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“The Graduate”
Final Paper – Option A

Water plays a major role in the filming techniques of Nichols and the underlying symbolism of *The Graduate*. The water that is so frequently seen throughout the film is often symbolized as pressure, overwhelming weight, or stress.

Ben’s common expression, often seen early in the film, is a blank stare, or a nothing-face. This expression is one of Ben’s coping mechanisms of dealing with the high expectations of his parents and their acquaintances.

At the graduation party, Ben sits upstairs away from all of the guests with his nothing-face expression framed within his fish tank. Although not literally submersed in the water, this shot portrays Ben in ‘over his head’ with all of his stresses. While ‘submersed’ in this frame, Ben mentions to his father that he wants his future “to be different” as a grin creeps across his face—I will elaborate later.

The next instance of water, still at the graduation party, Mr. McGuire mentions to Ben “one word...plastics” just as he pulls Ben to the poolside, a body of water. What Mr. McGuire has just delivered to Ben is a floating material. Almost all plastics float in water. Ben needs to find something to keep him above his stress; he needs ‘plastics’ to ‘stay afloat.’

Alone in his room, Ben seems to find some comfort looking into the fish tank merely watching from the outside looking in. He no longer wants to be the fish inside his glass walls completely submersed in high expectations. His parents have been keeping him in a fish tank throughout his youth, watching every move he’s made, forcing him to follow the path of their desires while neglecting his aspirations.

Mrs. Robinson comes to the room. She needs a ride home and tosses him his keys. They land in the fish tank, a likely intended target. Ben reaches to the bottom of the tank and pulls out the keys. In this instance, Ben’s hand (or Ben’s keys) symbolize all of Ben, being pulled out of the water and out of the fish tank he’s been in his whole life. Mrs. Robinson is the one to make his future “different” as he wished, relieving him of all of his pressures. Despite the fact, she does have some pressures of her own that she later pushes his way.

At Ben’s birthday party, his father dresses him up in a scuba gear completed with flippers, goggles, and a harpoon. Mr. Braddock makes Ben do a “practical presentation” of Ben’s new gift for all of the Braddocks’ friends. Ben prefers not

walking out in the outfit and makes it very clear to Mr. Braddock who neglects Ben's remarks. Ben walks out and Nichols cuts to first person view inside the scuba goggles.

In this view, the only thing heard is the breathing through the oxygen tank. Although we see everyone's mouths moving, no sound transmits to Ben. His parents, of course, guide him each step of the way to the pool shouting out instructions. Ben reaches the pool. He hesitates as though he wishes not to jump in. He looks to his parents who—along with everyone else in the back—insist he jumps in. This is a clear symbol of his youth. He was guided every step of the way in their direction and pressured into things against his will. Ben then jumps in. He stays underwater for a moment then tries to get out. Still in the goggles view, Mr. Braddock puts his hand over the goggles pushing Ben back underwater. Ben had no choice, but to stay. He sinks to the bottom and obediently stands on the pool floor. Although behind a scuba mask, we can see that he, again, resulted to his nothing-face to cope with the situation.

After he and Mrs. Robinson initiate the affair, the montage of Ben on the pool with "The Sound of Silence" playing as the only sound displays Ben now atop the water upon plastic. First, he's shown relaxing on an inflatable mattress, then on the diving board. Ben now floats above his stresses.

In the same montage, during "April, Come She Will," Ben is shown jumping out of the water onto a floating mattress. Just before he hits the mattress, Nichols cuts to Ben landing on Mrs. Robinson in bed. Mrs. Robinson is Ben's plastic, his device to keep him afloat, his "different future" outside of the fish tank.

Ben's parents swim around him as he floats on the pool, pressuring him to ask Elaine Robinson out on a date. Ben doesn't desire to ask her out, but his parents absolutely insist upon it. Ultimately, they tell him he has no choice and push him off the floating mattress. He falls into the water staring off into the distance in order to, once again, cope with the pressures of his parents.

It's raining. Ben is driving to pick up Elaine for a date. Out of the rain, Mrs. Robinson bombards the car and gets into the passenger seat. Ben gets to the Robinsons' house and runs toward it to reach Elaine before Mrs. Robinson. They're both soaked. This water is a symbol of the stress of the affair upon both of them. And the rain is a shower symbolizing a cleansing. From here, Ben has rinsed his hands of Mrs. Robinson; although, the effects will take some time to dry off.

Throughout the rest of the film, Ben has his head on straight. He's made up his mind. Water is rarely seen in the last portion of the story. On his way to Berkely, he drives on a bridge hundreds of feet above a very large body of water. Later, he waits

outside of the school seated on the bench of a large fountain. Ben is never fully submersed in water again throughout the rest of the story symbolizing his accomplishment of stress relief.

Water was the most prominent and, arguably, the most important symbolic element of the film. Nichols' ability to embed a high amount of symbolism into a comedy was innovative and remarkable in a film that ultimately became a classic.