

From Metaphors to Metonymies: Two Paradigms of Nature Writing in American Southern Literature

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Abstract

Nature writing is an integral part of American Southern literature. This article analyses *The Sound and the Fury* written by William Faulkner, the icon of the “Southern Renaissance”, and *Mama Day*, a critically acclaimed work by contemporary African American female writer Gloria Naylor, focusing on their different strategies of nature writing from the perspective of rhetoric. It unveils the metaphorical and metonymical aspects of the natural symbols in these two novels respectively and further points out the gap is caused by divergent ways of plotting so as to write the Southern history—Faulkner, as a modernist writer, chooses the romantic way, while Naylor, belonging to the postmodernists, writes a tragedy.

Key words: Metaphor; Metonymy; Nature writing; Modernism; Postmodernism

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When it comes to the study of American literature, “nature” is very likely to be met with as a key term. Recognized as a central figure in the study of Southern culture, William Faulkner has inspired numerous attempts to dig into his fictional writings for the unveiling and reconstruction of a quintessential yet distinctive South, or of his fictional Yoknapatawpha County. The Sound of the Fury (abbreviated as SF in the following discussion), in this respect, certainly is qualified to serve as an abundant

source of the unique natural symbols in the South. However, the repetitive emergence of certain universal natural symbols, such as fire, trees, earth and water, is also noteworthy, particularly in terms of the close relationship between the natural symbols, which are part of Faulkner’s “masks and metaphors” (Hönnighausen, 1997, p.62).

Faulkner’s influence on subsequent Southern literary writings, without any doubt, is profound and may have even caused much “anxiety”. Gloria Naylor owes to Faulkner at least in light of the narrative structure of *Mama Day*, her masterpiece. Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* is said by Naylor herself to be the “key to structure” of *Mama Day* and Willow Springs is “in a manner reminiscent of Yoknapatawpha County” (Fowler, 1996, p.83). What may be justifiably added to this indebtedness is Naylor’s appropriation of the Faulkner natural symbols in *SF* in her representation of Willow Springs.

This research paper aims to compare the different functions of natural symbols in *SF* and in *Mama Day*, focusing on their metaphorical attributes in the former, especially with regards to the identification of and the inter-relationships among the Compsons, and on their metonymical attributes in the latter, especially with regards to the representation of the mythical black matriarchal community of Willow Springs. It further explores the styles and strategies of nature writing in light of the transition from modernism to postmodernism.

BORN TO BE ENTANGLED: THE IDENTIFICATION MECHANISM OF THE COMPSONS

The first section of *SF*, namely Benjy’s narrative, is recognized as sense data. In this section, the narrator’s perception of the world is formed through his sense organs, his sense of smell in particular. Though fragmentary, his perception results directly from natural

symbols and can bring to light what is essentially natural in each of the Compsons. The centre of Benjy's conscious is unquestionably his sister, Caddy, who smelled like trees. Besides this olfactory connection between Caddy and trees, an important episode also leads to the same conclusion.

He went and pushed Caddy up into the tree to the first limb. We watched the muddy bottom of her drawers. Then we couldn't see her. We could hear the tree thrashing. (Faulkner, 1995, p.31)

In this scene Caddy is made indistinguishable from the tree. As the tree is itself a natural element, it also can be said in this case the heroine merges with nature. That is to say, the former subject-object relationship between Caddy and trees no longer holds; instead, the subject and object become integrated and unified.

Concerning the fact that the metaphorical implication is conveyed through a loony narrator, the reliability of the narrative might become in doubt. Yet, trees, as well as leaves and flowers, are connected once again to Caddy from the perspective of Quentin, the intelligent brother and Harvard student, a seemingly more competent narrator. In the Quentin section, Caddy is seen in his conscious "running out of the mirror the smells roses roses the voice that breathed o'er Eden" (Faulkner, 1995, p.68). Here the bond between Caddy and plants is further strengthened; what is more, the transcendence is pushed to a higher level—Caddy's unification with Eve, the mother of mankind and the original cause of man's fall. Now the feminine and maternal feature of plants serves as the foundation for the metaphor. Thus Caddy's "fall" is foreshadowed; so is the fall of the whole Compson family. As Robert W. Hamblin (2004) notes, "in its widest application of meaning, *The Sound and the Fury* is a retelling of the loss of Eden, of humanity's recurring initiation into the tragic certainties of life" (p.14). And as Liu (2002) observes, Caddy's bitchery is "what caused the Compson family's irrecoverable loss of hope for its recovery and occasioned all the sound and the fury throughout the book" (p.11).

However, plants are not the only natural symbol that contributes to the defining of Caddy's identity. As Benjy observes, through his visual sense this time, "her hair was like fire, and little points of fire were in her eyes" (Faulkner, 1995, p.59). The analogy is metaphorically justifiable in that Caddy has been a wayward girl in her childhood who neglects rules and premonitions, and a woman beyond the control of traditional morality in her later years. When the two natural symbols originally get juxtaposed in the same character, fire seems to have taken charge of the outward self of Caddy while plants safeguard her inner self. However, the two forces become irreconcilable once they are intermingled; neither in nature nor in Caddy. The fire makes it impossible for the tree to take root and grow into prosperity. Caddy can thus never be reclaimed by the Compson family.

The peculiar tree-fire combination in personality is passed down from the mother to the daughter. While Caddy once climbs up the tree to get a glimpse of the funeral taking place inside the house, her daughter, Quentin, jumps out of the window and uses the tree, probably the same pear tree her mother climbs, as a medium to escape from the house. Thus, like her mother, the tree may be seen as a metaphor for Quentin. However, unlike her fugitive mother—the metaphorically rootless tree, Quentin is sheltered in the house, which itself should be a metaphor for the old Southern tradition, and seems to have taken root in the Southern soil.

As for her connection with fire, Benjy's perception should be taken as a starter as well: "Quentin looked at the fire. The fire was in her eyes and on her mouth. Her mouth was red" (Faulkner, 1995, p.55). The fire observed in Quentin's eyes and on her mouth is just another marker of Faulkner's metaphorical use of natural symbols. With the connection between Quentin and fire in mind, it becomes comprehensible why the showman of the circus, whom Quentin elopes with, is depicted as a man with a red tie. Actually, the red tie seems to be his only distinguishable feature when Jason tries to catch him. The red tie, while functioning as a synecdoche for the man, is also a metaphor for fire, which itself is a metaphor for Quentin. In this sense, Quentin is simply attracted by someone of her own kind.

Yet Quentin's difference from her mother is evident. Though unable to be reclaimed by the family, Caddy never slackens in her responsibility for her daughter, just like a tree provides its branches with all that is needed no matter how far it extends from her. In other words, the blood bond is always emphasized by Caddy. In contrast, growing up in a family of self-centredness and lovelessness, Quentin never really cares about the life of her biological mother and only feels the need for a mother in the financial sense. Thus, fire may be said to symbolize Quentin's innate feature while trees turn out to be an unstable and breakable symbol on the superficial level.

Another point is that Quentin is named after her uncle, which contributes to the well-known obscurity of *SF*, especially in the first part narrated by Benjy, where the uncle and niece can hardly be recognized as two members of the family. So, there ought to be certain connection between these two characters. In fact, if so far it has been reasonable to link Quentin (F) to the natural symbol of fire, Quentin (M) is more likely to be connected with the same symbol. First of all, he obviously has a fiery temper. It is shown conspicuously in his reaction to Caddy's loss of virginity: "I held the point of the knife at her throat it wont take but a second just a second then I can do mine I can do mine then" (Faulkner, 1995, p.128). Later, after his fight with Dalton Ames, which itself can serve as an example of Quentin (M)'s temper, he confronts Caddy again. In this case, "her face looked off into the tree where

the sun slanted and where the bird” (Faulkner, 1995, p.138). In this scene, on the one hand, the metaphor of trees gets strengthened—Caddy unconsciously turns to what defines her inner self for help; on the other hand, the metaphor of fire comes to light—it is the tree that turns the sparkles into blazes, which engulf the tree at first as a protecting force and inevitably transforms into a demolishing force once the boundary is transgressed.

When the fire in Quentin (F) is irreconcilable with her surroundings, her resolution is to escape and join her own species. However, when the fire in Quentin (M), which is evidently much stronger, turns out to be out of control, he seems to have no choice but self-destruction. That can provide an explanation for both the cause of his suicide and the way he commits it, since water is what is out there in nature to restraint fire so as to keep its balance. Death also provides Quentin (M) with the solution for what bothers him throughout his metaphysical being—to get rid of the control of time and to live in timeless perfection. The very art of balance which nature imposes on its elements finally leads to Quentin (M)’s reconciliation with the outside world through his integration with nature, which is intact from time.

When it comes to the question of timelessness, the living state of Benjy should meet the requirement. However, it cannot be what Quentin (M) has been seeking in that it seems either “unnatural” or “unnaturally natural”. It is unnatural in that Benjy’s intellect stops growing and remains at the level of an infant—the defamiliarized Benjy from the third-person perspective in the fourth section makes the unnatural disparity sharply perceived. However, in another sense, Benjy remains at the most natural stage of human growth. That is why his senses have been taken as reliable data and evidence for the defining qualities of the Compsons. As Debrah Raschke (2007) suggests, “the Benjy section yields the raw material—the untainted image, which becomes for both Quentin and Jason constructed fictions” (p.106).

In effect, the closeness between Benjy and nature can be seen from the very beginning of *SF*: “Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting” (Faulkner, 1995, p.1). The importance of this depiction partly lies in the indication of the relationship between Benjy and land, or the natural symbol of earth. It is later told that the land beyond the fence originally belongs to the Compson family, and the last piece of land sold belongs to Benjy. It is sold so as to send Quentin (M) to Harvard, an indicator of the decline of the old Southern family. Considering the fact that the historical prosperity of the South largely depended on the plantation economy, we may see the metaphor more clearly—Benjy does provide material support for Quentin (M) and thus provide “gleams of resuscitation” (Liu, 2002, p.10) of the Compson family.

The metaphor of earth is further illustrated in Benjy’s

relationship with Caddy. Caddy’s genuine kindness towards her loony brother can be explained by the tree’s natural and inseparable bond with the earth. That is why upon leaving home, Caddy makes Quentin (M) promise to take care of Benjy and not to “let them send him to Jackson” (Faulkner, 1995, p.94). That also explains Benjy’s longing for Caddy’s return, which is the earth’s longing for the tree’s taking root again.

THE NATURAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL: THE REPRESENTATION OF WILLOW SPRINGS

If land was a key element for the Southern economy and culture before and in the 1920s when Faulkner wrote *SF*, it remains so in Naylor’s writings. The prologue of *Mama Day* introduces the setting of novel, an island called Willow Springs, whose only connection to the mainland is a bridge.

But anyways, all forty-nine square miles curves like a bow, stretching toward Georgia on the south end and South Carolina on the north, and right smack in the middle where each foot of our bridge sits is the dividing line between them two states. (Naylor, 1988, p.5)

The ownership of Willow Springs arouses interesting questions. Though it belongs to the Day family in legal terms, which can be seen in the prefatory documents, the inheritance patterns of the Day family clarify that “it’s always owned two generations down” in order to “keep any Day from selling it” (Naylor, 1988, p.5). As for the status quo, the youngest Day, Cocoa, doesn’t own the land—it belongs to her unborn children. This paradox makes it impossible for any living individual to claim ownership of the land. “So who it belong to? It belongs to us.” (Naylor, 1988, p.5) So the communal narrative voice of the opening section makes Willow Springs a collective property of the inhabitants, belonging to neither any state nor any individual.

This marked difference from *SF* is crucial. The specific geographical features and apolitical status makes the land of Willow Springs a target of modern commercialism. “Developers started swarming over here like sand flies at a Sunday picnic” (Naylor, 1988, p.6). To keep Willow Springs untainted by the outside world, Mama Day set the price of the land at “a million an acre”, who, from the perspective of the community, “wasn’t asking too much” (Naylor, 1988, p.6). What is clearly shown here is that Willow Springs is not a commodity for sale in the eyes of both the local inhabitants and the head of this matriarchal community. As Whitt (1999) observes, Land is an integral part of the concept of Willow Springs and serves as the platform on which the “mysterious” and the “ethereal” (p.116) take place. Whereas Faulkner’s metaphor-laden land fails to resist the assault of modern

commercialism and is turned into gulf courts, Naylor's land, as a metonymy for Willow Springs, succeeds in self-protection.

Talking about "the Land of the Mysterious and the Ethereal", we are actually coming to the discussion of the "conjure woman" (Naylor, 1988, p.1), the very concept of which originally is related to Sapphira Wade. This legendary woman's magic mainly consists of her ability to manipulate lightning and her healing power. Since lightning and fire are intrinsically the flow of energy and lightning's natural power is manifested to a large extent in its metamorphic form of fire, lightning can be seen as a counterpart to fire in *SF*. As the current head of Willow Springs, Miranda seems to have inherited these two powers.

Miranda's power of control of lightning is implicitly revealed when it comes to the part in which "the new deputy wanted to show off his badge while it was still shiny" (Naylor, 1988, p.80). With only lightning bolts and no rain or wind, the scene is certainly unnatural. As the deputy awkwardly retreats due to the threatening effects of the lightning bolts, the scene actually can be seen as an indirect declaration of the unchallengeable authority of Miranda (Mama) Day. The world beyond the bridge is shown that "Willow Springs was one place that's best left alone" (Naylor, 1988, p.81). Yet due to the lack of direct evidence of Miranda's involvement, another possible interpretation is that the lightning is caused by Sapphira, the conjure ancestor of Miranda, who serves as a God-like protector of Willow Springs. Since Sapphira is physically dead, her spirit is identified with the spirit of Willow Springs. No matter whether it is Miranda or Sapphira that is responsible for the lightning, the message conveyed in this natural symbol cannot be mistaken: it manages to achieve the consolidation of the mysterious and autonomous status of Willow Springs as a whole, or "as a magic circle" (Juhasz, 1997, p.129).

A more crucial role played by lightning is seen in the scene of Ruby's death. "It hits Ruby's twice, and the second time the house explodes" (Naylor, 1988, p.273). However, like in the former case, Miranda's relationship with lightning is still ambiguous. Though the "circle of silvery power" she deposits around Ruby's house without any doubt attracts the lightning strikes, there remains the questions whether Miranda predicts the coming of lightning bolts that night or she herself summons them. Therefore, the natural symbol of lightning should once again be seen as a metonymy rather than a metaphor. That is to say, while Willow Springs can be identified as Island of Lightning, Mama Day cannot be safely termed as the Woman of Lightnings.

As has been pointed out, the other magical quality of Miranda lies in her healing power. She is an expert of herbal medicine. "In the woods, we return to reason and faith...I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see

all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (Emerson, 2007, p.1112). Miranda's conjuring power, along with her experience and wisdom, lies in the woods and can to some extent identified with God in Willow Springs.

In fact, the knowledge is passed down to Miranda by her father, whose voice accompanies her when she is collecting medicinal plants in the woods. "*Little Mama, these woods been here before you and me, so why should they get out your way—learn to move around'em*" (Naylor, 1988, p.78). Here the subject-object relationship between Miranda and the plants is clear. The plants belong to Willow Springs, just like Miranda and her genealogy do. Unlike Caddy's integration with plants and the dissolving of the subject-object relationship based upon their mutual essence, there has always been a boundary between Miranda and plants, however fully she may make use of them. Actually, Miranda's healing power results from her following the natural ways and positing herself as part of nature, an equal and parallel status with plants. In this sense, just like the fact that there is no willow in Willow Springs opens the possibility for a chain of signifiers in the signification of the island, actually Miranda is not superior to other inhabitants of the island with regards to the part-whole relationship between individuals and nature.

Besides, Miranda is not the only person that should be taken into consideration in terms of man-nature relations in Willow Springs. Dr. Buzzard, the self-acclaimed professional rival of Miranda, also utilizes the plants in Willow Springs for medical purposes, though in a poor way. And it should be said this "hoodoo man" is also an integral part of Willow Springs and contributes to its representation. And there is Ruby to add to this list. Before Cocoa's returning to Willow Springs with George, Ruby casts spells on Cocoa by burying a bag of special plants in Miranda's garden, which is later picked out by Miranda's hen. Thus, both the three characters—two doctors and a witch, and the plants they work on in their own way respectively are metonymies for Willow Springs.

BEYOND RHETORIC: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

Faulkner stated more than once that *SF* centred round two lost women, however, as Dawn Trouard (2007) notes, "there is more to Caddy than loss, or rather, there are more Caddys lost than we have begun to do justice to" (p.36); moreover, "considering of the mother-daughter plot gives way to an emphasis on brother-sister, uncle-niece, and son-mother connections" (p.46). This proves the importance of identity construction in the novel, and shows the ease and confidence of Faulkner who takes total control of his fictional world as a mature modernist

writer. He is quite convinced that he can establish steady connection between characters and further bring order to this world.

Naylor's *Mama Day* is seen as a representative of "magic realism" (Hayes, 1997, p.177). In this sense, it seems more likely that *Mama Day*'s emphasis lies on the representation of Willow Springs as a whole. In other words, it is only on this mythical and matriarchal communal platform that the characterization of the conjure women can be achieved. As Larry R. Andrews (1993) observes, "in *Mama Day* the power comes from folk tradition, from 'foremothering,' and from nature, as Naylor moves into the realm of matriarchal mythmaking" (p.285). That is why the natural symbols in this novel should be interpreted as metonymies for Willow Springs rather than metaphors for individual characters.

The shift from Faulkner's obsession with metaphors to Naylor's inclination to metonymies may also be explained with the perspective of the rewriting of Southern history. Both metaphor and metonymy belong to the four "master tropes" favoured by Hayden White. And White's linkage of metaphor to the literary genre of romance and of metonymy to tragedy (White, 1973, pp. 1-43) may be applied to form the comparison between Faulkner and Naylor.

The obsession with virginity and bitchery shared by the three Compson brothers is what is seldom missed when it comes to the characterization of women in a romance. Quentin (M)'s emphasis upon the boundary between gentleman and non-gentleman is a modern and Southern version of the question about chivalry and knighthood. Quentin (F)'s elopement, with this lens, is a common element in the plot of a romance. Even the multiple types of master-servant relationship should be added as a feature of this genre. Besides, the novel takes sound and fury as its dynamics for plot development and ends with restored order, which falls into the basic pattern of romance as well.

The tragic sense in Naylor's writing of the Southern history may mainly be attributed to the hero's death, which brings the recovery of the heroine, or what Virginia Fowler (1996) calls "the recovery of peace" (p.91). In effect, death's role as a means of reconciliation is revealed earlier than the final tragedy of George. When the fierce storm is over, apart from the damage it does to the properties of Willow Springs, it leads to the death of the newly born baby of Bernice and Ambush. This may be seen as a controversial treatment by Naylor since the boy seems to be innocent. But his being spoiled by her mother and this transgressed love actually pose a challenge to the natural maternal love stressed in this matriarchal black community. In other words, Bernice transgresses the natural boundaries in Willow Springs once again, just like her former taking of the pills and this transgression has to be eliminated.

So, like what Faulkner does in *SF*, Naylor also does what she can to restore order in her story world. But she apparently lacks Faulkner's confidence in metaphors. Thus the representation of Willow Springs rests neither upon individual characters nor upon individual natural symbols. Instead, it is achieved by interaction between the human inhabitants and the natural symbols, or, by the creation of a chain of signifiers. In this sense, she is more of a follower of Emerson, who sees that "nothing is quite beautiful alone: nothing but is beautiful in the whole" (Emerson, 2007, p.1117).

The shift from metaphors to metonymies, or from the stable relationship between the signifier and the signified to the fluidity of signifiers, can be seen as the shift from modernism to postmodernism. In fact, when Ihab Hassan's (1992) summarized features of the two literary trends is taken into consideration (pp. 267-8), apart from the binary oppositions between signified and signifier, many other pairs can be applied in the comparative study of these two novels as well, such as the oppositions between determinacy and indeterminacy, between transcendence and immanence, between hierarchy and anarchy and between boundary and intertext. Therefore, in the context of literary movement, the differences of rhetorical choices seen in Faulkner and Naylor can be interpreted as a marker for the transition from modernism to postmodernism.

CONCLUSION

It is clear, therefore, that the shared natural symbols in *SF* and *Mama Day* are endowed with different attributes and functions. Whereas Faulkner uses them as metaphors in the identification of the Compsons and the inter-relationships among them, Naylor's appropriation achieves the representation of the unique black community of Willow Springs. This marked difference may be attributed to Faulkner's faith in order and confidence in the stability of metaphors as a modernist writer and Naylor's anxiety over the inflexibility and fluidity of signifiers as a postmodernist writer. It should be admitted that the natural symbols in both novels may carry other implications with other non-rhetorical perspectives, and that putting all the major natural symbols in a novel under the same rhetorical lens is not without risk. However, as long as such research can contribute to the interpretation of nature writing and history writing in American Southern literature, the attempt is worthwhile.

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