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Don't Toss that Novel! How to Read Benjy's Bright Shapes in *The Sound and the Fury* and Rhoda's Watery Words in *The Waves*

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Don't Toss That Novel!

How to Read Benjy's Bright Shapes in *The Sound and the Fury*

and Rhoda's Watery Words in *The Waves*

AN HONORS THESIS

College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

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by

Eleanor Gray

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PROJECT TITLE: *Don't Toss That Novel!* How to Read Benjy's Bright Shapes in *The Sound and the Fury* and Rhoda's Watery Words in *The Waves*

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In their respective novels *The Waves* and *The Sound and the Fury*, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner establish focal points in narration; each author uses a unique narrative strategy to trace characters and voices' mind processes, languages, and interactions. Each novel reads like a snapshot of these narrated worlds without omniscient authorial guidance, leaving the reader to decipher the language and codes on the page. Accordingly, the barrier these narrative languages face are both within the page and without, as translation requires a committed reader who wants to learn the language, a reader who, even when the voices spiral off the page, resists tossing the novel across the room. In fact, many readers have recommended that route, advocating that the novels be tossed. In his 1930 review of *The Sound and the Fury* in the *Nation* titled "Hardly Worth While," critic Clifton P. Fadiman writes, "Sound and fury indeed. Signifying (the witticism is cheap, but inevitable) almost nothing" (Fadiman 93) while critic Winfield Townley Scott in his review "Modernist Manner over Matter" called the novel "downright tiresome" (Scott 83). In the introduction to his critical text *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction*, Mark Hussey describes argues that in *The Waves* the "disjunction between language and reality is acute," and, he continues, "I find in *The Waves* serious failure on the terms of [Woolf's] aesthetic" (xx).

As these critics suggest, each novel forces the reader to struggle with the words and trailing sentences on the page, which are set into motion by the voices in the text. Both novels require translation because both pivot on improbable language: one centered on the speech of a mute, the other on the non-conversational language of six voices being used as dialogue. In *The Waves*, the narrative consists of a conversation between six friends; however, Woolf creates voices that appear disconnected from "real" speech and that instead engage in indirect dialogue using dense, philosophical language and highly descriptive figurative images. By arranging the

voices in this way, Woolf suggests that language is the *only* means through which each “character” (as made distinct by name) can define the qualities of his or her voice, as well as to create a voice that translates their internal identities into the social space. That is, through language, these six voices experience happenings in their lives, from childhood spent together, to college (for the men) and convent (for the women) years spent apart, to their meetings as adults at socials, and finally, their growing awareness of their progression toward death.

Although there are six distinct voices developing in their own right, I focus specifically on Rhoda’s voice because she represents the dilemma involved in creating an identity with a new language while at the same time struggling to accept this language; also, unlike the others, some quality of her voice leads her to commit suicide, ending this progression toward death, which I find is a process marked most clearly in her voice. Furthermore, her physical and emotional reactions illuminate her struggle to accept the standard language’s ability to constrain meaning; additionally, her reactions reveal the processes in her creation of an alternative, emotion-based language. Tracing her development of this new language, Rhoda’s own “plot” begins with her confusion with school language as a young child, followed by her isolated move into a convent; then, the second half of her plot centers on her experience with her adaptive language, and she is exposed to the social order (dinner parties, male gazes, etc.), which creates panic within her voice because she cannot control people’s continual re-shaping of her identity with their words.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner records the Compson family narrative using time-based sections that correspond with a different voice. Each of the four sections recollects a basic plotline: Caddy Compson, the only girl in the family, creates chaos within the family when she bears an illegitimate child; meanwhile, her brothers Quentin and Benjy are emotionally obsessed with her (albeit in different ways), with Quentin eventually moving to Harvard and committing

suicide on the day of Caddy's wedding. Then, the family (including the resentful brother, Jason Compson) adopts Caddy's child, Quentin, only to "protect" her from her mother as well as to preserve what remains of their family's reputation. To trace this complicated plot, Faulkner begins with Benjy's seemingly disorientated narrative, which provides the base set of meanings for Faulkner's time-based sections, and then moves into Quentin's semi-stable account, followed by the third and fourth sections, which essentially fill in the gaps. Each of these narrative sections reveals a stage (or a collection of past and present stages) in the plot. To trace this narrative, Faulkner injects Benjy's language into each section, so that his created collection of sounds and smells do not disappear from the novel but continues to emerge in different forms; he also gives the family's voices space on the page even when they are not speaking, allowing them to create new meaning in each scene.

Given the double problem of translating these novels, my project is to dissect and explore the language in each, outlining and comparing their key features, as well as indicating what barriers these languages face in "speaking" in the narrative. Essentially, Woolf and Faulkner create languages through characters that do not "speak" in the normal sense. Each author gives the narrative control to the internal, unspoken language (Benjy) or often struggling voice, trying to translate self-identity to the outside (Rhoda); by favoring the silenced voice, these authors build creative languages that provide new perspective in narration. In my usage, language in these novels is a set of meanings used by each voice to understand experiences, emotions, and feelings; it is a set of meanings rather than just a set of words because the sense fragment (the physical and emotional experience) is often understood according to a past, sense-based memory of that experience. Accordingly, the sense fragment is the basic unit of this language and is comprised of sounds, smells, objects, and abstracted images. For Benjy in *The Sound and the*

Fury and Rhoda in *The Waves*, their languages emerge from an exchange between the past sense fragment and the sense cues in the present: finding voice involves making associations between the emotional and sense fragments of one situation and then accessing those fragments to define another experience. Furthermore, this language is characterized by a constant exchange between the past (the sense fragment) and the present (the sense cue). In this context, language often appears as a chaotic collection of words and phrases, and it is voice that becomes the organized manifestation or product of this language.

My central comparison is between Rhoda and Benjy because they are the “creators” of the alternative language. Faulkner and Woolf each construct Benjy and Rhoda’s respective voices to “speak” through a similar structure in their use of senses, sounds, objects, memories, and emotions to shape their languages. Both voices also struggle to fully connect to their bodies, which is necessary to let this language move from the internal voice into the communal space to directly interact with others: Rhoda suffers from a crippling fear of the judgment held in other people’s gaze (directed at her body, but indirectly suppressing her voice) and Benjy lacks the capacity for speech because of mental disability. Although these two barriers are not identical, each represents an edge (a concept that I will elaborate on below) that an abstract or invented language must overcome to have meaning in the social space. Moreover, because of each novel’s narrative structure, both of their silences are quite similar: Rhoda “speaks” like the other voices in *The Waves* but it is to an abstract space that lacks any direct response or acknowledgement while Benjy can “speak” in howls and screams, yet none of his family’s voices can respond or interpret the voice beneath these sounds.

Accordingly, for Rhoda and Benjy speaking in these languages also creates a problem or barrier within the novel, and they encounter an edge that stifles their voices. The edge is a

physical boundary (the body) that transforms into a mental boundary (creating the discomfort or silence), as disconnect between the body and the physical act of speaking affects how each language translates onto the page. Although it does connect to the body's outline, this edge is also internal because it illuminates how a struggle with language can affect how that language reaches the surface (as in instances where their languages appear nonsensical, saying nothing at all). In both novels, sense fragments create meaning by collecting in the internal language and then emerge to give emotional definition to the object or experience. But both Benjy and Rhoda struggle with matching internal language with external appearance: Rhoda feels she is being defined from the outside strictly according to her physical form while Benjy's family members cannot see the linguistic process occurring inside him. Moreover, because their language is internal, any resulting definition is a collection of fragments, rather than a solid definition composed of words found in the dictionary that waits to pass over the edge. Those sense fragments and sense cues are merely *like* a definition. That is, to "define" in *The Waves* and in *The Sound and the Fury* is to collect sense fragments (sounds, smells, and images) and then to understand the thing or emotion according to this personalized definition, and, if language can organize itself into voice, it can cross that edge and speak in the social space.

Benjy's Language: Sounds, Smells, Objects, and Memories as Words and Meanings

I. Composition of meaning: sense-fragments

In an essay titled "A Rhetoric for Benjy" on language in *The Sound and the Fury*, L. Moffitt Cecil identifies a certain "problem of language" that Faulkner solved by "invent[ing] a language which would both sustain the illusion of Benjy's mental deficiencies and serve as a dependable verbal medium for the transmission of good sense" (66). This "problem" relates to

how to portray a physically silent character's experience with language and how to match, to some extent, that language with the character's mental capabilities. For Benjy, developing language (and eventually finding voice) involves making associations between the sense cue in one situation and then accessing, but not controlling, the appropriate, internal sense fragment to define the experience. Several other critics note Benjy's invented voice, including Andre Bleikasten, who calls Benjy's language an "idiolect" that "forms a closed system, a strictly private code, designed to suggest the functioning of an abnormally limited consciousness" (68). But in my reading, rather than being proof of "an abnormally limited consciousness," Benjy's language represents the silenced character's adaptive use of backgrounds, sounds, and smells to develop voice in silence. Instead of remaining silent, Benjy develops an attachment to objects that act as guides for his own experience with language; through these objects, his voice alters established, stable definitions. Benjy extends his voice to two separate levels: to memories and to backgrounds, both of which provide various sense fragments and sense cues for his chaotic voice. Benjy's voice navigates these various levels (memory and backgrounds), drawing from different sounds and shapes to build his language. Ultimately, these elements provide him with an unspoken language that uses sense experiences like "bright shapes" and inanimate objects like the slipper or the bowl to narrate the section; that is, the memories and backgrounds give Benjy his own language, distinctive from "the myriad abstract nouns which intelligent men use freely to distinguish their feelings and their thoughts" (Cecil 71).

Benjy connects what he feels (the sense fragment) to what he hears (the sense cue), which reassembles the scene in a way that reflects the disorientation in his voice. When his thoughts seem to slip out of control and he loses that connection between sense fragment and sense cue, he finds the slipper, which is a sense fragment with the strongest connection to his sister Caddy:

“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” (*SF* 46). When Benjy describes how the slipper feels in his hands, he continually relates each feeling to his position, building emotional intensity through this exchange between object and hand. Through this process, the sense fragment forms its connection to the sense cue. When he identifies the sense fragments held within the slipper (the sense cue), Benjy connects his body and what he feels with this internal language.

Similar to the process involving the slipper, Benjy also connects the “bright shapes” he sees throughout his section to his sister Caddy, as though his perspective in the world flows through his relationship with her in some way. For example, when he is in the carriage with his mother, he understands the movement alongside him in relation to an earlier memory of Caddy: “The shapes flowed on. The ones on the other-side began again, bright and fast and smooth, like when Caddy says we are going to bed” (*SF* 8). The “bright shapes” are connected to Caddy through the physical sensations Benjy experiences when Caddy sleeps with him in bed; however, even though this fragment, as well as the slipper, seems inherently sexual, Benjy’s language here instead relates to how he feels Caddy understands his language more than others appear to. She reveals her basic understanding of his language when Benjy is upset after seeing her with Dalton Aimes, who continues to caress Caddy because, according to him “[Benjy] cant talk” (*SF* 30) and thereby cannot understand. However, Caddy responds to Dalton saying, “He can see. Dont. Dont” (30), which indicates that she feels Benjy does collect visual cues and is able to understand them to some extent. In other words, Caddy understands Benjy beneath the physical edge that silences his voice, as she can read his cues and cries as indicators that he is building a language within his own mind.

Also within Benjy's voice is a unique ability to translate multiple voices (both human and those in the landscape) into a single, but still fragmented voice; he provides the center point for other voices to merge, collecting emotions, details, and associations that might otherwise be lost in the scene. In his critical essay "*The Sound and the Fury* and the Dislocation of Form," Donald M. Kartiganer characterizes these external voices as "a series of frozen pictures, offered without bias" (24) that ultimately allow Benjy to experience the past in full detail in spite of the fragmented memories. For example, Benjy uses the shadow as a sense fragment to create a "frozen picture" of Caddy with, assumedly, a lover, Charlie, as he notices, "It was two now, and then one in the swing. Caddy came fast, white in the darkness... The one in the swing got up and came, and I cried and pulled Caddy's dress" (*SF* 30). In this scene, Benjy's sense fragment for Charlie remains a shadow, while Caddy transitions into a human figure, which illustrates how he witnesses each of their movements differently according to his collected sense fragments. In other scenes, shadow traces simple movement, but here Benjy also uses the shadow to make his emotional response to Caddy differ from his response to Charlie. Although Benjy does not make explicit connections between what he sees in the present and the memory that emerges, there are patterns or distinct connections between what he feels and what memories emerge from the past. Moreover, because he is an "idiot," these associations align in his voice solely from his senses. Benjy does not intellectualize what he senses by applying outside definitions but rather works from within his own voice (a collection of sounds and smells) to "make sense" of what he witnesses.

But Benjy never makes a spoken phrase, as all of the phrases in his narrative are directly from the body and remain trapped there as unspoken fragments; yet, he does have a dimension to his voice that adopts fragmented qualities and uncensored emotion by picking up details in the

landscape. His language emerges in his descriptions of the backgrounds, as these provide him with a momentary escape from being a filter for his family's voices, yet, of course, it is only heard on the page. Michel Gresset identifies Benjy's close relationship with the landscapes as being connected to self-awareness, as he says, "The fact of being alive in the world is not problematic for him, for he is on a level with the world" (175). These non-human backgrounds, much like other objects provide the source for his language. In using background objects or scenes, he finds this sense-based language that allows his senses to merge with one another, where seeing, smelling and feeling become functions of the voice itself.

Benjy forms his relationship with the landscape by pulling sense fragments from the backgrounds; however, his family's voices still can overwhelm his baseline connection to these backgrounds. When the children are discussing a recent death in the family, Caddy mentions Nancy (a horse) and the buzzards that ate her corpse, which immediately transfers Benjy to his own memory of that scene: "The bones rounded out of the ditch, where the dark vines were in the black ditch, into the moonlight, like some of the shapes had stopped. Then they all stopped and it was dark, and when I stopped to start again I could hear Mother, and feet walking fast away, and I could smell it" (*SF* 22). Benjy's sense memory enters the present as a way for him to grasp the idea of death, yet what colludes this memory is the new connection between death and his mother. He loses the connection with the "bright shapes" that connect to the positive feelings he associates with sleeping with Caddy and immediately slips into the negative sense fragments connected to his mother's voice, which then becomes the overwhelming sense cue in this scene. This sense fragment emerges from an earlier scene (albeit one that appears on page later in the narrative) where Benjy sits in the grass "watching the bones where the buzzards ate Nancy" (*SF* 23) and he hears Caddy ask Jason, "Do you think buzzards are going to Damuddy" (*SF* 23)

(Damuddy is the children's grandmother, whose funeral is occurring inside the house). What he smells is moving from that memory into the present; it is through this sense association that he can understand death, which is why he begins to cry when the smell re-emerges and "some of the shapes had stopped" (*SF* 22). From that point, the smell intensifies and moves from scene to scene, as the children return to the house and "A door opened and [he] could smell it more than ever, and a head came out. It wasn't Father. Father was sick there" (*SF* 22). Benjy's way of speaking (his use of the unspoken, sense fragments in language) allows him to detect both the literal death (his father) and the figurative decay at the center of his family (his mother).

Memories of Caddy are important sense fragments within both Benjy's language, and through these memories, Faulkner gives the absent or verbally disembodied voice space within the narrative. Discussing Caddy's role in both Benjy and Quentin's voices in his essay "The Discovery of Loss," John T. Matthews notes how she becomes the center for their voices, as "Benjy and Quentin are doomed to appropriate nothing except Caddy as already disappearing; she is, in their sections already the trace that is an origin, and her absolute plentitude can never be evoked in their minds" (80). Caddy's voice, although absent (she is the only Compson child without a narrative section), takes on a different type of narrative power through the sense fragment. In Benjy's voice, her voice moves freely into the present, but with Quentin, the process has more layers, as he can suppress her voice, yet appears unable to do so.

Simple physical cues transport these memories of Caddy to the surface into the present landscape and into Benjy's language. When Benjy snags himself on a nail in the present, his voice immediately tracks this moment by moving to a past memory of Caddy, remembering how "*Caddy uncaught me*" (*SF* 3) as she untangled him from the fence. This single memory then transitions Benjy's voice into another scene, effectively becoming the sense fragment that fills in

the narrative gaps in Benjy's voice, as he can only let this sense experience move through him without restriction. When Caddy is with Benjy at the gate, he absorbs the moment through smells and physical sensations, storing both background details like how "the flowers rasped and rattle against us" (*SF* 3) as well as Caddy's "status" in the scene: "Caddy smelled like trees and like when she says we're asleep" (*SF* 5). Later in the section, Benjy uses this same sense fragment to "respond" to Caddy's reassurance that she is "not going to run away" (*SF* 12); he recognizes that she is still the same Caddy, reinforcing this original sense fragment, noticing, "Caddy smelled like trees in the rain" (*SF* 12). His voice works between these layers—the feel of backgrounds and the smell of moving objects—to develop a set of sense fragments that represent his understanding of Caddy.

II. Crisis of external instability: uncontrollable sense cues (a deepening of the original problem)

But, when one of those sense fragments is lost or altered, Benjy experiences disorientation both physically (in vertigo) and in his language (the panicked sequences). When Caddy has an affair with another man, Benjy understands this not as a moral failure (as their mother does), but as a moment where Caddy becomes a different sense cue. That is, he detects the changes in her sexual relations through his senses. Benjy creates the first sense fragment and its attached meaning set between Caddy's virginity and the smell of leaves, which is a central sense fragment for his language. In his voice, Caddy serves a similar function as a solid object, reflecting the same stabilizing qualities as the slipper; yet, she, as a character with significant agency, can easily alter this stable status. Caddy's sexual involvement with a man plunges Benjy into confusion and vertigo because he no longer is the man who she has slept with—in his mind, she now no longer belongs to just him. When he sees her mud-stained drawers (a physical

manifestation of her supposed impurity), he begins screaming because he fails to match his previous sense fragment of Caddy with what he sees unfolding in this scene: “Caddy put her arms around me, and her shining veil, and I couldn’t smell trees anymore and I began to cry” (*SF* 26). Benjy’s reaction to this shift illustrates how he comprehends the unspoken changes in this particular scene through smell; although, at least according to several critics, he does not “know” because he is an “idiot,” this disconnected association still causes him to react physically, as “[he] clawed [his] hands against the wall Caddy” (*SF* 25) when he sees her in this tree with dirty underpants.

Following this scene, Benjy’s language slips further into chaos, confusing his once prior sense association with Caddy as still preserved. When he grabs the neighbor girl passing by the fence, he immediately connects back to his relationship with Caddy and attempts to recover the meaning previously held in their bond; yet, Benjy’s voice is frantic here, fueled by this desperation to mend the detached sense fragments in his voice: “I was trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say and trying and the bright shapes began to stop and I tried to get out” (*SF* 34). He depends on Caddy to calm this chaotic unraveling of his voice, as she provides the sense experiences needed for him to make connections in other scenes. Caddy connects him to the family in a similar way that the objects do—through her sounds and smells he can understand certain features in his world. When he reaches for this unknown girl, he struggles to bring his voice over that edge (between object and meaning), as he “was trying to say and trying” (*SF* 34). Here the edge between the object and the meaning develops in Caddy’s absence. Without her physical presence in the family unit, Benjy slips into an internal silence.

III. Composition of new meaning / response to crisis

Benjy's struggle to maintain order in his internal voice stems from this change in Caddy, further illustrating how she dominates as a sense fragment in Benjy's language. Accordingly, Benjy allows Caddy's voice to filter unchanged through his own, providing details of her character rather than describing his own, and his "heart fixes on some of the objects in his collection precisely because they are just barely separated from the body of the beloved" (Matthews 82). Benjy's attachment to objects like the slipper, which are directly associated with Caddy, illustrates the foundational connection between his body and the object. Even though the section reveals Caddy's physical presence, Benjy becomes the avenue through which Caddy (or the memory of Caddy) can find voice, as she herself lacks an explicit narrative section in the novel. Caddy not only provides the central object for Benjy's voice, she provides the stability so as long as she remains unchanged. Yet, where she alters her behavior, she herself appears unaffected while Benjy internalizes the chaos in this external changes, gathering the family's growing instability in his own voice.

Benjy narrates through these sense experiences, unveiling the subtext of each scene, and indicating how each visual cue (the dirty underpants, the new smells) and the developing sense fragment gives meaning to the scene. Because Faulkner submerges the narrative in Benjy's unconscious, the reader observes both sides of this exchange, that is, the narrative provides both the sense associations made or lost and the resulting physical reaction (moaning, screaming, clawing, etc.). Benjy's internal voice translates into moans and cries, which Ted Roggenbuck argues gives Benjy some form of voice, as "crying involves [Benjy's] intentions and relates closely to saying" (583). However, this voice is often meaningless to Benjy's family, dismissed or misunderstood as the uncontrolled musings of an idiot—what actually occurs here embodies

the exchange between the sense fragment and the sense cue, as the chaotic elements of his internal voice accumulate in the sound of these moans and screams and represent the absence of a standard, word-object, perspective.

Rhoda's Voice: Waves and Watery Words as Emotion-based Descriptors

Where Benjy is unable to use standard English because he is mentally handicapped, Rhoda is unable to use standard English because she does not understand the connection between the word and the object, and because she experiences a gap between standard language and her own perception. For Rhoda, this gap first appears in her childlike language after the opening sequence (in which all characters have childlike language) when they are in school; and while they are all speaking the more standard English language, there is something that she cannot grasp—and she describes her alienation from standard English by calling their language “chalk figures” and defines herself as outside of “the loop,” which in my reading is associated with language. Unlike Benjy, Rhoda recognizes this gap and reacts increasingly through her narrative.

Like Benjy who uses the backgrounds to gather sense fragments, Rhoda in *The Waves* also patterns her language according to collected sense imagery and sense cues. But a single image more explicitly shapes the qualities of Rhoda's language—the wave. Rhoda experiences language with the wave and its characteristics as her central images, that is, the language associated with waves (sinking, flowing, floating, pouring, etc.) provide the key sense fragments she uses to track meaning. In Rhoda's section, the wave appears as an image that captures the passing moment; the sense fragment is of the motion of the moving wave, only gradually moving toward an endpoint—the shore. Although, as some critics note, the voices in *The Waves* often use similar images, Rhoda's language pivots on the wave, both as a key image in her language

and as a model for how the sense fragments fit within her language. The wave, much like Benjy's shadow, is the sense fragment that captures the dark or unknown in life (especially, death and the lack of meaning in words) while the movement of the wave toward shore captures her fear of the unknown—the endpoint on shore the same as the “terror” that awaits in a room of strangers.

I. Composition of meaning: sense-cues

Fitting with the waves' undisrupted flow, the childlike language at the novel's opening provides another illustrative model for the structure of Rhoda's language, but it also provides a base from which all the other voices move away. Although Rhoda also adapts her voice throughout the novel, she roots herself in the childlike sense fragments in the novel's opening that is similar to Benjy's sense-based, “simple” language. In the first section of *The Waves* all six voices speak in childlike fragments, matching one another's language with these creative descriptions:

“I see a ring,” said Bernard, “hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.”

“I see a slab of pale yellow,” said Susan, “spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.”

“I hear a sound,” said Rhoda, “cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down.”

“I see a globe,” said Neville, “hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.” (*Waves* 4)

Here Rhoda describes the bird's song as having the rhythmic pattern of the wave, “going up and down” with each sound, indicating how the wave as a sense fragment can be applied to understand sound. However, each voice in this section, not just Rhoda's, illustrates how the fragment works, as this grouping of words leaves the object or sound undefined and simply

describes, creating these sense fragments that can be accessed in later descriptions. Pointing to this similarity in voice, several critics argue that the voices within *The Waves* are not distinct and instead represent some collective perspective. Discussing how *The Waves* centers on a collective, unified voice, critic James Naremore argues that “the fundamental character of their language is the same” (158) and “separate voices often draw on the same body of imagery” (158). Critic Nancy Topin Bazin suggests that the voices balance between unity and disunity, as “An intricate network of similarities and differences among the characters exists; however, the overall movement is between integration (into a group personality through a mystical experience of oneness) and disintegration (into separate identities)” (148).

Although many of the images move from voice to voice, unlike these critical opinions, in my reading, the voices in *The Waves* reach toward distinct and varied foundations, ranging from the sense-based (Rhoda’s imaginative language) to a standardized or defined word set (Bernard’s word-object language). Whereas many of the voices abandon this early model of describing, Rhoda’s voice retains these qualities, allowing these childlike or disconnected sense fragments to naturally re-surface in her voice and become her method of speaking. Because she does not follow the word-object pattern, Rhoda uses details in a different way; for example, she finds, “Every tree is big with a shadow that is not the shadow of the tree behind it” (*Waves* 169) rather than using the standard definition as a “large woody, plant with one main trunk and many branches” (“Tree”). Using these details alters the object’s definition by providing more space for variations in meaning and by describing further how a tree appears in her experience. Rhoda reveals the relational qualities that define a tree and how each detail connects the object to another like it, relying on dynamic sense details rather than quantifiable details (“one main trunk with many branches”).

As a replacement for fragmented meaning, words in the established language system, fail to fully outline the individual perspective or personal interaction with the outside world (according to Rhoda). Patricia Laurence labels this fragment replacement as Woolf's attempt "to escape the alphabet" by using "images relating to the 'decipherry of pictographs'" (139). Laurence points to an important component of my argument—the use of the image as a new alphabet—but she does not explore how each of these images begins to pattern themselves within Rhoda's language to create a new narrative perspective. To break from limited words, Rhoda uses the sense fragment to understand the object or emotion. Like the unknown beneath the wave, Rhoda's fragment claims no truth, but rather seeks to combine with other fragments to continue to describe the thing, to never truly reach "extraordinary understanding," but to move toward it. Rhoda's voice questions the stability of the word, asking " 'Like' and 'like' and 'like' —but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?" (*Waves* 118). She continues to explain how claiming knowledge of objects based on these phrases or descriptions is a double-edged sword: "There is a square; there is an oblong...Very little is left on the outside. The structure is now visible...This our triumph; this is our consolation" (*Waves* 118). Through fragments Rhoda can both distinguish her voice from the others in the dialogue and she can also use them to develop perspective, to position her voice within the world.

Rhoda feels that her voice operates in a life filled with sounds of chaos and fury, which she incorporates into her voice, as she finds "there is no single scent, no single body for me to follow. And I have no face...I am whirled down caverns, and flap like paper against endless corridors, and must press my hand against the wall to draw myself back" (*Waves* 94). Even though she can create stability in the sense fragment by re-enforcing associated meanings, these fragments still are chaotic because they could allow a single thing to be continuously defined and

redefined. Rhoda's sense fragments form, but do not limit, meaning or understanding; she often connects her descriptions to an expansion of meaning, describing how she "flung words in fans like those the sower throws over the ploughed fields when the earth is bare. [She] desired to stretch the night fuller and fuller with dreams" (*Waves* 151). In this image, Rhoda indirectly reveals the process the sense fragment undergoes within this language: simply fling "words in fans" as they relate to the emotion in the scene. Each sense fragment grows her language and her poetic monologues create a space where "The cliffs vanish. Rippling small, rippling grey, innumerable waves spread beneath us. I touch nothing. I see nothing. We may sink and settle on the waves" (*Waves* 151).

In Rhoda's voice, the sense fragment is often tied to the wave in order to express a re-occurring emotion, especially panic and terror. She uses these sense fragments to explain the feeling in being exposed in social situations, indicating, "Like a ribbon or weed I am flung far every time the door opens. The wave breaks. I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness; I am also a girl; here in this room" (*Waves* 77). Here Rhoda links the wave with that feeling of being socially removed, of experiencing the instinctual terror that accompanies this fear of being re-defined or constrained by people's preconceptions "every time the door opens" and she must speak or communicate with other people. As more people enter the room and more voices threaten to crowd out her own, Rhoda links the wave again to her increasing awareness of her external identity, noting how "We cannot sink down, we cannot forget our faces" (*Waves* 88).

II. Crisis of external instability: uncontrolled sense cues (a deepening of the original problem)

When Rhoda says “we cannot sink down, we cannot forget our faces,” she is referring to the power of the mirror to remind her of the edge (the mental boundary) between her own understanding of her identity and what others translate for themselves. For Rhoda, the central terror lies in being described from the outside, as this usurps her own ability to define her language—which is directly connected to her identity—and gives the external voices the ability to “write” her story. When she enters the dining room, knowing that people are behind the door waiting to begin that “writing” process, she expresses this fear: “I am afraid of you all. I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do” (*Waves* 94). She experiences terror under their gaze because she feels people are adopting the capability of that mirror—the ability to display and permanently define the surface appearance and to ignore her own understanding of her voice.

Rhoda often finds herself disconnected from this natural flow, both in language and in life’s progression, that others around her seem to be held within: “how you stand embedded in a substance made of repeated moments run together; are committed, have an attitude, with children, authority, fame, love, society; where I have nothing. I have no face” (*Waves* 163). But Rhoda feels that her removal from this cycle or social wave is because of an internal disconnect, as she finds “There is some check in the flow of my being; a deep stream presses on some obstacle; it jerks; it tugs’ some knot in the centre resists” (*Waves* 40). What prevents Rhoda from completely submerging in the unknowns of the wave (and fully into this sense-based language) is an important, surface sense cue that creates the resistant “knot in the centre”—the mirror. The mirror reminds her of what she must continually work against in building this language—a language she believes belongs to someone else, as she notes her need to mimic: “I wait for you to speak and then speak like you” (*The Waves*).

As a sense cue in Rhoda's language, the mirror as an object connects to the sense fragment that signals the knowledge of limits; when she looks in the mirror, she becomes aware (via the emerging sense fragments from the past) of a lost opportunity to describe or explore the moment in the present. Woolf explains this moment of panic or the "experience" of losing the imagination and drifting into silence in her essay "Professions for Women":

Her imagination had rushed away. It had sought the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber. And then there was a smash...There was foam and confusion...The girl was roused from her dream...To speak without figure she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. (61)

The mirror, and also the gaze of other people, place limitations on Rhoda's language that "sought the pools, the depths, the dark places" ("Professions" 61) and on her voice, as these externally defining objects like the mirror (and in the case of people, assumptions) trap her internal identity and remind her of limitations. Rhoda's imagination about how her body fits with her language is immediately diverted into panicking about how she might be perceived by the people in the room. Rhoda's language is an attempt to bridge that gap between her body and her ability to speak, to cross that edge (the definitions other people are applying) and to claim her own identity through this sense-fragment based language. She's writing with new voice to find "something about the body, about the passions" ("Professions" 61) that she cannot speak in the language, the "chalk figures" that the others use. Her language often slips into this ecstatic world of passions, where her own body is no longer an impediment for experiencing raw sensations, where in dark and silence she "can let [her] tree grow, quivering in green pavilions above my head" (*Waves* 39).

III. Composition of new meaning / response to crisis

Even though the wave often appears as a negatively charged sense fragment, for Rhoda it also reveals the qualities of another world that she remains distanced from; she gravitates toward this image because within water she finds the unknown, unstructured qualities. Rhoda uses the concept of “the wave” to describe life’s trajectory, noting that it is impossible to resist forward movement to death as “life emerges heaving its dark crest from the sea” (*Waves* 45). Life is contained in that dark crest, that collection of unspoken and deep secrets; but, according to Rhoda, other voices fail to embrace these qualities even though, “It is to this [life] we are attached; it is to this we are bound, as bodies to wild horses. And yet we have invented devices for filling up the crevices and disguising these fissures” (*Waves* 45). Rhoda’s language mirrors the unknown, emotionally raw qualities within the dark crest. Words and phrases are the “invented devices” used both to eliminate that silence as well as to avoid acknowledging the unknown qualities reflected in life and in language.

Rhoda’s other main sense fragments build on the dark qualities of the wave, especially when used to describe moments of terror, generally related to social encounters. Rhoda’s central sense fragments are based in animalistic imagery, and she uses the animal’s unselfconscious, instinctual reactions and other wild images (trees, clouds, etc.) to describe her emotions and experience. Rhoda uses one such fragment, the tiger, to describe moments of terror, indicating how each time “the door opens; the tiger leaps” and she continues, “terror rushes in; terror upon terror, pursuing me” (*Waves* 75). Rhoda accesses emotional language beyond the present scene to submerge herself in the “meaning” behind what she sees; she links two sense experiences to access the “meaning” behind the thing, building her voice through these memories. Through the

sense fragment, she also creates a contrast between what she feels and to reveal how she longs to escape “this ill-fitting body” (*Waves* 76) and to go to the place where she would be without her crippling fear of other’s “writing” her identity without seeing her internal language: to the “marble columns and pools on the other side of the world where the swallow dips her wings” (*Waves* 76). Here Rhoda creates meaning and contrast by developing distinct sense fragments (the swallow and the tiger) that she feels capture the meaning behind her emotions and her reactions. Each of these images gains meaning by being re-used in different contexts, as each stabilizes in meaning when Rhoda uses the fragment consistently.

For example, when the absent voice Percival enters for dinner, Rhoda and the other voices outline the details of his appearance, subtly comparing their voices’ positions to his. In this scene, all the voices appear to slip into child-like sense fragments, seemingly nonsensical; Percival, as the absent voice, appears to transfer these voices back to a prior state of reliance on sense fragments. Drawing the scene with surface details, Jinny notes how “He has not dressed” (*Waves* 88) and Bernard watches him “smoothing his hair, not from vanity” (*Waves* 88) while, in contrast, Rhoda recalls an emotionally charged sense experience beyond his physical appearance, as she notices “The tiger leapt, and the swallow dipped her wings in dark pools on the other side of the world” (*Waves* 91). Rhoda re-accesses this same series of fragments (“The tiger leapt,” “the swallow dipped,” and “dark pools on the other side of the world”) to portray the emotional movement in the reaction to Percival’s entrance. In using these fragments, Rhoda indicates how emotions in each scene move into the voice through the sense fragment, giving the scene personal meaning and added depth.

Rhoda’s narrative perspective has its base in the unknown, in the hollowness behind the object, and in the malleability of meaning. These new sense fragments also cause Rhoda to

question other unknowns, namely, the impact of the word on the real meaning of the thing or object. Rhoda extends this new understanding of the unknown in death to directly question the accuracy of words in description, indicating that an important piece of the thing being described is lost when the word determines the final “semblance of the thing,” especially when those words attempt to explain death or a loss. Rhoda questions the ability of words to convey the emotions involved in losing a member of the group. Further into her reaction to Percival death, Rhoda responds by questioning the ability of language to understand this loss; accordingly, her interjections appear as disconnected, panicked ruminations. She indicates how the emotion, “the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing” (*Waves* 118), cannot be completely exposed.

For Rhoda, her voice feels this unavoidable exposure, as it finds that drawing inward and building the internal language is less stressful than engaging with a world dictated and controlled by the “chalk figures” of other’s language. Bernard believes his voice can accurately depict everything in the world, while Rhoda feels that objects have their own agency or independent existence beyond the word or phrase. In direct contrast to Rhoda, he believes that outside voices build his external image in a positive, defining him from all perspectives, and he notes how “I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me” (*Waves* 97). In terms of his use of language to experience the world, unlike Rhoda, Bernard finds comfort in words, believing that they can accurately describe, explaining, “I am astonished, as I draw the veil off things with words, how much, how infinitely more than I can say I have observed” (*Waves* 60). Feeling no need to “escape the alphabet” (Laurence 139), he uses defined words, which provide a standard language, to make a projection of his voice. Further pointing to the inadequacy of Rhoda’s language, Bernard also indicates how fragments, or brief descriptions of objects, are not sufficient for understanding, as “[v]isual impressions often communicate thus

briefly statements, that we shall in time to come uncover and coax into words” (*Waves* 130).

Here Bernard suggests that descriptions require a concrete connection between the impression and the coaxed word in order to be sufficient in explaining the nature of the thing. This “coaxing” into words involves reaching for explanations or descriptions not held within the object itself; rather, as Bernard finds, he can use his knowledge of language to establish solid connections between himself and the object.

Rather than needing to “coax” meaning through words, Rhoda’s voice uses the sense fragment and its unknowns as a foundation; she models her voice after the wave’s dark crest and the swallow’s abrupt flight, never filling the inherent disconnect between the word and the object with invented phrases. Rhoda notices a metaphorical translation of this silence in the landscape, outlining the “hollow where the many-backed steep hills come down like birds’ wings folded. There, on the short, firm turf, are bushes, dark leaved, and against their darkness I see a shape, white, but not of stone, moving, perhaps alive” (*Waves* 100). In this scene, the shape represents the undefined—the sense fragment used to understand a fraction of the object. Rhoda explains that in this hollow, an object or an image (the white arm) “makes no sign, it does not beckon, it does not see us...It is beyond our reach. Yet there I must venture. There I will go to replenish my emptiness, to stretch my nights and fill them fuller and fuller with dreams” (*Waves* 101). She models her own voice after this hollowness, this endless possibility for experiencing the world’s complexities with any combination of sense fragments, which, in the words of Bernard, removes limits from her language: “Rhoda was wild—Rhoda one never could catch” (*Waves* 183).

Body as the Edge: Breaking the Flow of Benjy and Rhoda’s Languages

Benjy, who cannot speak his language to other voices because of his “limited” body, illustrates though his groans and screams where what edge stifles his voice—the body’s physical outline, as in its functional capacity. Rhoda also exposes an edge that emerges because she knows other voices can define her identity, which is an awareness that prevents her entire self from speaking and reveals the edge’s location—the body’s mental outline. Although the nature of the edge is different (physical versus mental), in both cases, the body operates as the medium that both Benjy and Rhoda’s languages must pass through to be used in the social space; their unique languages will be recognized as belonging to their body only when they overcome the barrier of the edge. Writing specifically about women’s writing (note that these qualities translate to Benjy voice as well), Helene Cixous outlines the body’s role in “speaking” and in voice. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous describes a woman’s connection between her voice and body, arguing that a woman “ ‘doesn’t speak,’ she throws her trembling body forward...all of her passes into her voice, and it’s with her body that she vitally supports the ‘logic’ of her speech” (881). Rhoda and Benjy’s languages embody Cixous’s model of “speaking” with the body, as both collect these sense fragments with their bodies, which allows them to develop their own language, and then, in complete connectivity, the body must be the center for the voice to speak and she (and he) “physically materializes what she’s thinking” (Cixous 881).

Regarding her mental edge, when Rhoda can eliminate or quiet her sense of “this ill-fitting body” (*Waves* 76), then her language can move into her voice without impediment. In this sense, her voice is not permanently trapped in the way that Benjy’s is; yet, how she moves to that edge is similar to Benjy’s process in locating objects as sense fragments. When she reaches that point where the “lumps in the mattress soften beneath [her]” (*Waves* 150), Rhoda, like Benjy when he connects himself with the slipper, can fully access the potential descriptive power of the

sense fragment; however, she does not lose her connection to her body, but rather she eliminates the awareness that creates the edge, or the mental boundary. Furthermore, she maintains the connection between body and language by fusing herself with their sense-based meanings: “I touch nothing. I see nothing. We may sink and settle on the waves” (*Waves* 151). By using the wave in this context, Rhoda indicates that when her language mirrors that calmness within the wave’s steady, rhythmic movement, she can “speak” through her body. She writes her identity from the inside with her own language, but translating those qualities to the surface proves difficult, as her body has the potential to derail those sense fragments; she struggles to find the silence (that is, the quieting of outside voices, threatening to define her story) necessary to let the sense fragment “speak,” where she “can let the day drop down, before [she] can let [her] tree grow, quivering in green pavilions about [her] head” (*Waves* 39). When Rhoda cannot find this silent space the sense fragments lose their ability to provide meaning and she drifts further into awareness of how her mental discomfort masks the language beneath.

Although Rhoda’s edge is not permanent, there is an external force that continues to rebuild that barrier between her internal language and her voice—Rhoda must learn of the “chalk figures” (*Waves* 14) of other’s language (and consequently, the other’s voices) that further intensify her mental edge. Early in the narrative, Rhoda identifies her initial confusion with this language, indicating how “the loop of the figure is beginning to fill with time; it holds the world. I begin to draw a figure and the world is looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop...The world is entire, and I am outside of it” (*Waves* 13). Furthermore, by using the loop imagery, Rhoda reveals how both her and Benjy’s struggle with language is based in the alienation “outside the loop”: disconnect between the body and mind (both physical and mental) creates an external barrier that pushed them “outside the loop” (*Waves* 13). This internal edge relates to the

body's mental outline, that is, how the voice understands how it fits with the body. Rhoda notes how she "hate[s] looking-glasses which show me my face" (*Waves* 30) because she feels her body can never accurately depict or reflect the internal language she writes, and she thereby feels trapped by this "ill-fitting body" (*Waves* 76). Although the body provides the avenue for the voice to move into the social space, the body, as a creation of external gazes and definitions, is also a potential "trap" for voice—a silent barrier creating mental discomfort and dampening voice.

Because his mental incapacity makes his body a placeholder, Benjy struggles with a physical edge, as he fits into the world as a body and not necessarily as a subject. His mental status prevents his language from moving into the social space while the moans and screams indicate the edge between voice and body. His "lack" causes him to become both a filter for the other voices but also a voice for the unspoken details in the backgrounds. Although he does not speak words, Benjy's screams indicate that he is letting the chaotic fragments pass through his body and into his voice, yet his lack of mental capacity creates a barrier to full speech. What is left behind is a fragmented and poetic voice. Benjy's voice accesses qualities outlined in Cixous's feminine voice, as "she *inscribes* what she's saying, because she doesn't deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking" (881). Here the qualities of this voice stem from innocence, as well as the connection to the body, in navigating the backgrounds without applying judgment. Benjy's physical edge confines his voice to the first section; however, with his attention directed to the scene's silent components, he provides a lens through which the entire novel can be read—as a focused extraction of the background sounds and smells as well as of the absent voices (i.e., Caddy). After the first section "April Seventh, 1928" in *The Sound and the Fury*, Benjy appears only as a physical body, moaning, crying and

mumbling. In these other sections, Benjy's voice is lost to the conventional narrative, only emerging in places where the family's voices enter the scene beyond the narrator's control.

When the other voices in each novel outline Benjy and Rhoda's edges from the external perspective, the body as a boundary for language becomes more apparent; the other voices' depictions of Benjy and Rhoda reveal how easily the sense fragment slips from view and the edge consumes their voices, changing how they are perceived from the outside. Illustrating the gap between Rhoda's flowing language and her strange physical demeanor, Louis notices the manner in which Rhoda enters the room when the six voices meet for dinner: "Rhoda comes now, from nowhere, having slipped in while we were not looking. She must have made a torturous course, taking cover now behind a waiter, now behind some ornamental pillar, so as to put off as long as possible the shock of recognition, so as to be secure for one more moment to rock the petals of her basin. We wake her. We torture her" (*Waves* 86-7). Louis points to how Rhoda's movements signal her feelings of linguistic entrapment, of how the other voice "wake her...torture her" by subjecting her to their judgments based in these external, but largely inaccurate, perceptions of who she truly is.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Benjy is also described from the outside, from an omniscient voice. Far removed from his internal language, a more explicit depiction of Benjy's edge physical emerges in the other narrative sections, as he described beyond his control, from the observer's perspective, not as an insightful poet, but as a "baby" or

...a big man who appeared to have been shaped of some substance whose particles would not or did not cohere to one another or to the frame which supported it. His skin was dead looking and hairless; dropsical too, he moved with a shambling gait like a trained bear.

His hair was pale and fine. It had been brushed smoothly down upon his brow like that of

children in daguerreotypes. His eyes were clear, of the pale sweet blue of cornflowers, his thick mouth hung open, drooling a little. (*SF* 171)

Here Benjy appears an inadequate host for the complex language he uses in his own section, much as Rhoda appears to lack any desire to engage with the world and instead drifts only to hide from experience.

Overall, these descriptions provided by the other voices indicate that Rhoda and Benjy's internal language does not match each of their apparent, physical demeanors. Both their bodies (whether from physical or mental constraints) do not explicitly connect with the complexity and depth within their languages. Instead, the edge that each language meets creates havoc for these sense fragments, and the result is the narrative confusion on the page. Because of that disconnect, the reader must translate who Benjy and Rhoda are according to their respective languages rather than making assumptions based on the edge that masks the sense fragments beneath; that is, translating Benjy's narrative section and Rhoda's monologues requires understanding their languages from the inside. Reading each of these novels from Benjy and Rhoda's inside perspectives then allows what they feel, what they see, and what they hear to become the foundations for their identities—their own experience with language as the source for their voice.

Furthermore, the reader, having read through these novels without tossing them across the room, has also experienced languages composed of qualities Rhoda and Benjy find imprinted in their worlds. Benjy and Rhoda's languages are unique in the sense that they have inbuilt, but still shifting, perspectives, as each sense-based word emerges from an internal source that still adapts to external changes. But with an internal foundation also comes a second implication: the pivotal role one's language plays in shaping identity. Rhoda and Benjy experience their worlds through these languages even as the words in each set shift, grasp for the past, and further build

the attached collection of sense fragments. Both reveal the struggle to control that language, and by extension, to control an identity built by multiple languages, both internal and external. Rhoda provides an example for those who do not feel in total control of their language, or feel comfortable speaking and engaging in that language, while Benjy illustrates what language can become for someone without the ability to speak. Furthermore, because of each novel's structure, language is not only the sole way in which Benjy and Rhoda depict their experiences in the world, it is also the critical barrier the reader must untangle in order to experience the physical, emotional, and linguistic play shaping each of these novels.

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