“THAT DAMN LOONEY”: ILLUMINATING BENJY AND HIS NARRATIVE WITH OBJECTS AND AUTISM

A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty of The University of Akron

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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May, 2012
"THAT DAMN LOONEY": ILLUMINATING BENJY AND HIS NARRATIVE WITH
OBJECTS AND AUTISM

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CHAPTER I

“HE DEEF AND DUMB”: BENJY COMPSON AS AN IDIOT

“Do you want to get that damn looney bawling in the middle of the square?” Jason sharply asks his mother at the beginning of *The Sound and the Fury*. That damn looney, as much as it might pain Jason to admit it, is his brother, Benjy. Because of his sobs, moans, and general carrying on, Benjy never quite shakes off the cold labels of “idiot” and “loony.” Criticism of Faulkner’s novel, historical and contemporary, has been slow to move away from these pernicious labels, typically only considering Benjy as a “mentally retarded” man in addition to an “idiot” and a “looney.” These labels lead Jason to confine Benjy in the narrative; but, more importantly, the same labels trap him in many critical readings, prodding him to play the likely inappropriate catch-all role of idiot.

It is possible, however, that a better label to apply to Benjy may be “person with autism.” This idea was initially introduced in 1987, when Sara McLaughin published a brief article in *the Journal of Literature and Psychology* entitled “Faulkner’s Faux Pas: Referring to Benjamin Compson as an Idiot.” Using psychology from the 60s and 70s, McLaughlin attempts to diagnose Benjy with autism, thereby eschewing the standard critical use of “idiot.” While her thesis is intriguing and fresh, her analysis is cursory at best and, at several points, flawed. To a degree, she
was surely limited by a nascent scientific understanding of autism as well as an unsophisticated cultural understanding of disability. Reflecting her shaky scientific grounding and, perhaps, cultural prejudices, she concludes – in keeping with notions of the time – that Benjy’s autism, and the inherent failings that come with his condition, can be attributed to his mother. Mrs. Compson certainly fails to fulfill her most basic maternal duties, but she is not the cause of Benjy’s disability. McLaughin’s account merely suggests that Faulkner may have “unknowingly presented one of the earliest pictures in American literature of the devastating effects autism can have on a human being” (38). How viewing Benjy through the lens of autism might affect the text remains an issue unexamined.

Perhaps in part due to the shortcomings of McLaughin’s article, Benjy’s diagnosis of autism never gained much critical traction. Criticism that followed saw Benjy through traditional lenses: idiot, mental retard, man-child, and beast. In 2002, Jaqui Griffiths published “Indeterminate Children and Dogs in Flush and The Sound and the Fury” in The Yearbook of English Studies. Griffiths examines how Benjy’s identity straddles two categories: canine and infant. It is Griffiths’ theory that Benjy is shadowed by three competing roles: adult, child, and dog. The first he can never fulfill; the second he is traditionally considered to fill. The third is a new identity that Griffiths herself has discovered and one that may be just as viable as the two preceding roles. Curiously, as Griffiths attempts to reexamine Benjy’s identity, she begins her analysis from a common critical starting point. Dog or not, early in her analysis, she indicates that Benjy is the “forever-infantile retarded character” of the novel. (163).
The question of Benjy’s identity is a central issue in critical discussion of *The Sound and the Fury*, the lynchpin that a sizable history of criticism rests on. Much of this criticism relies on the likely historical parent word of Griffiths’ terminology, *retarded*. When surveying the history of scholarship that focuses on Benjy, *Idiot* emerges as the chief word to interpret Benjy’s character, perhaps because Faulkner himself referred to Benjy as an idiot. A draft of his 1933 introduction reads, “[Benjy] had to be an idiot so that, like Dilsey, he could be impervious to the future” (231). But for Faulkner, given his historical location, *idiot* was one of a few common terms available to describe people who in our modern time would be described as a person with an intellectual or developmental disability. Yet, even up to the present day, the criticism that has followed the publication of *The Sound and the Fury* has largely kept this term. This preservation of the term *idiot* is a scholarly anomaly: for other groups of labeled people, terminology has evolved; in fact, no modern day critic would refer to Luster or Dilsey as “Negro” characters. Labels, as has been widely acknowledged, are not neutral descriptions but are value laden and culturally charged. Reviewing the criticism pertinent to this project uncovers two basic categories that Benjy often falls under: *idiot* and *idiot asterisk*. The first category interprets Benjy as a simpleton, an eternal child, a mental retard, a beast, or a human so defective that his only connection with humanity may be his biological species. The second category, which has recently emerged, portrays Benjy as an idiot, but the application of the idiot label often comes with a qualifier. Benjy, in this view, is not *just* an idiot. There is something more to his identity; at the very
least, both he and his narration produce something valuable in the text that often goes unrecognized.

Returning to Griffiths, we might plausibly assert that without a starting point of idiocy, the leap to “dog” becomes more difficult. Certainly a “normal” human being would never be strictly interpreted through the lens of dog. By presupposing that Benjy is simply a drooling idiot, Griffiths’s analysis develops a new trajectory.

Consider this brief example where Griffiths examines a scene where Benjy demonstrably wants to go outside:

The reactions of his family when Benjy demands to go outside suggest his animality. When Benjy’s mother asks, “What is it now,” it is not clear who she is addressing. Benjy is apparently unable to speak, so if we assume that she is asking him what he wants, this immediately takes on the rhetorical characteristic of somebody asking the same question of a dog whining at the door. The question is answered by another character, Versh, who tells Mrs. Compson, “He want to go out doors.” After some debate among the family, Mrs. Compson tells Benjy, ‘If you don’t be good, you’ll have to go to the kitchen.’ While one might expect a child to be sent to its room, Benjy is threatened with the kitchen. This suggests that, like a dog, he has no room. (172)

We can observe that for Griffiths, Benjy’s status as a dog is not determined by anything that originates from him. He is not a dog because he has four legs, or a tail, or a wet nose; Benjy’s inherent animality is discoverable through the “reactions of his family.” But, even the most casual of readers would consider suspect any judgments from the Compson family, such as Mrs. Compson, a languid, lethargic camphor addict, or Jason, who starts off his section by calling Caddy a “bitch.” Making claims about Benjy’s identity based on reactions of Faulkner’s most unreliable characters seems unwise. We might ask, what about the more sympathetic reactions of Caddy? Whose reactions are the more legitimate clues to
Benjy’s identity? But, Griffiths continues to rely on Mrs. Compson’s judgment. She cites Benjy’s apparent inability to speak as the reason his mother’s question takes on the “rhetorical characteristic of somebody asking the same question of a dog whining at the door.” Again, we must not consider Mrs. Compson a normal mother. Her commands, and the tone they carry, are suspect: Just because a mother speaks to her son like a dog does not make her son a dog. Benjy’s simple lack of speech does not justify an animal-master rhetoric.

It is, in fact, Mrs. Compson’s inability to mother that is demonstrated in the scene Griffiths quotes. She cannot interpret Benjy’s needs or desires; Versh must inform her of Benjy’s wishes. As Griffiths notes, Benjy is threatened with the kitchen, yet her questionable conclusion, that this suggests animality, seems hardly the conclusion to be drawn. A more justifiable reading of this scene is that Mrs. Compson treats her son like a dog. She does not provide him a room; embarrassed of her son and what she thinks he is, she confines him to the kitchen. Marginalized by his mother and most of his family, Benjy’s animality is a projection of others. His mother constructs his identity to resemble that of an animal. The idiot role, and the subsequent animal role it may lead to, may be socially constructed, as modern disability scholarship would argue.

Licia Carlson cautions against abusive usage (both ethical and logical) of the terms used to describe disability in her book *The Faces of Intellectual Disability*. In her chapter “The Face of the Beast,” Carlson reflects on the association of people with intellectual disabilities and animals, a broad scholarly trend that extends beyond literary studies. Reflecting on philosophical literature, Carlson writes:
To continue to draw connections between non-human animals and persons with intellectual disabilities not only is conceptually unnecessary, but is harmful insofar as it perpetuates certain forms of conceptual oppression while ignoring other concrete forms, and obscures the distinctly human face of persons with intellectual disabilities. (145)

Similarly, electing to use idiot – a term on the verge of extinction -- as a conceptual lens distorts interpretations of Benjy. To our purposes, a reliance on the idiot label may significantly restrict a critical reading, as the starting point limits the outcome.

Several other critics consider Benjy an idiot. The reliance of Lynn Berk and James M. Mellard on the word idiot, for example, steers their conclusions. In his article, “Caliban as Prospero: Benjy and The Sound and the Fury,” Mellard asserts that Benjy’s section “is a special handling of the narrative archetype of romance” (234). For Mellard, Benjy is born innocent, and it is Benjy’s innocence that, in fact, gives birth to his idiocy. Given his condition, Benjy exists in a timeless world full of “vivid imagery” (235). Acknowledging that Benjy lies in the literary tradition of “idiot,” Mellard compares him to Caliban, Shakespeare’s well-known idiot character from The Tempest, who may be more id than idiot. Mellard considers Benjy, like Caliban, to be a “chthonic figure” identified with the earth (238), a primitive whose narrative, “begins to fulfill certain primitive, child-like desires” such as peace, order, and security (245). By employing the term idiot the door to “chthonic figure” is more easily opened. It allows the descriptors primitive and child-like to be ascribed to Benjy’s identity.

Benjy is not always associated with animals, or nature, or primitivism. Lynn Berk centers her article “A Tale Told by an Idiot: The Problem of Language in the Novels of William Faulkner” on Benjy’s inability to speak. Berk believes that “Benjy
is after all an idiot and his capacity for human experience is limited,” and justifies her reading in Faulkner’s remarks in interviews (338). She suggests that Benjy’s lack of language exposes Faulkner’s distrust of language. “Faulkner is a product of his times,” she writes, “and it is not surprising that a man who used words so beautifully should have distrusted them so much” (332). Benjy exists in stark contrast to his brother, Quentin, for whom “the word has become reality” (336). Berk writes, “Benjy cannot hide behind words because he has no demonstrable language” (337). Interestingly, his nature as an “idiot” becomes something of an advantage in comparison to the rest of his family. In contrast to his mother and brother, Benjy “is capable of responding to the reality behind words” (338). Berk concludes that the non-verbal reality is something Faulkner prized, and Caddy, Dilsey, and Benjy are the characters in *The Sound and the Fury* that have at least access to this realm. Reliance on the term idiot does not necessarily have to lead to ethically disagreeable conclusions, as it might for Mellard or Griffiths. Still, Berk’s assumptions about Benjy’s identity and the conclusions that arise from them deserve scrutiny. Does Benjy really have no access to language? Or, are “idiots” simply considered to categorically lack language? Is Benjy really privy to some layer of reality that isn’t obfuscated by language?

But, a few critics have interrogated Benjy’s traditional identity; Stacy Burton and Tedd Roggenbuck have both questioned the *idiot* label and the effects it has on readings of Benjy and *The Sound and the Fury*. Critical interpretations of Benjy, in their assessments, have been unduly narrow, jeopardizing the legitimacy of the conclusions drawn from such.
In “Benjy, Narrativity, and the Coherence of Compson History,” Burton rejects the notion that Benjy’s narrative is simply a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury. Rather she asserts that Benjy’s narrative is a complex one that “shows the dialogic formation of his identity, demonstrates how his preoccupation with the past affects the present perceptions, and reveals Benjy’s significance for other members of the household” (208). Burton herself is thoroughly aware of the common critical interpretation of Benjy and attempts to work against this standard reading. She writes that by utilizing Bakhtin, one can realize that “critical commonplaces seriously distort both the nature of Benjy’s discourse and its significance to the text” (208). For Burton, Benjy does have a voice and an identity rooted in personhood. His voice, in fact, interacts with various voices of his family. Burton writes, “The Compson’s brothers’ narratives – lived, imagine, reflected upon – reveal how even isolated characters shape their languages, chronotopes, and histories in constant interaction with others’ voices.” In stark contrast to her brothers, Caddy, Burton asserts, does not read Benjy in narrow terms. She engages him dialogically, asking genuine questions (218). Because of her willingness to do so, Caddy is loved, perhaps even revered, by Benjy. By questioning the common critical starting point, Burton arrives at conclusions others do not. Burton argues that Benjy is not a simple animal-like narrator who reports facts that directly mirror reality; instead, he is a person involved in an ongoing discussion who creates a unique narrative that centers on the conversational exchanges he finds important. Benjy does not simply recite. He composes.
In his 2005 article ‘The way he looked said Hush’: Benjy’s Mental Atrophy in *The Sound and the Fury,*" Roggenbuck echoes Roskus, who remarks Benjy’s “a lot smarter than most folks thinks.” Roggenbuck writes, “As a child Benjy demonstrates greater intellectual ability than most critics give him credit for” (581). Roggenbuck questions the critical reliance on Faulkner’s remarks in interviews about Benjy’s identity as an idiot. Critics, he assert, have taken Faulkner’s comments at “face value,” yet they “disregard the interest Faulkner expressed in Benjy’s relationship to the world” (584). As Roggenbuck notes, Faulkner considered this relationship to hinge on the tenderness and help of others. Unfortunately, this tenderness and help is hard to find in *The Sound and the Fury.* Despite the fact that he does develop during his early years, he quickly becomes neglected by the family, with the exception of Caddy and Dilsey. This neglect is an often overlooked tragedy in the novel. Reliance on the traditional *idiot* label allows the reader to look past this pervasive and otherwise obvious neglect. Many readers assume Benjy exists as he does because he is an idiot, not because he was born into an unstable family that rarely nurtures. Roggenbuck writes, “Comparing Benjy’s mind to a phonograph on which he possesses the ability to play the record of his life without the ability to choose, discriminate, or interpret, diminishes the tragedy of what he has lost and the relative emptiness of his current existence” (586). Benjy may not be an innate idiot; he may have been made an idiot by his family, and fabricated as one by critics.

Perhaps the article most critical of the scholarly fabrication of Benjy’s identity is “Textual Abuse: Faulkner’s Benjy,” by Maria Truchan-Tataryn, published in 2005. Rather than providing a close reading of Benjy’s section, she surveys the
scholarship that surrounds it in order to “demonstrate how unquestioning acceptance of [Benjy] as a successful representation of intellectual disability reveals an underlying ableism in the literary critical endeavor and an academic acquiescence to the dated socio-cultural constructions of disability” (160). Unlike plausible sister theories in feminism or cultural studies, disability studies has not been able to prompt much reconsideration of Benjy’s identity. Criticism, Truchan-Tataryn argues, relies on outdated models of disability that consider an individual with an intellectual disability to be “infantile, dependent, and subhuman” (161). To Truchan-Tataryn, Benjy is a poorly constructed doppelgänger of disability and little more. Because critics see Benjy as an “idiot,” poor readings follow.

Still, in obvious ways, Benjy is not like his family members. Because of his salient difference, we must refer to Benjy as something, and Faulkner used the term “idiot.” This term was one of few immediately available to him at his time; more terms are available to us now, which suggests that cultural labels of idiot or mentally retarded person, or even person with an intellectual disability are fluid constructions and not stable Truths. As terms created, their definition is mutable, constantly changed by the culture at large. By devoting the first section of narration to an “idiot” character, Faulkner himself interrogates the “the idiot” label and participates in this constant act of redefinition. Contemporary readings of the text should not be exclusively restricted to a term no longer used anywhere else in cultural and scientific dialogue.

One such contemporary reading that proves to lie outside of the idiot/idiot asterisk dichotomy appears in the 2010 Faulkner Journal of Japan. Patrick Samway,
S.J. and Gentry Silver resurrect McLaughlin's central thesis in their essay, “In The Sound and the Fury, Benjy Compson Most Likely Suffers from Autism.” Samway and Silver's analysis is much more comprehensive than McLaughlin's: the authors of the 2010 article scrutinize the application of the idiot label that pervades criticism; they survey the scholarship surrounding Benjy for mentions of, loose associations to, or implicit correlations with autism; and they provide a detailed list of textual evidence that establishes the existence of Benjy's mostly autistic behavior. Samway and Silver address a key dilemma facing projects that consider Benjy as a person with Autism. Since the term autism originated after the publication of The Sound and the Fury, the authors note, “it might not be possible to suggest that Benjy suffered from Autism” (3). The term was not readily available to Faulkner, so it would be impossible to assert that Faulkner was knowingly creating a character with autism. But, Samway and Silver offer a creative response to this question:

Faulkner simply never heard this word in 1928. But why look to a scientific basis for Benjy's physical and psychological profile outside of the text of the novel itself? Faulkner, himself, has provided the key: he wrote a number of para-historical texts about this novel in which he steps forward not as literary author but as historical guide whose own knowledge of the actual world about him provides valuable commentary about the novel. (3)

Samway and Silver seem to be gesturing towards a more general principle that this project will endorse: the identity of the literary idiot has been historically in flux. This argument would certainly hold for literary depictions of other minority groups: women, African Americans, etc. Faulkner's seeming idiot may not fit any sort of flat idiot archetype; he may be working against this label from the ground of his “actual” world experience – as Samway and Silver argue. The “idiot” that Faulkner creates may be similar to the literary idiot only in name. Faulkner may
have been limited by the vocabulary of his time, and perhaps even by the literary
selection of the quote from Shakespeare, “it is a tale told by an idiot,” but we are not.

Person with autism, is accessible to us, and it seems much more suitable for Benjy
than the over-used term idiot.

Benjy is better interpreted as a person with autism, but even autism itself, as
a label, is in flux. This paper will apply our contemporary understanding of autism
to the text, as opposed to the now outdated and relatively crude analysis provided
by McLaughin. Without over-medicalizing the text by authoritatively diagnosing
Benjy with autism -- something Samway and Silver might, at times, be guilty of, and
something Truchan-Tataryn cautions against -- this project will search for a new
critical starting point and suggest our understanding of Benjy can be enhanced by
considering him a person with autism. Most importantly, this project will examine
what conclusions can be drawn from a more plausible and perhaps more humane
premise.

This project will rely on the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and
Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, in addition to Samway and Silver’s analysis,
for determining some basic characteristics of Autism that might manifest
themselves in Benjy’s character and narrative. The DSM will simply be used as a
baseline for scientific, but more importantly, cultural consensus. The full text of the
Autism’s diagnostic criteria within the DSM can be seen in Appendix A. The main
diagnostic category consists of three groups of features: 1) qualitative impairment
in social interaction, 2) qualitative impairments in communication, and 3)
restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities.
In Benjy's narration, characteristics from all three categories manifest themselves, and in this project, discussions of these traits will necessarily overlap. However, the third category will be the primary focus, substantiated by observations drawn first two categories.

Benjy does exhibit many traits from the first two categories that profoundly affect his identity and his narrative. The first trait of the first category is a “marked impairment of the use of multiple non-verbal behaviors.” Of these behaviors, an avoidance of eye-contact is easily noticed in Benjy, and who Benjy does and does not make eye contact with will be highly relevant to our assessment. Other characteristics of this first will be generally relevant (“a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people,” for example), but these traits will serve as background and will not be analyzed in particular.

Elements from the second category in the DSM, impairments in communication, will be easily recognized in Benjy’s unique narration. Most obviously, readers will certainly recognize a “stereotyped and repetitive use of language” in Benjy’s text. Outside of his narration, Benjy doesn’t speak at all, thus satisfying other constituents of this category. Again, elements of these first two categories are important and unavoidable when examining Benjy’s narrative.

To provide a stable starting point, this analysis will frame itself around the third category. Benjy saliently satisfies the key constituent of this category: he has a “restricted pattern of interest that is abnormal in either intensity or focus.” For Benjy, his interest is abnormal in both intensity and focus. Much of Benjy’s narration, this project will show, revolves around certain objects that a normal
narrator would simply mention or ignore. Flowers, his sister’s old slipper, his mother’s cushion, the fire, and the mirror all demand Benjy's focus. During powerful, climatic scenes, these objects emerge and Benjy's narrative attention gravitates naturally towards them. By paying attention to Benjy's obsession, we can reevaluate his narrative and the form of *The Sound and the Fury*. A tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury may become something more.
CHAPTER II

“PLAYING WITH TWO WEEDS IN A BOTTLE”: BENJY’S FLOWER

There are five recurrent objects in *The Sound and the Fury* that fascinate Benjy: the Flower, the Fire, Caddy’s Slipper, the household cushion, and the bedroom mirror. Fascination with objects is corollary of the more general trait of autism, “restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities” (DSM 71). Clinging to a slipper or a flower may seem bizarre. There is no rational purpose for Benjy’s perpetual hold. His clinging, at best, seems childlike and, at worst, idiotic. However, if Benjy is reconsidered as a person with autism, not an idiot, his obsession is something the reader anticipates. The DSM confirms obsession with objects specifically: “The person may be highly attached to some inanimate object (e.g., a piece of string or a rubber band)” (71). Clinging to a slipper may not be symptomatic of idiocy. Rather, it may be a manifestation of autism.

Object obsession has been mentioned by both critics who have associated autism with Benjy. Sara McLaughlin notes that Benjy tends to covet objects that stimulate his basic senses. According to McLaughlin, Benjy, like other “autistics,” is “fascinated by light and by anything that twinkles,” such as the household fire. Benjy’s attraction is also rooted in objects that provide tactile stimulation, and he treasures objects that “feel” a certain way to the touch, like Caddy’s slipper.
McLaughlin’s discussion of object obsession is cursory, a small tenet in her overall argument for the presence of autism. Her treatment of this trait of autism is solely descriptive: she simply notes that there is textual evidence to support the existence of Benjy’s object obsession, and consequently, his autism. She does not consider how this obsession might shape the text and our readings of it.

More recently, Samway discusses Benjy’s object obsession, but like McLaughlin, he sees obsession as a fulfilled diagnostic criteria: “Obsessive Attachment to Objects” is the third example Samway provides of “Benjy’s Autism Based on his Behavior.” Samway’s discussion is as brief as McLaughlin’s, but it differs, importantly, when tracing the cause of Benjy’s obsession. Samway accurately acknowledges that sensory stimulation is partly responsible, but he also asserts that Benjy seems to covet objects that have a direct relation to certain people. The Slipper and the cushion, for example, are directly connected in Benjy’s mind to Caddy. In Samway’s brief treatment of object obsession, Benjy’s apparent irrationality is dispelled somewhat, leaving a more humanized figure for readers to consider. This treatment sharply contrasts McLaughlin, where Benjy is painted to be a self-centered, mechanical, computer-like being, allegedly similar to other “autistics.”

To start, I would like to look at Benjy’s fascination with one object: the flower. At the most basic level, the flower is something that Benjy physically clings to. However, it is not my intent to simply place Benjy in the more carefully considered and refined category of Autism. Rather than simply observe that Benjy’s autism manifests itself in his obsession with the flower, I intend to examine how the
obsession affects the form of Benjy’s narrative and mind. After an initial reading, one might feel that the flower is placed throughout the text indiscriminately. However, upon close reading, a pattern of when and where these objects are located emerges; Benjy may in fact be an active artist in the creation of his own narrative. When tracing the frequency of the objects in his narrative, an arc emerges.

Out of all of the objects Benjy is obsessed with, the flower is established the earliest. One of Benjy’s most prominent interactions with the flower occurs within the first several pages. The scene catalogues a few brief moments before Benjy and his mother depart for Damuddy’s funeral. Benjy, like a good narrator, identifies his mother as she enters the scene. The text reads, “Mother came out, pulling her veil down” (6). After Benjy introduces his mother into the scene, Benjy’s narrative quickly veers off a predictable course of conventional narrative and focuses, instantaneously, on his favorite object. “She had some flowers,” Benjy notes. Benjy’s focus snaps from his mother to what his mother is holding. This effect may seem banal by itself, but this is a common pattern in the text: when a coveted object is present, the narrative routinely snaps to it. The flower, and other objects, often command Benjy’s authorial focus.

After this brief description of his mother, Benjy catalogues some dialogue between Dilsey and his mother. Mrs. Compson is anxious about T.P. driving instead of Roskus. Dilsey tries, best she can, to pacify Mrs. Compson. During their exchange an ongoing unarticulated action that the reader is unaware of, and ultimately generated by the flower, is occurring. The reader is finally informed of the existence of a disruptive action when his mother remarks, “Stop Benjamin.” What Benjamin
has been doing *precisely* remains a mystery, and the reader is only left with the minimal knowledge that Benjy's action is something that bothers his mother.  

Unarticulated action occurs often in the Benjy's section of *The Sound and the Fury*. Unlike other narratives where the reader must do a bit of deductive work to understand more covert implicit actions, Benjy's narrative only implies important plot elements that would be generally obvious and articulated matter-of-factly. The text, one might say, struggles to communicate with the reader. It speaks its own unique language that becomes more comprehensible with exposure.

While Mrs. Compson's vague command "Stop" provides little insight into what exactly is going on, Dilsey's comments provide clarity. "Give him a flower to hold," Dilsey begins, "That's what he's wanting." Thanks to Dilsey's remark, Benjy's implicit action becomes more expressly articulated. Still, the reader must do a bit of work as they conjecture about what Benjy is doing *exactly*. Complete clarity is never reached, but many plausible, related readings emerge: Benjy has likely been pestering his mother, touching her, and vocalizing to her in "moans" or "bellows." Still, all of these possibilities stem from a sole stimulus: the flower. Benjy's attempt at communicating his desire to his mother fails, but it is his mother, not him, who is likely responsible for the failure. Seeing this failure, Dilsey quickly interprets Benjy's nonverbal communication and adequately addresses his need for his coveted object. Dilsey is well attuned to Benjy's obsession, and can make quick sense out of the actions produced by this obsession. What appears odd, and even impossible to comprehend, is simply a normal part of a language that Benjy and Dilsey share.
Readers familiar with Benjy and his idiosyncrasies recognize the flower as a subtle driver of Benjy's vague actions; one might conclude that the flower drives the overall scene as well. Benjy turns his attention to Dilsey and says, “She gave me a flower and her hand went away.” Though the sentence begins with Dilsey, Benjy’s focus quickly turns back to the flower, just as in the initial characterization of Mrs. Compson. After he receives the flower, Benjy is put at ease. The quoted sentence, however, is an odd one. It connects to separate sentences, the first of which centers on the flower and the second of which centers on, of all things, Dilsey’s hand. This second comment is not something that we anticipate from a “normal” narrator, and it contributes to the possible funny “feel” that the text emits to many readers. However, focusing on a hand is characteristic of a child with autism. The DSM states that a person with autism “may use the parent’s hand to obtain desired objects without ever making eye contact (as if it were the hand rather than the person that is relevant)1” (73). While Benjy doesn’t physically use Dilsey’s hand to pick a flower from his mother’s bouquet, he nonetheless focuses on it as it presents him a flower. The hand’s importance could plausibly be linked to the flower: it is the immediate courier between Benjy and the flower. Dilsey’s hand makes the flower accessible.

From the time the flower is introduced into the scene until the time Benjy receives it, the bulk of the narrative is constituted of dialogue. When one considers Benjy as a person with autism, this attention to dialogue comes as no surprise. People with autism frequently quote dialogue they have heard, though they may

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1 It is important to note that in this quotation, limitations of the DSM are demonstrated. Speaking about the relevancy an adult might hold for a child with autism is speculative at best, and perhaps reflects commonly held and historically preserved views of people with disability. An aversion to eye contact may simply signal a dislike of eye contact, rather than a judgment that a person is unimportant.
struggle to produce their own socially acceptable language. This phenomenon is termed *echolalia* and is the first characteristic that Samway and Silver cite for Benjy’s autism. If we remove the dialogue from this section, we see the remaining material to which Benjy’s narrative attention is devoted. The scene would read as follows:

She had some flowers.  
Dilsey went up the steps.  
She reached her hand in.  
She gave me a flower and her hand went away.

Benjy’s narration outside of dialogue almost exclusively centers on his treasured object, with three of the four sentences relating directly to the flower. Of the four sentences, the third illustrates the key problem that readers face when they first approach Benjy’s narrative: key constituents are missing. Here, Benjy does not specify what exactly Dilsey reaches into. Instead, the narrative, and perhaps Benjy himself, assumes that the reader will know the only possible destination for Dilsey’s hand: the bouquet of flowers. By this act of assumption, Benjy reveals how dear the object is to him and his narrative. For Benjy, the flower is always there, even if he fails to mention it to the reader.

While the funeral departure scene occurs early in the text, the very first instance we see of Benjy obsessively clinging to a flower occurs earlier in the text. Spliced in between a scene where Benjy runs outside to Caddy, Benjy provides a small snippet of narrative centering almost exclusively on the flower. The passage reads:

What are you moaning about, Luster said. You can watch them again when we get to the branch. Here. Here’s you a jimson weed. He gave me the flower. We went through the fence, into the lot. (5)
Just as Benjy’s “wanting” is conveyed to the reader by Dilsey, Benjy’s moaning is conveyed by Luster in this passage. Benjy cannot verbally answer Luster’s question, and Luster suspects that Benjy is moaning because he cannot see the golfers. To pacify Benjy, he hands him a jimson weed. Pacification is a frequent and often desired effect of the objects of Benjy’s obsession. As the text moves from Luster’s dialogue to Benjy’s thoughts, a disagreement about the object is revealed. Luster refers to the object as a jimson weed; Benjy refers to it as a flower. At first glance, Benjy’s definition of “flower” seems incorrect. Benjy’s flower is, in fact, an unrefined category with boundaries that swell to include not only “jimson weed,” but other tangible things and perhaps even intangible concepts that serve several functions. However, this expanded definition, suggests Benjy’s dependence on the word, or perhaps more accurately on the flower “image” or “sensation.” I use the term “image” or “sensation” to illustrate that while Benjy could identify what we call a flower as a flower, he also applies this conventional name to things that resemble it. The “flower” then is not only used as a label for tangible objects, but also as a descriptor. This usage, an incorrect usage, contributes to Benjy’s text in a unique way, allowing the narrative to provide the reader a new vantage point and offering unconventional, at times exhilarating imagery.

In fact, the term “flower” is introduced unconventionally at the very beginning of the narrative. The first line of text reads, “Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting” (3). At this introductory moment, the reader does not yet know the importance of the tangible flower object, and the phrase “flower spaces” seems odd to the reader, maybe even resembling idiot-
speak. Much of this oddness stems from Benjy’s use of the word as an adjective, and the reader may struggle to comprehend, at least initially, this new usage that is as exotic as it is confusing. Benjy begins to unintentionally distance himself from his reader. A “flower space” is not something that exists in a neurotypical world; Benjy’s expression has no traditional roots in reality. Though they might know what a “flower garden” is (a more conventional adjective-noun pairing), the reader does not know precisely what a “flower space” is. The expression exists abstractly, and through work and a bit of imagination the reader may be able to envision an image, albeit a vague one. Nonetheless, by using “flower spaces,” Benjy unconsciously shows that he sees the world through his objects. Like any good narrator, he establishes an important object, the flower, and theme, obsession, at the beginning of his text.

The most developed flower scene occurs much later in the narrative, when Luster manipulates Benjy’s obsession. While this scene is presented well after the initial flower scene, it is a constituent scene of Luster’s overarching quarter hunt and is temporally close to the beginning of the text. Benjy is still fixated on the golfers, and the text reads:

I held to the fence and looked through the flower spaces. They went away. “Now you aint got nothing to moan about.” Luster said. “Hush up. I the one got something to moan over, you aint. Here. Whyn’t you hold onto that weed. You be beller ing about it next.” He gave me the flower. “Where you heading now.” (35).

The golfers play in what appears to be a backdrop of the “flower space.” In fact, this backdrop may actually be a foreground: a lens that colors Benjy’s vision of the action. He must look through the flower space before he sees the golfers. Benjy’s
language, at this point, may seem repetitive, but Benjy’s repetition reinforces his obsession and character. More interestingly, unarticulated action, seen in the carriage scene, is repeated again. Though not directly stated, Benjy drops his flower (or what Luster and calls a “jimson weed”), and Luster chastises Benjy for this, remarking “whyn’t you hold onto that weed.” When Luster gives Benjy the flower, Benjy appears to take heed of Luster’s warning:

> Our shadows were on the grass. They got to the trees before we did. Mine got there first. Then we got there, and then the shadows were gone. There was a flower in the bottle. I put the other flower in it. (35)

After Luster’s warning, Benjy runs to his apparent, ad hoc holding place for his flowers. The sequence of events in the final two sentences further illustrates Benjy’s obsession. When Benjy comes to the flower bottle, the first thing he notices is the flower inside, not the bottle itself. He does not say, “There was a bottle with a flower in it.” Reflecting his obsession with the flower, Benjy inverts this more typical phrasing, mentioning flower and then bottle. He places his flower with his other one in the bottle. Storing objects seems odd, but the habit is a common manifestation of autism (Loveland and Tunali-Kotoski 266).

Yet, in this scene, Luster loses his patience with Benjy. Finding no apparent reason for Benjy’s bizarre behavior aside from his idiocy, Luster berates him:

> “Aint you a grown man, now.” Luster said. “Playing two weeds in a bottle. You know what they going to do with you when Miss Cahline die. They going to send you to Jackson where you belong. Mr Jason say so. Where you can hold the bars all day long with the rest of the looneys and slobber. How you like that.”

> Luster knocked the flowers over with his hand. “That’s what they’ll do to you at Jackson when you start belling.”

> I tried to pick up the flowers. Luster picked them up and they went away. I began to cry.
“Luster.” Dilsey said from the kitchen.
The flowers came back.
“Hush.” Luster said “Here they is. Look. It’s fixed back just like it was at first. Hush, now.” (35)

Not surprisingly, dialogue forms the bulk of this passage. Benjy devotes minimal attention to events occurring outside of Luster’s speech. As his anger grows, Luster, clearly aware of Benjy’s obsession with flowers, knocks over Benjy’s two piece collection. Luster, though, is also aware of one thought that may make Benjy “beller” even more: Caddy. Interestingly, when Luster’s dialogue is removed from this passage, almost all of the remaining sentences relate to the flower, just as in the carriage scene:

Luster knocked the flowers over with his hand.
I tried to pick up the flowers. Luster picked them up and they went away. I began to cry.
The flowers came back.

Benjy’s mind is stuck, simply put, on the flowers. Stripped of dialogue this section of narrative follows the movement of the flower. The flowers are the stimuli that cause Benjy to cry. They are also the stimuli that cause Benjy to act: when the flowers are knocked over by Luster, Benjy attempts to restore them to their previous state. As Samway and McLaughlin both argue, Benjy prizes stability and consistency in his life. Like many other people with autism, Benjy’s world is composed of routines and, for lack of better word, concrete constants like his coveted objects. When a constant is disturbed, a flower knocked over, or simply not held, Benjy becomes disturbed. These constants anchor Benjy’s reality and his narrative.
By attuning ourselves, like Dilsey, to what drives Benjy can we reveal any deeper truths about his narrative? Or, are these representations merely nonsensical and innocent, formless and objective? There has been some critical room carved out in scholarship to allow Benjy to exist as a composer, and not just an unbiased, undiscerning reporter. Stacy Burton writes, “That Benjy cannot explicitly differentiate between past and present does not mean that he does not experience time or attempt to order it; that he cannot speak or reason does not mean that his discourse is either wholly idiosyncratic or purely objective” (210). Benjy, it seems, may order his discourse quite a bit for the reader.

Figure 2.1 reflects how many times the word “flower” and the phrase “jimson weed” occur in the text according to page number in the Norton Critical Edition (The text of The Sound and the Fury starts on pg. 3). From this graph, we can
see that Benjy’s “flower” emerges, quite literally, at the beginning of the text and reappears near the end, with the sharp spike at page 35 reflecting the flower-bottle scene the scene. In the chart, the instances of “flower” are clustered. This clustering, by its very nature, does not support the reading is a simply a text born from randomness or idiocy. The grouping of objects suggests an ability to associate, and perhaps even organize. To introduce an object at the beginning of the text that is revisited at climax suggests something more: the ability to compose. Benjy, we might argue, has actively crafted his narrative. He introduces an object to the reader that is important to him early on in the narrative. Later on, after establishing his object, he returns to it at a location that is the conventional placing of a climax. While his reliance on the “flower” is certainly odd, his placement of what he considers an important constituent of his narrative is not. Benjy struggles to communicate, certainly. It takes a good deal of work to understand and track one of Benjy’s most salient autistic traits, his obsession. Once readers accommodate themselves to the narrator, patterns are found, and a narrative arc emerges within the scrambled material that seemed just sound and fury.
CHAPTER III

“HAS HE GOT TO KEEP THAT DIRTY OLD SLIPPER”: BENJY’S FAMILIAL OBJECTS

In the climactic flower scene, Luster prods Benjy with the word (and memory) sure to make Benjy beller most: Caddy. “You want something to beller about,” he cruelly asks Benjy, “Alright then. Caddy” (35). Of all the members of the Compson family, acknowledged and disowned, blood related or employed, Caddy is the person Benjy loves most intensely. Yet, on the day the narrative begins, Caddy is gone. In her absence, Benjy clings to her slipper obsessively. This dirty, repulsive slipper is treasured by Benjy, whose idiocy is likely solidified even more in the minds of some critics by this bizarre compulsion than his habit of holding the flower.

The slipper is not nearly instance as frequently as Benjy’s flower. Nonetheless, it serves as one of the more memorable objects in the work and has been much discussed by criticism. This attachment to an old, dirty object is often considered symptomatic of idiocy, but for Benjy, the slipper fills a void created by the departure of his sister. Commenting on the final flower scene, Andre Bleikasten writes, “…Caddy’s ghost reappears, summoned by Luster’s perverse whispering of her name to Benjy, and the latter immediately starts bellowing, only to be assuaged by Caddy’s satin slipper.” The slipper is a prized place holder for Caddy, but to most
critics and readers, it is a feeble one; Bleikasten observes that the slipper is “yellow, and cracked, and soiled” (47). Benjy’s reliance on the slipper is seen as a futile attempt to fill a vacuum that he struggles to comprehend in even the most basic terms.

Despite the prominence the slipper might have in readers’ memories and critical discussions, only three specific scenes mention the slipper in Benjy’s section. In two scenes, Benjy mentions the slipper himself; in the other scene, Benjy’s niece Quentin mentions the slipper. Just before Quentin’s complaint about the slipper, Benjy’s narrative moves from a scene where Caddy is feeding him to April 7th 1928 when Benjy is eating with his family. During this tension-filled gathering, Quentin openly disparages Benjy. The text reads:

*Has he got to keep that old dirty slipper on the table, Quentin said. Why don’t you feed him in the kitchen. It’s like eating with a pig.
If you dont like the way we eat, you’d better not come to the table, Jason said.* (45)

At center of this brief dispute lies Benjy’s slipper. Benjy’s odd habit has manifested itself in a location that is more undesirable than most, the dinner table. Repulsed by Benjy’s slipper (or, alternatively, her mother’s slipper), Quentin asks a question perhaps shared by the reader: does Benjy have to behave as he does? Isn’t there some sort of way around his obsessions, his idiosyncrasies, his behaviors, and his bellowing? Benjy’s behavior, for Quentin and others, is a problem, not because it necessarily does harm to anyone or anything, but simply because it is bizarre and incomprehensible. His habits seem disgusting, and since he is never without his habits, Benjy’s general presence is noxious.
This problem of presence, however, is one likely rooted in general social culture. It is culturally bizarre to dine with a “dirty old slipper.” Because his failure to comply with seemingly natural and normal behavior, Quentin suggests the he should be fed in the kitchen. She justifies her opinion by drawing a comparison between Benjy and an animal – an association on which Jaqui Griffiths bases her analysis. Quentin has not been around Benjy for his whole life, like the other family members; it is Jason, oddly, who comes to the defense of Benjy and his behavior, telling Quentin to dine elsewhere if she has a problem. Because of her lack of exposure, her comments serve as a valuable source of information about how outsiders might initially view Benjy. It is clear from her suggestion that bizarre features of Benjy’s character, like his compulsion to cling to a slipper, attract the focus of onlookers.

However, Benjy’s behavior does not seem so bizarre if we consider him – against conventional wisdom – a deliberative, cognizant, symbol-using human. To many, Benjy’s language skills are suspect, and his presumed idiocy undermines critics’ attempts to analyze his way of interpreting and utilizing symbols. Lynn Berk asserts, “Benjy is after all an idiot and his capacity for human experience is limited... while Benjy’s response to the people around him is honest and divested of rhetoric, it is a limited response. He is not capable of genuine human communication, nor is he capable of purposeful action” (338). However, Benjy’s obsession with and narrative use of his sister’s slipper suggests that he may in fact communicate humanly, efficiently, and powerfully. Readers have no trouble associating the slipper with Caddy. By examining the material immediately preceding the dinner table
scene, one could, and in fact should, conclude that Benjy has the same ability to associate the slipper with his sister, evidencing an ability to use symbols effectively.

In the preceding scene, Caddy volunteers to help Benjy eat. The text reads:

“I'll feed him tonight.' Caddy said. 'Sometimes he cries when Versh feeds him.'
“Take this tray up.” Dilsey said. “And hurry back and feed Benjy.”
“Don't you want Caddy to feed you.” Caddy said. (45)

In this specific example, Benjy’s ordering of scenes is clearly associative: he associates scenes with common elements. The two basic elements that relate these two scenes are Caddy and dinnertime. Dinnertime is a constant and unchanged in both scenes, but Caddy’s presence, far from stable, mutates in the transition. In the first scene, she is present, and her love for Benjy is manifest and catalogued by Benjy. In the second scene, she is absent. For Benjy, her presence in this second scene is a virtual one, signified by a yellowed slipper that serves as a feeble substitute for a sister he so fondly remembers, and, by the way, for Quentin's mother, drawing a parallel between Quentin and Benjy. For the reader, Caddy’s narrative presence is construed through this symbol. Caddy may also be instantiated through the presence of her daughter, who also needs Caddy, but who, in her cruelty, serves as a foil to her mother. Overall, the two scenes parallel each other neatly. The sister exists in the first, and disappears in the second. One could consider the linking of these two scenes as a fortunate, random outcome from the mind of an idiot, or to a new type of mind that Benjy owns: a mind that struggles to conventionally interpret and organize but is nonetheless able to wrestle with central, human problems. Attributing Benjy's linking of related scenes to chance
may be suspect here; Benjy may be creating powerful symbols and relating them to times, things, and people he finds important.

Unlike other critics, Roggenbuck acknowledges Benjy's ability to use symbols and understand their meaning. He comments on the final slipper scene of the text, noting that it “coincides with the only point in Benjy's narrative where he remembers the past while describing the present.” Roggenbuck's subtly suggests that Benjy's mental identity may be more formidable than previously assumed. He asserts that in the final slipper scene, Benjy “demonstrates memory, which suggests his awareness that he can remember when he cared enough about the people around him to notice how they smelled” (592). Roggenbuck's conclusions from this specific scene substantiate those drawn above, namely that Benjy has an active, symbol-using mind that is aware of the traumas that trouble him. In fact, Roggenbuck, in his analysis, relies on this final slipper scene, which occurs after a scene where Benjy and Caddy are held by their father and reads as follows:

She smelled like trees. In the corner it was dark, but I could see the window. I squatted there, holding the slipper. I couldn’t see it, but my hands saw it, and I could hear it getting night, and my hands saw the slipper but I couldn’t see myself, but my hands could see the slipper, and I squatted there, hearing it getting dark. (46)

Apart from demonstrating the ability to remember that Roggenbuck notes, Benjy demonstrates his ability to compose in this scene. This small snippet of Benjy's composition is repetitive, odd, and difficult to penetrate. However, interpreting Benjy as a person with autism allows for a more lucid reading. Reflecting his object obsession, Benjy narratively insists on the slipper in this scene, repeating his relationship to the slipper five times, employing "slipper" three times
and the pronoun “it” twice. Because of this intense repetition, a dramatic image is
created that depends upon three key constituents: Benjy, the slipper, and darkness.
The reader sees a stark, uncluttered image of Benjy, isolated and alone, clutching the
relic he knows is connected with the sister that loved him.

However, the key constituents do not exclusively create the drama of this
scene. Benjy's style - the way he depicts the interactions of these constituents – does
significant dramatic work. Benjy's sensory perceptions and narrative method extend
beyond neurotypical limits. He hears darkness, and his hands see the slipper. This
sensory expansion is something that only Benjy can offer and is more intriguing
than it is odd, as it signals an important moment in Benjy's life and narrative.

Roggenbuck comments that “this moment of memory exists in a text of swirling
presents, but Benjy, who rarely finds himself alone, experiences it in solitude.” This
insight is right in one sense: Benjy is certainly experiencing this moment alone,
without the company of any of his usual care providers. But, Roggenbuck's claim
misses something perhaps even more important: Benjy takes advantage of this
isolated moment of shelter from his abrasive, cruel, current family to clutch an old
slipper, expressing his ever unfailing desire to reconnect with his sister.

The first slipper scene in the narrative includes the third object of our
analysis, the cushion. This scene occurs when Benjy burns his hand in the kitchen.
After Benjy burns his hand, Dilsey, attuned to his obsessions, hands him a slipper.
The text reads: “‘Here.’ Dilsey said. ‘Stop crying, now.’ She gave me the slipper, and I
hushed” (39). In this instance, the slipper functions much as the flower does, as an
object that calms and curbs any “bellowing.” However, this scene is important
because of what occurs after Benjy hushes. After Dilsey tells Luster to take Benjy to the library, a puzzling series of events occurs:

We went to the library. Luster turned on the light. The windows went black, and the dark tall place on the wall came and I went and touched it. It was like a door, only it wasn’t a door.

The fire came behind me and I went to the fire and sat on the floor, holding the slipper. The fire went higher. It went onto the cushion in Mother’s chair.

“Hush up.” Luster said. “Cant you never get done for a while. Here I done built you a fire, and you won’t even look at it.” (39)

In this scene, there is a confluence of Benjy’s favorite objects: the slipper, the cushion, and, as the fourth section will examine, the fire. Benjy’s eyes latch onto the fire. His hands, meanwhile, remain latched onto the slipper. His vision follows the fire light as it goes “onto the cushion in Mother’s chair.” His eyes, we might assume from Luster’s remarks, remain on the cushion. Luster informs the reader of Benjy’s state: it can be deduced from Luster’s remark, “hush up,” that Benjy is vocalizing. Similarly, Luster’s final remark reveals that Benjy’s eyes are no longer on the fire itself. Clearly, Benjy’s attention bounces from coveted object to object though Luster struggles to recognize this motion.

The library scene is an example of an important type that appears elsewhere in Benjy’s narrative, what I will call the “convergent scene.” In the convergent scene, Benjy’s coveted objects intersect. This intersection typically leads Benjy’s senses to be highly stimulated and his attention to rapidly move to different stimuli. In this instance, Benjy sees the cushion and the firelight, and his hands feel Caddy’s slipper simultaneously. Additionally, convergent scenes are commonly found near the end of his narrative and may signal a high point in the narrative just as they signal a high point in Benjy’s sensory stimulation.
One can conclude that when the slipper emerges a powerful emotionally climatic occurs. In the first scene discussed, there is a showdown between Quentin and Jason; in the second, the reader sees Benjy remembering in dark isolation as his senses blur. The third is a convergent scene that includes several of Benjy's coveted objects: the slipper, the cushion, and the fire. The patterning of the slipper is similar to that of the flower. Figure 3.1 reflects the instances of the word *slipper* in the text.

**FIGURE 3.1 – SLIPPER LINE GRAPH**

While there are only six instances of the otherwise memorable slipper, those instance are clustered near the end of Benjy's narrative. Like the flower, a pattern emerges within Benjy's slipper references. In fact, this pattern is similar to the flower's: the bulk of the references occur at the end of the text, and the object is established and then developed – the second time the object is referenced, there are
more instances of the word. This trend continues when other coveted objects are examined.

The final tangible object that lies within Benjy’s obsession is the cushion. The cushion makes its first appearance in the convergent scene with Luster in the library. Just as the slipper is associated with Caddy, the cushion appears to be associated with Mrs. Compson. In the library scene, for example, the cushion is located in the chair that Mrs. Compson so frequently lounged in during his childhood. Interestingly, though, Benjy is usually holding the slipper when it is mentioned in the text and is usually removed from the cushion when it is instanced. Again, in the library scene, Benjy looks at the cushion as it is illuminated by the fire; he does not hold it as he does the slipper. Benjy’s possession of the slipper plausibly signifies the strong bond he shares with his sister. Likewise, his relationship with the cushion characterized not by touch but by sight, likely signifies his distant relationship with his mother.

In fact, unlike the slipper, the cushion is an object that is taken away from Benjy when he does possess it. He is only able to hold onto the cushion twice. In the first scene where the cushion is held, Benjy, at five-years-old, is taken to his mother by Caddy. Caddy tries to pacify Benjy with the cushion:

“If you hold him, he’ll stop.” Caddy said. “Hush.” she said. “You can go right back. Here. Here’s your cushion. See.”
“Don’t, Candace.” Mother said.
“Let him look at it and he’ll be quiet.” Caddy said. “Hold up just a minute while I slip it out. There, Benjy. Look.” (41)

Caddy understands his language and immediately knows the object that will put Benjy at ease. However, as Caddy assuages Benjy’s anxiety, her mother protests.
Caddy disobeys, and her mother chastises her for “humor[ing]” Benjy. In fact, according to Mrs. Compson, other family members, like Mr. Compson and Damuddy, have spoiled Benjy as well as Jason. Benjy’s behavior is something that he must, according to his mother, outgrow, which the reader knows that Benjy’s object obsession is destined to stay with him. Benjy’s coveted objects are, after all, central to his world, his narrative, and himself. Nonetheless, ignorant of the value these objects have, Mrs. Compson refuses to cater to Benjy’s annoying idiosyncrasies. His lack of eye contact, a key trait of autism as Samway and Silver note, is one of those bothersome habits. The cushion disappears and the stability it produces vanishes with it. After the cushion is gone, Mrs. Compson attempts to force Benjy to look into her eyes:

“Benjamin.” she said. “Take that cushion away, Candace.”
“He’ll cry.” Caddy said.
“Take that cushion away, like I told you.” Mother said. “He must learn to `mind.”
The cushion went away.
“Hush, Benjy.” Caddy said.
“You go over there and sit down.” Mother said. “Benjamin.” She held my face to hers.
“Stop that.” she said. “Stop it.”
But I didn’t stop and Mother caught me in her arms and began to cry, and I cried. Then the cushion came back and Caddy held it above Mother’s head. She drew Mother back in the chair and Mother lay crying against the red and yellow cushion. (41)

In this scene, the reader sees Mrs. Compson’s impatience grow as Caddy insists on making sure that Benjy at least visually possesses the cushion. For Mrs. Compson, “learning to mind” is what Benjy needs to achieve. Caddy, for her part, does mind her mother and takes the cushion away. Missing the cushion, Benjy begins to cry, an act that we again learn not through Benjy’s narration, but through
Caddy’s dialogue. Benjy’s mother forcefully tries to make him stop crying, but her efforts are futile. To stabilize the situation for both her mother and brother, Caddy brings the cushion back. As soon as the cushion reappears, Benjy makes note of it. As the narrative leaves Mrs. Compson, the reader is left with a poignant image of Benjy’s mother and the cushion fused together. Benjy concludes his depiction of his mother with a description of the cushion, and it becomes quite clear that the coveted object that Benjy is prohibited from holding is, after all, his mother’s.

The cushion is quickly mentioned again after the scene with Mrs. Compson. Caddy presents the cushion to Benjy after Jason tears up the dolls Benjy and Caddy made together. After this brief mention another convergent scene occurs:

You can look at the fire and the mirror and the cushion too, Caddy said. You won’t have to wait until supper to look at the cushion now. We could hear the roof. We could hear Jason too, crying beyond the wall. (42)

In this convergent scene, Caddy, unlike Luster, is aware of what Benjy’s favorite things are and what effect these objects might have when grouped together in the same space and at the same time. In fact, it is Caddy who seems to ensure that Benjy’s objects converge. This scene parallels the isolated slipper scene. In the slipper scene, Benjy sits alone with his slipper. Here, Benjy sits with Caddy, isolated, literally walled-off, from the rest of the family. Sensory confusion manifests itself in both these scenes. Just as Benjy “hear[s] it getting dark” at the very end of his chapter, he hears the roof in this passage. Interestingly, according to the text, it is not just Benjy who “hear[s]” the roof. There is no “I” in the final sentences of this selection. There is only a “we.” Whereas earlier we saw Benjy in desolate isolation clinging to a slipper, we now see Benjy with his sister. Though he has been
described as a “self-centered autistic,” Benjy’s narrative, here, appears almost grateful, including his beloved sister in a unique sensory experience. It comes as no surprise that during this narrative high point, Benjy’s coveted objects are present.

Figure 3.2 reflects the instances of “cushion” in the text. The cushion, though it appears early in Benjy’s life, occurs at the end of the narrative. The pattern that we have been tracking is substantiated by another one of Benjy’s coveted objects. The final spike in the graph is representative of the last cushion instances. The passage reads: “Caddy gave me the cushion, and I could look at the cushion and the mirror and the fire” (46). These two final instances of cushion are elements of yet another convergent scene. However, the two objects that Benjy mentions also, the fire and mirror, are not things Benjy can hold. For these last two objects, Benjy experiences his obsession with his eyes, not his hands.
CHAPTER IV

“LITTLE POINTS OF FIRE”: BENJY’S VISUAL OBJECTS

Two final stimuli capture Benjy’s attention: the fire and the mirror. These objects, however, are not things that Benjy can cling to like he does the slipper, or the cushion, or the flower. Benjy sees the fire and the mirror; he does not hold them. The fire is introduced promptly into the text, when Mrs. Compson curtly tells Versh to take Benjy to the fire. This introduction is unassuming, and Benjy’s narration does little to distinguish the fire in the mind of the reader. However, with each subsequent mention, the fire evolves, eventually growing into a vital force within the text that works to define not only Benjy, but other members of the Compson family as well.

Like the flower and the cushion, the fire immediately attracts Benjy’s focus whenever it is present. This attraction is visible early in the text when Benjy looks towards T.P.’s house. He states, “Quentin and Luster were playing in the dirt in the front of T.P.’s house. There was a fire in the house, rising and falling, with Roskus sitting black against it” (20). As any other narrator might do, Benjy begins to describe T.P.’s house once it is mentioned. Yet, Benjy’s terms are limited, and his obsession controls the description he provides. The first defining characteristic of
the house Benjy mentions is the fire inside. The presence of Roskus is related to the reader after this central detail.

In fact, Roskus himself is tethered to Benjy’s fire, and he is described in relation to this coveted object. Roskus is located “against” the flame. The relationship between Roskus and the fire is most strengthened by Benjy’s attention to the light the fire emits. Like many people with autism, Benjy is photosensitive. As Samway and Silver observe, this sensitivity is alluded to frequently in the text, and Benjy often references “bright” things. In this scene, Benjy’s sensitivity to light produces a very poignant image. The reader is shown a bright fire, and Roskus’s blackness is amplified by the fire light. For the reader, Benjy’s obsession with the fire amplifies Roskus’s racial and social identity. Later in the text, the fire magnifies important traits of other characters as well. As Benjy’s section progresses, Caddy, Jason, and Quentin are also identified with or against the fire.

One of the most memorable fire scenes occurs while Benjy is in the kitchen with Luster eating birthday cake. In this scene, the fire physically affects Benjy. His attention, unsurprisingly, is locked on the fire during the duration of this scene. The fire functions much like the other objects here and elsewhere: when it is available to Benjy, he is calmed; when it is taken away, he fusses. Fire first enters the scene on the smallest scale –The flames of candles top Benjy’s birthday cake. As in the case of the “flower”/”jimson weed” disagreement, Benjy’s terminology does not match conventional language. Luster blows out the candles for Benjy, and the text reads: “He leaned down and puffed his face. The candles went away. I began to cry” (37). For Luster, blowing out the candles is entirely unremarkable, a standard cultural
ritual. However, for Benjy, this action causes great distress. At the root of this distress lies the fire. Benjy, in observing “the candles went away,” reveals that in his mind, the flames of the candle are the sole constituent of the “candle.” The wick and the wax do not provide the “candle” any metaphysical traction; only the flame does. When the flame of the candle is extinguished, the candle loses all significance to Benjy. The candle goes away, ceasing to exist any longer in Benjy’s universe and narrative. The candles connection with fire is what allows it to emerge within the narration in the first place. As the text later shows, fire in Benjy’s narrative has dramatic repercussions that extend beyond birthday cake candles.

As clear as these initial events are, the remainder of the kitchen scene is foggy. Precisely what Benjy does and where he looks is difficult to determine. Because of this ambiguity, I will rely on a plausible order of events while reading this scene. The fogginess of the order of events, however, contributes to Benjy’s unique narrative style that gravitates to the phenomena Benjy finds relevant. Important details are omitted because of his compulsion. In an effort to hush Benjy, Luster encourages Benjy to look at the fire in the kitchen stove. Benjy complies. The text then reads, “A long piece of wire came across my shoulder. It went to the door and then the fire went away. I began to cry.” From this passage, one can deduce that either Dilsey or Luster closes the stove door with some sort of utensil, which Benjy refers to as the “long wire.” Shut out from his fire, Benjy fusses and then proceeds to quote a long dialogue between Luster and Dilsey. During this conversation, Benjy lapses into reminiscence, recalling a scene in which when Dilsey and Caddy discuss his name change. Once he returns from this scene, his focus immediately turns back
to the fire: “the long wire came across my shoulder, and the fire went away. I began to cry” (38). During Benjy’s reminiscence the fire door must have been reopened, and either Dilsey or Luster finds it necessary to close it again. Regardless, the fire is the stimulus that causes Benjy to snap out of his reminisce. As the fire disappears, Benjy is torn from memory and coldly brought back to reality.

For most of this scene, Benjy has been ostensibly passive; however, following another bit of dialogue, he acts. His action is caused by the fire. Benjy states, “I put my hand out where the fire had been.” Because Benjy does not provide a reason for why he reaches, two plausible readings emerge: 1) Benjy tactically investigates the visual ground from which the fire sprung; or 2) Benjy simply attempts to open the fire door. In either case, Benjy is driven by the fire. He attempts to recover it when it is lost. However, perhaps unbeknownst to Benjy, the fire is an object that is primarily experienced visually and one that can be never be physically possessed; tactile stimulation is secondary, often dangerous. Benjy’s senses overlap. Under the first possible reading, Benjy attempts to feel what he should see and damage is done. For both readings, Benjy’s vigorous pursuit of his coveted object pushes him to pain. The fire drives him, regardless of the cost.

Harmless sensory blurring frequently occurs when Benjy focuses on the fire. When Benjy looks at the fire, his other senses are uniquely stimulated, occasionally by other stimuli. In a way, Benjy’s visual experience of the fire seems to enrich his auditory and olfactory capacities. During the cake scene, Benjy’s narration quickly switches to a scene where Caddy cries on his lap. The scene reads:

*I could hear the clock, and I could hear Caddy standing behind me, and I could hear the roof. It’s still raining, Caddy said. I hate rain. I hate everything. And*
then her head came into my lap and she was crying, holding me and I began to cry. Then I looked at the fire again and the bright, smooth shapes went again. I could hear the clock and the roof and Caddy.

This scene immediately follows the moment when Luster blows out the candles. Benjy's experience, prior to this moment, was primarily visual. Quickly though, Benjy recalls a memory – a powerful memory in which Caddy his beloved sister cries in his lap – that is laced with auditory description. In the final two lines of this memory, Benjy's description isolates the key elements of the passage. Benjy focuses on the fire; its light, the flickering of its flames, initially capture his focus. After he processes the “bright smooth shapes,” the sensory barrage continues and transitions to things that stimulate his ear, the clock, the rain, and of course his crying sister. The fire signals a high point in sensory stimulation to the reader. During this high point of sensory stimulation, the reader also sees a moment of narrative significance in which a sister cries in a brother’s lap as a clock keeps relentless time behind the pair.

A similar scene where perceptions intersect and propel the narrative to sensory heights occurs with Mrs. Compson. This scene is a convergent one involving the fire, the cushion, and the mirror. Unlike the scene with Caddy, visual stimulation remains prominent. However, within a flurry of visually detail, a terse olfactory detail wedges itself within the middle of the narration. This small detail is a poignant one and the resulting effect is similar to the Caddy scene discussed above. The scene reads as follows:

Versh set me down and we went into Mother's room. There was a fire. It was rising and falling on the walls. There was another fire in the mirror. I could smell the sickness. It was on a cloth folded on Mother's head. Her hair was on
the pillow. The fire didn't reach it, but it shone on her hand where her rings were jumping. (40)

This scene is framed within references to the fire. When Benjy enters the room, the first thing he notices is the fire and the light it casts on the walls. For Benjy, the fire's light is an extension of the fire, allowing the "fire" to jump and fall on the wall. Benjy then notices the reflection of the fire within the mirror. This second fire attracts his attention, and his subsequent narration gives the illusion that he is alone, with his mother in a room braced by fire and fire light. The pair, it might seem to the reader, is walled in by two fires. In between the text, an important detail arises: "I could smell the sickness. It was on a cloth on Mother's head." Benjy, perhaps in a state of sensory overload, is hit with a poignant sensation – the smell of his mother's sickness. Because of the way Benjy's perceptions operate and the fashion in which they are communicated to the reader, this detail is magnified. Mrs. Compson's sickness, interestingly, is highlighted by the bright details that bookend it. Mrs. Compson's sickness dominates both Benjy's focus and the reader's.

After this sharp injection of scent detail, Benjy's focus turns to his mother's cushion on which her hair lies. The fire, Benjy notes, does not reach his mother's hair. Instead, it finds his mother's rings, which twinkle and further enrapture Benjy. Given this twinkling, it is very possible for the reader to overlook Mrs. Compson's hair's relationship to the fire. The fire's interaction with her hair is telling of the mother's relationship to the son. Benjy's coveted object (the one he can't possess, but nonetheless prizes) never reaches any biological part of his mother's body. What the fire does reach is something that can be removed - her rings. Similar to his relationship with his mother's cushion, the lack of connection between Mrs.
Compson and the fire expands the distance between her and Benjy. In a room full of brightness, where fire burns at all sides, no light can reach Benjy's sick mother.

The fire does not always leave Compson family members in darkness. Benjy's fire helps illuminate Caddy and her daughter. In the scene where Luster asks Jason for a quarter, Quentin is defined in light of the fire. The text reads:

[Jason] read the paper. Quentin looked at the fire. The fire was in her eyes and on her mouth. Her mouth was red...

“What did I tell you I was going to do if I saw you with that show fellow again.” he said. Quentin looked at the fire. “Did you hear me.” Jason said.

“I heard you” Quentin said. (43)

Unlike the case of Mrs. Compson, whose feeble status as mother is amplified, or Roskus, whose racial and social identity are magnified, the fire does not contrast Quentin. Quentin does not sit black against the fire, nor is she covered in shadow. Instead, the fire spills into and onto her. It is contained within her eyes and its light is cast on her mouth. Benjy's observation of “fire in her eyes” may seem unremarkable. However, as previously discussed, Benjy, a man with autism, struggles to make eye contact throughout his narrative. His mother goes so far as to force him to do so. Here then, the reader sees Benjy transcend his glaring social barrier. Benjy, by looking at his niece's eyes, values her in a rare way. He identifies her with fire, not against it. Interestingly, only one other character is defined in the same fashion: Caddy. This similarity suggests that at the very least, Benjy is subconsciously aware of the mother-daughter connection between Caddy and Quentin. Through his obsession, Benjy wrestles with the Compson family drama.

In this scene, Quentin bears a remarkable resemblance to her uncle Benjy. The pair both stare at the fire, and the reader can infer that prior to this moment,
Benjy’s eyes are filled with fire, his mouth and general countenance is reddened.
This surface level similarity likely reflects a deeper similarity between Quentin and Benjy: Both are subject – at times violently – to the will of the misguided, neurotic man of the house. Benjy and Quentin sit with their backs to Jason. One could imagine Jason’s interrogation coming from the darkness behind Benjy and Quentin. At this point in Benjy’s life, Quentin, however much she dislikes her “idiot” uncle, shares common circumstances with him. This similarity is construed in this reading by using Benjy’s fire as a starting point. After this scene, surely, the similarity will end: Quentin will rob Jason and leave the home and Benjy will be castrated and sent to Jackson. But, for the time being, Benjy closely aligns with his niece. This evidence, taken with the dinner table slipper scene, brings Benjy, Quentin, and Caddy into a close relationship with one another, even if this proximity is much to the chagrin of the youngest Compson.

The final fire scene in the text also provides the greatest insight into Benjy’s obsession and social relationships. In the scene Benjy, Caddy, Jason, and Mr. Compson are all together while Quentin is studying. The scene begins with a sentence where Benjy’s coveted objects, the cushion, the mirror, and the fire, converge. Caddy, Benjy, and Mr. Compson are all closer to the fire than Jason, who again appears to be hidden in darkness. When Jason does emerge, “he comes out of the corner,” at the request of his father. The association between darkness and Jason is strengthened when he throws his chewing paper into the fire. Benjy writes, “Jason threw into the fire. It hissed, uncurled, turning black. Then it was gray. Then it was
gone” (46). Jason’s byproduct is black, and throughout Benjy’s narrative he is identified against the fire.

However, Caddy’s characterization starkly differs from Jason’s. The text reads:

Caddy and Father and Jason were in Mother’s chair. Jason’s eyes were puffed shut and his mouth moved like tasting. Caddy’s head was on Father’s shoulder. Her hair was like fire, and little points of fire were in her eyes, and I went and Father lifted me into the chair too, and Caddy held me. She smelled like trees. (46)

Just like Quentin, Caddy is identified with the fire; however, Caddy’s identification is much stronger. Initially, some readers might disagree that any notable differences exist between Caddy’s and Quentin’s characterizations. However, such a reading ignores Benjy’s language. Benjy’s language is more “limited” in its vocabulary and syntax than other narrators. However, this streamlined language allows for slight alterations in descriptions to carry great significance. In the case of Mrs. Compson, Benjy observes her hair, noting the fire “didn’t reach it.” Benjy does not describe Quentin’s hair, but her eyes and her mouth. Still, similar to his account of Mrs. Compson’s hair, Benjy’s description of Quentin’s mouth portrays two discrete objects interacting with one another. The fire, the first object, is on Quentin’s mouth, the second object. In his narrative, there are varying levels of identification with the fire. Benjy’s description of Quentin’s eyes is much stronger than the previous two examples. In this description, the fire is “in” Quentin’s eye, an associative level markedly above others.

Returning to Caddy’s hair, Benjy, breaking apart from his usual style, draws a comparison (a simile in pure terms) between Caddy’s hair and fire. He states, “her
hair was *like* fire” (emphasis added). Caddy’s identification with the fire is far stronger than anyone else’s, as evidenced by this use, conscious or not, of simile. Elsewhere in the novel, Caddy’s hair is identified with Benjy’s flower and a simile using “like” is used quickly afterwards: “I saw Caddy with, with flowers in her hair, and a long veil like shining wind” (25). Benjy communicates the bond he has with his sister to the reader through his coveted objects. In fact, in the fire example, he uses the object most instanced in his text. This association continues to grow stronger as the narration moves to Caddy’s eyes and notes “little points of fire were in her eyes.” This description, at first glance, resembles the description of Quentin’s eyes. However, in this instance, the description is more developed. Benjy does not simply say “there was fire in her eyes” like he does for Quentin. Instead, Benjy develops the fire, noting how it looked, emerging in little points. Benjy, we might assume, looks deeper into Caddy’s eyes, paying closer attention. For Caddy’s eyes, Benjy’s gaze is far deeper.

The fire is instrumental to Benjy when he characterizes the Compson family. The word fire is instanced 51 times in the text. Figure 4.1 reflects these instances. Like the flower, and unlike the slipper and the cushion, the fire is introduced very early in the text. At the end of the text, a deluge of fire references occurs. Not surprisingly, this deluge provides readers great insight into Benjy’s relationships to the key characters of his narrative. The antagonists of the narrative are cast in a light that shows them to be such. Likewise, the heroes are able to shine.

FIGURE 4.1 – FIRE LINE GRAPH
Benjy’s final object, the mirror is often referenced in conjunction with other objects, particularly with the fire. Twice it is mentioned in a tight, list-style convergent sentence. As mentioned earlier, this convergence of objects comforts Benjy after (or during) times of stress. The first convergent sentence occurs when Benjy is in the library with Caddy. Caddy states, “You can look at the fire and the mirror and the cushion too” (42). In contrast to other family members, Caddy is aware of the objects that put Benjy at ease. However, in the narrative, the mirror does not merely pacify Benjy; like the fire, it amplifies other essential components to Benjy’s story.

Notably, the mirror serves to duplicate Benjy’s most instanced object, the fire. In the scene with Mrs. Compson, the mirror allows for Benjy’s object to literally surround him and his mother. This profusion of light allows for the reader to develop an enriched understanding of Benjy’s relationship with his mother. Family
tension is highlighted elsewhere by Benjy’s objects. Towards the end of Benjy’s narrative, the mirror amplifies a childhood conflict between Caddy and Jason. The text reads:

Caddy and Jason were fighting in the mirror.
"You, Caddy." Father said.
They fought. Jason began to cry.
"Caddy." Father said. Jason was crying. He wasn’t fighting anymore, but we could see Caddy fighting in the mirror and Father put me down and went into the mirror and fought too. He lifted Caddy up. She fought. Jason lay on the floor, crying. He had the scissors in his hand. Father held Caddy.
"He cut up all Benjy's dolls." Caddy said. "I'll slit his gizzle."
"Candace." Father said.
"I will." Caddy said. "I will." She fought. Father held her. She kicked at Jason. He rolled into the corner, out of the mirror. Father brought Caddy to the fire. They were all out of the mirror. Only the fire was in it. Like the fire was in a door. (41-2)

In this scene, Caddy and Jason symbolically combat each other. The wrestling pair are the same two siblings who have the power to influence Benjy's fate. With Caddy, Benjy is aided and empowered. With Jason, Benjy is pushed into the margins of the household, eventually pushed out of the house altogether, and ultimately imprisoned. Benjy is at the center of the fundamental conflict between his brother and sister that is enacted on a smaller scale here. Jason cruelly cuts up the dolls that Benjy and Caddy made together. Why Jason did this is unclear, but in doing so he demonstrates not only a disregard for Benjy, but an animosity. Caddy, enraged, fights Jason. The loving, destined to be ostracized sister, battles and the mean-spirited brother, who, decades later, will become Benjy’s condemner. This tension-filled struggle is related to Benjy (and the reader) through his object the mirror. Reflecting his social discomfort, Benjy does not view the difficult contest for
himself. He instead deflects it through his mirror. Near the end of his narrative, Benjy resurrects a painful memory, aided by one of his objects.

Soon, Mr. Compson himself enters the conflict and the mirror. He manages to separate the feuding siblings. Jason leaves the mirror, and Benjy’s field of vision.

Soon after, Mr. Compson and Caddy also leave the mirror. The immediate conflict is cooled. Once his family members are out of the mirror, Benjy is left in a state that he often assumes in adulthood. In Benjy’s vision, no one is present. He is isolated. His family is gone from his gaze. Benjy sits, isolated in a strange way, just has he has in earlier portions of the narrative. His only company is the fire that burns in the mirror.

“Mirror” occurs 11 times in the narrative. The instances of “mirror” are seen in figure 4.2.

FIGURE 4.2 - MIRROR LINE GRAPH
The patterning of the mirror is similar to the cushion and the slipper. It is introduced into the text earlier than these two objects, but not as early as the fire and flower. As with the other objects, the bulk of mirror references occur at the end of the text. Particularly, in the mirror’s case, events vital to Benjy’s life and symbolic of the Compson family are communicated to the reader through Benjy’s obsession.
CHAPTER V

“HE KNOW LOT MORE THAN MOST FOLKS THINKS”: BENJY COMPSON AS A PERSON WITH AUTISM

A latent, unperceived pattern – essential to the narrative – underlies Benjy’s discussion of the flower, the slipper, the cushion, the mirror and the fire. In order to perceive this pattern the reader must first repudiate the traditional label of “idiot” and any of its subsequent deviations. Given Benjy’s unique characteristics, his object obsession, his social relationships, and his limited language, “person with autism” is a far more accurate label to apply to Benjy. Like us, Faulkner had certain terms with which he could interpret disability. To suppose that Faulkner was simply subscribing to common disability terms and not contributing to and refining a mutable discourse of disability is a critical misstep. Such a belief not only undermines Faulkner’s insight, but also allows Benjy, an engaging, dynamic character, to mutate into a form inhuman. “Idiot,” by its very use, directs attention to problems of Benjy’s text: its practical incoherency, rudimentary language, and an apparent lack of structure. Conversely, “person with autism” redirects the reader’s attention to the intriguing features of the narrative: his depictions of familial relationships that are either warmly nourished or coldly neglected; his rapid associative memory that recalls poignant moments in Compson history with
remarkable precision; and his obsession with objects that reflects his personal stability, his happiness, his distress, and his love. Adopting a new lens to view Benjy through is hardly a mistake, some sort of anachronistic scholarly error; it is an action that enlivens a new dimension in *The Sound and the Fury*, one that must be explored in our contemporary discussions of Faulkner’s seminal work.

This project tracks the raw data in the novel. By charting the specific instances of Benjy’s coveted objects, patterns subtly emerge from a seemingly amorphous mass of words. Figure 5.1 diagrams the instances of Benjy’s objects.

**FIGURE 5.1 - MASTER LINE GRAPH**

Benjy’s objects make a significant entrance into the novel. The first pronounced arc in the chart represents early instances of the fire and the flower. After this entrance, Benjy moves away from his objects, and few are instanced in the middle section of his narrative. However, on page 35 of the Norton Critical edition, during the “flower
bottle” scene, a sharp spike in the graph announces an oncoming deluge of objects. Within the resulting flurry, Benjy communicates his habits, his personal relationships and the drama of his family to the reader. In this final obsessional storm, the reader sees Benjy accompanied and isolated, and granted and denied the things he values. A clear arc emerges in Benjy’s narrative. Uncovering this arc demands that the reader eschew traditional labels, yet once the pattern is discovered Benjy’s text is given form. This “autistic” structure of Benjy’s narrative is what distinguishes it from other texts within the novel and in Faulkner’s overall canon.

Raw data is only part of the evidence that substantiates this new form. As this project shows, close readings develop the patterns in Benjy’s narrative and demonstrate the tight connection between Benjy, his objects, and his social relationship. In fact, the raw data is not enough when determining the precise value of Benjy’s objects to his narrative. For example, when Benjy sits with his mother in a room of fire produced, in part, by the mirror, a simple tallying of “fire,” and “mirror,” and “cushion” will not capture the drama of the scene. The reader must engage the scene with sensitivity to Benjy’s obsession. With these considerations in place, a more full understanding of the distance between Benjy and Mrs. Compson can be developed. Certainly, even the most novice of readers can reach the conclusion that Mrs. Compson and Benjy are distant. However, the sensitive reader is able to understand how Benjy creates this distance in his narrative. It is Benjy’s autistic poetics that leave this impression. By permitting Benjy to exist beyond the label of
“idiot,” the reader allows him to flourish in new creative spaces and his narrative to be reinvigorated.

This project is hardly an exhaustive application of autism to Benjy. Only object obsession, a single trait of Benjy’s “restricted interests,” is examined. His obsession naturally invites related discussions of his language and his social relationships. A plethora of other topics related to Benjy’s plausible autism can be investigated: how does Benjy’s echolalia function in the text? When does he recall quotes? From whom does this dialogue come from? Does Benjy catalogue some individuals more than others? Why might Benjy do this and what repercussions does this have on the form of the text? Benjy’s language outside of quotations could also be thoroughly reinvestigated in light of autism. Does Benjy communicate more to the reader when he is with certain individuals? Does Benjy’s language grow or plateau, and when does this happen? This project is the first step in this reinvestigation of Benjy. Many of the resulting threads it produces could lead to equally insightful discussion.

In the middle of his section, Frony reflects on Benjy’s name change. She remarks, “Saying a name. He dont know nobody’s name.” Frony’s belief stirs Dilsey and Roskus. Dilsey rebuts Frony, and Roskus quickly adds, “He know lot more than folks thinks” (20). This project explores these untouched and often unconsidered powerful regions of Benjy’s mind. Focus must be redirected to what other ways Benjy’s plausible autism might shape his reality and his relationships with others. A corollary of his disability, object obsession, is central to the way Benjy makes sense of the world and those that surround him. The shortcomings of an alleged “idiot”
may in fact be the unique narrative powers that give Benjy an authorial identity. By recognizing this identity, we can revel in a barrage of sound and fury, finding insight and truth within it.
LITERATURE CITED


LITERATURE CONSULTED


APPENDIX

DSM’S DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA FOR AUTISM

A. A total of six (or more) items from (1), (2), and (3), with at least two from (1), and one each from (2) and (3):

1. qualitative impairment in social interaction, as manifested by...the following:
   a. marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interaction
   b. failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
   c. a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people (e.g., by a lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest)
   d. lack of social or emotional reciprocity

2. qualitative impairments in communication as manifested by...the following:
   a. delay in, or total lack of, the development of spoken language (not accompanied by an attempt to compensate through alternative modes of communication such as gesture or mime)
   ...d. lack of varied, spontaneous make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level

3. restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities, as manifested by...the following:
   a. encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus
   b. apparently inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals
   c. stereotyped and repetitive motor manners (e.g., hand or finger flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements)
   d. persistent preoccupation with parts of objects
B. Delays or abnormal functioning in at least one of the following areas, with onset prior to age 3 years: (1) social interaction, (2) language as used in social communication, or (3) symbolic or imaginative play.

C. The disturbance is not better accounted for by Rett's Disorder or Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (75)