JUDIT NAGY

Symbolic Interpretations of Weather in William Faulkner's South

Faulkner's *Light in August, As I Lay Dying* and *Absalom, Absalom!* are all set in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County,[1] which became the locale of his imaginative world. This fictional region is the counterpart of, and was inspired by, the American South.[2] Faulkner brought it to life by following Sherwood Anderson's advice to "write about his native region."[3] In his writings conceived in this context, Faulkner "drew upon both regional geography and family history."[4] As weather and climate constitute an integral part of local geography, their use is likely to be linked symbolically with Southern family life in its regional socio-cultural and historical context. Regionalism, in its more current form, as represented by Adamson, involves geographical as well as historical and socio-cultural elements, which intermingle to weave the fictional texture conceived in a regionalist manner.[5] This suggests that if the climatic features typical of the American South are used symbolically in Faulkner's novels, the target domains will logically represent aspects of local history, society, or culture.

If one examines the themes of the above three novels, one will find auspicious ground for Adamson's regionalist interpretation. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, "emphasis shifts from the private psychology that dominated in earlier work to social psychology: to the collective mind of the South."[6] In *Light in August*, through Joe Christmas's hybrid identity, the reader also catches a glimpse of contemporary society, and of the life of Christmas's ancestors, whose lifestyle played a major role in determining his course of life. *As I Lay Dying* focuses on the hard struggle of a poor, white Southern family determined to honor the matriarch's burial wishes. As can

1 Yoknapatawpha Country works as a geographical unifier that enhances the interrelatedness of some of Faulkner's novels. Stephen Railton and Christopher Rieger, "Faulkner Mapping|Mapping Faulkner," *Digital Yoknapatawpha*, University of Virginia, 2017, accessed April 6, 2025, faulkner.iath.virginia.edu/media/resources/DISPLAYS/FaulknerMapsHP.html.

2 Railton and Rieger, "Faulkner Mapping." More precisely, Lafayette County.

3 Biography.com Editors, "William Faulkner Biography," *Biography.com,* A&E; Television Networks, last updated September 16, 2022, accessed April 6, 2025, biography.com/authors-writers/william-faulkner.

4 "William Faulkner Biography."

5 Arthur Adamson, "Identity through Metaphor: An Approach to the Question of Regionalism in Canadian Literature," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 5, no. 1 (1980), accessed April 6, 2025, journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/7936.

6 Robert S. Levine and Sandra M. Gustafson, eds., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 1525.

be seen, these novels share some aspects of Southern reality that perfectly align with the above concept of regionalism. Simultaneously, certain weather elements – such as dust, heat, the calm before the storm, rain, mud, cold or wind – recur systematically in the novels mentioned above. The following analysis will explore the connection between weather and Faulkner's Southern themes.

To start with, dust, heat and the muggy calm preceding a gathering storm all prove to be symbolic projections of a stultifying environment that invades the lives of its inhabitants. Dust is often associated with a weathered, faded quality. The very adjective *weathered* appears in these novels several times. It is used for describing building material, clothes, or the locals' face. For example, "weathered wood,"[7] "sunbonnet of faded blue, weathered now by other than formal soap and water,"[8] Mrs. Armstrid is "being weathered, too."[9] This indicates that whatever is exposed to the influence of the South, it fades, it wears away. The region, like a yellow-smoked, slow-burn fire, consumes it. The society it accommodates is likewise weathered: it is old and decaying.

Dust undeniably shapes people. Ms. Coldfield of *Absalom, Absalom!* has an air of "impotent and static rage," she is possessed by "impotent yet indomitable frustration" as though "by outraged recapitulation evoked, quiet, inattentive and harmless, out of the blinding and dreamy and victorious dust."[10] As dust is *blinding*, it prevents one from seeing clearly and it settles on the soul oppressively. It is *dreamy* because it is slow and hovering. Moreover, it is *victorious*, because it stifles any attempt at change and leaves nothing to be negotiated. Resulting from this atmosphere, Ms. Coldfield and most other inhabitants of the region brew in helpless rage, they slowly give up on life, they become ghostly figures: "The deep south [has been] dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts."[11]

Heat is often depicted as oppressive. "It's this hot weather … It does wear a man out."[12] The street "shimmers and swirls."[13] The reader learns that the climate, even stripped down to pure physical attributes, is hard to bear. When Hightower leaves the shop, "It was hot; heat quivered up from the asphalt, giving to the familiar buildings about the square a nimbus quality, a quality of living and palpitant chiaroscuro."[14] The buildings on the square appear dressed in a thick layer of haze. Humidity is a factor that makes the heat more intolerable. This atmosphere is likely to induce abrupt, violent reactions in those who are exposed to it. For example,

7 William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), 7.

8 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying,* 10.

9 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying,* 14.

10 The stultifying nature of the region described in the quotation is also supported by the frequent references to death in the three novels.

11 William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 3–4.

12 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!,* 4.

13 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!,* 4.

14 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 271. In fact, it is not the weather that affects Hightower but the emotional stress Byron puts on him when he shares his plans with him concerning Lena.

when Hightower is thinking about whether he should support Byron in his endeavor to claim Lena, "sweat, heat, mirage, all, rushes fused into a finality which abrogates all logic and justification and obliterates it like fire would."[15] Thus, Hightower breaks out in the tempestuous cry "I *will* not! I *will* not!" When Byron, heated by passion, tells Hightower about his plans regarding Lena, he is surrounded by "the hot myriad silence of the breathless night,"[16] in which case the image of heat can be associated with passion, whereas *breathless* can refer to secrecy and concealment, perhaps suppression.[17]

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the reader is submerged in the stifling atmosphere of the "long still hot weary dead September afternoon"[18] and witnesses Miss Rosa Coldfield's "dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat and dark was always cooler."[19] This shows how tradition sticks with southerners for such a long time, how they tend to live in the past. They never experiment, they sweep aside new ways, which reflects their reluctance and immunity to winds of change. Miss Rosa's room "became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Quentin thought of as being flecks of the dead old dried paint itself."[20] The reference to death makes it clear that keeping the traditions results rather in decay and decline than in advancement. Similar implications surface in *As I Lay Dying,* where "the dead, hot, pale air breathes on [Dewey Dell's] face again."[21] Here weather is linked with the image of death: "The dead air shapes the dead earth in the dead darkness."[22] The image of the "savage quiet September sun"[23] suggests that this hostile environment kills slowly, which idea can additionally be supported by "Her voice would not cease, it would just vanish."[24] The term *cease* refers to a sudden, immediate action, whereas *vanish* describes a gradual process, similar in effect to the slowly killing drought. Miss Rosa Coldfield's description of the stuffy heat and airlessness pervading the house is symbolic of living in an ancient vacuum that combines the weight of the past and the futility of the present.

Another frequent Faulknerian weather motif, *the calm before the storm* represents suspension, something hanging in the air waiting to come down. *In As I Lay Dying*, "The sun … is poised like a bloody egg upon a crest of thunderheads; the light has

15 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 272.

16 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 269.

17 Byron feels ashamed of himself for his feelings towards Lena, but he yields to temptation. His thoughts are his skeleton in the cupboard, which quite many Faulknerian characters have. In fact, all four novels reveal some shameful family secrets.

18 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 3.

19 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 3.

20 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 3.

21 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 61. Note the implications of Dewey Dell's name. Dew is reference to wetness that is juxtaposed to the dry environment.

22 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 4.

23 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 3.

24 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 4.

turned copper, in the eye portentous, in the nose sulphurous, smelling of lightning."[25] Taking the implication of the words *bloody*, *portentous*, and *smelling of* into account, the previous description of the calm before the storm hides suppressed violence, which the word *sulphur* links with the image of the evil. The accumulating clouds of tension may belong to a worn-down, declining social system which is dying, and which is saturated with suppressed violence.[26] When exactly it will cease to exist, no one knows, yet, this is impending, it is bound to happen.[27] What makes the South hard to tolerate is exactly its oppressively permanent hanging-in-the-air quality: "That's the trouble with this country: everything, weather, all, hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent; shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image."[28]

Rain and mud, event and aftermath, seem to cohabit those of Faulkner's novels in which they appear. Pa's figure, in *As I lay Dying*, connects the image of rain with misfortune: "It's fixing up to rain … I am a luckless man. I have ever been."[29] Rain is long in preparation, and it does not end in true relief: "It begins to rain. The first harsh, sparse, swift drops rush through the leaves and across the ground in a long sigh, as though of relief from intolerable suspense. They are big as buckshot, warm as though fired from a gun; they sweep across the lantern in a vicious hissing.[30] The raindrops are not soft and gentle but *harsh*, the words *buckshot* and *gun* carry violence as they are both connected to firearms. *Hissing* can be associated with snakes telltale of the presence of sin. The *as though* of the *long sigh* raises doubt in the reader about any genuine feeling of relief.

Rain acts as a victimizer, a vicious hand of Fate in *Light in August*. Due to heavy rainfall, the circus is stuck at the settlement as their wagon falls in the river. Thus rain enhances Milly's seduction. When Uncle Doc finds his daughter with a stranger in the buggy, he shoots the male intruder: "He left the buggy and the man both there in the road. It was raining again, too."[31] This last, additional remark describing the weather at the end of the paragraph raises suspicion in the reader about a possible symbolic role of the rain here. A few lines later, the image of rain and mud reappears, with the indication of Milly's fall, both in the literary and in the figurative sense: "and Milly stood there with rain on her face and her hair and her new dress all muddy and her eyes shut and then Euphus hit her and she fell to the floor."[32]

[25] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 39.

[26] In fact, quite many Faulknerian characters die an unnatural, violent death.

[27] As suggested in the introduction, the idiom also has its counterpart at the level of the individual. In *Light in August*, Hightower "could hear the beginning thunder not yet louder than a whisper, a rumor, in the air," where the still distant, yet approaching storm is indicative of the tension forming between him and his wife. William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 408.

[28] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 43–44.

[29] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 18.

[30] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 72.

[31] Faulkner, *Light in August*, 329.

[32] Faulkner, *Light in August*, 330. Mud = sin, rain = the seduction of the young girl, Milly.

Originating from her sin, Christmas is born, representing the new generation. He has to carry the sinful burden of his heritage, which is to blame for his childhood miseries. His later life goes astray, too: he is tossed from one calamity into the other. When Eupheus hits Milly, he is "wet and muddy,"[33] too. His sin is that he physically abuses her daughter and later sacrifices her life to conformity, to pretentious social norms. In his eyes, it is more important to be proper than to be human. Mud, the by-product of permanent rain, represents sin in *Light in August*. The contemporary South is known for its strong Protestantism, which in places verges on mindless bigotry. This mentality also dictates certain moral principles, which the inhabitants are determined to preserve at all costs. In fact, it is the appearances they aim to keep up, while a consistent commitment to upholding the values behind these appearances is no longer imperative, which may cause the decline of such a society. It is a fallen region where new generations pay the price of the deeds and actions of their ancestors. Inherited curse drives them to kill or to commit suicide. As there are no real ethic guidelines, disintegration occurs both at a macrostructural and at a microstructural level. Without an ethnic cohesive force human relationships become empty and meaningless, families fall apart. Mud may also represent the series of economic difficulties in which poor white families are stuck, and which always pulls them back.[34] Mud here is a substance that hinders one from getting over to the other side, from development, both physically and symbolically. Respective examples can be provided in the person of the Bundren family and Thomas Sutpen.

The South is also reflected in the cloud imagery spelt out by Tull: "It's fixing to rain, too. Clouds like that don't lie, and the cotton making every day the Lord sends."[35] This insightful description likens cumuli to cotton, an agricultural cash plant typical of the South in this metaphor.

Though foreign to the region of the American South, cold does make repeated appearances both in *Light in August* and in *Absalom, Absalom!*, especially in juxtaposition to the humid and persistent heat, usually to illustrate conflict in human relationships. It is also indicative of indifference and displacement. Faulkner uses the juxtaposition of heat and cold to illustrate the conflict between Reverend Hightower and his wife. The wife once begins to "wear that frozen look on her face."[36] July brings a hot spell, and the wife goes "to cool herself off"[37] while the husband's "wild face is frozen in the shape of the thundering and allegorical period,"[38] the manifestation of his obsession with the past, which lies at the heart of the conflict of the spouses. The word *thundering* refers both to the wild rage of this obsession here and to something that is already audible, but yet to surface visibly, unequivocally:

33 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 330.
34 For example, when Anse is to be buried in *As I Lay Dying*.
35 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 31.
36 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 54.
37 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 54.
38 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 55.

a touch of local and personal history that has already contaminated and pervaded Hightower's subconscious but will be faced consciously only later. Also, he describes his wife as *quiet*, *glacier-like*, *calm*, *rapt* but *latently furious*.[39] Beyond the seemingly cool frosty surface a repressed storm is brewing in her.

The word *cold* is quite frequent in *Light in August*, in the sense of indicating someone's feeling of isolation as in the repeated "cold eyes," or "cold stare."[40] When Hightower is talking about his ancestors, the reader learns that "their relations were peaceable enough, being on the son's part a cold, humorless, automatically respectful reserve."[41] The term *cold* here is to illustrate that – as no emotional bonds tied father and son together – their descendant, Hightower, is also unable to love. Ruthless McEachern also has "cold eyes,"[42] where *cold* characterizes the unfeeling, cruel type of person. "Christmas was lying cold and rigid in his bed,"[43] which coldness is symbolic of the distortion that the unfeeling environment effects in the boy, who is surprised at Mrs. McEachern's helping intention and interprets it as "she is trying to make me cry."[44] Joe Christmas also attempts to flee emotional bonds, in exchange for which Mrs. Burden presses on yet, she talks to him "in a voice calm, a little deep, quite cold."[45] She "becomes passive and cold"[46] when they make love. Also, when the relationship between Mrs. Burden and Joe Christmas is in decline, winter is approaching and the moon "fills the room with something cold and irrevocable."[47] Symbolic coldness is indicative of the characters' inability to establish lasting emotional bonds, which typifies members of the disintegrated Southern family: Faulknerian examples include the figures of Quentin Compson, Miss Rosa Coldfield, Henry Sutpen, Caddy Compson, Thomas Sutpen, and Charles Bon.

Cold may refer to the loveless, indifferent, pretentious family atmosphere into which some of the characters are thrown. Eupheus's wife utters the following words after her husband abuses their daughter physically: "And I was that tired, and it was cold, and I said 'What happened?'"[48] Also, when Joe Christmas is found on Christmas day, "it was cold,"[49] from which the reader may suspect that he is destined to do without affection throughout his life. The impartial and thus

39 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 55.
40 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 124.
41 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 412.
42 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 131.
43 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 147.
44 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 147.
45 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 202. In this sense, Mrs. Burden is a talking name: any kind of an emotional bond is a burden to Joe Christmas.
46 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 232.
47 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 231. Also note that the moon may symbolise female sexuality. In this reading, Christmas flees from Mrs. Burden's overflowing influence and control.
48 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 330.
49 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 336.

merciless cold of detachment Hightower faces[50] charges him with choosing marriage only as an instrumental tool to get to Jefferson. Picking up on the Nietzschean line, coldness may also refer to general, universal indifference: "With all air, all heaven, filled with the lost and unheeded crying of all the living who ever lived, wailing still like lost children among the cold and terrible stars."[51] In this case, the South becomes the micro-universe with features and tendencies also characteristic of the macro-universe.

The New England dark and cold is an important catalyst to help Quentin Compson see his land as it is – it inspires him to look in the mirror from the outside and share a saga with his Canadian roommate that comprises the essence of Southern existence. Symbolically, it may mean that despite all the shortcomings of Southern life, Quentin Compson realizes that his roots are there, the North remains foreign forever. Hence the exclamation: "I don't hate it."[52] This is an important part of the story, in which "most of the characters and the incidents have a double meaning … they belong to a tragic fable of southern history."[53] Though the New England cold seems alien and vigorous, Quentin does not feel as cold as his Canadian roommate, whose native environment is "but a few acres of snow"[54]: "Shreve, the Canadian, the child of blizzards and of cold in a bathrobe with an overcoat above it, the collar turned up above his ears; Quentin, the Southerner, the morose and delicate offspring of rain and steamy heat in the thin suitable clothing which he had brought from Mississippi, his overcoat … lying on the floor where he had not even bothered to raise it."[55] Quentin lacks the sensation of cold because he is heated by a controversial passion which binds him to his native South.

When Joe Christmas is taken to McEachern's place, his household has a room that is described as bleak and clean, into which "the springfilled air blew in fainting gusts."[56] The word *springfilled* suggests strength, dynamism and life. Yet, as soon as such an impulse reaches the household, which is kept neat and tidy but lifeless, it weakens and dies down. *Bleak* and *clean* can also be symbolic of Puritan manners, which Mr. McEachern's joyless attitude to life also reflects. As the spirited wind of life is incapable of reaching the McEachern household, a stifling vacuum remains, just like in many other Southern families.

Inspired by his emotional conflict with Bobbie, Joe Christmas brings the image of long wind into play: "Then she too, seemed to blow out of his life on the long

[50] "The final and supreme Face Itself, cold, terrible because of its omniscient detachment." Faulkner, *Light in August*, 428. A possible Heideggerian interpretation is that Hightower had one of his genuine nothingness moments.

[51] Faulkner, *Light in August*, 431. A Nietzsche-like statement of human abandonment and loneliness.

[52] Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!,* 303.

[53] Malcolm Cowley, "William Faulkner's Legend of the South," *The Sewanee Review* 53, no. 3 (1945): 348.

[54] This well-known statement about Canada is taken from Voltaire's *Candide*.

[55] Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!,* 276.

[56] Faulkner, *Light in August*, 129.

wind like a … scrap of paper. … Perhaps he heard only the long wind."[57] The image recurs when Joe Christmas is about to part with Mrs. Burden: "then in that long blowing wind he jerked her up."[58] In both cases, the long wind may be interpreted as a symbol characterizing Christmas's life. According to an Inca legend, when one hears the long wind blow, it is time for one to move on.[59] This is exactly what befalls rolling stone Joe Christmas. Never does he manage to suppress the impulse. Never does he manage to settle down, an incident always makes him continue his arduous trek, which, by necessity, ends in doom and failure. And Christmas is not the only such person, the product of disintegrated Southern families.

Byron, disappointed, decides to leave Jefferson. "Then a cold, hard wind seems to blow through him. It is at once violent and peaceful, blowing hard away like chaff or trash or dead leaves all the desire and the despair and the hopelessness and the tragic and vain imagining, too."[60] Byron decides to turn back. His figure exemplifies that one cannot just flee from the South, it is a vital and organic part of the person's being by birth. Here the wind may embody the drive of the subconscious, which makes it impossible for one to detach oneself from the land once one was born here. In another reading, the wind is like a moral scolding Byron receives for trying to leave. In either case, the South seems to be pictured as a region one can neither do with, nor without.

This paper offers a glimpse into the cornucopia of roles weather images can play in describing, illustrating or interpreting Faulkner's depiction of the American South. The focus of discussion is placed on the employment of weather imagery that characterizes Faulkner's South as a whole, rather than on images that act only locally within specific novels. While further roles and examples of weather imagery could be explored across all three novels, my main aim was simply to call the reader's attention to the significance of the issue.

Abstract

This paper aims to explore how the American South is translated into weather images in Faulkner's three novels, Light in August, As I Lay Dying and Absalom, Absalom! set in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County. Inspired by the American South, Faulkner's work integrates regional geography and family history. The study highlights how weather elements, integral to local geography, symbolize aspects of Southern family life within its socio-cultural and historical context. For the analysis, which aims to reveal the significance of weather imagery in portraying Southern realities and its broader implications in Faulkner's regionalist narrative,

57 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 190.

58 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 242.

59 This legend is also referred to in the film *Chocolat,* directed by Lasse Hallström (Miramax Films, 2000).

60 Faulkner, *Light in August*, 373.

the paper uses Adamson's concept of regionalism, which encompasses geographical, historical, and socio-cultural elements.

Keywords: Faulkner, American South, regionalism, weather symbolism

Rezümé
A faulkneri Dél időjárásszimbolikája

Ez a tanulmány az időjárási képek szimbolikus használatát vizsgálja Faulkner Light in August, As I Lay Dying *és* Absalom, Absalom! *című műveiben, amelyek a fiktív Yoknapatawpha megyében játszódnak. Az amerikai Dél által inspirált, a jelen tanulmányban elemzett művek alapján a tanulmány számos példán keresztül mutatja be, hogy a regionális földrajz szerves részét képező időjárási elemek hogyan szimbolizálják a déli családi élet különböző aspektusait annak szociokulturális és történelmi kontextusában. Az elemzés célja, hogy feltárja az időjárási képek jelentőségét a déli élet ábrázolásában Faulkner fent említett regényein keresztül. A tanulmány Adamson regionalizmus-fogalmát használja, amely földrajzi, történelmi és szociokulturális elemeket foglal magában.*

Kulcsszavak: Faulkner, az amerikai Dél, regionalizmus, időjárás szimbolika