other characters stand vis-à-vis celestial favor. Consequently, Dilsey is not some shadow standing in the wake of the Compson family—no, she is the symbolic ethical gauge Faulkner felt lacked in Southern society.¹¹ For example, Dilsey refers to Caddy, whose future truancy is foreshadowed by her early impishness, as, "You, Satan" (45). To Luster, her own grandson, she roars, "You vilyun!" (316). On the other hand, she is capable of dispensing divine benevolence upon others, as for Benjy: "You's de Lawd's chile" (317). Dilsey, given moral preeminence, is privileged to make these personal assessments. Vickery, cited earlier, incorrectly concludes, "At no time does Dilsey judge any of the Compsons, not even Jason" (51). Yet, as evidenced through these lines, she freely doles out judgment on the Compsons. Quentin is familiar with Dilsey's proclivity for judgment as evidenced by, when reflecting on his impending suicide, laments, "What a *sinful* waste Dilsey would say" (emphasis added, 90). When asking Jason to come to dinner, she says, "Come on," then summarily adds, "fo you kin think up some mo devilmint" (257). Though not of Compson blood, Luster tends to receive even more censure; she convicts him of having "jes es much Compson devilmint ... es any of em" (276). Without the objectiveobjective, yet intimate voice of Dilsey,

¹⁰See Jun Liu's "Nihilists and Their Relations: A Nietzschean Approach to Teaching *The Sound and the Fury*" and Ted Steege's "Dilsey's Negation of Nihilism: Meaning in *The Sound and the Fury*."

¹¹In response to the simple question, "Do you love the South?" during an interview dated August 5th, 1955, Faulkner answers, "I love it and hate it. Some of the things there I don't like at all, but I was born there, and that's my home, and I will still defend it even if I hate it" (Meriwether 101). Some of the "things there [he doesn't] like at all" included he and the South's opposing views on education, race, expression, individualism, religion, and in context to the current discussion, moral consciousness (Meriwether 14-15, 70, 77, 102-103).

including her expressed disapprobation, the reader would not have an attuned gauge with which to assess the moral integrity of the other characters.

To understand why Dilsey is allowed this moral acumen, she must be firmly situated within the context of religious criticism. Remembering that Dilsey already has herself grounded in the wholeness of the present, we recognize the veracity of Cleanth Brooks's belief that her temporal "wholeness constitutes her holiness" (Brooks, "Vision" 324). Davis develops this point further when he addresses the "innate signification of the Negro faith [which] ... presupposes an understanding of human motivation ..." (Davis 109). In other words, due to her strong faith and timeless perspective, Dilsey has a keener insight into the motivation of characters. This ability is not solely limited to Dilsey, as Roskus and Luster make similar judgments, albeit not as rooted in Christian ethos as those of Dilsey. Earlier in the same essay, Davis describes the perspective provided through the Gibson family: "These blacks provide access to added information about the private and public lives of the protagonists," which we regard with more credulity because it comes from characters with unpretentious perceptions (Davis 68). Davis is thoroughly correct here—the black characters are not simply a reflection of the white characters; they are Faulkner's viable means of providing a genuinely modern view on the wholly outmoded Compson perspective. To read them simply as background "Negros"¹² is to ignore the "sustained alternative perspective," they provide (Davis 1). The Gibson family's disconnected intimateness reveals particular flaws in the Compson family. The most privileged is of course Dilsey, who, through faith and morality is enabled, as theological critic Timothy Caron writes, to "make a way out of no way" (Caron 15). John T. Matthews calls her, "The soul or conscience" of the novel, which empowers her "identification with Christ's suffering and redemption constitut[ing her] faith and assur[ing] ... her an eternal place in heaven. Dilsey surely trusts this interpretation of mortal existence" (Matthews 82). Dilsey, as the moral and spiritual foundation of the novel, provides the only means by which readers may also have license to judge the characters in the text.

Dilsey does not judge merely as some nominal Christian would; she lives the life a Christian should. If one takes the nihilistic assertions of the novel, religion doesn't matter—it's merely a literary ploy Faulkner uses to tell an allegorical story.¹³ This view ignores not only the beautiful complexity of the novel, but disregards "Faulkner's attitudes—including his religious attitudes—[which] reflect the complexity of the real world" (Barth 218). On the other hand, a pure theological reading of *The Sound and the Fury* would be erroneous as well. Giles Gunn makes this key observation: "Faulkner seems to put far less credence in the postulates of Christianity, or even in their associated sentiments, than in its practices" (Gunn 168). Dilsey's own theological assumptions do not convey Faulkner's intent in the novel; rather, analysis of her Christian piety in action provides a meaningful way to read the novel. Religiousness is neither Faulkner's ploy nor his admonition.¹⁴ Thus, the measured approach of juxtaposing Dilsey's true devotion with the Compsons' nominal Christianity demonstrates that Dilsey's piety and temporal transcendence grant her character dynamism.

¹²See Thadious Davis's "Preface" to *Faulkner's Negro* for his distinction between "Negro" and "black." In the context of the sentence, I am using his distinction relative to "an attempt to reflect Faulkner in his proper sociohistorical context [in which] *Negro* evokes a wide variety of traditional meanings and experimental associations that *black*, despite its inherent color symbolism, has not yet accumulated" (Davis 1).

¹³To this end, Jean-Paul Sartre sums up what he assesses as Faulkner's thoughts as demonstrated in the novel and by extension, through Dilsey's piety: "Man is not the sum of what he has, but the totality of what he does not yet have, of what he might have" (Sartre 92). In words relative to Dilsey, "She is not the sum of her faith and morality, but the totality of the faith and morality she does not yet have." Contrary to Sartre, I do not see such "absurdity" and "despair" reigning in the story. Dilsey provides a viable means to meet and vanquish all of the sound and fury of the Compson family. Speaking of Sartre while partially quoting him, "I like his art, but I do not believe in his ..." cynicism (Sartre 93).

¹⁴Cleanth Brooks does not identify the novel to be a treatise on Christianity. Instead, he highlights the necessity of understanding the Christian elements and how they relate to the themes of the novel:

To call Faulkner 'one of the most profoundly Christian writers in our time' seems somewhat incautious. Perhaps it would be safer to say that Faulkner is a profoundly religious writer; that his characters come out of a Christian environment, and represent, whatever their shortcomings and whatever their theological heresies, Christian concerns; and that they are finally to be understood only by reference to Christian premises. (Brooks, "Vision" 310)

Reflect first on the similarities between the two matriarchs of the novel. Mrs. Compson, the opprobrious hypochondriac, feigns Christianity while Dilsey emulates the life of Christ in both suffering and compassion. Though Brooks's discussion of Faulkner's female reality does not indulge in a consideration of Mrs. Compson, it certainly applies to her as well: she well knows her family is doomed, as implied in her statement to Dilsey: "You're not the one who has to bear it, ... You don't have to bear the brunt of it day in and day out" (272). Earlier, Mrs. Compson states, "It's my place to suffer for my children," adding, "I can bear it" (220). While the latter statement elicits doubt, the former statement obtains general assent. It *is* her place to suffer for the family; her misguided values and inability to love any character besides the unlovable Jason have doomed the family. Quentin, the most gifted and potentially successful Compson, bemoans this plight, "*If I'd just had a mother so I could say Mother Mother*" (172). Davis, discussing Mrs. Compson and Dilsey states, "[Mrs. Compson's] words, 'At least I can do my best,' are more meaningfully restated by Dilsey in the final section: 'I does de bes I kin ... Lord knows dat,'" as Mrs. Compson consistently retreats into her bedroom while Dilsey bears the bruntwithstands the worst of the Compson misery (74), perhaps most notably in her bearing of the Compson shame: Benjy.

Nothing attests to Mrs. Compson's nominal Christianity more than her relationship with her Bible. After Dilsey's attendance at Easter service, she returns to the Compson house, which she begins to truly see for the first time,¹⁵ enters Mrs. Compson's room, and sees the Bible lying, symbolically, face down on the ground. Dilsey again becomes Christ-like at this moment, one of many times where she does so. In Christian theology, Christ offers a redemptive hope to mankind; humankind; if one takes the first step towards him, Christ will aid the sinner complete the journey towards divine grace. Paralleling this, Dilsey offers the face down Bible again to Mrs. Compson, not by placing it in her hands, but by making the Bible accessible to Mrs. Compson, if only she would get out of bed, if only she would take the first step. Yet even that is too burdensome for the valetudinarian Caroline Compson. Dismissing her as is irredeemable, Dilsey, disillusioned, says, "You can't see to read, noways," after which point, she no longer has any interaction with Mrs. Compson in the novel (300).¹⁶

If Dilsey is a foil to Mrs. Compson's matriarchy, she is the antithesis of Jason's ethos; her Christianity can be no more strongly substantiated than through their interchanges. Faulkner addresses the lifelong adversarial relationship between the two when he states that Dilsey was Jason's "sworn enemy since his birth and his mortal one since that day in 1911 when she too divined ... that he was somehow using his infant niece's illegitimacy to blackmail its mother ..." (Appendix 212). Dilsey has been aware of Jason's wickedness from childhood—particularly noteworthy is the incident when Jason "cut up all Benjy's dolls" "just for meanness" (65). While Dilsey never comments on Jason's ill-gotten wealth during adulthood, she does struggle with him over the upbringing of Miss Quentin, who is as unloved as her uncle with whom she shares a name. If Dilsey is the Christ-figure in the novel, Jason is the Devil-figure with whom she must contend.¹⁷ Though Dilsey is an enervated grandmother, she is willing to challenge Jason when necessary; when he threatens to hit her for her opposition, she flatly acknowledges, "I don't put no devilment beyond you" (185). As Thadious Davis maintains, "Her presence in the Compson house deflates Jason's verbal assessment of his stature" (Davis 89). Additionally, Dilsey offers a redemptive hope to the Compson family while Jason only offers wicked temptation, best demonstrated in the scene with Luster, the tickets, and the stove. On Easter, Dilsey wears royal colors¹⁸ as Christ did

¹⁵While the symbolism to the Compson family needs no explanation, the revelation this provides about Dilsey will be discussed shortly.

¹⁶Dilsey's tacit condemnation of Mrs. Compson can also apply to Faulkner as a metatextual condemnation of the inevitable misreading of religious signifiers in the novel, such as Benjy's Messianic characteristics, Shegog's "misarranging" of Biblical events, or even misinterpreting the meaning of Dilsey's Christianity.

¹⁷For a Biblical context, see Jude 1:9.

¹⁸Faulkner's description is as follows: "She wore ... a maroon velvet cape with a border of mangy and anonymous fur above a dress of purple silk" (265).

during his staged trial and appearance before Pilate who ultimately decided his fate; Jason is fixated on red, often associated in Christianity with Satan and his machinations.¹⁹ The analogy between Dilsey: Jason and Christ: Devil can easily continue, but a comparison between Dilsey and her counter-Christ figure, Benjy, further establishes Dilsey's important role in the outworking of Faulkner's novel.

Frequently referred to as the Christ figure in the novel, Benjy is "the sacrificial figure in the Compson household" (Coffee 38).²⁰ Mentioned earlier, Benjy is "de Lawd's chile" and in so being, is blessed with insights other characters lack. Benjy senses Caddy's promiscuity and the trouble her wedding will bring. But nevertheless, critic Jessie Coffee correctly assesses, "Benjamin is not a satisfactory Christ-figure, nor is he meant to be" (Coffee 39). First of all, Benjy's intelligence, if paralleled to Christ, would suit only the most cynical criticism. Additionally, while Benjy's perception is supremely innocent, it is unfettered by reality. Gunn puts it this way: "Time in Benjy's world is an undifferentiated continuum" (Gunn 164). Dilsey's perception, while not innocent like that of Benjy, does not indict her either: her perception transcends human restraints of guilt and innocence. Furthermore, her perception is a conscious choice rather than an intellectual handicap. Also, while Christ voluntarily came to redeem mankind, Benjy did not sacrifice his pasture, nor his gentiles for that matter, voluntarily. It is reasonable to conclude that this sacrifice is contrary to his will, as he continues to long for promenades in what is now a golf course and bellows when he sees his naked groin. Moreover, his sacrifice is not of any ultimate, redeeming value—the money used for Quentin's education is wasted. Contrast this with Dilsey's sacrifice: she is not compensated financially for her servitude; she is not even compensated for being the principal caregiver for her grandson, Luster; she is certainly not compensated for putting up with the venomous Jason. In fact, Jason tried unsuccessfully to "force [Dilsey] to leave, even [by not] paying her weekly wages" (Appendix 212). Dilsey's sacrifice is willful and selfless, with her only hope of recompense coming from divine grace. Finally, while Quentin and Jason exist in the past, Benjy does not even function in temporal reality, yet temporal reality makes "Dilsey [sit] bolt upright, beside, crying rigidly and quietly in the annealment and the blood of the remembered Lamb" (297). In other words, Benjy is touched by perception; more importantly, however, Dilsey is touched by reality.

Dilsey's consummate "reality check" comes as a result of Reverend Shegog's sermon on Easter Sunday. Through Shegog's liturgy, Faulkner provides the key intersection between the problems of communication, time, and faith. Regarding the impact of Shegog's adroit communication, Matthews writes, "In the sermon's urgent eloquence, in its willingness to search for the right words for its audience, in its engulfment of speaker and listener in the presence of voice, in its transformation of sound into image, the sermon represents in one way a writer's highest ambition" (Matthews 85). Faulkner, therefore, gives Shegog the ability to engage his audience in the epitome of communication: call and response. Shegog commences his oration in Standard English, as he says, "I got the recollection of the blood of the Lamb" (294). Such "white" English elicits only one response, a "woman's single soprano: 'Yes, Jesus!'" yet as his language conforms to his audience of unlettered, Southern blacks, becomes "negroid," the attendees sit "in their seats as the voice took them into itself" (295). Through his intonation, rhetoric, and oration delivered primarily in present tense, Shegog and his audience see, hear, feel, and get "de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb." In other words, his unlettered, Southern, black audience is teleported out of the present and given a vision transcending spatial and temporal restrictions, a vision incorporating both the past of Christ at Calvary and God's future damnation of those that "done kilt [his] Son" (296). Arthur Geffen addresses the overall effect of this call and

¹⁹For an interesting discussion of red, and in particular, Miss Quentin's red-tie wearing beau, see Michelle Ann Abate's "Reading Red: The Man with the (Gay) Red Tie in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*."

²⁰While not identifying Benjy as a Christ-figure, Jessie Coffee points to thirty-three-year-old Benjy as "the sacrificial figure in the Compson household ... described as having blond bangs and a 'sweet blue gaze'" (Coffee 38). In his essay, however, Coffee incorrectly assesses that one reason Benjy cannot be a satisfactory Christ-figure is because "he is the scapegoat who suffers for the sins of others" (Coffee 39). To this, I must rhetorically ask, "What is more Christ-like than suffering for the sins of others?" Nevertheless, I agree with his overall assessment that Benjy is an unconvincing Christ-figure. Yet there are many readers who will ardently advocate Benjy's designation as Faulkner's Christ. For two examples, see Richard North's "An Examination of William Faulkner's Use of Biblical Symbolism in Three Early Novels" and James Mellard's "Caliban as Prospero: Benjy and 'The Sound and the Fury.'"

response technique saying that it “reevokes the black congregation’s communal consciousness and finally makes his people vital participants” (Geffen 184). Faulkner artfully captures the Southern black church, and in so doing, idealizes the unpretentious delivery of words capable of collapsing restrictive perceptions and temporal differences. Yet, Shegog required the use of more than simple oratory skills to create this mass melding of minds.

Shegog unreservedly blends past, present, and future to grant his audience a timeless perspective.²¹ Coffee writes, “The Sermon counterpoints allusions to the New Covenant with allusions to the Old Covenant” (Coffee 36). In this respect, the chronology with which he narrates Biblical events is of paramount importance. Commencing with allusions to Israelite bondage in Egypt and Jesus’s parables concerning the rich and poor, he ends his introduction with references to Christ’s sacrifice which sacrifice, which results in eternal blessings for the faithful in heaven. Shegog then begins to liberally weave in elements of Judeo-Christian belief “so rapidly and wildly that his listeners cannot order happenings chronologically and causally” (Geffen 183). He then progresses to a retelling of the birth of Christ, quickly advancing to the Passion of the Christ, and concluding with an audacious placement of the Biblical flood of Noah’s day occurring after Christ’s crucifixion. Because it accentuates God’s finite patience with sinful mankind, humankind, readers may agree with literary critic Philip Castille who believes this to be “the most significant of these scriptural rearrangements ...” (Castille 425). Fire and brimstone are not, however, the lasting impressions made by his discourse; rather, the supremacy of life over death marks Shegog’s true message. Shegog “sees de darkness en de death everlasting upon de generations” but he concludes by emphasizing that emphasizing, “de arisen dead whut got de blood and de ricklickshun of de Lamb” (296-297). Recalling this all takes place on Easter weekend, the foundation to understanding the entire novel lies here. Temporal existence and religious piety, limited comprehension and eternal perspective, death, resurrection, and eternal life, past, present, and future and time indefinite are all manifested in Dilsey’s profoundest realization: “I’ve seed de first en de last, ... I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin” (297).

While these quotes are discussed in just about every piece of criticism on *The Sound and the Fury*, an important distinction must be made: Dilsey is a dynamic character. For three sections of the novel spanning several decades, Dilsey’s primary concern has been for the Compson family. But now the parallels between Dilsey and Christ are strongest: for as far as the reader can tell, Dilsey has spent her whole life in the service of the Compsons, doing “de bes [she] kin” to, albeit unsuccessfully, prevent the family’s deterioration (317). Yet the timeless perception bestowed upon Dilsey persisted even after the conclusion of the sermon—she emerges from the sermon changed. The epiphany she experiences allows her to transcend what she incorrectly thought to be divine mercy. Shegog explicates the limits of God’s forbearance—“I sees de whelmin flood roll between,” he says, invoking the Christian tenets of damnation awaiting those who have rejected God’s mercy (296). The Compsons, like sinful mankind, humankind, have rejected the symbolic olive branch offered through Dilsey’s magnanimity. Unconsciously, she realizes this and her immediately her perception is readjusted. Consider the first description given of the Compsons’ physical home, which up to this point had only been suggested. Upon returning from Church, Dilsey perceives implicit characteristics about the Compsons through the symbolic description of their house: a “square, paintless house with ... a rotting portico.” Faulkner takes care to even describe the group’s hesitation to enter the home again, “For a while all of them looked up the drive at the [house]” (298). Immediately after this acute description, Frony asks Dilsey about the events of that morning. Marking a major shift in Dilsey’s relationship with the Compsons, she reprimands Frony for being overly interested in a family that doesn’t reciprocate that concern, saying, “You tend to yo business en let de whitefolks tend to deir’n” (298). Luster professes to know the whereabouts of Miss Quentin and instead of sharing his knowledge with the Compsons, Compsons;

²¹Shegog parallels Faulkner in this regard. In blending past and present with intimations of the future, Faulkner, too, tries to grant his readers a perspective unbound by orthodox textual chronology. Given such recondit knowledge, the reader then may choose to parallel one of two characters in the novel: Caddy or Dilsey. If one chooses Caddy, then the novel presents a vision of utter disintegration. If, however, one chooses to parallel Dilsey, then that reader will find the novel inspires a measure of hope.

Dilsey expediently tells him to “jes keep hit” and let the Compsons deal with their own problems (298). In a span of less than a page, Dilsey's selflessness devolves into indifference.

Dilsey grasps that she has seen “de last” and “de endin” of the Compson family. In the “Appendix,” Dilsey even rejects looking at a photo of Caddy, saying, “My eyes aint any good anymore,” then, more importantly, adding, “How can I see that picture?” (Appendix 211). Dilsey, having sacrificed her body to men enough, later thinks Caddy, like the Compsons, “*hasn't anything anymore worth being saved*” (Appendix 212). Reverend Shegog's “homily prompts Dilsey to break free from the Compsons and to renounce her years of resignation and denial” (Castille 424). While it can be argued that this “resignation” makes her less Christ-like, it is quite the opposite. Christ never promised salvation for all mankind. humankind. He dispensed adverse judgment and even discussed the fate awaiting those who would not accept God's means of salvation.²² As in Reverend Shegog's sermon Christ's return to heaven ushers in both damnation and benediction, so Dilsey's return home ushers in her resignation of the Compsons and her subsequent consecration to a new and greater identity. Dilsey's previous subservient identity was crucified for the salvation of her own family. Dilsey's Easter resurrection grants her, as it did Christ, a more powerful and transcendent identity, one discrete from the Compson lineage.

Easter marked Christ's transcendence from man to divine, so Easter service on April Eighth, 1928, marks the shift of Dilsey paralleling Christ the man to her paralleling Christ the God. She becomes, through her timeless perception, Faulkner's personification of time indefinite. In stating she has seen the first and the last, she aligns herself with the Biblical Alpha and Omega: He who is omnipresent through time, He who transcends time.²³ Besides her concern for the present, she envisions the future, too, not only of the Compson family but her mischievous grandson, “You bound fer de chain gang” (318). Dilsey clearly recognizes the symbolic death of the Compson family took place long ago.²⁴ She well knows that the great name of the Compson family was lost long ago; yet, she continues to do “de bes [she] kin” for the sake of Benjy, her spiritual son, for whom her transcendence in the church guarantees a future as her child. Like an all-loving God, Dilsey continues to have affection for the family but particularly so for Benjy, whom even Faulkner describes as “an animal” (Meriwether 246). Yet Dilsey, impervious to the temporal future, endures as the chimney of a ruined house, all for the love of “de Lawd's chile.” This fixity, in effect, transforms Dilsey into the god of Quentin, the god of Benjy, and the god of Jason.²⁵ Paralleling the Christian God, Dilsey does restrain her godship, or de facto matriarchy to one family's lineage. When Jason finally dissolves the family, symbolically rejecting Dilsey's grace, she, like the Christian God who rejected the Israelites in favor of the Gentiles, turns her attention to her greater family of Southern blacks who continue to metaphorically live, or persevere with a hope of

²²See, for example, Matthew 12.31-32: “Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.” Even more forcefully, compare John 8.44: “Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it,” and Matthew 23.33: “Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?” (King James Version). Christ never indicates that the only prerequisite for salvation is belief.

²³See footnote 3. The discussion regarding the Biblical usage of the expression in question in the first chapter of Revelation is a relatively hot topic in theological circles. Suffice it to say, for the purposes of this essay, that Christendom's theologians generally accept Jesus reincarnate as the Biblical Alpha and Omega. For a secular commentary, see Irene Belyeu's *Revelation in Context: A Literary and Historical Commentary on the Book of Revelation with Supporting Referents and Notes*.

²⁴Dilsey's husband Roskus prophesied decades prior, “They been two [deaths], now. ... Going to be one more. I seen the sign, and you is too” (29). Shortly after, he further articulates the inherent malediction within the Compson family, “I told you ... They aint no luck on this place. ... They aint no luck going be on no place where one they own chillen's name aint never spoke” (31). Dilsey never counters Roskus's insinuations of doom and symbolic death of the Compsons; she merely tells Roskus to “hush” for the sake of their own children.

²⁵Quentin represents the stranglehold of the past; Benjy is eternally locked in the present; Jason hopelessly tries to control the future. Dilsey supersedes all three, becoming their god. It is important to note that human judges and family heads were referred to as gods in Scripture. For example, see John 10.35; and Psalms 82:1-6. As for parallels in Scripture, see Matthew 22.32, Luke 20.38.

enhancing their socio-economic situation and provide a stable foundation for future generations. This is why Faulkner concludes his "Appendix" so laconically, saying of Dilsey, "They endured" (Appendix 215).

Yet, that terse commentary on Dilsey's future often leaves readers feeling unfulfilled, and few critics have attempted to assuage their sentiments. But However, drawing back to the parallels, not to Christ, but to God can help explain Dilsey's newfound plural identity "they." In the Old Testament, God is frequently referred to using the title *Elohim* (Hebrew עֱלֹהִים). Depending on the verbs, articles, and adjectives used, *Elohim* could denote a plurality of person as well as gender. Without discussing theological interpretations of Hebrew grammar, it is indisputable that Faulkner is alluding to a new dimension of Dilsey's dynamic character. As previously established, Dilsey was wholly altered that Easter morning, especially as "the congregation seemed to watch with its own eyes while [Shegog's] voice consumed him, until he was nothing and *they* were nothing and there was not even a voice but instead *their* hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the need for words" (emphasis added, 294). The congregation experienced what Faulkner refers to as "a collective dream" which prompts Dilsey to shed tears during "the myriad coruscations of immolations and abnegation and time" (294-295). Dilsey is amalgamated with fellow worshippers, prompting "abnegation," or her self-denial of identity. She rejects her bondage to the Compson family, in addition to rejecting the servile identity constructed by that role; in effect, Dilsey rejects the only identity she ever knew. She now assumes the role of "they," the avatar of the entire black community, the exemplar of not only just Christ but their God, the One who shed His human bondage and transcended the nature of existence itself. Faulkner's true resurrection on Easter Sunday is not of the degenerate Southern society as manifested in the Compson family. No, what takes place on Sunday April 8th, 1928, is the resurrection, the reassertion of simple values, like hard work, familial loyalty, and Christian social morays, all embodied in Dilsey and rejected by the Compsons. Her sacrifice helps reconceptualize the black identity, transitioning the group from passive subservience to what Faulkner's views as the only tangible hope for the resurrection and reassertion of the South.²⁶

Faulkner's African-Americans offer what the Compson family cannot—a future. Dilsey and the black community keenly remember all aspects of time, in particular their bondage (alluded to in Shegog's reference to Egypt) and the new possibilities offered to them during this period of transition for the South and its community of African-Americans.²⁷ A character like Dilsey had the power to refashion the identity of the black community from decedents of slaves to integral strands of the American fabric, and in particular, a growing voice in the composite Southern identity. Faulkner also realized that regardless of his personal religious convictions, the simple black relationship with the church, which provided not only theological instruction but a bedrock community based on wholesome and unsophisticated principles, offered a brighter future than would ignoble neo-slavery to rotting aristocracies. What readers see and appreciate in Dilsey is legion: representation of a beleaguered community, transcendent temporal perspectives, idyllic Christian virtue, unadulterated interpersonal communication, and identity refashioning and reconceptualization. But in truth, no matter one's race, creed, or politics, readers most admire Dilsey because she is a chimney around which a future house will

²⁶As with Jesus's sacrifice in Christian theology, Dilsey's surrender of identity through epiphany and plurality cannot be repeated. In fact, as Sandra Milloy states, "In 1928, there was only a small number of black women who regarded themselves as members of white households, and in 1948, the number was even smaller. Today, in America, such a group of black women does not exist. This is in itself a comment on the nature of Dilsey's sacrifice and endurance" (Milloy 70). The sacrifice Dilsey, and women like her, made, both for their (generally unappreciative) white families and their biological ones, is a testament to their simple, unadulterated Christian virtues which Faulkner desires because of human compassion and not any specific theological belief. Thadious Davis expresses the result well when he writes, "Dilsey may not have succeeded in holding the Compson family together, but she is the lone standard bearer of the attempt ... [which is further testament to] the innate significance of the Negro's faith, which in Faulkner's version presupposes an understanding of human motivation in its simplest form" (Davis 108-109). As for Faulkner's views on the black community, see Meriwether, 264. Note one quote in particular: "With a little more social, economic, and educational equality the Negro will often be the landlord and the white man will be working for him" (Meriwether 264).

²⁷Interestingly, the "Appendix" states that even Dilsey and Frony ended up in Memphis, little more than 100 miles from the border of the Free States, symbolic of the Gibson family's general progress towards greater emancipation.

be constructed—Dilsey represents the hope for a better future found in the recess of every reader's heart.

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