

That Evening Sun



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM FAULKNER

William Faulkner was born to in New Albany, Mississippi, in 1897. His family name was actually “Falkner,” but was misspelled “Faulkner” during his time in the Canadian air force; Faulkner adopted the new spelling and published his books under this title. During his childhood, Faulkner was deeply influenced by his mother and grandmother, who were both interested in art and literature. He was also very close with family’s black servant, Caroline “Callie” Barr, and his relationship with Callie influenced his fascination with racial tensions in the American south, which appear in much of his work. His family were fond of storytelling and Faulkner grew up listening to tales about the history of the south and of his great grandfather, who was a Civil War hero. When he was seventeen Faulkner enrolled at the University of Mississippi and met Philip Stone, who mentored the young writer. Stone tried to get several of Faulkner’s poems published, but his early efforts were unsuccessful. Faulkner’s first poetry collection, *The Marble Faun*, was published in 1924. Faulkner published his first novel, *Soldiers’ Pay*, in 1925 and in 1927 wrote *Flags in the Dust*, his first novel set in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County. To Faulkner’s dismay *Flags in the Dust* was initially rejected by publishers, though eventually published in 1929. During a period of disillusionment with his literary career after the rejection of *Flags in the Dust*, Faulkner began working on an experimental novel, [The Sound and the Fury](#), set in Yoknapatawpha County; the novel was published in 1929 and became one of Faulkner’s most famous works. Faulkner married Estelle Oldham in 1929 and hoped to make a living as a novelist. His novels [As I Lay Dying](#) and *Sanctuary* were published in the early 1930s. Later in life, struggling to make money, Faulkner moved to California and took a job as a screenwriter in Hollywood. He died in 1962 after a fall from a horse and was buried in Oxford, Mississippi.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“That Evening Sun” is set in the southern state of Mississippi and deals with the aftermath of slavery in the United States. Slaves were used to work the land on large plantations which grew tobacco and cotton, both of which were huge industries at the time and were major sources of wealth for the south. Despite the abolition of slavery in 1862 and the subsequent decline of plantation industries—which were being replaced by capitalist industries in the north fueled by European immigration—black people still had no civil rights and were subject to racist segregation laws in the south until the 1960s.

These laws stated that black and white people could not eat in the same restaurants or sit in the same coaches on public transport; that black people could not vote or carry weapons; and that black people could not own land or property. As industry in the south declined and once wealthy white families became poorer, black people continued to suffer the effects of extreme racial prejudice as well as further resentment from the white people who still viewed them as inferior. “That Evening Sun” deals with some of the effects of this cultural racism and the immensely prejudiced double standards which came to be accepted in the south during the twentieth century and before the Civil Rights Movement.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

“That Evening Sun” is an example of the Southern Gothic literary style. Faulkner was directly influenced by Sherwood Anderson, whose novels, *Poor White*, *Many Marriages*, and *Dark Laughter*, explored life in the Midwest in and examined the psychological and social frustrations of the people living there. Faulkner was also heavily influenced by the Irish writer James Joyce, whose famous novel *Ulysses* pioneered many of the modernist and experimental techniques—including stream of consciousness, which Faulkner employed and expanded upon in *The Sound and the Fury*. “That Evening Sun,” with its observation of the decline of the south in the early 1900s, is similar in tone to other short stories by Faulkner such as “A Rose for Miss Emily.” The Compson family, who are some of main the characters in “That Evening Sun,” also feature in short stories which Faulkner set in Yoknapatawpha County, and [The Sound and the Fury](#) charts the disintegration of the Compson family once the children in “That Evening Sun” are adults. Faulkner’s influence can be seen in the work of Flannery O’Connor, with her use of psychological themes and her emphasis on the corrosive effect of racial divides in the south, as well as in Harper Lee’s seminal novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** That Evening Sun
- **When Written:** 1931
- **Where Written:** Mississippi
- **When Published:** 1931
- **Literary Period:** Modernist
- **Genre:** Southern Gothic
- **Setting:** Jefferson, Mississippi, a fictional town in the fictional county of Yoknapatawpha where Faulkner set much of his fiction
- **Climax:** Nancy, convinced that her husband Jesus is waiting

in the ditch outside her house and plans to kill her, persuades the Compson children to come home with her; the group waits anxiously in Nancy's cabin as footsteps approach outside. These footsteps belong to the Compson children's father however, who takes them home, leaving Nancy alone in her cabin.

- **Antagonist:** Jesus
- **Point of View:** First person limited; the story is narrated by the adult Quentin Compson, who is looking back on his childhood

EXTRA CREDIT

The Title. The title of the story comes from the Louis Armstrong song "Saint Louis Blues." The lyrics of this song refer to a woman who "hates to see that evening sun" go down because it makes her feel that she is going to die. It also refers to the fact that the woman is going to "make her getaway" if she still feels afraid in the morning. This relates to Nancy's fear of Jesus in the story and the fear that, when the sun goes down, he will kill her if she does not make a "getaway."

Nancy's Bones. In [The Sound and the Fury](#), Faulkner's 1928 novel which deals with the disintegration of the Compson family several years after the events in "That Evening Sun," Faulkner notes that Nancy's bones are found in the ditch outside her cabin. Readers have speculated that this is proof that Jesus does kill Nancy after the story. However, Faulkner denied this and made use of Nancy again in a later story. Faulkner claimed that "Nancy's bones" in [The Sound and the Fury](#) refer to the bones of a horse which belonged to the Compsons.



PLOT SUMMARY

Quentin Compson, reminisces about his hometown of Jefferson, Mississippi, which has changed a great deal since he was a child. The town has been modernized, with paved streets, telephone poles, and a city laundry; "even the Negro women" now have cars, which they use when they are doing the laundry for the white families in town.

Fifteen years earlier, when Quentin is still a child, he and his siblings enjoy watching their black servant, Nancy, carry the bundle of laundry on her head from their house down to her own cabin in Negro Hollow. Sometimes the servant women's husbands come and collect the laundry for them, but Jesus, Nancy's husband, never does.

The Compson family's regular servant, Dilsey, is sick, and as such Nancy has been working in her stead. Quentin describes an incident in which Nancy—who has also turned to prostitution—is arrested after loudly demanding payment from Mr. Stovall, a white man who works at the bank and is a

respected member of the local church. Mr. Stovall kicks Nancy to silence her, knocking out her teeth. She is put in jail, where she sings and protests all day before trying to hang herself from the window bars with her dress. When the jailor finds her, he remarks that her belly is swollen "like a little balloon," suggesting that Nancy is pregnant.

Later, Quentin, his sister Caddy, and his younger brother Jason also notice Nancy's swollen belly while she is cooking for them. Jesus is in the kitchen with them and tells the children that Nancy has a watermelon under her dress. When Nancy says it hasn't "come off" Jesus's "vine," Jesus responds that he can easily "cut down the vine" that it did come from, much to the children's confusion.

Nancy continues to cook for the Compsons even though, after this incident, Mr. Compson tells Jesus to stay away from the house. Although everyone in the community thinks Jesus has left town, Nancy becomes afraid to walk home by herself because she thinks Jesus is back and looking for her. Mr. Compson agrees to walk Nancy home and take the children with him even though Mrs. Compson disapproves. As the group walks Nancy down a **dark** lane, Nancy tells Mr. Compson that she thinks that Jesus is waiting in the **ditch** outside her house with a razor and that he is going to kill her.

The Compsons walk Nancy home every night for a period until Mrs. Compson becomes frustrated. One night they let Nancy sleep over in their kitchen, but she wakes everyone by making a strange noise that both is and is not like singing. Mr. Compson finds no one outside the house but nevertheless lets Nancy sleep in the children's bedroom. Quentin is haunted by the image of her frightened eyes.

Dilsey gets better, but Nancy still comes to the kitchen in the evenings to talk about Jesus. Dilsey says that Nancy can stay with her, but Nancy says that "no nigger" will be able to stop Jesus and, instead, begs the Compson children to ask their parents if she can stay in their room again. Mrs. Compson refuses, and Mr. Compson tells Nancy to "go home and lock her door."

Nancy persuades the children to walk home with her, telling them that they will have fun. When they arrive at Nancy's house, however, the children do not like the smell and are nervous about the fact that their parents do not know where they are. Jason begins to cry, and Nancy tries to placate the children by telling them stories and making popcorn. Eventually they hear footsteps outside the cabin, which turn out to be coming from Mr. Compson; he has arrived to take the children home. They leave Nancy sitting in her hut with the door open, again making the sound which is like singing but not singing, waiting for Jesus to come for her. On the way home, Quentin wonders who will do their laundry now. Mr. Compson carries Jason on his shoulders and snaps at Caddy when she teases calls her brother for being afraid of the dark.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Quentin Compson – Quentin Compson, the narrator of “That Evening Sun,” tells the story as an adult looking back on his childhood memories of the Compson family’s doomed black servant, Nancy. A sensitive and observant child, Quentin is fascinated and unnerved by Nancy’s fear of her husband, Jesus. He maintains a watchful distance from Nancy, unlike his younger siblings Caddy and Jason, who constantly question Nancy. Quentin is nine when the events of the story take place and, as such, is on the cusp of understanding some of the adult subjects that Nancy, his parents, and the other servants discuss in front of the Compson children. Still, he remains naïve about much of what he witnesses. And although as a child Quentin seems on the verge of questioning his family’s treatment of Nancy and race relations in his community more generally, as an adult he seems romantic and nostalgic about the south of his childhood. The adult Quentin feels that modernization has sapped the personality from Mississippi, suggesting that, however thoughtful and sympathetic towards Nancy he is as a child, he grows up to hold the same the racial prejudices he has long been surrounded by.

Nancy – Nancy is the Compson’s black servant who works for the family while their regular servant, Dilsey, is sick. Due to her race and position in society, Nancy is very poor and is forced to work as a prostitute alongside serving the Compson’s. Nancy has become terrified that her husband Jesus is waiting in **the ditch** outside her house and is planning to kill her. Nancy, who has been violently beaten by a white man named Mr. Stovall earlier in the story, and who is pregnant with a white man’s child because of her prostitution, feels that there is nothing she can do to protect herself against Jesus. Her fear becomes more and more desperate as the story progresses. Although Nancy’s situation is exacerbated by her social circumstances (the fact that she is not protected by law and her lack of status in society) Nancy comes to believe that her situation is caused by something inherent in herself and that she is doomed. Nancy verbalizes this fear when she tells Mr. Compson that what’s coming to her is “hers” and that it belongs to her. She also describes herself as “hellborn,” demonstrating that Nancy views herself as damned. The extent of Nancy’s fear is evident in that her actions become more and more desperate throughout the story, to the point where she tries to use the Compson children as protection from Jesus. Nancy is, overall, a tragic figure who is a victim of circumstances in the place and period in which she has been born.

Caddy Compson – Caddy is the second eldest of the Compson children and the sister of Quentin and Jason. Caddy is portrayed as naïve and curious throughout the story. She is fascinated by Nancy and the events taking place around her, but does not fully understand the seriousness of the threat that

Nancy faces from Jesus. Caddy does pick up on the fact that Nancy and Jesus are married, however, and becomes curious about whether her own mother, Mrs. Compson, is afraid of her father, and whether such fear is normal in a marriage. This suggests that Caddy, because she is a girl in a patriarchal society, has already learned to anticipate not having as many rights as her husband in her own future marriage. Caddy also frequently teases Jason about being scared and is reprimanded for doing so at the end of the story by her father, Mr. Compson.

Jason Compson – Jason is the youngest of the Compson children and only about four years old when the events in the story take place. Jason is just beginning to learn the rules of the society roundabout him and often looking for clarification from the adults in the story. Jason seems especially confused about and fascinated by the concept of who is “a nigger” and who isn’t, not yet understanding the racial divides in the south; this underscores the story’s suggestion that racism is a learned behavior, rather than something innate. The fact that the story ends with Jason riding on Mr. Compson’s shoulders and announcing that he “is not a nigger” suggests that, in the future, these racial divides will remain unchallenged, and that Jason will be protected by his own status as a white man—just as his father protects him when Caddy makes fun of him and calls him a “scairy cat.”

Mr. Compson – Mr. Compson is the father of Quentin, Caddy, and Jason. A wealthy white man, he employs Nancy and Dilsey as servants. Although Mr. Compson is relatively sympathetic towards Nancy (he lets her stay in the house one night and walks her home when she is afraid of Jesus), his attitude towards her is marked by condescension and dismissiveness. Although Mr. Compson seems to be behaving in a chivalrous way towards Nancy, he places the blame for the situation on her—claiming that Jesus would not be angry with her if only she would “leave white men alone” and not work as a prostitute. The insinuation that Nancy has led white men on demonstrates Mr. Compson’s patriarchal and racially bigoted worldview. Mr. Compson also seems to take a casual and lighthearted approach to Nancy’s belief that Jesus is stalking her. Although he walks her home several times, when he is reprimanded by Mrs. Compson he immediately gives up Nancy’s cause and tells her to walk home alone. He also chooses to leave her alone and unprotected at the end of the story, telling Nancy that he has checked **the ditch** and that Jesus is not in there. When Quentin looks in the ditch, however, he sees that it is too **dark** to tell whether anyone is hiding there or not; this suggests that Mr. Compson has lied to placate Nancy and to save himself the task of taking responsibility for her wellbeing.

Jesus – Jesus, Nancy’s abusive husband, is a threatening figure throughout the story. Jesus, who carries a razor, threatens to kill the man who got Nancy pregnant, and Mr. Compson has told Jesus to stay away from the Compson’s property. Despite his violent nature, the reader does feel a small degree of

sympathy for Jesus; it is clear that his resentment and anger comes from the fact that he is disenfranchised compared to the white characters in the story. When Jesus is talking to Nancy in the kitchen, he complains that “he can’t hang around a white man’s kitchen” but that a “white man can hang around his.” This suggests that Jesus is bitter about his lack of rights in society and underscores the double standards that exist for white people, who can act in ways which black people cannot.

Mrs. Compson – Mrs. Compson is the mother of Quentin, Caddy, and Jason, and the wife of Mr. Compson. Mrs. Compson comes across as spoiled, pampered, and petulant. She is jealous and suspicious of Nancy, whom Mrs. Compson likely knows works as a prostitute. Mrs. Compson dislikes her husband walking Nancy home even though, as Mr. Compson says, Mrs. Compson has less to fear than Nancy and knows that no one is “waiting outside with a razor” for her. In Mrs. Compson’s mind, even though she is not in real danger, her own comfort is more important than Nancy’s genuine fear for her life. Mrs. Compson views Nancy as unimportant in comparison to herself because Nancy is black, poor, and a servant, while Mrs. Compson is a respectable white woman—and therefore more valuable in the social hierarchies of the period.

Mr. Stovall – Mr. Stovall is a “respectable” white man who lives in Jefferson. As a “cashier at the bank and a deacon in the Baptist church,” he is held in high esteem among the community. Yet Mr. Stovall has also been using Nancy’s services as a prostitute while neglecting to pay her. When Nancy publicly shames Mr. Stovall for this—shouting “when you going to pay me white man” at him in public—Mr. Stovall violently attacks Nancy and kicks out several of her teeth. Despite the fact that he has robbed and beaten her in order to protect his own reputation, it is Nancy who is arrested and imprisoned. This demonstrates that, according to the standards of the period, the blame for this dispute falls on Nancy and does not affect Mr. Stovall’s reputation. White people in the town are more willing to believe—or pretend—that a black woman is lying than to condemn a “respectable” white man for visiting and cheating a black prostitute. Through Mr. Stovall, Faulker highlights the stark racial prejudice that limits Nancy’s opportunities and options to protect herself.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Dilsey – Dilsey is the Compson’s maid who is replaced by Nancy while Dilsey is sick.

Aunt Rachel – Aunt Rachel is a black woman who lives in “Negro Hollow” and may or may not be Jesus’s mother. The fact that Aunt Rachel sometimes admits to this and sometimes does not suggest that there are times when she is ashamed of her son’s behavior.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



RACISM AND SEGREGATION

“That Evening Sun” is set in the early 1900s in the fictional town of Jefferson, Mississippi. Though slavery had been abolished in 1862, black people at the time of the story still did not have civil rights and were subject to extreme racial prejudice—often even working as servants for the same white families who had kept their grandparents as slaves. The corrosive effects of racial segregation are demonstrated through Faulkner’s tragic portrayal of Nancy, a black servant who works for the white Compson family and also as a prostitute. Faulkner’s story highlights how the effects of slavery lingered long after abolition, and further suggests that racial segregation is detrimental to *all* members of a society—including the white people whose complacency and hypocrisy help uphold such an unequal world.

Faulkner emphasizes the physical segregation between the story’s white and black characters, the latter of whom live in extreme poverty and labor as white people’s servants. The Compson family lives in a very different part of town than the “Negro Hollow” where Nancy, Dilsey, and the other black characters reside. In contrast to the houses in the white part of the town (like the Compson’s, with its library and many bedrooms) the black characters are described as living in “cabins,” which suggests that these dwellings are small and that the people living there are poor. Faulkner walks the reader through this contrast by describing the journey the black servants make, carrying the laundry “from the kitchen of the white house to the blackened washpot beside a cabin door.” Faulkner further emphasizes the town’s physical segregation in his description of the **ditch** outside Nancy’s house, where she thinks her husband, Jesus, is hiding. As the story progresses, Nancy’s fear of Jesus becomes symbolized by this physical divide between the black and white characters.

The ditch also comes to reflect the deep psychological separation between white and black characters in the story. Rather than seeing this disparity in living conditions as an injustice resulting from centuries of slavery, the white characters accept segregation as normal and natural, a stance that would have been further legitimized by the laws of the period. Under segregation laws black people were not allowed to use the same bathrooms as white people, vote, or move freely around the state. Black people were considered inferior

and, although no longer slaves, were still often seen as property by their white employers. That's why, instead of understanding Nancy's circumstances, the Compsons view the danger she is in as something she has brought upon herself and something that is inconvenient for *them*.

When Nancy is attacked by Mr. Stovall, it is clear to the reader that Mr. Stovall has been using Nancy's services as a prostitute but, because she is black, he has refused to pay her. The fact that he is violent towards her to protect his own reputation underscores the brutalizing effects of racism. Yet rather than highlight the injustice of Mr. Stovall's behavior, the narrator and the eldest Compson child, Quentin, instead refers to Mr. Stovall's position in the community as a "a deacon in the Baptist Church," highlighting the fact that, in the white community Mr. Stovall is a respectable man. Indeed, his position and skin color shield him from repercussions for knocking Nancy's teeth out, while Nancy herself is thrown in jail for brashly demanding payment from her white client.

Later in the story, when Mr. Compson is walking Nancy home, he repeatedly tells Nancy that she should "let white men alone," blaming her for the violence used against her—even though she has been forced into prostitution because she is so poor. This is even more hypocritical when the reader considers that Nancy is employed by the Compsons, as it suggests how little they must pay her. Faulkner thus uses Nancy and the Compsons to suggest the hypocrisy and cyclical nature of racism: racism is upheld by white characters, who then blame black characters for being in desperate circumstances brought about by racism.

Nevertheless, both black and white characters develop their sense of identity and agency, and their sense of importance within society, based on these racial divides. The black characters, like Nancy and Jesus, are aware that they are less valued and hold less authority than the white people around them. Jesus points out the hypocrisy in this when he complains that a "white man can come in my house, I can't stop him. When a white man want to come in my house, I ain't got no house." While Jesus is resentful of his situation, Nancy internalizes her lack of agency and the prejudice aimed at her, viewing it as something she cannot do anything about nor protect herself from. She repeatedly laments that she "ain't nothing but a nigger" and that it "ain't none her fault." This shows that, although Nancy is less aggressive than Jesus, she understands that her situation is hopeless as long as she is forced to rely on white people for protection and sympathy.

In contrast, the white Compson children learn that their place in society is more important than that of black people. The children show little respect for Nancy, although she cooks and cleans for them. When Quentin describes summoning her to make breakfast, for example he says that they "throw rocks at her house" until she comes to the door. They do not feel that it is necessary to respect Nancy, nor her house, because in their minds it is a black woman's place to be their servant.

Racial segregation defines multiple aspects of the characters' lives in "That Evening Sun," from their living situations, to their personal identities. While the Compson children grow up complacent and protected by the law within society, characters like Nancy and Jesus operate on the other side of this, separated from the white characters by both experiential, physical, and legal divides.



NAIVETY, IGNORANCE, AND NOSTALGIA

Though "That Evening Sun" is narrated from Quentin's adult point of view, much of the story deals with the impressions left on the Compson siblings as children. Faulkner uses the naive perspective of the children to suggest that racial categorization itself is childish, and to criticize the nostalgic way in which many white people, including Quentin, came to view the south as black people won more rights in society. Although Quentin is a child when the events with Nancy take place, the adult Quentin narrating the story overlooks certain moments that cast the family's treatment of Nancy in a negative light. Quentin's unwillingness to criticize his family's behavior extends into an unwillingness to criticize white society more generally, which undermines his nostalgic vision of the old south. Faulkner further rejects this vision as prejudiced and inaccurate through his use of the children's ignorant perspective as a mouthpiece for racially bigoted views.

The story opens with Quentin looking back on his childhood and reminiscing about how Jefferson used to be. This comparison brings to light the modernization of the town and the changes in the status of black people in the south, which have improved since Quentin was a child. Yet it also suggests the rosy view with which Quentin views the south of his childhood, despite the stark racial divides he remembers. Quentin's use of words like "ghostly" to describe the new telegraph poles, which have replaced the trees in Jefferson, suggests that he is unhappy with this modernization and longs for the old ways of life. The old ways of life, however, are only happy and nostalgic for Quentin because he is white; the black characters, like Nancy and Jesus, did not have happy lives in the old south because of the racial prejudice they faced.

That this does not trouble Quentin suggests that he still does not really comprehend his own racial bias. Describing the "city laundry," which collects the clothes in "motorcars" and has replaced the black servants who used to do laundry when he was a child, Quentin remarks that "even the Negro women" now have cars. Quentin's use of the word "even" suggests that, in Quentin's mind, black people are still not equal to white people. By connecting this new way of doing laundry to the "bloodless" appearance of the town, Quentin suggests that modernization has sapped personality from Jefferson, while the black women carrying bundles of laundry like "cotton bales" remind him positively of his childhood. The reference to "cotton

bales,” though a fond memory for Quentin, links directly to slavery and reminds the reader that the system that Quentin is nostalgic for was built on a history of subjugating its black citizens.

Although the reader can be critical of Quentin as an adult narrator, the Compson children’s perspective on the world is defined by their naivety and their inability to understand the implications of the adult events taking place around them. The children are frequently exposed to adult conversations which they do not understand, but which the reader does. For example, when Jesus says that Nancy has a “watermelon” under her dress, Caddy and Jason are confused; the reader recognizes that Jesus is referring to the fact that Nancy is pregnant.

Although the children do not understand the implications of everything they hear, they are exposed to extreme racial divides and prejudices by the white adults around them and come to view this social division as normal and proper. This reflects poorly on the white adults in the story, as Faulkner implicitly connects racism with a childish and simplistic view of the world. This is reinforced when Jason, the youngest Compson child, asks their black servant Dilsey if he “is a nigger.” Dilsey confirms that he is not, and, throughout the story, Jason repeatedly draws attention to the fact that he “is not a nigger” and points out the other characters who are black, emphasizing the difference between them and himself. This shows that, even from a very young age, the children are learning to segregate people into racial categories; racism is not something that a child is born with, but which they pick up from the adults and the society around them.

Although the white children’s attitudes can be viewed as naive, those of the adults are deliberately ignorant and irresponsible. The children’s mother, for instance, acts petulantly when she wishes to dissuade her husband from walking Nancy home, even though Nancy is afraid for her life. Mrs. Compson views Nancy’s situation as an inconvenience to herself and feels that her husband is simply trying to irritate her by appearing to favor Nancy.

When he takes Nancy home, Mr. Compson tells her that he has checked the ditch for any sign of Jesus. When he returns to his own home with his children, however, Quentin notes that he “couldn’t see much in the ditch where the **shadows**” were. This suggests that Mr. Compson has lied to placate Nancy, rather than making the effort to check the ditch. The fact that Quentin is aware of this lie further implies that, even as a child, he realizes there is potentially a real threat to Nancy that his family is ignoring. Quentin, who is nine when the story is set, is just on the verge of leaving behind his period of childlike naivety. He has the potential to fully recognize and admit the racial bias all around him and to acknowledge his family’s complicity in Nancy’s fate.

Yet as an adult narrating the story, Quentin gives the reader the

impression that his awakening in this sense has never come to fruition. Instead, he has never addressed his romantic view of the south nor what happened to Nancy after his family left her that night. Although Quentin cannot be held responsible for his ignorance as a child, as an adult he represents a major problem in the south: white people’s refusal to acknowledge their complicity in upholding racism.



FEAR AND VULNERABILITY

Nancy is portrayed as a vulnerable character in several ways throughout “That Evening Sun.” Due to the lack of civil rights for black people in this period, she has no one to defend her. As a woman, she is also physically more vulnerable to threats from men and, because she is poor, she is vulnerable in that she must make a living any way that she can—even this means undertaking a dangerous profession like prostitution. There is a sense of connection between Nancy’s vulnerability and that of the Compson children, who are fascinated by Nancy’s fear because, to an extent, they can relate to it; children are often scared of things like monsters hiding in the **dark**, and they view Nancy’s fear of Jesus in these terms—as though she is one of them, even though, because they are white, the Compson children can’t fully comprehend the depth of Nancy’s terror. Though her fear is often dismissed by other characters, the story suggests that it is entirely justified by highlighting Nancy’s helplessness in a town that has no sympathy for her. Racism, sexism, and poverty, the story argues, together make black women like Nancy some of the most vulnerable members of society.

The use of the name Jesus to represent a threatening character is a bit of irony by Faulkner, underscored when Nancy, terrified, calls out to “Jesus” in the middle of the night. Quentin points out that it is not her husband she is calling for but “the other Jesus”—Jesus Christ. Nancy professes that she is “hellborn,” and the idea that Jesus is coming for her—and that this something she should be afraid of—suggests Nancy’s belief in her own lack of salvation; Jesus coming for her is a frightening concept as he is coming to *punish* her, not save her. Nancy believes she is damned because this is how society has made her feel by failing to protect her.

When Nancy sleeps in the children’s bedroom they question her constantly about her fear of Jesus, failing to fully understand how it is different from their own fears. Caddy can see Nancy’s eyes, wide with fear, in the dark and treats this like a game, asking, “can you see our eyes too Nancy?” Although the children are titillated by Nancy’s fear, they are already beginning to understand that their society values patriarchal qualities like “bravery.” Caddy teases Jason about being scared and at one point tells him that he is “scardier than a nigger.” This accusation suggests the racial stereotype that black people are more cowardly than white people, which Caddy has obviously picked up from the adults around her. The fact that white adults

think like this demonstrates the complete denial about how badly black people are treated in society, as white people don't understand why black people should be afraid of mistreatment or prejudice.

The story's ending again emphasizes the different vulnerabilities of white and black characters. Nancy encourages the children to come to her cabin, the implication being that having them there will offer her some semblance of protection because their social status is higher than hers; Nancy hopes that their presence will deter Jesus, as he would not dare hurt white children because of the consequences this would have for a black man. Although Jason is scared in Nancy's house, the story ends with him riding on his father's shoulders and announcing that he is "not a nigger." When Caddy calls him a "scary cat," Mr. Compson defends Jason. This closing image suggests that, although Jason is vulnerable as a child, his status as an adult white man (represented here by his father) will protect him in future because, in the patriarchal and racist society they live in, he will be the most powerful type of person.

The story's recurring metaphor of darkness, meanwhile, ironizes white people's fear of black people, who, because of their "darkness," who were often treated as criminals and thought of as threatening. This fear is not founded on anything genuine but simply on white people's paranoia and racism. However, the fact that Nancy's fear does seem to affect the young Quentin, who has not yet fully developed into his adult complacency and prejudice, suggests that there is something corrosive and frightening under the surface of society in Jefferson. Faulkner portrays racism *itself* as the true horror in "That Evening Sun." The fact that Mr. Compson leaves Nancy unprotected when she is likely to be murdered suggests that white people should be afraid of the way they have treated black people. The sheer brutality and negligence shown towards Nancy in the story is part of the horror underlying southern culture and lurking, unacknowledged, on the conscience of the white people in Jefferson.

follows Nancy's journey carrying the laundry from the "kitchen of the white house" to the "blackened washpot outside a cabin in Negro Hollow." This description contrasts the comfort of the "white" houses, which have kitchens and servants, with the poverty of the "cabins" in "Negro Hollow," which do not have kitchens and whose inhabitants work for the white families as servants.

The divide represented by the ditch is, of course, also an ideological one, as the white characters in Jefferson view "Negro Hollow," on the other side of the ditch, as a proper environment for black people to live. Racial prejudice in the period meant that many white people agreed with segregation laws and felt that black people should not live near or share facilities with white people. The pampered Compson children are warned not to cross this divide, partly because of Jesus, but partly because it is not seen as their place in society. When they visit Nancy's home, the children are uncomfortable and dislike the smell, suggesting that they have absorbed racist ideas and are too privileged to recognize that Nancy's poverty and desperation are not her own fault. The fact that Jesus may be hiding in the ditch, waiting to kill Nancy, further suggests that racism is an unspoken and yet ever-present threat to the black characters in Jefferson.



DARKNESS

Darkness in "That Evening Sun" represents Nancy's fear and the unspoken horror of death that underlies events in the story. Nancy is terrified of the dark, particularly the dark lane outside her cabin, where she believes her husband Jesus is lying in wait to murder her. Throughout the story, Nancy is desperately trying to put off the moment that she feels is inevitable (the moment that Jesus will attack her) and this desperation links into the story's title; Nancy trying to postpone her own death is like trying to stop the sun going down and leaving the world in darkness.

Nancy's certainty that she is going to be killed is underscored by Faulkner's use of language pertaining to death and darkness throughout the story. When Nancy is lying in the dark in the Compson children's bedroom, she makes a sound which, Quentin says, seems like "it went out like a match." This reflects the hopelessness of Nancy's life—the fact that she has only existed to be a servant and a prostitute and then to be murdered. Nancy also thinks she is damned or "hellborn"; that is, she believes that even after she is killed she will find no salvation or "light" in the Christian sense, despite the fact that "Jesus" is coming for her. When the children are in Nancy's cabin, Quentin says that though her form is inside, but it is like some part of her is outside, in the darkness. When Quentin peers into the dark **ditch** after they have walked Nancy home, he notes that he cannot see clearly in the "shadows" there. This suggests that, although Mr. Compson has assured Nancy that



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE DITCH

The ditch outside Nancy's cabin becomes of symbol of the racial divide between the black and the white characters in the story. The ditch literally marks the divide between the part of the town where the white people live and "Negro Hollow" where black characters like Nancy and Dilsey live. "Negro Hollow" is much poorer than the white part of the town, a result of intense racial prejudice and segregation. Faulkner walks the reader through this contrast when he

Jesus is not in the ditch, Mr. Compson also has little idea, and does not really want to know, what is lurking in the dark in Jefferson.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* published in 1995.

That Evening Sun Quotes

Monday is no different from any other weekday in Jefferson now. The streets are paved now, and the telephone and electric companies are cutting down more and more of the shade trees [...] to make room for iron poles bearing clusters of bloated and ghostly and bloodless grapes, and we have a city laundry, which makes the round on Monday morning, gathering the bundles of clothes into bright-colored, specially-made motorcars: the soiled wearing of a whole week now flees, apparitionlike, behind alert and irritable electric horns, with a long, diminishing noise of rubber and asphalt like tearing silk.

Related Characters: Quentin Compson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

Quentin opens the story by reminiscing about the changes that have taken place in the town of Jefferson since he was a boy. He points out the type of modernization that has taken place in the town (the introduction of electricity and motorcars) and the ways in which this has changed the town's appearance and disrupted the rhythm of life, which used to be defined by events such as "laundry day."

Quentin's portrayal of modernization is decidedly negative. His use of words like "bloated" suggests that, although the town is now prospering industrially, it is losing its personality and becoming lifeless, or "bloodless," through the loss of its unique way of life. The motorcars are described as disruptive and "irritable," suggesting that unpleasantly fast-paced modern lifestyles are replacing the older, slower lifestyles in the town. Quentin suggests that nature is being replaced by industry in his description of the trees being cut down to make way for telegraph poles.

The use of words like "ghostly" and "apparitionlike" suggest that he dislikes modernization because there is a loss of connection with the actual labor (although, as a white child, Quentin did not have to perform this "labor" himself) as it is

managed, unseen, by machines. The noise like "tearing silk" suggests damage and implies that work, such as laundry, is now done carelessly and in a way that suggests severance from old ways of life, which Quentin is clearly nostalgic for.

But fifteen years ago, on Monday morning the quiet, dusty, shady streets would be full of Negro women with, balanced on their steady, turbaned heads, bundles of clothes tied up in sheets, almost as large as cotton bales, carried so without touch of a hand, between the kitchen door of the white house and the blackened washpot beside a cabin door in Negro Hollow.

Related Characters: Quentin Compson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

Quentin contrasts laundry day in modern Jefferson to laundry day when he was a child in Jefferson "fifteen years ago." Before the introduction of motorcars and the city laundry, it was the black, female servants of white families who would do the laundry every Monday, transporting and washing the clothes by hand rather than being aided by new machinery.

Quentin's memory of laundry day when he was a child is framed very positively, in contrast to his description of the modernized town. The use of words like "quiet," "shady," and "dusty" suggest peace and relaxation and this is mirrored by the image of the "Negro" women walking "steadily" with the bundles on their heads. This suggests that Quentin remembers life in the South, from his childhood, as leisurely and comfortable.

However, Quentin is reminiscing about the way of life from the perspective of a privileged white member of society rather than from the perspective of a black servant. Faulkner undercuts Quentin's nostalgia for the old ways of life by comparing the bundles of clothes to "cotton bales." This links the servitude of black people in the South of Quentin's childhood, after the abolition of slavery but in which black people still had very few rights, to the history of slavery itself. It is unlikely that the black servants, whose lives as servants have doubtless been made easier by the introduction of machinery and the reduction in physical labor, would be as nostalgic as Quentin for these quaint ways of life.

●● And then about half the time we'd have to go down the lane to Nancy's cabin and tell her to come on and cook breakfast. We would stop at the ditch, because father told us not to have anything to do with Jesus – he was a short, black man with a razor scar down his face – and we would throw rocks at Nancy's house until she came to the door, leaning her head around it without any clothes on.

Related Characters: Quentin Compson (speaker), Dilsey, Jason Compson, Caddy Compson, Jesus, Nancy

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

Quentin is describing a period in his childhood when their regular servant, Dilsey, was sick and was replaced for a time with Nancy. Quentin describes how he and his siblings, Caddy and Jason, would often have to go down to Nancy's house and wake her so that she could begin her work. Quentin seems to remember being disappointed with the changeover from Dilsey to Nancy. This suggests that Dilsey is a reliable servant, who arrives to cook breakfast on time, while Nancy is not. The fact that the children throw rocks at her house to rouse her show that they have no respect for her property even though she works for them.

However, the children have been sent to do an adult's (their father's) job and are encroaching on the adult issues which are at work within the story, and which the children are too young and naïve to understand. The children have been warned not to cross the ditch because of Jesus, Nancy's husband, who has argued with Mr. Compson, although the children do not know why. Jesus is a threatening presence in the story: his razor scar suggesting that he has been involved in violence. The ditch symbolizes the divide between the white part of the town and the black residences, but also the divide between the naïve world the children inhabit and the adult world they do not yet understand.

●● So we thought it was whiskey until that day they arrested her again and were taking her to jail and they passed Mr. Stovall. He was a cashier in the bank and a deacon in the Baptist church, and Nancy began to say: "When you going to pay me, white man?" [...] Mr. Stovall knocked her down but she kept on saying, "When you going to pay me, white man?" [...] until Mr. Stovall kicked her in the mouth with his heel and the marshal caught Mr. Stovall back, and Nancy lying in the street, laughing. She turned her head and spat out some blood and teeth and said, "It's been three times since he paid me a cent."

Related Characters: Quentin Compson , Nancy (speaker), Mr. Stovall

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis

The Compsons believe that Nancy is a drunk and this is why she is late in the mornings. However, when they hear a story about her altercation with Mr. Stovall, they learn that Nancy is late for work because she is also working as a prostitute at night. Quentin notes Mr. Stovall's position as a respectable member of the white community, naming him as a "cashier in the bank" and a "deacon" in the church. However, this respectable public image does not align with Mr. Stovall's treatment of Nancy and the insinuation that he has used her services as a prostitute, which would break the segregation laws of the period forbidding relationships between black and white people. Faulkner undercuts Quentin's nostalgic narration to show the hidden, ugly face of racism in the American South.

By shouting that "it has been three times since he paid her a cent," Nancy implies that Mr. Stovall has not only visited her but also repeatedly refused to pay her. Mr. Stovall attacks Nancy and kicks her in the mouth to silence her. His violent reaction suggests that what Nancy says is true, and Mr. Stovall attacks her to stop her from publicly acknowledging his actions and potentially damaging his reputation. However, although Mr. Stovall physically attacks Nancy in public, there are no consequences for his behavior. Instead, Nancy is taken to prison and Mr. Stovall goes free, demonstrating the hypocrisy and unfairness in the way black people were treated in the South in this period.

●● She didn't shut up until almost daylight, when the jailor began to hear a bumping and scraping upstairs and he went up there and found Nancy hanging from the window bar. He said that it was cocaine and not whisky, because no nigger would try to commit suicide unless he was full of cocaine, because a nigger full of cocaine wasn't a nigger any longer. The jailer cut her down and revived her; then he beat her, whipped her. She had hung herself with her dress [...] So the jailer heard the noise and ran up there and found Nancy hanging from the window, stark naked, her belly already swelling out a little, like a little balloon.

Related Characters: Quentin Compson (speaker), Nancy

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis

In jail Nancy protests her incarceration by shouting and singing all day. When she finally falls quiet, the jailor finds that she has tried to commit suicide in her cell. Quentin's use of the term "shut up" here is callous and suggests that Nancy is making a fuss for no reason, rather than protesting the fact that she has been put in prison despite being violently and publicly assaulted by a white man on the way to the jail. The jailor's response to Nancy's suicide attempt is extremely cruel as he beats and whips her after cutting her down from where she has tried to hang herself. He is also deeply racist and trivializes her pain by suggesting that the only way a black person would try to kill themselves was if they had taken cocaine.

It is especially cruel and brutal that the jailor beats Nancy even when he sees her belly "swelling out," betraying that she is pregnant. This demonstrates the dehumanization of black people as a result of the segregation laws and the brutalization of white people who supported this system and became violently racist as a result of their beliefs in white supremacy and superiority.

●● When Dilsey was sick in her cabin and Nancy was cooking for us, we could see her apron swelling out; that was before father told Jesus to stay away from the house. Jesus was in the kitchen, sitting behind the stove, with his razor scar on his black face like a piece of dirty string. He said it was a watermelon that Nancy had under her dress.

"It never come off of your vine, though," Nancy said.

"Off of what vine?" Caddy said.

"I can cut down the vine it did come off of," Jesus said.

"What makes you want to talk like that before these chillen," Nancy said [...]

"I can't hang around white man's kitchen," Jesus said. "But white man can hang around mine."

Related Characters: Quentin Compson, Jesus, Caddy Compson, Nancy (speaker), Mr. Compson, Dilsey

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

When the Compson children are in the kitchen, Jesus deliberately disguises the implications of his words by saying that Nancy has a "watermelon under her dress," meaning that she is pregnant. Jesus is hanging around the kitchen trying to intimidate Nancy. By saying that she is hiding a "watermelon," Jesus teases the children in order to threaten Nancy in front of them but without them understanding. Caddy, who is too young to understand what Jesus means, is confused and tries to question the adults about this. This shows that Jesus is making use of what little power he has as a black man to toy with the Compson children, who do not understand and who he can push the boundaries of propriety with by saying inappropriate things in front of them.

Nancy however, does understand the implications of Jesus's words and asks Jesus "why he wants to talk this way in front of these chillen?" She understands that when Jesus talks about "cutting down the vine," he is implying that he could murder her baby's father; presumably a white man who has hired Nancy as a prostitute. Jesus demonstrates that his resentment towards the white characters, and white people in general, comes from the hypocrisy which robs him of power in society but allows white men to do as they please.

“Mother wants to know if you are through,” I said.
 “Yes,” Nancy said. She looked at me. “I done finished.” She looked at me.

“What is it?” I said. “What is it?”

“I aint nothing but a nigger,” Nancy said. “It aint none of my fault.”

She looked at me, sitting in the chair before the cold stove, the sailor hat on her head. I went back to the library. It was the cold stove and all, when you think of a kitchen being warm and busy and cheerful. And with the cold stove and the dishes all put away, and nobody wanting to eat at that hour.

Related Characters: Nancy , Quentin Compson (speaker), Mrs. Compson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 293

Explanation and Analysis

One night, after she has finished her work, Nancy avoids going home from the Compson's. Mrs. Compson sends Quentin to find out what is taking Nancy so long in the kitchen, and Quentin finds Nancy sitting by the cold stove. When Quentin questions Nancy, her response is extremely bleak. Nancy seems to feel hopeless about her situation and feels that there is nothing she can do about it because of her race, which leaves her powerless and unprotected in society. She views herself as society views her, as “nothing but a nigger,” suggesting that nobody will care what happens to her.

Quentin tries to empathize with Nancy, but he is only a child and is quickly frightened away by the hopelessness of Nancy's position. It represents an unknown, adult area of life that Quentin is not yet ready to face (and that he will never *really* face, as the reader learns from his nostalgic narration, which glosses over the racial problems in the South). Quentin is upset by his conversation with Nancy because it breaks with his expectations of how things should be. The kitchen, Quentin says, should be “warm, busy, and cheerful,” rather than cold and dark, and it puts Quentin off. Similarly, Nancy (whom Quentin associates with homey quirks such as her “sailor hat”) disappoints Quentin by failing to be cheerful and not fulfilling her role as a servant by going straight home.

“You'll leave me alone, to take Nancy home?” mother said.
 “Is her safety more precious to you than mine!”

“I won't be long,” father said.

“You'll leave these children unprotected, with that Negro about?”

“I'm going too,” Caddy said. “Let me go, Father.”

“What would he do with them, if he were unfortunate enough to have them?” father said.

“I want to go, too,” Jason said.

“Jason!” mother said. She was speaking to father. You could tell that by the way she said the name. Like she believed that all day father had been trying to think of doing the thing she wouldn't like the most and that she knew all the time that after a while he would think of it.

Related Characters: Quentin Compson , Jason Compson, Caddy Compson, Mr. Compson, Mrs. Compson (speaker), Jesus, Nancy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Compson becomes irritated with her husband for offering to walk Nancy home, because Nancy is scared that Jesus is back and going to come after her for becoming pregnant with another man's child. Mrs. Compson, however, trivializes the danger that Nancy could be in and makes the situation all about herself. Rather than empathizing with Nancy, who is genuinely terrified of Jesus, Mrs. Compson tries to guilt her husband into allowing Nancy to walk home alone by suggesting that, if he does so, he cares more about Nancy than his own wife and children. This is disingenuous and self-centered, as Mrs. Compson should be aware that as a white woman protected by the law, she is in far less danger from Jesus than Nancy is.

Mrs. Compson demonstrates how little empathy she has for Nancy, and for black people in general, when she implies that Mr. Compson has agreed to walk Nancy home simply to annoy her. This makes Nancy's problem all about Mrs. Compson, rather than Nancy, and delegitimizes Nancy's fears and Mr. Compson's potentially genuine concerns over Nancy's safety. Mrs. Compson's attitude would not have been unusual in this society and would have likely been the norm. However, this demonstrates how white people were used to privileging themselves and their own concerns and inconveniences over the genuine social problems faced by black people.

“Well, he's gone now,” father said.
 “There's nothing for you to be afraid of now. And if you'd just let white men alone.”
 “Let what white men alone?” Caddy said. “How let them alone?”
 “He aint gone nowhere,” Nancy said. “I can feel him. I can feel him now, in this lane. He hearing us talk, every word, hid somewhere, waiting. I aint seen him, and I aint going to see him again but once more, with that razor in his mouth. That razor on that string down his back, inside his shirt. And then I aint going to be even surprised.”

Related Characters: Quentin Compson , Nancy , Caddy Compson, Mr. Compson (speaker), Jesus, Jason Compson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

As Mr. Compson and the children are walking Nancy home, Mr. Compson tries to reassure Nancy that Jesus is gone. Mr. Compson tries to pass the responsibility for the situation onto Nancy. He tells her that she would not be in this situation if she had “let white men alone.” This suggests that Nancy leads white men astray by offering herself as a prostitute and also implies that, because of this, Jesus has a right to be angry with her. Caddy, who is beginning to learn about gender roles, listens and tries to understand their conversation, but it goes over her head.

Although Mr. Compson suggests that Nancy has an element of agency or complicity in her situation with Jesus, Nancy contradicts him and states that her situation is absolutely hopeless. Although she has no proof that Jesus has come back, Nancy asserts that she can “feel him” and implies that her murder at Jesus’s hands is inevitable—she “won’t even be surprised.” This exchange between Nancy and Mr. Compson shows the gulf, in terms of expectations and privilege, between the black and white characters. The white characters like the Compsons feel complacent and assured that they will be protected by society, or the law, and that they have control over their destiny. Nancy, however, feels none of this assurance because of her race.

“The floor was cold. Our toes curled away from it while we listened to the sound. It was like singing and it wasn't like singing like the sounds that Negroes make. Then it stopped and we heard father going down the back stairs, and we went to the head of the stairs. Then the sound began again, in the stairway, not loud, and we could see Nancy's eyes halfway up the stairs, against the wall. They looked like cat's eyes do, like a big cat against the wall, watching us.”

Related Characters: Quentin Compson (speaker), Jesus, Nancy , Caddy Compson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

One night, the Compsons allow Nancy to sleep on a pallet in their kitchen because she is still afraid of walking home, believing Jesus is waiting for her to walk home. In the night, Nancy wakes the family up by making a strange sound, which is “like singing” and not “like singing.” The sound Nancy makes frightens the Compson children. The sound is connected with the “cold floor,” which their toes curl away from, just as the children recoil from the sound Nancy makes, which seems strange and alien to them. It is described as a “sound Negroes make.” This suggests the racial and cultural divides in Jefferson; although the noise that Nancy makes may be understood or have significance in the black community, it is not understood by the white community who are unfamiliar with black culture other than with racist stereotypes. This is the result of the complete segregation between the races, which means that the cultures cannot integrate or understand each other, and white people do not learn to see black people humanely as a result of this.

Quentin further dehumanizes and distances himself from Nancy by describing her as being like a “big cat against the wall.” By likening Nancy to an animal, Quentin unknowingly plays into racial stereotypes about black people being more like animals than “civilized” white people.

“Nancy whispered something. It was oh or no, I don't know which. Like nobody had made it, like it came from nowhere and went nowhere, until it was like Nancy was not there at all; that I had looked so hard at her eyes on the stairs that they had got printed on my eyeballs, like the sun does when you have closed your eyes and there is no sun. “Jesus,” Nancy whispered. “Jesus.” “Was it Jesus?” Caddy said. “Did he try to come into the kitchen?” “Jesus” Nancy said. Like this: Jeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeesus, until the sound went out like a match or a candle does.

Related Characters: Caddy Compson, Nancy , Quentin Compson (speaker), Jesus

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

Lying in the dark in Quentin and Caddy's room, Nancy continues to call out and the children attempt to interpret what she says. It is pertinent that the children do not know if Nancy has made an unintelligible, meaningless sound like “oh” or if she has said the word “no.” This demonstrates that Nancy and the world that she inhabits is a mystery to the children and that there are divides in experience between them that, because of the society they have grown up in, they will not be able to cross. The fact that the sound seems to “come from nowhere” and “go nowhere” suggests that Nancy is becoming one with the darkness in the room because she has already accepted her own death as inevitable and anticipates her plunge into darkness at any moment.

Although Caddy does not yet understand the divide that separates her and Nancy, Quentin, who is older, is beginning to understand that there is a separate world in Jefferson that he knows nothing about and that he does not want to understand, because it is too frightening and uncomfortable. The image of Nancy's eyes “printed on Quentin's eyeballs” suggests that Nancy's fear haunts him, as it is something that comes from this other world which, to Quentin, is associated with death and yet is really the poverty and despair caused by racism.

“Hush,” Nancy said. She was talking loud when we crossed the ditch and stooped through the fence where she used to stoop through with the clothes on her head. Then we came to her house. We were going fast then. She opened the door. The smell of the house was like the lamp and the smell of Nancy was like the wick, like they were waiting for one another to begin to smell. She lit the lamp and closed the door and put the bar up. Then she quit talking loud, looking at us [...] There was something about Nancy's house; something you could smell besides Nancy and the house. Jason smelled it, even. “I don't want to stay here,” he said.

Related Characters: Jason Compson, Quentin Compson , Nancy (speaker), Jesus, Caddy Compson

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 302

Explanation and Analysis

When Mr. Compson refuses to take Nancy home again and she is not allowed to sleep at the house, Nancy persuades the children to walk down the road with her, hoping that (because they are white and, despite the fact that they are only children) they will provide her with protection from Jesus. Nancy's talks “loud” on the dark lane leading to her house so that Jesus will know that Nancy is with the Compsons and will be put off from attacking her. The children are confused that Nancy tells them to hush and hurries them towards her house. Quentin's comment about how she used to carry the washing over the ditch is a point of familiarity for the children as they cross the divide into the unknown, adult world of Nancy's life.

The image of Nancy's house as “the lamp” and herself as “the wick” suggests that Nancy belongs in this world; when the children see Nancy in this context, they realize that she belongs to this other world, separate from them and the context in which they know Nancy. The “other smell” in Nancy's house suggests this adult world (with insinuations of poverty or sex from Nancy's prostitution) and this alarms the children—“even” Jason, who is still very young. From this, Faulkner begins to suggest that the children may be in danger here away from the naïve, white world they inhabit.

●● She came and sat in a chair before the hearth. There was a little fire there. Nancy built it up, when it was already hot inside. She built a good blaze. She told a story. She talked like her eyes looked, like her eyes watching us and her voice talking to us did not belong to her. Like she was, living somewhere else, waiting somewhere else. She was outside the cabin. Her voice was inside and the shape of her, the Nancy that could stoop under a barbed wire fence with a bundle of clothes balanced on her head as though without weight, like a balloon, was there. But that was all.

Related Characters: Quentin Compson (speaker), Jesus, Jason Compson, Caddy Compson, Nancy

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 302

Explanation and Analysis

In Nancy's cabin, the children wait with Nancy and listen to her story. Quentin's observation that Nancy's eyes and voice seem like they "do not belong to her," and notion that she is "living somewhere else," "outside the cabin," suggests that Nancy is consumed by thoughts about her inevitable death at Jesus's hands. Although Nancy is trying to postpone the moment of her death by detaining the children, Quentin's statement suggests that Nancy is already part of the darkness that is waiting for her and will consume her at the moment of her death.

The idea that Nancy's form (which the children have seen carrying the washing) shows that the children do not see the "real" Nancy when she is acting as a servant for them, or that they only see a part of her. This reflects the idea that white people in Jefferson do not see black people's real lives and struggles in the community. Instead, white people only see black people as servants, as this is how it is most convenient for white people to think about black people in a racist society.

●● We left her sitting before the fire. "Come and put the bar up," father said. But she didn't move. She didn't look at us again, sitting quietly there between the lamp and the fire. From some distance down the lane we could look back and see her through the open door. "What, Father?" Caddy said. "What's going to happen?" "Nothing," father said. Jason was on father's back, so Jason was the tallest of all of us. We went down into the ditch. I looked at it, quiet. I couldn't see much where the moonlight and the shadows tangled. "If Jesus is hid here, he can see us, cant he?" Caddy said. "He's not there," father said. "He went away a long time ago."

Related Characters: Quentin Compson , Caddy Compson, Mr. Compson (speaker), Jesus, Nancy , Jason Compson

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 309

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Compson and the children leave Nancy sitting in her cabin with the door open, rigid with fear and expecting to be murdered by Jesus any minute. Nancy surrenders to her fate and remains sitting in her house with the door open rather than trying to put off her death by barring the door against Jesus. Caddy asks her father "what's going to happen," but her father dismisses Nancy's fears and tells her that nothing is going to happen. Quentin, however, obviously doubts his father's judgement and checks the ditch for himself, looking for signs of Jesus. Quentin casts doubt over this father's judgement when he says that he "couldn't see much where the shadows and the moonlight tangled," suggesting that Jesus could be hiding in the ditch and that his father thinks Nancy is overreacting.

Jason, who is the youngest and consequently understands the least about what is going on, is on Mr. Compson's shoulders, making him the tallest. This suggests that, although Mr. Compson's opinion (like Jason's) is uninformed, his point of view will win out over that of others because he is a white man and wields the most power in society. Mr. Compson has taken a naïve and careless approach to Nancy's safety, and this signifies that childish and ignorant attitudes towards race have won out in the story, represented by the image of Jason riding on his father's shoulders.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THAT EVENING SUN

The narrator, Quentin Compson, points out that Monday “is no different from any other weekday in Jefferson now.” A “city laundry” has replaced the “Negro women” who used to do the laundry on Mondays when Quentin was a boy, and the streets in Jefferson are now paved. Quentin complains that the trees which used to grow on the sidewalk are being cut down to make room for telegraph poles, which bear “clusters of bloated and ghostly and bloodless grapes,” and the laundry is now collected and taken away in motorcars.

Quentin notes that “even the Negro women who still take in white people’s laundry after the old custom” have cars now. On Mondays “fifteen years ago,” when Quentin was a boy, the streets were “full of Negro women” carrying bundles of laundry on their heads that were “almost as large as cotton bales.” They carried these bundles, “without a touch of hand,” from the “kitchen door of the white house” to the “blackened washpot beside a cabin door in Negro Hollow.”

Quentin describes how Nancy, a black woman who sometimes worked for the Compsons, would wear her sailor hat on top of the bundle of laundry she carried. Quentin and his brother and sister, Jason and Caddy, would follow Nancy and marvel at how the bundle “never bobbed nor wavered,” even when she had to climb down into the **ditch** that was outside her house and climb out the other side. Nancy had a “high, sad” face that sunk in a little “where her teeth were missing.”

Quentin points out the changes that have taken place in Jefferson since he was a child. While the “Negro women” used to do the laundry on Mondays, a “city laundry” has now taken over this job. This change is symptomatic of the other modernizations that have taken place in the American South since the early 1900s. By using words like “bloated” and “bloodless,” Quentin suggests that he thinks these changes are negative, and that they have sapped the personality (the “blood”) from the town by replacing the old ways of life in the South.



The fact that “Negro women” still take in “white people’s laundry” suggests that, although black people’s status has improved since Quentin’s childhood, they still often work for white people as servants. The fact that Quentin says that “even the Negro women” have cars suggests that black people are still second-class citizens in Quentin’s mind. Although Quentin praises the black women’s skill in carrying the laundry, his nostalgia for this is synonymous with nostalgia for the old ways of life in the South when black people had very few rights. The bundles of laundry are like “cotton bales,” cotton being one of the main industries built on slavery in the South. This signifies that black people in the South are still suffering the consequences of slavery, many years after its abolition, in terms of how white people view and treat them.



Quentin and his siblings enjoyed the novelty of seeing Nancy carry the laundry on her head. While the white children see laundry day as a game, and Nancy as entertaining, it is hard physical labor for the black servants and not something they would be nostalgic for. Nancy’s “sad” face and “missing teeth” further suggest that her life is hard and that she has been a victim of physical violence.



Some of the washer women's husbands would help their wives by fetching the clothes for them, but Jesus, Nancy's husband, never did—"even before" Mr. Compson, Quentin's father, told Jesus to stay away from the Compson's property. Jesus never came to help Nancy with the washing, even when she was doing the extra work of cooking for the Compsons because their usual maid, Dilsey, was sick.

Quentin complains that Nancy was not a very reliable servant and describes how he, Caddy, and Jason would often have to go to Nancy's cabin and wake her up so that she could come and cook their breakfast. They did not cross the **ditch** however, because Mr. Compson had warned them to stay away from Jesus, who lived with Nancy. He recalls a memory from the past, in which the children throw rocks at Nancy's house to wake her and Nancy comes to the door "without any clothes on" and tells them she is sleeping. By the time she gets around to making breakfast, it is too late for Quentin to go to school.

Quentin and his family think that Nancy is a drunk, and that is why she is late for work. Later they hear that Nancy has been arrested again. As she is being escorted to jail, the group passes a man called Mr. Stovall, a local bank cashier and church deacon. Nancy screams at Mr. Stovall, demanding, "when you going to pay me white man?" Mr. Stovall responds by kicking Nancy in the face and knocking out several of her teeth. As Nancy is lying on the ground and Mr. Stovall is restrained, she laughs and says, "it's been three times now since he paid me a cent."

In jail Nancy protests all night, "singing and yelling," and people stop outside to listen and laugh at the jailor trying to "shut her up." The next morning, Nancy stops singing, and when the jailor goes up to her cell, he finds that she has tried to hang herself from the window bar. The jailor "revives her" and then beats her; he tells everyone that Nancy is not a drunk but is on cocaine, because "no nigger would try to commit suicide unless he was full of cocaine." The jailor also reveals that Nancy is pregnant because she hangs herself naked and he can see her "belly already swelling out a little, like a little balloon."

Nancy's husband, Jesus, is framed as a menacing figure from this early point in the story. The fact that he never helps Nancy, even when she is taking on extra work, suggests he is a mean, careless husband. The fact that Mr. Compson has banished him from the property suggests that he has caused or been in trouble in some way.



Quentin's privilege is evident here as he remembers the inconvenience of their regular servant being sick and their having to make do with Nancy. The ditch represents the racial segregation between the two societies in Jefferson: the white part of the town, and the black society in "Negro Hollow." The fact that the children throw rocks at Nancy's house, and yet still expect her to serve them, shows that the children have learned to disrespect black people and expect black people to wait on them.



This scene between Nancy and Mr. Stovall implies that Nancy has been working as a prostitute, and that Mr. Stovall has used her services but has failed to pay her. Mr. Stovall responds violently towards Nancy, kicking her in the mouth, in order to silence her. He is afraid that her outburst will expose his actions and damage his reputation as a respectable member of the white community. However, there are no consequences for Mr. Stovall, even when he publicly assaults Nancy. This shows how safe white people were from the law (which generally took their side) compared to black people.



The white community's lack of sympathy towards Nancy is evident; rather than feel concerned about her, they view her arrest as entertaining gossip. The severity of Nancy's problems is made clear by the fact that she tries to commit suicide. However, the report from the jailor suggests that the white community trivializes this too and thinks that Nancy tries to kill herself because she is on drugs rather than because she is deeply unhappy. This shows an unwillingness on the part of the white community to address the reasons a black woman may have for being unhappy, such as racism or extreme poverty.



Quentin notes that he, Caddy, and Jason also notice Nancy's "apron swelling out" when she is cooking for them because Dilsey is sick. This is "before father told Jesus to stay away from the house," Quentin notes, and as such Jesus is sitting in the Compson's kitchen while Nancy cooks. Jesus says that Nancy has a "watermelon" under her dress, to which Nancy replies that it didn't "come off" Jesus's "vine." Caddy is confused and asks Nancy and Jesus what they mean but the adults ignore her. Jesus says that he can easily "cut down the vine it did come off," and Nancy tells him not to talk like that before the children, and that Mr. Compson doesn't want Jesus hanging around the kitchen. Jesus sulks and complains that "he can't hang around a white man's kitchen," but a "white man can hang around his."

Mr. Compson tells Jesus to stay away from the house, suggesting that Jesus's aggressive behavior has escalated in some way. Quentin refers to an incident before this takes place, while Nancy is evidently pregnant with someone else's child, probably as a result of her prostitution. When she says the "watermelon" has not come off Jesus's "vine" she means it is not Jesus's child. Jesus implies that he might hurt the man who got Nancy pregnant, saying he can "cut down the vine it did come off of." Jesus is angry about the hypocrisy in their society, as he feels there is one rule for white men and another for black men. White men can tell black men to get off their property, but black people have no civil rights to defend themselves or their own homes from the actions of white men.



Dilsey stays sick for a long time, so Nancy continues to cook for the family, and Mr. Compson tells Jesus to stay away from the house. One evening, after supper, Mrs. Compson remarks that Nancy is taking a long time to wash and dry the dishes and sends Quentin to see what is taking so long. Quentin finds that the dishes have been put away and fire is out. Nancy is sitting by the "cold stove," and when Quentin asks her what is wrong, she says that "she ain't nothing but a nigger" and that "it ain't none of her fault."

Nancy is clearly avoiding going home, which is why she sits so long in the kitchen after all her work is finished. When Quentin goes to question her, she implies that she is in trouble but that there is nothing she can do about it since "she ain't nothing but a nigger" and "it ain't none of her fault." This suggests that Nancy feels her situation is hopeless and that she can't do anything to help or protect herself because of her race and lack of rights and power in society.



Unnerved by Nancy's manner and the contrast between the "warm, busy, cheerful" way the kitchen usually feels and the cold, dreary atmosphere "at that hour" of the night, Quentin returns to the library and tells his parents that Nancy is finished. Mr. Compson goes to see what is wrong with Nancy. Caddy suggests that she might be waiting for Jesus to come and get her, but Quentin says that Jesus has left town. Jason thinks Nancy is "scared of the **dark**" and doesn't want to walk home. Caddy tells Jason that he is afraid of the dark too, causing the younger boy to defend his own bravery.

Quentin demonstrates his privilege and his ability to avoid situations that makes him uncomfortable. He dislikes the atmosphere in the kitchen, which is depressing compared to the "warm, busy, cheerful" atmosphere he thinks a kitchen should have. Although Nancy is a human being, Quentin only views her as something that cooks and cleans and makes the kitchen feel homey. The younger children's reaction suggests that they are too young to comprehend adult fears but empathize with Nancy on their own level, assuming she is afraid of the same things as them, like the dark. Jason, however, is already learning that in the patriarchal culture of the South, boys are meant to be brave and not admit their fears.



Mr. Compson returns and says that he is going to walk Nancy home because Nancy thinks that Jesus has come back to town. Mrs. Compson asks if Nancy has seen Jesus, but Mr. Compson says she hasn't. Mrs. Compson then complains that her husband seems to consider Nancy's safety "more precious" than her own, as he will leave her and the children "unprotected" with Jesus about. Caddy and Jason then beg to go with their father and Nancy and, although Mrs. Compson is irritated, Mr. Compson takes the three children and goes to walk Nancy home.

Mrs. Compson trivializes Nancy's fear, even though if Jesus is outside, Nancy could be in significant danger. Instead of acknowledging this, Mrs. Compson acts as though she and Nancy are in the same amount of danger from Jesus, even though this is clearly not true—Jesus is unlikely to hurt a white woman because the consequences would be so severe, and Nancy is the person he is angry with. In contrast, killing Nancy will have no consequences because she is not protected by the law or civil rights.



On the walk home, Nancy says that she will be alright if she can just get “through the lane,” which is the **darkest** part of the walk. Mr. Compson asks Nancy if she can stay with Aunt Rachel, who sometimes claims to be Jesus’s mother yet also sometimes says she isn’t “kin” to him. Caddy teases Jason about being “scairder than niggers,” but Jason denies it.

The dark lane becomes symbolic of the racial divide in Jefferson. Aunt Rachel clearly is Jesus’s mother, but his violent behavior sometimes makes her ashamed to admit she is related to him. Caddy calls Jason “scairder than niggers” which demonstrates that the children have learned racist stereotypes, such as the idea that black people are cowardly. This stereotype ignored the fact that black people were genuinely afraid for their lives because of racial violence during this period and, instead, suggested that black people were inherently weak. This supported the patriarchal culture of the South, in which macho bravery was considered a virtue while cowardice was considered unmanly and inferior.



While the children argue, Mr. Compson tries to reassure Nancy that Jesus is gone. Nancy replies that Jesus told her that “she done woke up the devil in him and there aint but one thing going to lay it down again.” Mr. Compson tells Nancy that she wouldn’t be in this situation if she could “just let white men alone.” Caddy asks what her father means and is ignored. Nancy tells Mr. Compson that she knows Jesus hasn’t “gone nowhere”—that, in fact, he is hiding somewhere in wait, and that she “aint going to see him again but once, with that razor in his mouth.” Nancy says, when he appears, she “won’t even be surprised.”

Nancy believes that there is nothing she can do to stop Jesus, and that it is her destiny to be murdered by him. Rather than understanding the hopelessness she feels in her vulnerable position as a black woman, Mr. Compson blames Nancy for the situation. He says that she should “let white men alone,” suggesting that Nancy has led white men on by persuading them to use her services as a prostitute; rather than accepting that white men go to her voluntarily. Mr. Compson shows his racial prejudice because he is more willing to believe that a black woman leads white men astray than that white men freely act in ways which society, in this period, would deem immoral.



Dilsey is still sick, so the family begin to walk Nancy home every night after she has finished her work. Eventually Mrs. Compson becomes annoyed that she is being “left alone in this big house” while Mr. Compson takes home “a frightened Negro.” Instead of walking Nancy home, the family sets up a bed for her in the kitchen and allow her to sleep there for several nights. One night they are woken up by a Nancy making an eerie sound that isn’t “singing” nor “crying.” Mr. Compson goes downstairs to check on Nancy as Caddy and Quentin creep out onto the landing to see what is going on.

Mrs. Compson demonstrates that she is willing to put her own convenience (her desire not to be left alone) ahead of Nancy’s physical safety. The fact that they allow Nancy to sleep in the kitchen shows that the Compsons are relatively sympathetic towards their servants, although they do not let Nancy have one of the bedrooms. The sound Nancy makes is associated with the racial divide between black and white characters in the story. The white characters do not understand the sound, and it is portrayed as something alien and strange. The sound expresses Nancy terror of what may happen to her. The fact that the white characters do not understand this shows what a gulf in sympathy there is between the white and black people in Jefferson.



The children hear their father going down the back stairs and then hear Nancy’s sound again “in the stairway.” They see that she is standing against the wall in the **dark**, her eyes appearing catlike. Nancy stops making the sound when the children go down and stand with her until Mr. Compson comes back. He brings Nancy’s bed up with him from the kitchen and sets it up for her to sleep in the children’s bedroom.

Nancy is most afraid when she is alone and stops making the sound when the children go down to the landing because they provide her with company in the darkness. Although the children are very privileged compared to Nancy, they are in a similar position to her as they cannot physically defend themselves and rely on their father for protection.



Quentin and Caddy lie in the **dark** room with Nancy. Caddy keeps asking Nancy questions about what made her afraid and what she saw in the kitchen, wondering whether she saw Jesus trying to get in. Nancy whispers something but, in the dark, it seems as though “nobody” had made the sound, and that it “came from nowhere and went nowhere.” To Quentin, it seems as if Nancy isn’t in the room at all, and that he had “looked so hard at her eyes on the stairs” in the dark that their image had been “printed” on his eyeballs—“like the sun” after staring at it and then closing one’s eyes. Nancy starts crying for Jesus, making the sound long until it “goes out like a match.” Quentin tells Caddy that it is the other Jesus, not her husband, that Nancy is calling for.

Nancy becomes associated with the darkness here as the sound she makes seems to come from nowhere and go nowhere; as though it comes out of the dark. This suggests that Nancy’s life has been overshadowed by the darkness (racism) that haunts Jefferson and that, since she will likely be murdered by Jesus, her whole life and death have been defined by this. Nancy’s death is foreshadowed by the sound “going out like a match.” The image of Nancy’s eyes “printed” on Quentin’s eyeballs suggests that Nancy’s fears haunt Quentin after the events. It is ironic that Nancy is calling for “Jesus,” since Jesus could be either Jesus Christ (who is a sign of salvation in the Christian faith) or Jesus her husband (whom she believes will kill her rather than save her).



Dilsey gets well and comes to cook for the Compsons again, but Nancy still comes into the kitchen after it gets **dark**. Dilsey asks Nancy how she knows that Jesus has come back. Jason, who is also in the kitchen, says that “Jesus is a nigger.” Nancy tells Dilsey that she can feel Jesus; that he is “laying yonder in the **ditch**.” Jason says that Dilsey “is a nigger” too, while Dilsey makes Nancy some coffee and tries to calm her down. Jason then says that he “ain’t a nigger” and asks Nancy if she is one. Nancy replies, “I hellborn, child. I won’t be nothing soon. I going back to where I came from.”

Nancy cannot prove that Jesus has come back but senses that he is nearby and that she is in danger. This represents racism in Jefferson, which puts all the black characters in danger and is ever present even though it is never openly articulated. Jason is in the process of learning this racism as he is learning to separate black and white people into different categories. The fact that he keeps asking who is “a nigger” and who is not suggests that he does not understand the reason for the divide and will need it confirmed by the adults around him before it becomes second nature to him. When Nancy replies to Jason, she again associates herself with darkness, nothingness, and lack of salvation, suggesting that her life is meaningless and that nothing can help her. Nancy, like Jason, has learned her place in society because, in the Christian culture of the South, Nancy would be considered sinful because she has been a prostitute.



Nancy tries to drink the coffee that Dilsey has made for her, but she cannot swallow it. She starts making “the sound,” which she made the night that she slept in the children’s bedroom. Quentin remarks that it was like there were two Nancys, “one looking” at the children, the other “making that sound.” Nancy spills the coffee on the floor, and Dilsey says that Nancy can sleep in her house if she is afraid of Jesus. Nancy turns this offer down though because she says that “no nigger” will stop Jesus.

Nancy says that “no nigger will stop Jesus” because she feels that black people are powerless to stop Jesus’s literal violence, but also against the atmosphere of racial violence that surrounds them. Jesus will not be afraid to hurt other black people because they are not protected by the law like white people are.



Nancy seems to have an idea suddenly, and her eyes “move fast, like she is afraid” there isn’t time. She asks the children if they remember the night she slept in their room and says that, if they let her stay again, she will play with them like she did last time. She persuades the children to ask their mother, but Mrs. Compson says that she “can’t have Negroes sleeping in the bedrooms.” Caddy asks Mrs. Compson why Nancy is afraid of Jesus and if Mrs. Compson is afraid of Mr. Compson. Jason starts to cry and says he will only stop crying if Dilsey makes him a chocolate cake. Mr. Compson tells Jason off and sends the children to tell Nancy to go home and lock her door.

Caddy tells Nancy what Mr. Compson has said and asks what Nancy has done to make Jesus mad. Nancy drops her cup and begins making “the sound” again, before asking the children if they remember having fun when she stayed in their room. Jason says he didn’t have any fun, but Caddy reminds him that he was not there, but asleep in Mrs. Compson’s room. Nancy says that if the children come home with her, they will have fun again. Caddy doesn’t think their parents will let them go, but Nancy says that she shouldn’t tell them. Caddy thinks it will be alright to go because their mother didn’t say they shouldn’t, but Quentin reminds her that this is only because they haven’t asked.

The children set off down the lane with Nancy. The lane is **dark**, and Caddy teases Jason about being scared. Caddy asks Nancy why she is “talking so loud” and Nancy laughs and says, “listen at Quentin and Caddy and Jason saying I’m talking loud.” The children are confused and say that Nancy is talking “like there are five” of them or like Mr. Compson is with them. Nancy calls Jason “Mister Jason,” the way she would Mr. Compson, whose first name is also Jason. Nancy tells them to “hush” and they cross the **ditch** towards her house.

Quentin doesn’t like the smell in Nancy’s house, which is like a lamp and Nancy’s smell like the wick; “they [are] waiting for one another to begin to smell.” Nancy asks them what they want to do at her house, but the children are uncomfortable. Quentin says that there is “something you could smell besides Nancy in the house,” something even Jason smells. The young boy wants to go home.

Nancy attempts to manipulate the children by reminding them of the time that they played in the bedroom together. Although she has said that “no nigger will stop Jesus,” she feels protected in the presence of the white Compsons, as they have more protection under the law than she has. Mrs. Compson, however, has lost patience with Nancy and says no. Caddy picks up on the fact that Nancy is afraid of her husband and is curious about this. Caddy too is learning the social boundaries of the world she is growing up in. As a girl in a patriarchal culture Caddy is probably aware that she will be married one day, and that she will have fewer rights than her husband. Like Nancy, Caddy may one day be afraid of her husband or be a victim of domestic violence.



Nancy grows increasingly desperate after learning that Mr. and Mrs. Compson have given up on helping her. Again, she tries to manipulate the children, trying to bribe them to come to her house and convincing them not to ask their parents for permission to go. Caddy too is clearly familiar with this type of manipulation as she astutely points out that her parents have not said they could not go. Quentin, who is older, knows that this is not a good excuse to behave in a way that their parents will not like.



Nancy tries to make it sound like Mr. Compson is with them in order to deter Jesus from attacking her. This shows that she does not believe that the children alone will be enough to protect her and suggests that she is putting them in danger by taking them with her. Although this is not an admirable decision on Nancy’s part, she is driven to this by fear and by the negligence of the children’s parents.



The image of the lamp and the wick suggests that Nancy belongs to her environment in “Negro Hollow,” but that the Compson children do not. They are not familiar with the poverty there, signified by Nancy’s “smell,” and it immediately makes them uncomfortable. The “something” besides Nancy that they can smell suggests the adult world, which the children do not understand but that they sense their proximity to and want to escape from.



Nancy stands in front of the door and looks at the children as if she is “emptying” her eyes. Caddy asks if Nancy will tell them a story and Nancy agrees. While she is telling the story though, Quentin notices that she talks and looks around as if her eyes and voice “did not belong to her.” Quentin says that “the Nancy who could stoop under a barbed wire fence with a bundle of clothes balanced on her head” was there, but another part of her “was outside”—“waiting somewhere else.”

Nancy’s story is about a queen who is trying to get across the **ditch** outside her house, so that she can “get home and bar the door.” Caddy asks why a queen would need to go near a ditch or get home and bar her door. Jason says he doesn’t like the story and wants to go home. He says that he will tell his parents if they won’t take him home, and Nancy pleads with the children to stay, saying that she knows better stories. She tells them that she has some popcorn and that Jason can hold the popper if they stay. Jason says this will be alright as long as he can hold the popper and Caddy cannot. While they are talking, Nancy puts her hand on a hot lamp and doesn’t seem to notice it burning until Caddy points it out.

Nancy gets the popper out from under the bed, but it is broken. Jason begins to cry when he sees this and again says he wants to go home. Caddy is losing interest in the popcorn too and thinks that they should leave because it is getting late. Nancy seems desperate for them to stay and tries to fix the popper, but Caddy says it won’t hold. Nancy helps Jason hold the popper over the fire, but it breaks, and the corn falls in the grate. Jason gets smoke in his eyes and starts crying again.

As Nancy is taking the popcorn out of the fire, insisting that it will still be good to eat, the group hear footsteps approaching the cabin outside. They all stop to listen, and Nancy begins making the sound again as tears start coming out of her eyes even though she is not crying. The children watch, fascinated, unsure what is going on. Caddy goes to the door and says that she sees Mr. Compson coming. Nancy begs Caddy to ask Mr. Compson if she can come and sleep in their room again and that, if she can, they will have fun. Jason says that he hasn’t had any fun, and that Nancy got smoke in his eye and hurt him.

The idea that part of Nancy is already waiting outside the house suggests that Nancy has already accepted her death as inevitable. The idea that she is waiting for it outside in the darkness associates Nancy with death, which is often talked about in terms of darkness. Nancy tries to keep the children occupied with stories in an attempt to put off her death, even though she considers it inevitable and inescapable.



Nancy, who was able to manipulate the children at first, is now begging them to stay. Jason shows his tyrannical side when he says that he will stay to make popcorn if Caddy cannot hold the popper. Although Jason is very young, this shows that the children are pampered and accustomed to getting their own way. Nancy, meanwhile, is so transported by fear that she is almost literally detached from her body and is unable to feel her hand burning until Caddy points it out.



Nancy gets increasingly desperate as the children grow less enthusiastic about staying. Caddy, who has been the most interested in staying with Nancy and the most curious about Nancy’s situation so far, also begins to lose interest. The popper breaking suggests Nancy’s losing battle to keep the children invested in her situation, which they do not really care about except in a very naïve, superficial way because they are too young to understand.



It is unclear whether the footsteps approaching belong to Jesus or not. It is possible that he is sneaking up on the house, and that he is prepared to hurt the children inside, but that he is deterred by the approach of Mr. Compson. However, the reader could also assume that the footsteps belong to Mr. Compson and that the children are in no real danger.



Mr. Compson enters the cabin and, again, tells Nancy to go and stay with Aunt Rachel. He says that he has checked the **ditch** outside Nancy's cabin, and that Jesus is not there. Nancy says she knows Jesus is there because she received a sign from him: a pig's bone with some meat and blood still on it, which was on the table when she got home. Nancy says that she knows Jesus is there and that "as soon as" the Compsons walk out the door, she will be "gone." Mr. Compson again tries to coax her to Aunt Rachel's, but Nancy says that it won't do "no good," and that even if she were sleeping in the room with the Compson children she would still be "gone" the next morning.

Giving up, Mr. Compson tells Nancy to lock her door and put out the lamp, but Nancy says she is scared for "it to happen in the **dark**." Mr. Compson moves to take the children home and Nancy says that she has her "coffin money saved up with Mr. Lovelady." (In an aside, Quentin tells the reader that Mr. Lovelady is the town undertaker whose wife killed herself suddenly one morning.) Mr. Compson tells Nancy not to talk "nonsense" and says that he will see her in the kitchen the next day. Nancy says that Mr. Compson will "see what he sees," but that "it will take the Lord to say what will be."

The children leave with Mr. Compson. Nancy remains sitting by the fire with the door of her cabin open and does not get up to close it. Caddy asks her father what's going to happen, and he tells her that nothing will. They walk down through the **ditch** and Quentin observes that he can't "see much where the moonlight and the shadows tangled."

Nancy loses all hope as soon as Mr. Compson arrives because she knows that he has not come to help her. Although he tries to placate her, telling her that he has checked the ditch and that Jesus is not there, Nancy is convinced that when they leave, she will be "gone." The use of the word "gone" suggests that she will vanish, returning to the empty darkness that she believes is waiting for her and that her life has been made up of because of her low social status.



The digression about Mr. Lovelady and his wife's unexpected suicide ties into the idea that uncomfortable ideas go unacknowledged in this society. Rather than openly acknowledging racism in the town, the residents push it under the surface. Similarly, with Mr. Lovelady's wife, the reason for her suicide is unknown and it is treated as something inexplicable and random, rather than the result of some underlying problem. Although Nancy believes she is damned and that her death will be "dark," her closing statement suggests that she does believe in Christianity and that her fate is synonymous with what "the Lord" has planned for her. This implies that Nancy feels she is damned on a spiritual level and that salvation is being denied her because she does not deserve it. This suggests that Nancy has internalized the racist ideas about herself and her social status.



Although Nancy is clearly very afraid, so much so that she is paralyzed by fear and simply sits with the door open after they leave, Mr. Compson still trivializes her fear. He dismisses the children's questions about what will happen to Nancy. Although Quentin does not openly question his father's judgement, he does check the ditch for himself and acknowledges that he cannot really see if someone is hiding there or not. This suggests that Mr. Compson is willing to overlook potential danger to Nancy rather than inconvenience himself and go out of his way to look for Jesus. The fact that Quentin is aware of this and does not draw attention to it suggests that he too has learned to ignore uncomfortable ideas and become complacent and preoccupied with his own comfort and convenience.



Caddy asks if Jesus is watching them from the **ditch**, but Mr. Compson says that Jesus is gone. Jason is sitting on his father's shoulders and it looks like Mr. Compson "has two heads, a big one and a little one." They come out of the ditch and can no longer see Nancy through the open door, but they can hear her making the sound which is "like singing and not like singing." Quentin asks Mr. Compson who will do their washing now. Jason, on Mr. Compson's shoulders, declares that he "is not a nigger," to which Caddy responds that Jason is "worse" because he's a "tattletale." She says he is "scardier than a nigger," prompting Mr. Compson to break up the fight by shouting at Candace.

The image of Jason riding on Mr. Compson's shoulders, like Mr. Compson has "two heads," suggests that Jason will grow up to be a version of his father. This is supported by the fact that Jason announces that "he is not a nigger," suggesting that Jason is learning to differentiate himself from black people and learn racist attitudes in the same way that his father has. When Mr. Compson defends Jason from Candace, it suggests that Jason's status as white man will protect him from criticism in the future, just as Mr. Compson protects Jason from it as a child. Quentin's question about "who will do the washing," implies that he believes Nancy will be killed but also that, in his mind, the most significant consequence of this will be that no one will be there to do his washing. This shows his total disregard for Nancy's wellbeing and connects the end of the story to Quentin's nostalgic comments about the washer women at the beginning of the story.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Greenall, Lily. "That Evening Sun." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 19 Dec 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Greenall, Lily. "That Evening Sun." LitCharts LLC, December 19, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/that-evening-sun>.

To cite any of the quotes from *That Evening Sun* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Faulkner, William. *That Evening Sun*. Vintage. 1995.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Faulkner, William. *That Evening Sun*. New York: Vintage. 1995.