If William Faulkner every heard the saying “you can’t step into the same river twice,” he spent the early part of his career trying to defy it. Tracing themes of water, the female body, and the relationship between the character’s internal psychology and their external environment, I explore the progression of several works of Faulkner’s early career through a formalist interpretation. A formalist reading discusses the structures of an author’s works as they relate to the overall structure of their career. For those of you who aren’t English professors, this will make more sense later. I examine his career chronologically, from the short story “Nympholepsy” to *The Sound and the Fury* and finally, to *Absalom, Absalom!*

I focus on the early stages of Faulkner’s career as he experiments with literary forms such as the short story and develops the style and structure of his novels. Reading Faulkner chronologically and including his early and unpublished material provides a unique perspective regarding his development into the monumental works of his later career.  As he recycles themes, imagery, and even characters, Faulkner has created his own area of the Mississippi Delta called Yoknapatawpha County in which many of his novels and stories are set. This comprises a common geography and my particular argument dwells in the many interlacing waterways which flood and fertilize the land. This chronological and interconnected method of understanding Faulkner lends itself very conveniently to a formalist analysis. However, Faulkner is also well known for nonlinear structures within his novels. This forces scholars and readers of Faulkner to piece together disparate chronologies and read backwards through time and text.

While I discuss three of Faulkner’s works, *The Sound and the Fury* written in 1929 is at the center of my inquiry*. The Sound and the Fury* follows the Compson family as they decline from prestige in the early 20th century.  The novel is divided into chapters, each narrated by a different Compson brother: Benji, Quentin, and then Jason.  Caddy and her blossoming sexuality is the central focus of her brother’s memories and the driving force of the novel, but she only appears within her brothers’ narrations. These chapters follow a non-linear, stream of consciousness style that represents each brothers’ psychological inclinations.

The oldest sibling, Quentin Compson, and his chapter titled “June 2, 1910,” is the main subject of my paper and his story is the one from which my primary question originates. His chapter, voiced completely inside his mind, follows him around Cambridge, Massachusetts where he attends Harvard. While the chapter takes place over the course of one day, Quentin’s consciousness experiences temporal jumps as certain moments, particularly moments where he interacts with the river, trigger memories of his childhood in the South. Usually, these memories mark moments in Caddy’s transition into sexual maturity. The process of Caddy losing her innocence traumatizes Quentin and her brothers profoundly and they remain obsessed with her well after her adolescence. It is revealed through clues in other chapters that this day, June 2, is the day before Quentin commits suicide by drowning himself in the river.

While Quentin Compson lives and dies in *The Sound and the Fury,* Faulkner returns to his story in 1936 in *Absalom, Absalom!* In fact, Faulkner picks up Quentin’s story just before June 2, 1910, perhaps even on the evening of June 1st. *Absalom, Absalom!* operates under layers of storytelling. The novel’s structure is Quentin telling his college roommate the stories he’s heard from his father about the pre-civil war history of his southern town regarding a man named Thomas Sutpen. In this way, Faulkner connects Quentin to the history of the south through storytelling and offers entirely new material for making sense of Quentin’s suicide in *The Sound and the Fury.*

My central question is: Why does Quentin Compson drown himself? I argue that the answer requires us looking both forward and backwards in Faulkner’s career. Reading forward chronologically from material in Faulkner’s earliest and unpublished works, the answer lies in Quentin’s internal preoccupation with his sister Caddy. He projects his feelings about Caddy onto his surroundings, specifically onto the rivers and streams of his environments. Reading backwards through the content of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Quentin’s death can still be explained by examining the waterways of the texts. However, this retrospection reverses the relationship between the psychological and the environmental. Here, Quentin’s mind is actually shaped by the stories and physical features of the southern landscape.

In order to trace how Faulkner positions waterways within and without the psychologies of his characters, I first turn to “Nympholepsy,” a short unpublished story written in 1925. Following a working man taking a twilight stroll home after a day of labor, the central drama of this short piece is immersed within a treacherous stream. In a dream-like pursuit of a female form, the titular nymphomania, the man runs through the hillsides and tumbles into the stream:

“Then the water took him. But here was something more than water… But here beneath his hand a startled thigh slid like a snake, among the dark bubbles he felt a swift leg; and sinking, the point of a breast scraped his back. Amid the slow commotion of disturbed water, he saw death like a woman, shining and drowning and waiting, saw a flashing body tortured by water…” (N 335)

Immersed within the turbulence of the stream, the character encounters “something more than water” that is both physical and psychological. The man collides with various pieces of debris in the water and feels the textures of the river bottom as he struggles to swim to the other side. However, the character understands these physical sensations to be the overarching spiritual presence of a woman.  The water becomes the location of his nymphomania, the place where he collides and entangles with the body of this ethereal woman.  Instead of finding safety or sex, his fantasy quickly turns nightmarish and evil. The water froths with “dark bubbles” as a “swift leg” slides beneath his hand “like a snake” and he feels a sharp nipple “scrape” in violent arousal against his back. This “snake” leg, perhaps in truth a loose root in the stream, is an uncanny allusion to biblical temptation. When the character falls into the water, he encounters the temptation of the female body which becomes snakelike, torturous, and thoroughly dangerous. While he collides with these disembodied parts, it is uncertain whether the “leg” and the “breast” are actually connected to the woman he seeks. By the dreamy and nightmarish quality of this scene, it is more likely that these sensations are only a projection of an imagined woman within a landscape inscribed by the character’s psychology.

The character in this early story constructs his landscape entirely through perceptions and sensations. The waterways of *The Sound and the Fury* emerge out of this exclusively psychological frame. Keeping “Nympholepsy” in mind, consider how Quentin’s adolescent recollections of Caddy explore the ecological associations between his sister, the watery environment of the South, and his own psychological disturbance. On the night when Caddy loses her virginity, Quentin finds his sister at the branch, a small stream on the Compson property:

“she was lying in the water her head on the sand spit the water flowing about her hips there was a little more light in the water her skirt half saturated flopped along her flanks to the waters motion in heavy ripples going nowhere renewed themselves of their own movement” (*SF* 149)

Here, the watery Southern landscape engulfs Caddy as she merges with the branch from the waist down. Quentin notices “water flowing about her hips” which saturates her sexual anatomy. Thus, the branch indicates the stain of female sexuality and loss of virginity. These “ripples” emanate from the location of her womb like tides propelled by the moon. Thus, these tide-like “ripples” resemble Caddy’s own cycles of fertility. This moment is a catastrophe for Quentin as it represents the dirtying of Caddy’s virtue, the core of his distress. Note how this memory is constructed through the watery landscape as its crosses over into Caddy’s body and Quentin’s imagination.

While the branch is a rivulet within the drainage system of the Mississippi Delta, the river where Quentin actually drowns is outside of this Southern landscape. Quentin carries the South and its embedded traumas with him during his migration to the north for college. Like the character in “Nympholepsy,” Quentin inscribes his obsessions onto his environments, such as onto the river where he ends in life:

“a drowned man’s shadow was watching for him in the water all the time. It twinkled and glinted, like breathing… and debris half submerged, healing out to the sea and the caverns and the grottoes of the sea.” (*SF* 90)

This “shadow” lurks beneath the surface apparently waiting for its owner to follow it into the depths. When Quentin stands beside the river, he gazes at his “shadow” in the water from the same place on the bank where he gazes at Caddy in the branch. Caddy, like the entire environment of the South, follows Quentin like his “shadow” and seems to beckon him towards the water. Quentin seeks a “healing” in this eerie, watery journey out to the “caverns and the grottoes of the sea.” As hollow vessels which fill with ocean tides, these “caverns and grottoes” are yonic spaces like Caddy’s hips in the branch. Just as the nymphomaniac discovers “death like a woman,” Quentin drowns in a waterway that he believes will heal him through immersive, womb-like death.

While *The Sound and the Fury* scavenges the very depths of Quentin’s interior, the layered narratives of *Absalom, Abasalom!* flood outwards through the chorus of many voices. *Absalom* widens the scope of the Southern landscape to a broader scale and water, embodied by the vast Mississippi River, determines the very narrative structure of the text.

Reading backwards through *Absalom,* Quentin’s psyche becomes infused by the potency of the Southern landscape instead of the other way around. Throughout, the Mississippi River occupies an ubiquitous symbolic space. Cutting through the narrative strata like the river itself cutting through the land, the narrator describes the omnipresence of the Mississippi River as:

“…a sort of geographical transubstantiation by that Continental Trough, that River which runs not only through the physical land of which it is the geologic umbilical, not only runs through the spiritual lives of the beings within its scope, but is the very Environment itself which laughs at degrees of latitude and temperature…” (*AA!* 208).

This passage lies under every other narrative voice in the text as if embedded in the pure bedrock of the story. This structure places the river at the very foundation of the novel and locates it outside of the psychologies of the characters as “the very Environment itself.” Although an important aspect of the Mississippi’s supremacy is its “Continental” span, this river is far more than simply a physical landscape. Indicated by the mystical Catholic vocabulary of “geographical transubstantiation,” the river has the ability to conjure blood and flesh from mere water and topography. This “transubstantiation” establishes the physical river as a remarkably creative force that itself transforms “the beings within its scope,” rather than being inscribed by the psychologies of these characters. As the “geologic umbilical,” the Mississippi River feeds and connects the narratives told by the characters. This is a distinct departure from the psychological landscapes of *The Sound and the Fury* and “Nympholepsy.” Here, Faulkner places the physical landscape above and beyond his characters. In doing so, he makes the river and its watery landscape external to Quentin as a physical component of his Southern identity.

In *Absalom,* Faulkner reverses how his characters relate to their environment by reversing the direction of influence between psychology and landscape. With this reversal, Faulkner crosses the river in order to address the same themes – female sexuality, Southern identity, Quentin’s suicide – from the opposite bank. By its connective power and unbridled fertility, the Mississippi River substantiates the pervasive presence of female sexuality found in the earlier works.

Faulkner also returns to the watery consciousness of Quentin’s interiority in *Absalom*. While Quentin delves into the stories of his heritage, he speculates how the narratives of his own life and those of this Southern past flow back and forth within one another:

“*Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed…”* (*AA!* 210, italics in original)

The image of these interconnected pools feeding back and forth describes the many narrative threads and pathways of storytelling in *Absalom.* Faulkner’s career can also be read through this twofold direction of narrative connection. Faulkner loops back to June 2, 1910 in *Absalom* in order to make Quentin “happen” once more. The “umbilical” carries the legacies of Faulkner’s early works forward while at the same time allowing Faulkner’s later texts to flow backwards. A “pebble” dropped into the waters of Faulkner’s career by “Nympholepsy” sends “ripples” of drowned women and psychological landscapes through *The Sound and the Fury* and beyond. These are the same “heavy ripples” that pulse outwards from Caddy’s body in the branch and from Faulkner’s landscapes into his psychologies. When Quentin “sinks” to the bottom of the river on June 3 like a “pebble,” he too generates “ripples” that spread through *Absalom.* Quentin-at-large is a product of both iterations, created by the interconnectivity of Faulkner’s “umbilical” narratives.

This structure of interconnected waterways resonates both between Faulkner’s texts and within the actual landscape of the Mississippi Delta. By examining the hydrological properties of the region, Quentin’s drowning can be located as if on a map. In geologic terms, the Mississippi Delta is an alluvial plain of agriculturally rich sediments created by frequent flooding of Mississippi River. Waterways of various sizes meander across this flat, fertile, and perpetually saturated landscape. While the hydrology of the Mississippi River influences Faulkner’s body of work in many direct and indirect ways, this overflowing quality particularly informs the relationship between *Absalom* and *The Sound and the Fury.* In this figure, I have shown the looping, or meandering, structure of the Mississippi River. Over time, the river eventually joins at its meanders as the current erodes the inside banks. When this happens, the water upstream and downstream merges into one flow. Now, consider Faulkner’s career between *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom* structured along the curvature of the Mississippi River. As he loops backwards towards Quentin in *Absalom,* Faulkner follows the meanders of the river and opens a channel between the two versions of Quentin. By returning to *The Sound and the Fury,* Faulkner carves a waterway between 1929 and 1936 through which the river, and Quentin’s story, rushes, intermingles, and “feeds” itself.

This forces us to understand Quentin and his suicide through the psychoanalytic lens of *The Sound and the Fury* alongside the historic lens of *Absalom, Absalom!* In fact, by inundating Quentin from both sides of the river, Faulkner effectively doubles the scale of Quentin’s trauma. In this way, Faulkner drowns Quentin twice. By considering the legacy from Faulkner’s early works alongside the structure of *Absalom,* we can read Faulkner’s career as a continuous stream which doubles back on itself. Quentin exists within this fold, caught in a landscape which traumatizes him both internally and externally.