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Pining for Affection

by

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Pining for Affection

As innately social beings, humans long to be understood. Language, the ultimate tool for interpersonal communication, allows for one person to transport his or her innermost thoughts into the mind of another. Additionally, it offers the individual a means of internally organizing the disorder that arises from the constant processing of external stimuli. This latter aspect of language is often seen as the basis for human consciousness, for it allows the mind to logically make sense of its surroundings before formulating a response. However, much evidence contradicts this claim. Antonio Damasio, a leading expert in the field of cognitive neuroscience, argues in his groundbreaking work, *The Feeling of What Happens*, that aspects of consciousness preclude language. He distinguishes these components, which he calls core consciousness, from other aspects of high level thinking by deeming them the basis for human sentience. While Damasio did not formulate the theory of core consciousness in neuroscientific terms until the twenty-first century, many authors and humanities scholars have examined this phenomenon as the basis for the human condition for much longer. In his masterpiece, *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner explores core consciousness by writing from the perspective of a developmentally delayed character who fundamentally lacks the use of language. Focusing on the images and sounds experienced by this character without explicitly stating his thoughts, Faulkner inserts the reader directly into the depths of Benjy’s mind. This allows for Faulkner to relay these inner workings using tools readily available to Benjy and offers the reader a much more accurate portrayal of Benjy thoughts and feelings.

The processing undergone by core consciousness, the fundamental basis for humanity, very much mimics that of a silent movie, incorporating sensory images and underlying emotions to produce a rich and ever changing picture without so much as an utterance of sound. Much like
a person watching an old Charlie Chaplin film, the mind at the level of core consciousness relies on a stream of consistent images and the emotions evoked by internalizing these snippets to comprehend the present situation. Damasio furthers this comparison by contending, “What goes on within each shot, the different framing of a subject that the movement of the camera can accomplish…and what goes on in the narrative constructed by a particular juxtaposition of shots are comparable in some respects to what is going on in the mind” (188). At this level of processing, words never come into play. However, a full story is still produced and this tale is uniquely experienced by the individual. The mere act of integrating these sensory inputs into a narrative produces a sense of self; it distinguishes the processor from the processed. This distinction does not require linguistic representation, as it occurs prior to language formation. In other words, concepts necessarily preclude the words used to describe them. Language does not arise de novo. Additionally, this formation of self and all of its integral components, including individualized thoughts and feelings, prove meaningful as another may verify them, a factor specifically mentioned by Damasio in his description of core consciousness (109).

Writing in a style that mimics the analytical processing that occurs at the level of core consciousness, Faulkner depicts the events of his story not in chronological order, but through relating each scene to its predecessor by a physical or emotional commonality. In doing so, Faulkner thrusts the reader into Benjy’s stunted mind, forcing him or her to re-experience the world without access to higher-level language processing. Fortunately, this blurred world contains clear logic. With some effort, the reader can reasonably navigate Benjy’s thoughts and memories by following the flow of images that course through his mind. One of the most telling examples of this unique form of scene transition, which Faulkner uses to bridge Benjy’s memories, occurs as Benjy attempts to climb through a hole in the fence that separates his
family’s property from the neighboring golf course. As he progresses through this hole, his shirt hooks on a nail and his mind jolts back to a similar instance in his childhood: “‘You snagged on that nail again. Can’t you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail.’ Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through” (Faulkner 4). As if yanked back in time by the nail, Benjy begins to relive the episode with his sister in full detail, becoming completely removed from the present. The obvious link that the two scenes share, a common location, shows that Benjy thinks in an organized and systematic way, but his inability to separate the past from the present, as indicated by his not changing the tense, highlights his lack of higher mental faculties. In this way, Benjy’s thinking appears to be occurring at the level of core consciousness.

Although he often links memories based on sensory similarities, Benjy struggles to correctly articulate his experiences in words, frequently confusing one sensory modality for another. As a result, others often confuse the expressions of his feelings for nonsense. He consistently misrepresents the sensory input his mind receives when computing it into verbal thought: “I couldn’t feel the gate at all, but I could smell the bright cold” (Faulkner 6). This confusion must occur on the level of language processing and not at the level of sensory perception, as the experience itself proves real: the gate is in fact cold. The reader knows this because Caddy, equipped with higher level processing skills, tells him to put his hands back in his pocket to avoid the cold. Therefore, the mistake arises when he attempts to vocalize the experience and not prior. The discrepancy between the reality of the experience and Benjy’s linguistic articulation of it becomes most pronounced when he recalls his love for his sister, Caddy. For example, after witnessing an intense argument between Jason and Miss Quentin, Benjy hides in a dark room clutching an old dirty slipper remembering his sister: “She smelled like trees. In the corner it was dark, but I could see the window. I squatted there, holding the
slipper. I couldn’t see it, but my hands saw it, and I could hear it getting night” (Faulkner 72).

During this scene, Benjy confuses many of his senses, misrepresenting his sense of touch as sight and confusing his sense of sight for hearing. Additionally, his sense of love takes on the form of a scent. Interestingly, every time he recalls his love for his sister, he articulates it using the same phrase, the first of which occurs during his recollection of Caddy while crawling through the fence: “Caddy smelled like trees” (Faulkner 6). He repeats this exact phrase many times throughout his section as his mind continuously wanders back to times he spent with his sister during his childhood. This indicates that his feelings are real and contain clear logic. However, as abstract thought requires higher-level language processing, he cannot express his feelings in a more typical manner.

While its form is untraditional, Benjy’s love for Caddy proves the strongest and most pure of the Compson family. Even when he recognizes that she no longer physically smells like trees, which occurs on her wedding day as she prepares to leave the family, his love remains ever steadfast: “Caddy put her arms around me, and her shining veil, and I couldn’t smell trees anymore and I began to cry” (Faulkner 40). While this realization initially brings him to tears, one major event does not stifle his love for Caddy, a statement that cannot be made for the rest of the Compson family. His continued adoration of his sister is proven by his constant thinking of her in the present day storyline. A telling example of this occurs directly prior to the argument between Jason and Miss Quentin that leads Benjy to retreat to Caddy’s old room and sit in the darkness clutching what can be assumed is her old slipper. Benjy sees Quentin sitting on a swing with a young man and his mind immediately races back to a similar scene he witnesses as a boy with Caddy on the same swing with a young man (Faulkner 46-49). Just from connecting these two events his mind, his adoration for his sister comes back with the same intensity as it had as a
child: “She smelled like trees” (Faulkner 72). Sitting in the dark room, he experiences his love for Caddy as he would if she was right by his side, hinting that despite not seeing her or hearing her name for many years, his feelings have not wavered. In fact, he still expresses his love for her in his idiosyncratic way, highlighting its inherent logic.

In order to prove that the words uttered by a person with dysfunctional language faculties actually contain meaning and are not just nonsensical noises, a second person must verify their significance. According to Damasio, one can communicate with mute patients by learning how he or she processes the world without the use of language: “It is possible to communicate, richly and humanely, if only you have the patience to accommodate to the limited and improvised vocabulary of nonlinguistic signs the patient may develop” (109). Damasio hints that in order for one to understand these seemingly nonsensical utterances as inherently meaningful, he or she must recognize the humanity that lies innately within the person core consciousness beneath language faculties, an exercise that requires immense empathy. Perhaps one of the most powerful and truly beautiful examples of this type of compassion is Caddy’s reciprocated love for Benjy. While most interpret Benjy’s expressions as nonsense, Caddy understands Benjy on a human level, even recognizing the way that he articulates his own love for her. The scene that most highlights her understanding of Benjy occurs when she applies perfume for the first time, an act that masks her natural aroma of trees. She quickly realizes this change in scent upsets her brother: “She put the bottle down and came and put her arms around me. ‘So that was it. And you were trying to tell Caddy and you couldn’t tell her. You wanted to but you couldn’t, could you’” (Faulkner 42). Through this interaction, Caddy clearly shows that recognizes his love for her, and in doing so, confirms its validity. Additionally, she understands the exact form his
adoration takes and reciprocates this affection by giving away the perfume so that it can no
longer upset him, an act of pure empathetic love.

Despite lacking the mental faculties required to express his love for his sister through
simple vocalization, the intensity and manner of Benjy’s affection is clearly understandable by
others. Through heavily focusing on imagery and connecting each scene through commonalities
in sense perception, Faulkner aptly portrays his story using tools readily available to Benjy; he
articulates Benjy’s most intimate feelings without ever clearly putting them in writing, as Benjy
experiences them himself. In doing so, Faulkner explores the deepest realms of the human mind
simply by toying with the traditional structure of the novel. This core consciousness, as Damasio
deems this basis of the mind, proves so deeply rooted in the soul that it precludes functions
typically thought to define humanity such as thought articulation and language. As Benjy and
Caddy’s relationship shows, true understanding of another person does not require a series of in
depth conversations or adept psychoanalysis; it simple requires empathy. No words need be
spoken.