The beaded web: Metaphor and association in John Edgar Wideman's Sent for you yesterday

Joel Wesley Kilpatrick

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THE BEADED WEB:
METAPHOR AND ASSOCIATION IN JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN'S
SENT FOR YOU YESTERDAY

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Joel Wesley Kilpatrick

December 2007
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ABSTRACT

One of the more fascinating aspects of metaphor is its ability to forge powerful connections between images or ideas. By taking one image and metaphorizing it as another (e.g., referring to a soap bubble as a blister), an author associates them. Such an association is rooted in the similarity between the two images, although in some cases it can be based partially on their contiguity or causal relation. In Sent For You Yesterday, Wideman takes full advantage of the associative function of metaphor, creating a vast network, or web, of interconnected images. In deviating from linguistic norms, and growing steadily from page to page, this web causes the novel to appear symbolic. Upon closer examination, it also appears to have a symbolic meaning of its own, possibly representing the intricate social and spiritual connections that comprise the novel’s fictional community, Homewood.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................. iii

LIST OF FIGURES ............................................. v

CHAPTER ONE: WIDEMAN'S IMAGERY .......................... 1

CHAPTER TWO: TRACING THE WEB .............................. 13

  Non-metaphorical Associations .......................... 17

  Metaphorical Associations ............................... 24

  Diagrams of Metaphorical Associations .................. 35

CHAPTER THREE: THE WEB'S SYMBOLIC EFFECTS ......... 52

  Scheme as Symbol ....................................... 53

  Association as Symbol ................................... 60

CHAPTER FOUR: READING THE WEB ............................ 64

WORKS CITED ............................................... 81
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Two Sample Diagrams .................................. 10

Figure 2. An Interconnection between Two
Metaphors .................................................................. 36

Figure 3. An Obvious Interconnection ............................. 38

Figure 4. Connection between the "Bubble" and the
"Watermelon" ............................................................... 38

Figure 5. Connection between the "Bubble" and the
"Blister" ..................................................................... 39

Figure 6. "Branches" Extending from the
"Triangle." .................................................................. 41

Figure 7. Two Branches Stemming from the "Bubble" .... 44

Figure 8. Array of Connections Extending from the
"Bubble" ..................................................................... 48

Figure 9. The Beaded Web ............................................. 50

Figure 10. Continuous Growth of the Web ..................... 60
CHAPTER ONE

WIDEMAN'S IMAGERY

In *Sent For You Yesterday*, John Edgar Wideman's fictional persona, Doot, returns to Homewood, the black Pittsburgh neighborhood of his youth, to hear his aging Uncle Carl and would-be aunt-in-law, Lucy Tate, tell the stories of their lives. While sitting down with them one evening in the Velvet Slipper, and later that night in the Tate's living room, Doot listens as their stories expand outward like ripples in a pond, colliding and merging with the tales of other members of the community, such as Brother Tate, Junebug, and Albert Wilkes. In this patchwork quilt of voices, lives, and memories, it is Wilkes' tale in particular that serves as a unifying thread. Wilkes, a musical genius who had fled Homewood after killing a policeman in self-defense, returned seven years later only to be shot dead by the police while playing the piano at the Tate's home. His death was a tragic blow to the community, depriving it of the music that was--both figuratively and literally--its spiritual lifeblood. However, in the stories of Homewood there is hope, for in their transmission from one generation to the next (from Carl and Lucy to Doot/Wideman) lies the
possibility that Wilkes and his music, and hence Homewood itself, will live on.

As a novel that weaves together these various tales, *Sent For You Yesterday* contains a number of sophisticated stylistic features. Wideman's non-linear approach to narrative time, for example, and his intricate embedding of stories within stories, have generated a fairly substantial body of commentary (see Bennion, Page, Wilson). Yet it is Wideman's ingenious use of imagery, best seen in the novel's dizzying array of enigmatic metaphors, that may ultimately present the greatest challenge to critics. Although a comprehensive study of these devices has yet to be undertaken, there are several scholars who have already begun to grapple with the question of their meaning and function.

Francoise Palleau-Papin, in her article "Of Balloons in John Wideman's Fiction," shows how the image of an exploding balloon oftentimes will appear in passages that display an abrupt shift in style. Her example from *Sent For You Yesterday* is a scene in which Brother, apparently under the spell of a heroin-induced delirium, envisions himself as a large balloon and feels his body slowly deflate as he urinates in a dark alleyway:
He feels his body going limp. All the air hissing away so his cheeks sink and his chest caves and his navel is folding into his backbone and his potbelly shrivels and the faucet in his fingers shrinks till it's nothing but a string attached to the flat kite he's become. Then he starts to rise. The dry wind lifts him. (178)

Palleau-Papin observes that in the second sentence, "when the air is said to be hissing away from the character's body," the style is long and flowing, while in the third and fourth sentences, "once the air is let out and the reader needs to take a breath to begin again," the style becomes short and fragmented (646). This coincidence between form and content--the way in which "the breath and rhythm of the sentences mimic" the deflation that the sentences describe (646)--suggests to Palleau-Papin that Brother's balloon-like body is actually "a metaphor for the writing process at work in the style" of the paragraph (651).

In "The Circles of History in John Edgar Wideman's Homewood Trilogy," Matthew Wilson takes a revealing look at two major images in the novel--that of a broken record and a shattered skull. He quotes from a scene in which Lucy,
sitting on the floor of the Tate's living room in an opium-induced haze, watches as a stoned Rodney Jones smashes old blues records from John French's Victrola:

The room crisscrossed with music[....] She thinks of broken pieces. Of the mess Rodney Jones is making. She knows someone will have to clean it up. Albert Wilkes sat on the wall and Albert Wilkes had a great fall. And she will have to find every piece[....]

Every splinter of shattered egg. (206)

According to Wilson, "splinter[s] of shattered egg" is a metaphor for the skull fragments that were found around the Tate's piano after Wilkes had been killed. Thus, in Lucy's "stoned vision," the broken records are actually "commingled" (255) with the pieces of Wilkes' skull. In this scene, which belongs to a larger sequence in which music forms an important "leitmotif" (253), both the records and the skull fragments "symbolize the destruction of value and continuity within the Afro-American community" (255). Yet since the skull fragments are the scattered remains of a human embodiment of this community--Albert Wilkes--they can also be viewed symbolically as a kind of "sparagmos," or "dissemination," in which the "seed of
[Wilkes’] playing” is cast into the soil of future generations (251).

In his chapter on Wideman in Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African-American Fiction, Philip Page suggests that many of the novel’s images are an expression of “the tension between isolation and community” (39), a major theme of Wideman’s oeuvre. On one side of this tension are the images of a fist and a train, which represent the incredible harshness of life in Homewood, the “constant economic struggle” that forces men away from their families each day “to beg for work” in the streets, and the “constant psychological battle” that leads some people to abandon reality altogether for the “solace of drugs” (47). These images, Page notes, “coalesce” (47) in two scenes in which a train is described metaphorically as having (and perhaps also as being) a gigantic fist. A related image, that of a train car filled with detached body parts, represents “the ultimate breakdown of community,” in which community becomes nothing more than “isolated individuals banging into each other” (48).

On the other side of the tension, Page argues, is the “tangled skein,” the “twisted or interwoven strands of fiber” which comprise “Wideman’s principle image for the
intersubjective web of human relationships" (39). A striking version of this image appears early on in the novel, in a scene in which Doot, through the magic of memory and storytelling, travels back through time to see his grandmother Freeda as a young woman covered in "a dusty, beaded web [...] threads stretched from the top of her head to all the walls, the things in the room" (29-30). In this instance the skein "depicts the infinite ties that bind some of Wideman's characters to the objects around them" (39).

However, as Page points out, because webs can be broken and tangled threads can be unraveled, this image also implies its antithesis, "the contrasting harshness of isolation," which finds its quintessential image in "the needle's eye," Wideman's symbol for "the unyielding and often bitter realities of life" (41). Many of Wideman's characters are strung like thread through the "needle's eye" "despite their intersubjective webs" (41). In *Sent For You Yesterday* Brother "had to crawl through the needle's eye" when his son Junebug died (176), his mourning "becoming an alienating passage, a harrowing regression from within the human web of community to the alienation of insanity and death" (Page 41).
In "The Shape of Memory in John Edgar Wideman’s Sent For You Yesterday," John Bennion argues that the "shape" or "form" (143) of the novel can be characterized in part by the numerous "connections" or "linkages" (145) that exist between characters, places, and events. Bennion first shows how "each character [...] is linked through spirit and identity to every other" (143). Brother and Carl, for example, are linked by friendship; Carl and Lucy by love; Brother "receives Albert Wilkes' music when he dies; he dreams that he is Wilkes;" Carl and Lizabeth are "linked" to their parents "by blood and mannerism;" and "the narrator is connected to all the characters through blood and storytelling." These "relationships," Bennion notes, "are frequently supported by repeated images--references to shadows or to mirror images (144).

Bennion then goes on to illustrate how certain objects and events "are linked [...] through metaphors, primarily those of a train and an ark" (144). Carl's "body-shaking sexual climax" and the Tates' piano, for instance, are both described as trains, while such seemingly unrelated objects as houses, wombs, and saloons are all referred to as arks. These metaphors, Bennion argues, are so abundant that they "cause the reader to view the book symbolically" (144).
Bennion also asserts that the connections in the novel "provide a means by which the characters see" their world, a mechanism by which they interpret and recollect their experience (145). Freeda, he observes, sees time as "a voice pulling her away from a clear soap-bubble world" (148); Samantha "thinks of her house as an ark; Brother sees death as a powerful train" (145); Wilkes "thinks the days he was away [from Homewood] are like cards shuffled in the hands of a dealer"; Lucy "compares events to notes falling down on her" like snow; and Doot sees "the spherical net of time and person"--the "cyclical" connections between past and present and the spiritual connections between each character--as a giant "spider web" (149). Because they form the "interconnected net" of the characters' memories (150), these linkages naturally "have much of the randomness and emotional linking of memory itself." The narrator, who "has rolled them up into his own consciousness," relates them "with undeviating fidelity to the manner in which he received them, so readers apprehend the material in the same way he does, with the same interconnectedness and leaps memory has" (150). The result, Bennion concludes, is a novel whose overall form is nothing less than the "shape of memory" (145, 148).
Bennion’s analysis of the “connections” in the novel touches on an essential yet underappreciated aspect of Wideman’s style, namely the frequency of suggestive associations or links between images. Although Page and Wilson, in their talk of images coalescing and commingling, also show a keen awareness of these associations, it is Bennion who gives them the greatest attention. Furthermore, while Page identifies one association (the train and fist images that “coalesce”) without specifically stating that it is metaphorical, Bennion catalogues a substantial number of associations that he explicitly labels as metaphors.

Because it is neither Page’s nor Wilson’s intention to focus entirely on these associations, the fact that both critics consider it necessary to address them, in however indirect a fashion, strongly suggests their importance and prevalence within the novel. Indeed, Wideman’s associations are so numerous that even Bennion, who does make them his primary focus, cannot reasonably account for every one in the space of a single journal article. Thus, while it would be impractical to attempt an analysis of every association in the novel, it may be possible to expand on Bennion’s observations by providing a more
detailed examination of only those associations that are clearly metaphorical. How this might be done is suggested in Bennion's analysis of the novel's ark and train imagery. As mentioned above, Bennion argues that the images of a house, a womb, and a saloon are "linked" by virtue of their being metaphorized by the image of an ark; while "Carl's sexual climax" and the Tates' piano are similarly linked through the image of a train. If one were to diagram these connections, the result might look like either of the following:

```
womb       saloon
  \      /  \\
   \    /  \\
     \ /  \\
      \ ark
        |
        house

Carl's climax       the Tates' piano
  \      /  \\
   \    /  \\
     \ /  \\
      \ train
```

Fig. 1. Two Sample Diagrams.
The two diagrams in Figure 1 have been purposely drawn in such a way so as to avoid the impression that they are somehow hierarchical. A hierarchical or "tree" diagram would be misleading, as Wideman's associations are synthetic rather than analytic, coordinative rather than subordinative.

Although Bennion mentions several other images that also connect to the train and ark by way of metaphor, there are in fact hundreds of metaphorical associations in the novel that have yet to be recorded. This paper not only will attempt to diagram many of these associations in the manner illustrated above, but it will also try to explain how, in Bennion's words, they "cause the reader to view the book symbolically." Essentially, it will be shown that Wideman's metaphorical associations make the novel appear symbolic by doing two important things. First, they deviate from the standard language, thus defying readers' expectations and resisting easy interpretation. Second, they steadily multiply into a vast network, so that by the end of the novel, each image that belongs to the network is associated with literally dozens of other images.

In Chapter Two, I will first give some examples of the different kinds of associations in the novel, and then will
use diagrams to paint a partial yet representative picture of those associations which are metaphorical. In Chapter Three, I will show how the linguistic deviance and gradual proliferation of Wideman's metaphorical associations make the novel look and feel symbolic. In Chapter Four, I will argue that the network or "web" formed by these associations has both a logical structure and a discernable meaning.
CHAPTER TWO

TRACING THE WEB

In the "Abstract" of his 1737 monograph, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume says of himself, "if any thing can entitle the author to so glorious a name as that of an inventor, 'tis the use he makes of the principle of the association of ideas, which enters into most of his philosophy." This "principle," which Hume arrives at through a series of empirical observations of his own thought processes, explains why our ideas usually follow each other in a coherent fashion, rather than coming to us entirely at random. Although there would seem to be no limit to the power of the imagination--and therefore no ideas "which it cannot separate, and join, and compose into all the varieties of fiction"--there is, Hume argues, "a secret tie or union among particular ideas, which causes the mind to conjoin them more frequently together, and makes the one, upon its appearance, introduce the other." This "tie" can be based on "similarity," as when "a picture naturally makes us think of the man it was drawn for." It can also be based on "contiguity:" the mere mention of Emily Dickinson, for example, might very likely bring to mind the idea of nineteenth-century New England. Or, the
"tie" can be rooted in "causation," for the same mention of Dickinson might just as soon carry our thoughts to one of her poems. The picture of the man and the mention of the Amherst poet do not provoke just any random idea, but rather call to mind especially those ideas which are related by way of similarity, contiguity, and causation. Without these three principles of association guiding the flow of our thoughts, each new idea that entered our mind would have no discernible connection to the one that preceded it. Language (or what Hume calls "the apropos of discourse") would be an utter impossibility; and "that thread, or chain of thought, which a man naturally supports even in the loosest reverie," would be unattainable (416).

Interestingly enough, many of the connections in Sent For You Yesterday seem to be based on these very same principles. In fact, Bennion's term "connection" is also used by Hume as a synonym for "association" (Hume 12). In this chapter, I will first give some examples of connections/associations from the novel that clearly show Hume's principles at work, and then will present the diagrams mentioned earlier in Chapter 1. It is worth pointing out here that while my first examples will feature non-metaphorical associations, the remaining examples, as
well as the diagrams, will involve metaphorical associations only. As I stated previously, the purpose of distinguishing between non-metaphorical and metaphorical associations is to limit the number of associations that appear in the diagrams. Since one cannot reasonably diagram all of the associations in the novel, the choice must be made as to which associations are to be included and which excluded; and because it would be best to avoid making this choice on purely arbitrary grounds, one naturally seeks to isolate a certain type of association whose number is neither too great nor too small.

My decision to isolate metaphorical associations, however, certainly has its methodological weaknesses. As it is not the purpose of this thesis to enter into the never-ending debate over the definition of metaphor, I have decided to rely on both my own and my readers' intuitive sense of what a metaphor is and what it looks like. While the problems with such an approach scarcely need mentioning, they are still relatively minor in comparison with their alternative; for in order to genuinely incorporate a preexisting theory of metaphor into my analysis, I would need to show how that theory supported every one of my decisions to label an association as either
metaphorical or non-metaphorical. This, I expect, would only raise more questions than it answered, thus necessitating a bewildering flurry of qualifications and elaborations, and ultimately distracting readers' attention away from the main analysis. Although I will use some theory in leading up to my examination of metaphorical associations, I will let my readers have the final decision as to whether my metaphor/non-metaphor distinction is legitimate or not. Indeed, it may be possible that every one of the novel's associations is in some way metaphorical; or it could be the case that some of the associations that I consider metaphorical are really nothing of the sort. Yet even if my distinction were untenable, and the associations I chose to diagram were therefore chosen arbitrarily, the two main pillars of my argument would still stand: namely, that many of the associations in _Sent For You Yesterday_ are held together according to Hume's principles of the connection of ideas, and that enough of these associations can be diagrammed so as to paint a representative picture of the network of connections that spans the entire novel.
Non-metaphorical Associations

If we look first at non-metaphorical associations based on the principle of similarity, we find a number of passages whose language clearly suggests a movement of thought from one similar idea to the next. For example, when Doot imagines how Cassina Way might have looked in the early part of the Twentieth Century, his mind immediately leaps to images of Noah's ark and the Flood:

I think of my grandmother and grandfather and the children they were raising in that house on Cassina and I see islands, arks, life teeming but enclosed or surrounded or exiled to arbitrary boundaries. (20)

In this passage the process of association is made explicit in the language itself, the initial phrase "I think" and the following "I see." Doot "sees" Noah's ark every time he thinks of "that house on Cassina" because, in his mind, both share an important similarity: both are, as he reveals earlier in the same paragraph, "teeming with life."

Similar language can be found in another passage in which Freeda sees Brother the albino standing in her doorway as he waits for Carl to come outside and play:
His skin is raw and wrinkled like a plucked chicken before you wet it and roll it in flour and drop it in the bubbling grease. If she let him, he would stand there, dead in that bag of white skin till Carl returned. She thought of the flamingos in Highland Park Zoo. How they tucked one leg into the bag of their pink bodies and stood frozen, balanced on the other stick leg for as long as you could watch. (36)

As she associates Brother with the flamingos, Freeda’s mental process is brought to light with the phrase “she thought.” The similarity that motivates her association lies in the bag-like qualities of both Brother’s skin and the flamingos’ bodies.

Brother appears in another association later in the novel, when Samantha thinks about the wind chimes Carl brought home from Iwo Jima after World War II:

[The chimes] were etched with black markings. Japanese writing, she thought, a message if I could read the designs, a message dangling from strings so the glass squares bumped and sang and she remembered Brother’s skin that day. How you could almost see through it like you could almost see through the chiming glass squares. (129)
The phrases "she thought" and "she remembered" mark the different stages of Samantha’s thought as she comes to associate Brother’s pale skin with the "glass squares" of the wind chimes. Because, to her, the "glass squares" and the albino’s skin are similar in that both appear transparent, her thought of one easily invokes the idea of the other.

Although similarity-based connections would seem to make up the majority of non-metaphorical associations, there are several contiguity- and causation-based associations that merit attention. One of these, a rather straightforward contiguity-based association, appears in the same passage in which Samantha remembers Carl’s wind chimes. In addition to making her think of Brother’s skin, "the chimes made her think of far away places like Okinawa where [Carl] had been a soldier and paper houses and warm, sea breezes and giant flowers and tiny birds" (129). As with the similarity-based associations analyzed above, we find language that illustrates the process of association— in this case the phrase "made her think of ...." Because the chimes come from, and therefore are contiguous to, Japan, Samantha’s mind leaps to thoughts of Japan (and of
other objects which are also contiguous to that location) when she thinks of them.

Earlier in the novel, in a scene in which Carl thinks about his mother Freeda’s eyes— which have become red from weeping over the return of Albert Wilkes, whom she feels will be the death of her husband John—we find two causation-based associations appearing in close sequence:

*Sunshine, you are my sunshine.* His father sang that to his mother when she was scared. When her long hair hung down loose, [...] and her eyes were red from crying or no sleep [...] He sang *You are my sunshine* when she left one twin dead in the hospital and brought the other one home to die on Cassina. Sang it and hummed it that sad week waiting for the baby boy who was also John French to die. He was humming it to himself now, his father’s song, his mother’s eyes, the baby who lived only a week on Cassina Way [...] (24-25)

The loss of one newly born and the impending death of another are the causes of Freeda’s red eyes, which in turn are the causes of John French’s attempts to comfort her by singing “You are my sunshine.” Carl’s thoughts are swept along by these causal connections so easily and so rapidly
that by the end of the passage, the idea of Freeda’s eyes and the idea of her dying child become one with the idea of John French’s song, which Carl sings to himself as he walks the streets of Homewood.

While these associations do seem to occur less frequently than their similarity-based counterparts, it may just be that they are easier to overlook. One reason why this might be the case is that the principles of causation and contiguity tend to produce sequences of ideas that are more predictable, and therefore less striking, than those which are usually supported by the principle of similarity. We expect, for example, that if Carl is going to think about the cause of Freeda’s red eyes, he will most likely think about a painful event that took place earlier in her life; or that if Samantha is going to think about something that is or was contiguous to the glass wind chimes, she will probably think of the place they came from, or the person who owned them, or the events preceding and surrounding her first glimpse of them. However, if Freeda is going to think about an object that is similar to Brother’s body, we can have no idea of what that object might be, since there are literally countless objects in the universe for her to pick from that resemble his body in
at least one respect. Thus we cannot help but be a little surprised when Freeda’s mind leaps to the idea of a flamingo; the passage in which her similarity-based association appears will almost inevitably “stand out” to us. On the other hand, Carl’s and Samantha’s associations, which are based on the principles of causation and contiguity respectively, do not seem to involve much of a conceptual leap at all, and therefore are less likely grab our attention.

Another reason might be that similarity-based associations have more of the look and feel of poetry, and so are more likely than the relatively prosaic contiguity- and causation-based associations to appeal to readers’ latent Romantic or Symbolist biases, which regard poetry as more “imaginative” and “meaningful”—and therefore more worthy of the critic’s attention—than “factual,” “literal” prose. The correlation of poetry with similarity-based associations, and of prose with contiguity- and causation-based associations, finds support in Roman Jakobson, who in his influential article, “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” argues that “[t]he principle of similarity underlies poetry,” and that “prose, on the contrary, is forwarded essentially by contiguity”
Like Hume, who asserts that the driving principles behind the “apropos of discourse” are similarity, contiguity, and causation, Jakobson contends that “the development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or their contiguity” (1266). (Since, as Hume points out, “the relation of CONTIGUITY [is] essential to that of causation,” inasmuch as “whatever objects are consider’d as causes or effects are contiguous” (52), we can safely read Jakobson’s use of the term “contiguity” as including the notion of causation, as well.) For Jakobson, then, a discourse that is held together primarily by the similarity of its topics has a poetic quality, whereas a discourse whose topics are joined mainly on the basis of their contiguity is to an extent prosaic. Therefore, if a character’s train of thought can be considered an internal form of discourse, then it is more poetic when it is comprised of similarity-based associations, and more prosaic when it is made up of contiguity- and causation-based associations. Because readers are oftentimes on the lookout for “deep” meanings (sometimes despite their best intentions), they may end up devoting the majority of their attention to passages which
feature similarity-based associations, since it is these
which more often contain the poetry whose rich meanings
supposedly demand the most careful interpretation.

Metaphorical Associations

It would almost be criminal at this point not to
invoke the name of metaphor, which thus far has loomed like
a specter over my discussion of similarity and poetry. As
Jakobson points out, it is in metaphor that the principle
of similarity "finds [its] most condensed expression"
(1266). Likewise, Aristotle, in an oft-cited passage from
his Poetics, declares: "making good metaphors requires the
ability to grasp resemblances" (153). In Sent For You
Yesterday there are perhaps as many as two thousand
metaphorical associations. This number essentially
coincides with the total number of metaphors in the novel,
the reason being that all metaphors (excluding dead
metaphors) are in fact associations. Almost without
exception, metaphors consist of two ideas: an initial,
metaphorized idea and a subsequent, metaphorizing idea—
what I. A. Richards famously called the "tenor" and
"vehicle" (95-101). Because tenor and vehicle are similar,
the appearance in one's mind of the former induces,
according to Hume’s principle of similarity, the appearance of the latter. Thus the idea of an “evening […] spread out against the sky” called to Eliot’s mind the idea of “a patient etherized upon a table,” and thus the idea of Juliet’s eyes brought forth from Shakespeare’s imagination the idea of “[t]wo of the fairest stars in heaven.” (Sometimes, however, the vehicle will precede the tenor, as when the idea of the sea in Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” causes the speaker to think of “faith,” which he then metaphorizes as “[t]he Sea of Faith.”) Dead metaphors, on the other hand, consist of only one idea, and therefore cannot be associations in the same sense. When we hear or use the dead metaphor “the leg of the table,” for example, only the tenor (i.e., the idea of a vertical beam that supports the horizontal portion of a table) enters our thought, whereas the original vehicle (the idea of a human or animal limb) no longer comes before our mind’s eye. (In those exceptional cases in which the vehicle does enter our consciousness, the dead metaphor can be said “to come to life.”)

My claim that all metaphors are associations begs an important question: What is it about Wideman’s metaphors that makes them more susceptible of a Humean analysis than
the metaphors one encounters in any other novel or poem? That is to say, if all metaphors have an associative nature, then why make such an ado about the associative nature of Wideman’s metaphors? While I for one believe that a Humean analysis can just as easily—and just as fruitfully—be applied to the metaphors in other works by other authors, there are several reasons why I think it would be especially applicable to the metaphors in Sent For You Yesterday. First, the noticeable presence of non-metaphorical associations (especially those based on similarity) encourages us to view Wideman’s metaphors as part of a larger pattern of associations in the novel. Second, many of his metaphors, by either resulting from or comprising acts of recollection, represent the kinds of psychological processes that we typically think of as being associative. Third, the numerous interconnections between metaphors, which my diagrams will lay bare in the next section, strongly suggest what Bennion calls an “interconnected web” of associated ideas or memories.

Another important question is whether Hume’s classificatory scheme can reasonably be applied to an analysis of metaphorical associations. After all, if it is true that metaphors operate according to the principle of
similarity, then would not the very notion of a contiguity- or causation-based metaphorical association be contradictory? This is an excellent question, and one which I will turn to shortly. First, however, I would like to examine several similarity-based metaphorical associations and show how, by being produced from or composed of recollections, they draw attention to their associative natures.

A good starting example can be found early in the novel, in a scene in which Freeda, while visiting her Aunt Aida's house, finds her Uncle Bill breathing faintly beneath the white sheet of his deathbed:

Uncle Bill in his bed, the white sheet pulled to his chin. When she thought of him, he was always wearing an apron. Tending bar he liked it to ride high under his armpits so it looked like a giant white bib. How many times had she watched [Aunt Aida] tie the apron in the morning and loosen it at night. She saw Uncle Bill aproned again now, whiteness draping him and draping the bed in its folds. (48)

If we treat simile as a species of metaphor, we have at least two metaphors (and therefore at least two metaphorical associations) in this passage: "it looked like
a giant white bib” and “aproned again now.” In each case, Freeda’s mind moves from a tenor to a vehicle because of a similarity that she perceives between them: Uncle Bill’s apron “looked like” a bib, and the white sheet that now rests under his chin resembles his apron.

However, although the apron-bib metaphor and the sheet-apron metaphor are both associations based on similarity, readers are more likely to notice the associative nature of the latter than they are of the former. This is because the latter closely resembles an act of recollection, in which the thought of one object reminds an individual of another object that is either similar, contiguous, or casually related. Freeda sees the “white sheet” tucked under Uncle Bill’s chin and is immediately reminded of his apron, which used “to ride high under his armpits.” Her recollection crystallizes in the form of a metaphor when she envisions him “aproned again now.” Because this metaphor is ostensibly the end product of an act of recollection—and because such an act is oftentimes what comes to mind when we think of association—readers are apt to discern its associative nature.

The first metaphor, in contrast, does not necessarily comprise or result from an act of recollection.
Freeda thinks about the apron, her mind leaps to the idea of "a giant white bib." Yet this idea does not give any indication of being a memory; instead, it seems to be merely a metaphorical phrase, or figure of speech, which Freeda, for whatever reason, has chosen to use in order to describe the apron. In *Sent For You Yesterday* there are many metaphors that, like this one, do little to draw attention to their status as associations. Nevertheless, because they are frequently accompanied by metaphors like "aproned again now," whose associative natures are readily discernable, readers may eventually become alerted to the fact that they are associations, as well.

Another example of a similarity-based metaphorical association occurs at the apocalyptic climax of the novel, when Brother (either in a drug-induced hallucination, a dream, or a vision) witnesses the Armageddon-like destruction of Homewood:

The graves in Allegheny Cemetery opening, a wind flood floating them though the streets so the streets are crowded and empty and everywhere he steps, his feet crush somebody’s dry bones [....] He’s tramping on Kellogg’s cornflakes but it doesn’t matter because nobody’s left to hear him [....] (177)
Because cornflakes would make a similar sound were they also trampled upon, Brother thinks of them as he walks over the “dry bones” of the dead members of his community. At first glance, this metaphor does not appear to involve an instance of recollection. Yet if we consider that throughout the novel, Brother displays an inexplicable affinity for cornflakes—an affinity so powerful that he is compelled to sneak into the French’s kitchen in the middle of the night and help himself to a bowl (38)—we realize that when Brother’s thought shifts from a consciousness of the “dry bones” to the idea of cornflakes, he is actually being reminded of his favorite breakfast cereal.

Many of Wideman’s similarity-based metaphorical associations are also similes whose vehicles are clearly memories. To Carl, for example, the trees in Westinghouse Park look like the “tightly packed heads of fresh broccoli in crates outside Indovina’s grocery store” (24); the spring air “smells like the salve his mama rubs on his chest at night when he’s got the croup” (95); and the small white note that Lucy sends him is like “that piece of Albert Wilkes,” the pale skull fragment that Lucy keeps hidden away “in the handkerchief in her drawer” (111). To Lucy, the story of Junebug’s death is “[l]ike a fan [. . .
..] One of those tissue-paper and stick fans from Murphy’s Five and Dime” (122); and the “[l]ong pebbly sheets” on which Brother drew his pictures “looked like the wallpaper samples John French used to give [her and Brother] to play with” (193). In every one of these similes, the vehicle is a clearly defined object from either Carl’s or Lucy’s memory. Carl does not think of broccoli in general, but rather of the broccoli he has seen outside of Indovina’s store. Lucy does not imagine just any fan, but rather one of the fans she has seen at Murphy’s Five and Dime. Since it is fairly obvious that these similes comprise acts of recollection, readers are likely to notice their associative natures.

Before moving on to the next section, let us turn for a moment to the last and rarest types of metaphorical associations in the novel: causation- and contiguity-based metaphorical associations. As I mentioned earlier, because similarity is the driving principle behind metaphor, the very notion of a metaphor based on causation or contiguity would seem paradoxical. However, if we take a closer look at the psychological processes that contribute to the formation of Wideman’s metaphors, we discover that they are sometimes partly based on either causation or contiguity.
This makes sense if we recognize that ideas which are contiguous or causally related can also be similar at the same time. A character can easily associate two ideas on the basis of their contiguity or causal relation, and then, if the ideas are similar as well, associate them metaphorically on the basis of their similarity. A character can also create metaphors whose tenor and vehicle are related not only in terms of their similarity, but also in terms of any one of the other two principles of association. When a character does these things, the result is either a contiguity- or causation-based metaphorical association.

Perhaps the best example of a causation-based metaphorical association is found in a scene in which Freeda thinks about the swarms of flies that have recently appeared in Homewood:

Flies in Cassina Way had never been bad till all those people from the deep South started arriving with their dirty boxes and bags and spitting in the street and throwing garbage where people have to walk. It was like having all those people in her house when the flies swarmed through the open door, those careless,
dirty people lighting on her things, crawling across her ceiling and floors. (35)

The metaphor in this passage extends from the beginning to the end of the second sentence--from the simile, “it was like having all those people in her house,” to the substitution, “those careless, dirty people lighting on her things.” If we were to look only at the second sentence, we would think that Freeda’s mind moves from the tenor (the flies) to the vehicle (the Southern migrants) because they are similar; i.e., both are “dirty,” and both have “swarmed” into Cassina. However, if we turn our attention to the first sentence, we learn that in actuality, the movement of Freeda’s thought is based not on similarity, but on causation. Freeda’s mind moves to the vehicle because, in her view, the vehicle is the cause of the tenor: the migrants, with their less-than-perfect hygiene, have caused the recent proliferation of flies by transforming Cassina into a veritable Promised Land of grime, “garbage,” and “dirty boxes and bags.” Although Freeda could not have metaphorized the flies as migrants unless they were similar, she may never have thought of the migrants in the first place were they not also related to the flies by way of causation. Therefore, because it is
the principle of causation that initially provides Freeda with the idea of the migrants, we can say that the resulting metaphorical association is causation-based.

About as rare as their causation-based counterparts, contiguity-based metaphorical associations often consist of metaphors whose tenors and vehicles are not only similar, but also contiguous. A good example comes from a scene in which Lucy sits with Carl in Westinghouse Park and watches "the young girls and boys courting":

[She] would sit with Carl watching the squirrels and the kids acting like squirrels, giggly and teasing or suddenly quiet and checking out everything around them before pairing off arm in arm for a stroll around the path circling the park (123).

In the simile, "the kids acting like squirrels," the tenor (kids) and the vehicle (squirrels) are both similar and contiguous--similar in terms of their behavior and contiguous in terms of their physical proximity. The kids, who at one moment will be "giggling and teasing" and at another "suddenly quiet and checking out everything," behave like the squirrels, which in the middle of the most intense frolicking will pause to send out nervous glances at their human spectators. The kids are also close enough
to the squirrels that both them and the squirrels are within full view of Lucy. Unlike the causation-based metaphorical association analyzed above, this metaphorical association seems to result from a single-step process. Instead of first associating the kids and the squirrels on the basis of their contiguity, and then associating them on the basis of their similarity, Lucy seems to associate them on both grounds simultaneously. In other words, each of her associations appears to occur nowhere else but in the simile itself. Therefore, because the simile is based at once on similarity and contiguity, we can refer to it--at least in a limited sense--as a contiguity-based metaphorical association.

Diagrams of Metaphorical Associations

The connections that exist between the tenors and vehicles of Wideman’s metaphors oftentimes extend beyond the metaphors themselves. This usually occurs when the vehicle of one metaphor is the tenor of another. Take, for example, the scene in which Freeda thinks about the white sheet covering Uncle Bill. Not only does she metaphorize the sheet as Bill’s old apron, but she also metaphorizes the apron as “a giant white bib.” While in the first
metaphor, the tenor and vehicle are the sheet and the apron respectively, in the second metaphor, they are the apron and the bib. Because the vehicle of the first metaphor (i.e., the apron) is also the tenor of the second, it serves to connect the image of the sheet with that of the bib. We can diagram this interconnection thus:

sheet ——— apron ——— bib
(tenor) (vehicle/tenor) (vehicle)

Fig. 2: An Interconnection between Two Metaphors.

In Sent For You Yesterday there are literally hundreds of such interconnections which, when diagrammed, form an interlocking network or "beaded web" of associated images. In the following pages I will try to paint a partial yet representative picture of this network, leaving aside the question of its significance until the next chapter. It should be mentioned here that although my diagrams will primarily feature metaphorical associations, they will by no means account for all of the metaphors in the novel.
Due to space constraints, Wideman’s many animal metaphors (e.g., “the kids acting like squirrels,” “the top sheet jerked like dogs fighting under it” [49]) and most of his metaphors for characters (e.g., “Carl like a mirror” [183], “Brother was like somebody had used a chisel on him” [62]), will be excluded.

One of the novel’s most obvious interconnections involves the images of a belly, a bubble, and a watermelon. When Freeda is washing dishes in the downstairs kitchen, she notices a “jelly-bellied bubble” on her hand (31). This metaphor, which links the “bubble” and “belly” images, reappears in a somewhat different form when Lucy, thinking about what Carl looked like as a boy, recalls his “bubble belly” (189). In addition to being connected to the “bubble,” the “belly” is also joined to the “watermelon.” Contemplating Brother’s strange appearance, Carl thinks of Brother’s “watermelon belly” (29). Lucy places her hand on the “watermelon bulge” of Carl’s stomach (146) and later, while reclining in the Tate’s rocking chair, she remembers the “pickaninny watermelon bellies” that Carl and Brother “sported [. . .] when they were kids” (189). Because the “belly” is metaphorically linked to both the “bubble” and the “watermelon,” it acts as a connection between them.
The "bubble" and the "watermelon" also share a direct connection. When Freeda sees the soap bubble on her hand, she thinks of it as "a long watermelon blister of soap" (31). We can signify this extra connection by inserting a third line into our diagram:

![Diagram](image)

**Fig. 4: Connection between the "Bubble" and the "Watermelon"**
Freeda’s idea of “a long watermelon blister of soap” is actually two metaphors rather than one, for it describes the bubble on her hand as not only a watermelon, but also a “blister.” If we add the connection between the “bubble” and the “blister” to our diagram, we arrive at something like this:

![Diagram of connections between bubble, blister, belly, and watermelon](image)

**Fig. 5: Connection between the “Bubble” and the “Blister”**

Like a branch extending from the trunk of a tree, the bubble-blister association extends from the “triangle” formed by the bubble-belly-watermelon association. A similar branch-like effect is produced by other associations, as well. When John French brings home an expensive Victrola record player on the back of his old
yellow wagon, Freeda notices that he is "pulling it [. . .] calm as if it were a watermelon from the A & P" (44). This association, which links the "watermelon" with the image of a Victrola, has, like the bubble-blister connection, a branching appearance when diagrammed. Also extending from the "watermelon" is the association produced by Carl’s metaphor for a pregnant belly. Watching the girls flirting in Westinghouse Park, Carl tells Lucy, "[b]e a watermelon up under that one’s dress by summer" (123).

Several other branches extend from the "belly" in the original triangle. Lucy thinks of Carl’s beer belly as "a tub for all that Rolling Rock and Iron City he can’t live without" (123), and later she refers to Carl’s and Brother’s stomachs as "bowling balls pushing out their belly buttons" (189). These two associations, as well as the previous two that extend from the "watermelon," can be seen in the following diagram:
Fig. 6: "Branches" Extending from the "Triangle."

There are also many branches that consist of more than one image. A good example is the spoon-bottle-egg association, which extends from the "bubble" in the original triangle. When Freeda tilts the soap bubble on her hand, she notices how "the glistening skin reflect[s] the kitchen, the kitchen made tiny and funny-shaped like a face in a spoon" (31). Freeda associates the soap bubble with a spoon by way of analogy, figuring (in a spontaneous, intuitive way) that the kitchen is to the bubble what a human face is to a spoon. A strikingly similar association occurs about forty pages later when Wilkes catches John French's reflection in the dark surface of a Tokay bottle:

In the green glass [Wilkes] can catch a reflection of scraggly treetops silhouetted against the sky. He
plays the light and shadow until French rolls across the glass, all head, then all belly, then legs [. . .]
Then his own face. The shape of a spoon. (76)
The reflection of John's face could not have "the shape of a spoon" if the bottle--the reflective surface--did not have a spoon-like shape itself. Therefore, implicit behind Wilkes' metaphor for John's face is his association of the Tokay bottle with a spoon.

Wilkes' spoon-bottle association connects with Freeda's bubble-spoon association to form the larger bubble-spoon-bottle interconnection. This interconnection would consist of only three images were it not for another metaphor which links the image of a bottle with that of an egg. On page 44, Freeda refers to John's secret stash of Tokay bottles--a straw-filled niche located underneath the porch stairs--as a "nest." While she does not explicitly associate the bottles with eggs, her metaphor relies on an analogy which does; namely, the bottles are to the stash what eggs are to a nest. Readers are not likely to miss this implicit association, even though the term "eggs" is never mentioned.

Another branch that extends from the "bubble" has a distinct fork-like appearance and consists of no less than
six metaphors, the first two of which involve images of clouds and perfume. In one of her childhood daydreams, Freeda "would soar up into the air, and the tiny clouds bobbing like bubbles in bathwater, would smell just like [her mother] Gert's perfume" (52). Freeda metaphorizes the clouds not only as her mother's perfume but also as "bubbles in bathwater." As a consequence, the bubbles become associated with the clouds, while the clouds become associated with the perfume. The resulting bubble-cloud-perfume interconnection is augmented by yet another metaphor. When Lucy takes a sip of watered-down gin at the Velvet Slipper, she thinks it "[t]astes like perfume" (145). The term "perfume" links the image of gin with the rest of the images in the interconnection, thus producing the first half of the forking branch.

The second half of the forking branch consists of three metaphors, the first of which involves the images of clouds and smoke. When John French looks into "the early evening sky," he can see "clouds of smoke" rising from the steel mills down along the river" (81). The image of smoke appears again in the next two metaphors. Making love to Lucy for the first time, Carl can feel the "[f]ast womanish heat from between her legs [...] burning in his chest with
the smoke as thick as peanut butter" (105); and when he climaxes, a train “roars out [...] through the end of his joint spewing black smoke onto Lucy’s belly” (107). While the first metaphor connects clouds with smoke, the second and third connect smoke with peanut butter and semen respectively.

![Diagram of image associations](image_url)

*Fig. 7: Two Branches Stemming from the “Bubble”*

The cluster of images in Fig. 7 is linked, via the “bubble,” to a vast array of metaphorical associations. On page 41 the “bubble” is associated with the image of a web. No longer distracted by the memory of her mother, which had
had been clinging to her like the soap bubble on her hand, Freeda “cleared the cobwebs of rainbow and bubble and perfume from her mind [. . .] and set out into the Homewood streets to find her husband.” Linked thus to the “bubble,” the image of the web is then associated with that of an amniotic sac, or caul. On page 137 Samantha “tease[s] Brother about the caul, the gauzy web clinging to [their infant] Junebug’s see-through skin.” The caul, however, is also associated with the image of a bag, which is in turn associated with the image of human skin. Thinking of Junebug, Samantha says, “Little monkey came here in a shopping bag” (137). And when Brother stands “slack-jawed” in the kitchen, Freeda thinks he looks “dead in that bag of white skin” (36).

The image of skin has several branches of its own, the first of which involves the images of ice and a bone fragment. To Wilkes, the skin of his white lover “is like snow, like ice in the hard light” that shines from the bathroom (72). Ice appears some thirty pages later when Carl, holding a fragment of Wilkes’ skull, notes that it is “cold as ice” (104).

The second branch that extends from “skin” involves the images of paper and snow. On page 63, John French
thinks that Brother’s skin is “like waxed paper you could see through.” This same skin-paper connection is made twice more in the novel. When Anaydee opens her front door and “poke[s] her head into the bright sunshine,” her face is “the color of the pages in the old Bible [she] had given Freeda when she married John French” (48). And when Lucy looks through Brother’s drawings of “Homewood people,” she can imagine “Brother’s hand, pale as the paper, moving across each sheet” (194). In addition to being associated with skin, paper is also associated with snow. Although Brother never witnessed the Revival posters being put up all over town, “one morning” he saw them “everywhere, like snow falling at night” (175).

The third branch that extends from “skin” is comprised of seven connections, the first of which involves images of clothing. On page 86, John French’s skin is compared to his brogan shoes, which are covered in crusty layers of dried paint: “[Freeda] reaches across the checkered oilcloth and lays her soft hand on his hard one, her young fingers on his old fingers, her little girl, Lisabeth smoothness on his rough paperhanging crusty-as-brogan skin.” Skin and clothing are again associated on page 173. Hiding in the alleyway on a “moonless night,” Brother
"tr[ies] to lose himself in the skin of his tan jacket."

Beyond its connection with the image of skin, clothing also shares a connection with the image of a wing. In her childhood daydream, Freeda is carried into the air on the back of a "pony" whose wings "would rustle like her mama's skirts" (53). Wings, in turn, are associated with legs.

Telling stories with Carl and Doot at the Velvet Slipper, Lucy can see Carl's "heavy thighs flapping like wings [...] under the edge of the bar" (124). This chain of connections continues when we discover that legs are thrice metaphorized as sticks: Freeda remembers how the flamingos in Highland Park Zoo "tucked one leg up into the bag of their pink bodies and stood frozen, balanced on the other stick leg for as long as you could watch" (36); John French says of his daughter Lizabeth, "Nothing to her skinny little twig legs" (64); and Samantha's daughter, Rebecca, "raise[s] her ashy, black twig of a leg," letting Brother "slice the pink underflesh of her big toe and suck out a splinter" (133). As if that were not enough, both sticks and legs are associated with fingers, which are in turn associated with thread. John French snaps his fingers "loud as breaking a stick" (25); and his legs, reflected in the bottle of Tokay, appear as if they were "flattened and
curling around the glass like fingers" (75-76). Later, as Lucy shakes of the memory of Samantha, "she sees Sam's long fingers slipping from the edge [...] Black fingers letting go one by one like threads popping when you rip a seam" (183). All of these connections can be diagrammed thus:

![Diagram of Connections](image)

**Fig. 8: Array of Connections Extending from the "Bubble"

The three branches that extend from "skin" each spawn several branches of their own, which in turn spawn several more branches, and so on. For example, the "skull fragment" image produces ten branches, which then produce three. The image of thread, on the other hand, produces
only four branches; yet from these four extend a total of fourteen, and from those fourteen, an additional four. Needless to say, the diagram of these extra branches—which are comprised of no fewer than 104 images—ends up being much larger and more complex than any of the diagrams we have seen so far:
This final diagram is what I refer to, somewhat fancifully, as Wideman's "beaded web." The "beads," of course, are the various images, while the "web" is the network of metaphorical connections that holds the images together. Although the "web," as I have presented it here, consists of more than 130 connections, the entire network of images in Sent For You Yesterday is most likely composed of over a thousand. Nevertheless, despite its relatively small size, the "web" in Fig.7 shows enough of the entire network to allow us to make several important conclusions regarding its symbolic effect. In the next chapter, I will argue that this network makes the novel appear symbolic by doing two things: first, by deviating from the standard language, and second, by multiplying gradually over the course of the novel.
CHAPTER THREE

THE WEB'S SYMBOLIC EFFECTS

When John Bennion asserts that the metaphorical connections in Sent For You Yesterday "cause the reader to view the book symbolically," he generates several new avenues for research. The first, and perhaps the most labyrinthine, I took in the previous chapter when I showed that the connections actually comprise a massive network or "web" of associated images. In this chapter, I will take as my starting point Bennion's description of the connections' symbolic effects. Since Bennion does not give a detailed account of how this effect is achieved, he opens the way for others to pioneer their own theories.

Approaching the problem first from a stylistic standpoint, I will explore the possibility that Wideman's metaphorical connections make the novel appear symbolic by being foregrounded. Then, with the aid of a new diagram, I will see if the connections produce the same result by growing more numerous over the course of the novel.
Scheme as Symbol

To say that a metaphorical connection or association is foregrounded is to say that it stands out to the reader by defying his or her expectations. The term "foregrounding" was first used by the Russian Formalist Jan Mukarovsky in his article "Standard Language and Poetic Language." There Mukarovsky suggests that the expectations a reader brings to a text are largely determined by "the norm of the standard" language, the "linguistic components" and conventions which together comprise the language's overall structure (42). An utterance that does not adhere to the norm confounds these expectations, and in so doing, it captures more of the reader's attention, and demands more of his or her interpretive effort, than utterances which do adhere. Such an utterance is foregrounded in the sense that it stands out against the background of utterances which require less effort and command less attention. A metaphorical word, for example, breaks with the norm by deviating from its standard meaning; and so if it is surrounded by words that retain their standard meanings, it will be foregrounded not only because the reader must spend more time and energy interpreting it, but
also because its metaphorical meaning is, in that context, different and unexpected.

Foregrounding can also be caused by a different kind of deviation. Instead of breaking with a pattern, an author can establish one where there would normally be randomness, thus creating an unexpected degree of order. Geoffrey Leech, in his stylistic analysis of Dylan Thomas' poem, "This Bread I Break," finds several of these patterns, which he calls "schemes." In the fourth line of the poem, for example, "one noun phrase of the structure noun + prepositional phrase ('Man in the day') is followed by another noun phrase of like structure ('wind at night')" (122). (The full line reads: "Man in the day or wind at night.") In constructing this scheme, which is essentially a grammatical parallelism, Thomas "successfully restricts himself to the same [grammatical] pattern," even though "the language tolerates a great variety of noun phrase structures" (122-3). Because the "variety" or "diversity" of such structures is an expected feature of the standard language, the contrasting "uniformity" (122) of Thomas' scheme causes it to stand out to the reader, and thus to be foregrounded.
Much larger and more complex than a grammatical parallelism, many schemes can extend throughout an entire work of poetry or even fiction. Some obvious examples are the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet, the alliteration of Beowulf, and the iambic pentameter of Paradise Lost--complex patterns of sound that rarely occur in ordinary discourse. In his analysis of Thomas' poem, Leech suggests that these "extended schemes" are held together through "cohesion" (123), which he defines as "the way in which independent choices in different points of a text correspond with and presuppose one another, forming a network of sequential relations" (120). In the case of the Shakespearean sonnet, for instance, an author's choice to end the first line with, let us say, the word "day" corresponds with and presupposes his or her choice to end the third line with "May." As a result, both words form a cohesive "network" based on their similarity of sound (123). The rhyme scheme of the sonnet is readily discernable not only because its pattern is tightly woven, completing its first full iteration by the fourth line, but also because the elements that comprise the pattern--the words at the end of each line--bear striking phonological similarities.
Some schemes, in contrast, are much more difficult to discern, whether it be because their patterns are looser, completing fewer iterations within the same space, or because the similarities between their elements are relatively obscure. Leech gives us a glimpse of what one of these subtler schemes might look like when he discusses the cohesion between the metaphors in Thomas’ poem. Although they differ in terms of their grammatical structure, phonology, and reference, the metaphors nevertheless contain a faint “pattern of similarities” (123). Several of them, for example, juxtapose “inanimate nouns” with “items denoting psychological states”—metaphors like “the grape’s joy,” “the oat was merry,” and “sensual root” (122).

Using Leech’s definition of cohesion, we can say that these metaphors, by joining similar kinds of terms, correspond with and presuppose one another, and thus form a cohesive network. Their pattern is faint because, although it is tightly woven, its elements (i.e., the kinds of terms the metaphors juxtapose) are by no means obviously similar. Yet even if this pattern may be hard to spot, it is certainly real. Indeed, were it to exhibit a greater degree of cohesion, either by being more tightly
constructed or by relying on more obvious similarities, it would, Leech implies, become an extended scheme.

Not surprisingly, the metaphors in *Sent For You Yesterday* also form a cohesive network or "pattern of similarities." By sharing virtually the same images, they, too, correspond with and presuppose one another. For example, the metaphors "bubble belly" (189) and "watermelon belly" (29) share the image of a belly, while "watermelon belly" and "clouds bobbing like bubbles" (52) share the image of a bubble. Meanwhile, "clouds bobbling like bubbles" and "clouds of smoke" (81) share the image of clouds, whereas "clouds of smoke" and "smoke thick as peanut butter" (105) share the image of smoke. Although this pattern is loosely woven, consisting of at least 200 metaphors scattered over the space of 208 pages, the elements that comprise it--i.e., the images that the various metaphors share--are more obviously similar than the elements which comprise the pattern in Thomas' poem; for instead of merely being different species of the same general class of terms, they are practically identical. On this basis alone, one could argue that the pattern formed by Wideman's metaphors is an example of schematic foregrounding.
However, if it is true that the pattern in *Sent For You Yesterday* comprises an extended scheme, how does this fact explain the novel's symbolic appearance? Here again Leech may provide us with a clue. Toward the end of his analysis of the Thomas poem, Leech argues that, within the framework of the standard language, a foregrounded feature of a text--whether it be a single metaphor or a novel-length scheme--is "unintelligible." That is to say, because a foregrounded feature violates the norm of the standard, the critic's knowledge of the norm, no matter how extensive, will be of little use in interpreting the feature's non-standard meaning. Indeed, if the critic relies exclusively on such knowledge, he or she will ultimately be forced to conclude that the feature is meaningless. For this reason, "literary interpretation" ought to "be seen as a negative process: a coming to terms with what would otherwise have to be dismissed as an unmotivated aberration--a linguistic 'mistake.'" Instead of regarding the foregrounded features of a text as errors or anomalies, the critic must see them "as so many question marks, to which [he or she], as interpreter, consciously or unconsciously attempts to find answers" (125). Echoing this last statement in his guidebook, *Style In Fiction*,
Leech (together with Michael Short) argues that the "significance we attach to schemes and tropes are [sic] part of an integral process of imaginatively making sense of a strange linguistic experience" (144).

The language that Leech uses in the last two passages quoted above could easily serve as a practical definition of literary symbols. For regardless of what such symbols are in actuality, there is no question that to many critics, they are indeed like "so many question marks," which, when encountered, provide "a strange linguistic experience." Although the language in the passages could just as easily apply to any number of features that, depending on one's outlook, may or may not comprise genuine symbols, it may nevertheless constitute the intuitive definition of symbolism that informs Bennion's interpretation. In other words, when Bennion calls the novel "symbolic," he may be responding partly to the strange and mysterious qualities of Wideman's metaphors--qualities which are a result of foregrounding.
Association as Symbol

The symbolic appearance of *Sent For You Yesterday* may also be attributable to the gradual expansion of Wideman’s web of associated images. In the first few chapters of the novel, when the web is just beginning to form, the total number of associations that any image can carry is relatively small. However, toward the end of the novel, when the web is approaching its maximum size, each image carries a multitude of associations. Figure 1 below illustrates this phenomenon by aligning several of the novel’s associated images above their corresponding page numbers:

![Diagram of associated images with page numbers]

**Fig. 10**: Continuous Growth of the Web
For the sake of exposition, let us imagine that the cluster of images in Figure 1 makes up the whole of Wideman's web. On page 52, the cluster consists of only three images: those of clouds, bubbles, and perfume. Each image carries two associations: perfume is associated with clouds and bubbles, bubbles with perfume and clouds, and clouds with bubbles and perfume. On page 81, however, the cluster expands to include four images: those of clouds, bubbles, perfume, and smoke. Each image now carries three associations: smoke is associated with clouds, bubbles, and perfume; perfume is associated with clouds, bubbles, and smoke; and so on. This process continues until, on page 145, the cluster contains seven images, each of which carries a total of six associations.

Because this cluster is really only a small part of Wideman's web, the number of associations that each of its images carry is actually much larger. Toward the end of the novel, when the web is almost fully formed, every one of the web's constituent images carries around 100 associations. It is at this point when the number of associations in the novel begins to reach critical mass: every new image that joins the web is on the verge of imploding under the weight of its numerous connections.
When readers encounter one of these images, they may feel that it has a profound significance, even if they are unable to articulate what that significance might be, or are mostly unconscious of the web's existence. To them, the image's various associations may seem like so many hidden meanings, and the image itself, like a "symbol."

Many of the images that appear toward the end of the novel derive a great deal of their power from being joined to Wideman's ever-expanding web. For example, the image of human bones littering the Homewood streets (177), with its prophetic and eschatological overtones, could easily be counted among the most memorable and symbolic in *Sent For You Yesterday*. Yet when we read that the bones crunch like "Kellogg's cornflakes" under Brother's feet, the image takes on an even more profoundly and symbolic significance. This is because the metaphorical image of cornflakes is a part of Wideman's web, and so when it connects with the image of the bones, the image of the bones becomes associated with all of the images in the web. Thus, in addition to alluding to Ezekiel and the Apocalypse, the image of the bones may call to mind any one of the many images with which it is associated: dice (76), pebbles (104), seashells (105), snow (123), broken glass (177),
broken eggshells (146), etc. The question that remains at this point is: What should readers make of these various images? In the next chapter, I will argue that the images in Wideman’s web, rather than being random and meaningless, actually form a highly ordered structure that has at least one interpretable meaning.
CHAPTER FOUR
READING THE WEB

Seeing the web for the first time, many readers may doubt whether its images bear a meaningful relationship to one another. The image of a bubble, for instance, does not seem to have anything to do with that of a curtain, nor does the image of thread share an obvious affinity with that of snowflakes. Yet if the images in the web are unrelated, and hence random, then the web as a whole cannot have any kind of a coherent meaning; and if it cannot have any such meaning, then the effort spent in analyzing it will, at least from an interpreter's standpoint, contribute little to our understanding of the novel. Fortunately, a close inspection of the web reveals that its images share not only a close relationship with each other, but also a similar meaning. According to their physical properties (or, more accurately, the properties of the physical objects they represent) virtually all of the images can be classified into five categories. These five categories are in turn related through what I call complex images, which (to oversimplify somewhat) integrate features that are specific to two or more categories. In addition, many of the web's images--at least several within each category--
can be shown to represent the community of Homewood, thus making the web itself Wideman’s premiere symbol for the spiritual and social bonds that unite individual souls.

Of the five categories, the first (Category 1) comprises images of objects which are either container-like or spherical, or some combination of both. Samantha refers to the placenta wrapped around Junebug’s body as a “shopping bag” (137), and Freeda thinks of Brother’s skin as a “bag” containing his insides (36). When Lucy shows Carl the fragment of Wilkes’ skull, he at first mistakes it for a round-shaped pearl (104); and Doot, while having a drink in the Velvet Slipper, sees Lucy rest her hand on the round “watermelon bulge” of Carl’s stomach (146). Lucy’s green corduroys become a spherical container when Carl, consumed with desire, imagines them as “the green shell of a buckeye,” which can easily be peeled off (100). Another spherical container is Carl’s belly, which in Lucy’s mind is a “tub for all that Rolling Rock and Iron City he can’t do without” (123). The soap bubble on Freeda’s hand is also container-like in that it resembles a blister, whose thin membrane encloses a translucent fluid (31).

The second category (Category 2) includes images of membrane-like objects which function as either coatings or
partitions. The “sun-brown tint” of Carl and Brother’s’ skin is viewed by Freeda as “a coating thin enough for the wind to erase” (37), and the Revival posters are to Brother “like snow [...] covering everything in the morning” (175). During her bubble bath, Lucy is enveloped by the silence in the bathroom, which is “thick and quivering like the blanket of foam stretching from her chin to the far end of the tub” (185). While Carl waits for Albert in the Bucket of Blood, he thinks about those quiet moments when “you know you’re just one little lump, one little wrinkle under the blanket of sky” (68). In a daydream, Carl runs to “the end of the world,” where the waters of the ocean “roar over the edge and the sky is no thicker than a sheet of paper” (18). The heat waves that rise from the rails at the edge of town are “a shimmering curtain” (18), and the rails themselves are “like a screen cutting [Brother] off from what lay beyond Homewood” (180).

In the third category (Category 3) are images of limb- or thread-like objects. Rebecca’s tiny leg is an “ashy, black twig” (133), and Carl’s “heavy thighs” can be seen “flapping like wings” under the bar (124). The curls on Anaydee’s forehead are “two wings framing her face,” and her gray hairs are “silver threads” (48). While urinating
in a dark alley, Brother watches as "the faucet in his fingers shrinks till its nothing but a string" (178).

Walking into the vestibule, Lucy "sees Sam's long, dark fingers [. . .] letting go one by one like threads popping when you rip a seam" (183).

In the fourth category (Category 4), one finds images of air, liquid, and fire. Brother watches as a "wind flood" carries the graves in Allegheny Cemetery through the Homewood streets. The flames that consume Junebug are "like wind," blowing back Samantha and knocking her to the ground (140). Carl sees Pittsburgh as an ocean surrounding Cassina (20-21), and Brother founders in "a churning sea of Dago Red" (160). When John French spits chewing tobacco on the street, "it splats and sizzles" like blood (61); and as storm clouds gather over Homewood School, the students can see "puddles of shadow getting deeper around their feet" (96).

The fifth category (Category 5) is comprised of various forms of detritus. Lucy hums Albert's song as "the pieces of him" fall down "around her, lazy and soft like huge, wet snowflakes" (189); and when she sees the "black fragments" of John French's blues records strewn across her living room floor, she thinks of "splinters[s] of shattered
egg,” and of the fragments of Wilkes’ skull (206). The shattered wine bottles in the narrow alleyway, as well as the tiny rocks that line the railroad track, remind Brother of “cornflakes” (174). To Samantha, Brother’s eyelashes look like “blonde ash” (131). At the climax of Brother’s apocalyptic vision, the ruins of Homewood are buried by a “rain dry as talcum powder” (177).

As these examples illustrate, the images in Wideman’s web are not as random and unrelated as they might have seemed at first; for nearly every one of them belongs to one of five categories whose members represent similar objects. This should not come as too much of a surprise, since all of these images are already associated by way of metaphor, which, as I explained in Chapter 2, operates mainly on the principle of similarity. The real difficulty arises when we try to determine the relation between the five categories. Obviously, if the categories are composed of the images in the web, and if the images in the web are associated metaphorically, then the categories must be associated metaphorically as well—and hence either similar, contiguous, or causally connected. Yet when we look at the images that belong to each category, we are at a loss to determine how the categories might be related. The images
in Category 1, for example, represent objects that are spherical and container-like; however, these objects appear neither similar, nor causally connected, nor contiguous to those represented by the images from the other three categories. It goes without saying that buckeyes do not resemble blankets, pearls cannot cause puddles to form, and blisters can never appear on threads. While it is certainly possible that these objects are related in a deeper, subtler way—linked by some obscure similarity, causal connection, or contiguity that stubbornly eludes discovery—there is at this point little way of knowing.

Therefore, to find out how the categories are associated, it will be necessary to try a different strategy: instead of comparing the objects that the images from each category represent, we can compare the images themselves. In other words, rather than concentrating on their meaning, we can look for any other features that the images might have that would make their respective categories similar, causally related, or contiguous. The most obvious feature, and the one that I will focus on here, is the fact that all of the images belong to the same web of associations. Like a brick in a building, each image is a part of a single structure, and thus is related to every
other image by way of contiguity. This, of course, means that the categories are related by contiguity as well, since they are comprised of the images. While this relationship might at first seem too superficial or too obvious to be considered, it is actually quite intricate. Rather than existing only between the categories in the web, it also exists between the components of what, in the spirit of Hume's terminology (49-54), I will call complex images. As miniature versions or microcosms of the web, complex images are built out of smaller, simple images, each of which possesses features that are specific to a different category.

A good example is the blacked-out boxcar in Brother's "train dream." Recounting the dream in heaven, Brother says that the boxcar is "full [...] of pieces of people [...] People just rolling around like marbles on the floor" (10). When he experiences the dream for the first time in 1941, Brother sees a "stew of bodies sloshed helter-skelter over the wet floor of the boxcar" (159). This image of a train car full of wet, writhing bodies is actually made up of four simple images: the image of the train car, that of the liquid, that of the passengers, and that of the passengers' extremities--the arms, legs, hands,
and fingers that Brother refers to as "pieces of people."

Each of these images has features that define at least one of the categories in the web. The train car, as a dungeon-like vessel devoid of doors or windows (10), has the container-like features that define Category 1. The fluid—which, according to Brother, could be either sweat or blood (160)—has the liquid-like qualities of Category 4. The passengers, who roll around "like marbles," have the spherical properties of many of the images in Category 1; and their extremities, or "pieces," resemble the various forms of detritus in Category 5, not to mention the numerous limb-like objects in Category 3.

Another complex image is that of the "crystal ball." When Lucy hears Wilkes play the piano, she feels as if she were "inside one of those crystal balls you buy at Murphy's Five and Dime, those balls you turn upside down so they fill with snow, lazy floating warm suds of snow. Falling down. Falling down." (192). This image consists of three simple images: that of the crystal ball itself, that of the snowflakes, and that of the water in which the snowflakes float. The spherical crystal ball, which encloses Lucy within its translucent shell, has the container-like features that are characteristic of Category 1; the tiny
flakes of synthetic snow are reminiscent of the detritus in Category 5; and the water mirrors the liquids in Category 4.

The mysterious soap bubble on Freeda’s hand is also a complex image. Washing dishes at the kitchen sink, Freeda notices that there is a "bubble webbed between her thumb and first finger, a long, jelly-bellied bubble with see-through skin" (31). This image, like that of the crystal ball, is made up of three simple images: that of the bubble itself, that of the bubble’s skin, and that of Freeda’s fingers. The bubble, which remains in Freeda’s memory long after it has burst, is spherical like many of the images in Category 1; its “see-through” skin has the membrane-like features that characterize Category 2; and the two fingers between which it is “webbed” possess both the limb-like and the thread-like qualities of Category 3.

To construct these complex images, Wideman not only had to associate the same types of images that he associated in the web, but he also had to associate them in the same way—i.e., by making them contiguous to each other. In other words, Wideman had to repeat or reproduce the same associations he made between the five categories in the web. If he had constructed only these three complex
images, and thus reproduced the associations between the categories only three times, then we might be able to dismiss the associations as insignificant anomalies. But because there are literally dozens of other complex images in the novel--even the "beaded web," the eponymous image of this essay, is a complex image--we have no choice but to take the associations seriously. If Wideman did not feel that they were meaningful, he would not have repeated them so many times.

This, of course, raises the whole question of the web's meaning--a question to which there is no simple answer. Being the enigma that it is, the web invites a wide variety of interpretations, some perhaps better than others, but none necessarily conclusive. Perhaps the best the critic can do is to concentrate on just one of its potential meanings, fully aware that such an approach necessarily minimalizes, and thus misrepresents, the web's true complexity. The one meaning that I will attempt to interpret here is that of community. Although it can be teased from the text using a variety of interpretive methods, the simplest way to bring out this meaning is to examine how the objects within each category in the web are described. As it turns out, many of the objects are shown
as breaking or falling apart, much in the same way that Homewood, through the events in the novel, is shown as disintegrating or "coming apart." Indeed, the destruction of Homewood is echoed so closely by the destruction of the objects in the web that one could very well say it is symbolized by it. One could go a step further and argue that if these two instances of destruction are symbolically related, then the two things that are destroyed are also symbolically related. That is to say, if the destruction of the objects in the web symbolizes the destruction of community, then the objects themselves symbolize community. Furthermore, since so many of the objects are shown as being destroyed, one could conclude that the web as a whole symbolizes community. To see whether this conclusion is justified, let us first look at how the objects within each category are described.

In Category 1 a number of objects are shown as popping, breaking, or falling off the things they contain. The soap bubble on Freeda's hand suddenly and mysteriously bursts (31-2). Lucy's underwear falls off of her body like an eggshell breaking apart (145-6). The pieces of Wilkes' skull are "splinter[s] of shattered egg," and Wilkes himself is Humpty Dumpty. Lucy sees Junebug's story
as an icy "shell" or a "bag of skin" that she must either break through or shake off (145), and Carl imagines himself peeling off Lucy's green corduroys as if they were "the green shell of a buckeye" (100). To Brother, the torn bodies and broken bones that litter the streets of Homewood are like broken wine bottles (177).

Quite a few of the membrane-like objects in Category 2 are described as ripping, peeling off, or rupturing. While listening to Carl tell Junebug's story, Lucy imagines a Chinese fan opening up so wide that its "dust-colored tissue rips" (122). In her old age, Samantha looks as if "somebody had pumped [her] full of air. Her skin splotchy and split like it's ready to bust open" (188). Brother can feel Wilkes' life "hanging on him like a skin to be shed" (163). Carl images a distant point beyond the horizon where the world is "as thin as tissue paper," so thin "you could poke your finger through it" (27). When Freeda, standing at her front window, sees John French being chased down Cassina Way by a man with a gun, she punches through the glass to save him (30). At the very moment Carl came of age, "the walls" of the French's house "tumbled down, and [he] rolled out on the cobblestones [of Cassina]. Soft and naked and full of young blood" (201).
The thread- and limb-like objects in Category 3 are often shown as snapping or popping. John French snaps his fingers "as loud as breaking a stick" (25). Doing charcoal sketches in art class, Carl thinks, "if bones was as easy to break as these [charcoal] sticks, we'd be in trouble" (147). The picture inside Lucy's imaginary Chinese fan "hangs like a broken wing," and when the fan opens wide, its "bones snap one by one in the wind" (122). Sam's fingers let go "like threads popping when you rip a seam" (183); and Brother in his reverie wonders "what it would feel like to cut the string" that connects his feet to "the sun-dimpled bubble of his bald head" (172).

The air and liquid in Category 4 is frequently described as either burning or spilling out of a ruptured container. When John French's tobacco juice lands on the hot street, "it splats and sizzles" (61), dances like popping grease" (178); and when Carl's pot of spinach boils over, a "dribble seeps down the side [...] into the flame which flares yellow, sputters and hisses" (207). Brother contemplates what would happen if the "balloon" of his head popped in the heat of the sun: "would the air rush out and the balloon zigzag [.. .] across the sky?" (172). Brother thinks about "the time [.. .] he felt like a balloon," and
wonders as he makes "a little river along the curb why the air didn’t rush out when the water rushed out. You pulled the plug and the water drained, and why didn’t the air leak out too?" (178). Lucy remembers how Wilkes’ "music joined things, blended them so you follow one note and then it splits and shimmers and spills the thousand things it took to make the note whole, the silences within the note, the voices and songs" (189).

The detritus in Category 5 is usually presented as the left-over remains of a deceased person. The snowflakes that fall around Lucy (189, 192) are the "pieces" of Wilkes, the bits of brain and skull that were left on the Tate’s floor after Wilkes’ was shot. The broken bottles on which Brother walks become the “dry bones” and decomposing bodies (177) of past Homewood residents. Brother’s eyelashes, which cling to his face “like blonde ash” (131), call to mind the fiery immolation of his son, Junebug.

The destruction of the objects in the web would not be worth mentioning if it did not echo the larger and more consequential destruction of Doot’s Pittsburgh community. In the words of John French, “[a]ll Homewood coming apart” (67). With the exile and murder of Wilkes, the music that held Homewood together can no longer be heard. Brother,
who for a short time could play just as well as Wilkes (122), commits suicide after Junebug is murdered. Samantha winds up in a mental hospital; and old Mrs. Tate, believing that she is in jail, languishes in her bedroom for years (104-5). Neglected by their families and neighbors, the elderly members of Homewood freeze or starve to death in the streets, or get "burnt up in some tinderbox" (197). Carl gives up trying to be an artist and turns to heroin. Lucy, who also becomes addicted, does nothing to stop Rodney Jones from destroying John French's records. As Lucy declares years later, Homewood "is gone." There is no longer a "real" community, only an aggregation of lifeless buildings and lonely spirits (198). The most vivid manifestation of this spiritual emptiness is Brother's terrifying eschatological vision, in which Homewood, after being "drained" of "thousands of trifling souls," dries up and blows away (176-177).

In a novel in which the destruction of community figures so prominently, the destruction of the objects in Wideman's web cannot help but appear symbolic. If this appearance is in fact reality, then one could by analogy argue that the objects themselves are symbolic, as well. For if the destruction of community is symbolized by the
destruction of the objects, then the objects arguably symbolize community. Moreover, because so many of the objects are shown as being destroyed, one could again argue by analogy and conclude that every one of them—and hence the entire web as a whole, as well as each complex image that mirrors the web—is a symbol of community. It would seem that Wideman expresses his vision of community not just through the events in the novel, but also figuratively through his web of associations and his array of complex images. This would make sense since, as Page points out, Wideman views community as "an intersubjective web of human relationships" (39).

If Wideman's web does in fact symbolize community, then it most definitely cannot be a meaningless collection of random images. At the very minimum, it is the kind of elaborate motif that one would expect to find in a play by Shakespeare or a novel by Conrad. At maximum, it is an entirely original phenomenon, one which demands a different conception of metaphor and a new method of interpretation. In Sent For You Yesterday, Wideman takes full advantage of the connective or associative function of metaphor, creating what may be the vastest and most intricate network of metaphorical associations ever encountered. To
interpret this network requires a systematic and ultimately philosophical method of analysis, a strategy that takes nothing for granted. For Wideman's metaphorical associations do not reveal their secrets to just anyone. Rather, like the designs of braided hair that Lucy learned from Mrs. Tate, they speak only to those who know how to listen (191).
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