

**Saying Yes to Death:  
Mortality in William Faulkner's Fiction**

by  
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‘All are born with halters round their necks, but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life’

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1850).

‘Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge?’


Joseph Conrad, “Heart of Darkness” (1899).

‘And what the dead had no speech for, when living/They can tell you, being dead: the communication/Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living’

T. S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’ (1942).

### **Declaration of authorship**

I, Ahmed Honeini, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: 

Date: 05/08/2018

## Abstract

This thesis examines representations of mortality in selected works by William Faulkner (1897-1962). It builds upon the scholarship of Robert W. Hamblin (1980), who indicates that the act of writing and storytelling was Faulkner's authorial method of 'saying No to death.' Faulkner's ambivalence towards death, Hamblin notes, began during his adolescence, and 'it was not merely death which Faulkner feared, but death as obliteration.' This thesis extends and challenges Hamblin's argument, exploring how Faulkner's characters respond to the trauma and ambivalence which death creates. Indeed, in certain instances, as the thesis will show, Faulkner's characters are driven towards accepting and 'saying Yes to death.'

Faulkner's narratives, specifically those explored within this thesis, are constructed around both what the living have to say about the dead and what the dead have to say about the living and the process of dying. This feature of Faulkner's fiction is most evident in "A Rose for Emily" (1930) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930), texts which frame the discussion within the thesis. The chapters herein have been organised in terms of thematic connection, and the works discussed have not been considered in their original, sequential publication order. Instead, the structure of the thesis aims to show that the seemingly binary issues of life and death often intersect with one another in Faulkner's fiction. Chapter One explores the implications for the living speaking of and for the dead in "A Rose for Emily". The opening chapter examines the story's narrator, who expresses their community's prejudices towards Emily Grierson, a recently-deceased Southern aristocrat. The chapter argues that the narrator and their community repeatedly attempt to coerce Emily and her milieu into accepting mortality. Chapter Two analyses Faulkner's use of third-person distanced voice in "Pantaloon in Black", the third story from *Go Down, Moses* (1942). The chapter examines how Rider's refusal to engage properly in African-American funerary rituals leads to a wilful misrepresentation of his actions by the white community in Yoknapatawpha County, as embodied by Jefferson's deputy sheriff. Chapter Three focuses on the first-person voice of Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) as he readies himself for death by water. The chapter explores how Southern society's anxieties towards suicide saturate Quentin's voice at various stages throughout June Second, 1910. Chapter Four moves from the violence and harm which Quentin inflicts upon himself in Chapter Three to the murder of Colonel Thomas Sutpen by Wash Jones in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), the events of which are retold from Quentin's perspective. Chapter Five brings the thesis to a close with the dead voice of Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*. Addie offers a posthumous, first-person account of her life, explaining why her entire existence was, essentially, a preparation for her final, inevitable acceptance of death.

The thesis aims to demonstrate how the various spoken accounts of human mortality that these characters provide, which include experiences of grief, bereavement, mourning, and violence, compel them to desire and accept death. Indeed, to the characters explored within this thesis, death is not a profoundly negative state of annihilation.

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It would be remiss of me to ignore the Faulkner research community in the United States, particularly in Oxford, Mississippi and Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Thanks to past and current Faulkner Society Presidents, Dr Ted Atkinson and Dr Taylor Hagood. Special thanks to Professor Robert W. Hamblin and Dr Christopher Rieger for their various acts of hospitality during 2016's Faulkner and Hemingway Conference.

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Parts of this thesis have been presented in various conference papers since June, 2016:

1. 'Houses as Spaces of Horror and Secrets: William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*', presented at the Royal Holloway Interdisciplinary Summer Conference, June, 2016.
2. "'It wont balance": Addie's Coffin, Cash's Foot, and the Failure of Functionality in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*', presented at the Royal Holloway English Department Research Conference, November, 2016.
3. "'Ah aint tryin' to git away": Whiteness as a Form of Death in William Faulkner's "Pantaloon in Black'", presented at the 62nd Annual British Association for American Studies (BAAS) Conference at Canterbury Christ Church University, April, 2017.
4. 'Tales of Dead Men Talking: Conrad's Mr. Kurtz and Faulkner's Colonel Thomas Sutpen', presented at the 43rd Annual Joseph Conrad Society (UK) Conference in London, July, 2017.
5. 'Wash Jones, gift giving, and the murder of Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*', at the inaugural Southern Studies in the UK Research Network colloquium, August, 2017.
6. "'Who loved only death": Three Reactions to the Suicide of Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*', presented at the Royal Holloway English PGR Easter Colloquium, Bedford Square, London, April, 2018. I also gave (a slightly revised version of) this paper at the inaugural Faulkner Studies in the UK Colloquium, May, 2018.
7. 'Saying No to Death? Mortality, Voice, and the Work of William Faulkner', a thesis overview presented at the inaugural Royal Holloway English Student-Staff Research Seminar, May, 2018. I also gave a condensed version of this paper at the British Association for Modernist Studies' New Works in Modernist Studies conference, University of Glasgow, December, 2018.

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### **A note on editions used**

Please note the following editions of the works of William Faulkner examined which have been cited throughout this thesis:

*The Sound and the Fury* (1929), edited by Michael Gorra (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014). This Norton edition supersedes the two previous Norton editions edited by David Minter (published in 1988 and 1993, respectively), but retains the corrected version of the novel prepared by Noel Polk in 1984.

“A Rose for Emily” (1930), in *Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 1995). This Vintage edition reprints the original edition of *Collected Stories* first published by Random House in 1950.

*As I Lay Dying* (1930), edited by Michael Gorra (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010).

*Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) (New York: Vintage Books, 1987). This Vintage edition is a corrected version of the novel prepared by Noel Polk in 1986.

*Go Down, Moses* (1942) (New York: Vintage International, 2011). This Vintage edition reprints the corrected version of the short story collection prepared by Noel Polk in 1994.

## Table of contents

<b>Title page and copyright notice</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Epigraphs</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Declaration of authorship</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>A note on editions used</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Table of contents</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Introduction:</b> Saying No to Death?: William Faulkner and mortality	<b>9</b>
1. Burying the “fallen monument”: Mortality, social prejudice, and the narrator in “A Rose for Emily”	<b>29</b>
2. “Ah’m goan home”: Narration, whiteness, and the subversion of African-American funerary culture in “Pantaloon in Black”	<b>68</b>
3. The word that Quentin cannot say: Suicide in <i>The Sound and the Fury</i>	<b>115</b>
4. “a bloody mischancing of human affairs”: Wash Jones and the murder of Thomas Sutpen in <i>Absalom, Absalom!</i>	<b>167</b>
5. “I knew that living was terrible”: Confronting mortality in <i>As I Lay Dying</i>	<b>214</b>
<b>Conclusion:</b> Saying Yes to Death in Faulkner’s fiction	<b>268</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>273</b>



## Introduction

### Saying No to Death?: William Faulkner and mortality

#### Faulkner, the aesthetics of immortality, and ‘saying Yes to death’

In the Foreword to *The Faulkner Reader*, William Faulkner asserted that his purpose in writing fiction was ‘to uplift man’s heart.’<sup>1</sup> Qualifying this statement, Faulkner added that:

This does not mean that we are trying to change man, improve him, though this is the hope—maybe even the intention—of some of us. On the contrary, in the last analysis, this hope and desire to uplift man’s heart is completely selfish, completely personal. He would uplift man’s heart for his own benefit, because in that way he can say No to death.

(x-xi)

Faulkner’s declaration here was followed, two years later, by a statement in an interview during his visit to Nagano, Japan. In this interview, Faulkner elaborated upon his earlier sentiments, asserting that ‘in no way can man attain harmony better than in the creation of something which [...] will outlast him’, because ‘when he has passed beyond the wall of oblivion, he will leave on that wall—you know for a few years, everywhere you saw “Kilroy was here”—well, that’s what the artist has done.’<sup>2</sup> Faulkner contended that, though the artist cannot ‘live forever [...] somehow the picture, the poem [...] lasts a long time, a very long time, longer than anything’ (103). Faulkner’s utterances on these occasions have led critics such as Robert W. Hamblin to conclude that ‘the key to Faulkner’s theory of fiction is to be found in his statement, repeated many times after 1951 but implicit in even his

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<sup>1</sup> William Faulkner, ‘Foreword’, *The Faulkner Reader* (New York: Random House, 1954), x. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>2</sup> James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate (eds.), *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 103. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text. For further, similar statements Faulkner made during his tenure as writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia, see Fredrick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (eds.), *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), 61. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

earliest work, that writing was his way of “saying No to death.”<sup>3</sup> Following on from Hamblin, Warwick Wadlington has typified Faulkner’s declaration in the Foreword as a ‘confrontation with mortality which tests as it enacts the power to exist.’<sup>4</sup>

In a letter to Malcolm Cowley, Faulkner announced that ‘It is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished from history, leaving it markless, no refuse save for the printed books. It is my aim [...] that the sum and history of my life [...] shall be [...] “He made the books and he died.”’<sup>5</sup> Faulkner adopted this aesthetic of immortality, ‘saying No to death’ through the act of writing, from two of his most significant literary influences: William Shakespeare (1564-1616)<sup>6</sup> and John Keats (1795-1821). Both Shakespeare and Faulkner were aware of the inevitable arrival of one’s mortality and the need to ‘make war upon this bloody tyrant, time.’<sup>7</sup> Art, to Faulkner, becomes the means by which one could preserve life and extend one’s mortality, thereby ‘saying No to death.’ In practice, therefore, Faulkner emulates one of the central thrusts of the early part of Shakespeare’s sonnets: ‘So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,/So long lives this, and this gives life to thee’ (‘Sonnet 18’, 13-14). As Hamblin writes, ‘Faulkner was inclined to view art as the

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<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Hamblin, “Saying No to Death”: Toward William Faulkner’s Theory of Fiction’, in Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (eds.), *“A Cosmos of My Own”* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 4. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>4</sup> Warwick Wadlington, *Reading Faulknerian Tragedy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 16. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Blotner (ed.), *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1977), 285. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text. For a response to Faulkner’s letter to Cowley, see Philip Weinstein, ‘He Made the Books and He Died: The Fiftieth Anniversary of Faulkner’s Death’, *Sewanee Review*, Volume 121, Issue 3 (Summer, 2013): 432-438.

<sup>6</sup> While at the University of Virginia, and in answer to the question ‘Do you enjoy reading Shakespeare?’, Faulkner stated: ‘Yes’m, I still read Shakespeare. I have a one-volume Shakespeare that I have just about worn out carrying around with me’ (*Faulkner in the University*, 67). In *Faulkner: A Biography* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), Joseph Blotner writes that Faulkner could easily identify ‘obscure’ sonnets by Shakespeare and could quote what, in Joan Williams’s terms, were “‘reams of obscure Shakespeare sonnets from memory” (513). For more on Shakespeare’s influence upon Faulkner, see Thomas Kevin Conley, ‘Resounding Fury: Faulkner’s Shakespeare, Shakespeare’s Faulkner’, in Philip C. Kolin (ed.), *Shakespeare and Southern Writers* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 83-125.

<sup>7</sup> William Shakespeare, ‘Sonnet 16’, *Sonnets*, edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 2. All further references to the sonnets are from this edition and are incorporated into the text.

principal means by which man might defy time and death and achieve at least a measure of immortality' (8). Or, as Faulkner himself stated while at the University of Virginia: '[T]he individual is not too much, he is only a pinch of dust, he won't be here very long anyway, but his species, his dreams, they go on. There's always somebody that will keep on creating [...] Shakespeare as long as man keeps on producing' (*Faulkner in the University*, 286).

Alongside Shakespeare, Keats exerted a lasting influence upon Faulkner's approach to his work. In 1925, Faulkner recounted that, during his youth, he 'read "Thou still unravished bride of quietness"' and found a still water withal strong and potent, quiet with all its own strength, and satisfying as bread.<sup>8</sup> In Keats, Faulkner discovered a 'beautiful awareness [...] so sure of its own power that it is not necessary to create the illusion of force by frenzy and motion' (117). Keats, in his odes to a nightingale and a Grecian urn, evinces a constant awareness of humanity's eventual end while presenting music and art as transcending mortality. For example, he claims that the nightingale will never be affected by 'the weariness, the fever, and the fret' of human life.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the nightingale will escape these mortal threats and, indeed, become immune to death ('Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!' [61]). Therefore, the nightingale preserve its 'lustrous' appearance (29), while human beauty cannot. Similarly, the Grecian urn survives to assert the claim that "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty.'" <sup>10</sup> Indeed, the Grecian urn encapsulates Faulkner's aesthetic quest as a novelist 'to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again.'<sup>11</sup> As evidenced by the Grecian urn, though death cannot be stopped, and

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<sup>8</sup> William Faulkner, 'Verse Old and Nascent: A Pilgrimage' (1925), in Carvel Collins (ed.), *William Faulkner: Early Prose and Poetry* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), 117. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>9</sup> John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale', *The Illustrated Poetry*, illustrated by George Scharf (London: Chancellor Press, 1984), 23. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>10</sup> John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', *The Illustrated Poetry*, 49. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>11</sup> William Faulkner, interviewed by Jean Stein, in Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (eds.), *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism* (New York: Harbinger Books, 1963), 80.

though ‘Old age shall this generation waste’ (46), humankind can leave a monument of itself behind. The immortal ‘piping songs’ of the ‘melodist’ await the spectator (24-25), the reader, the poet, the literary artist to make this ‘fixed art’ move again. Much like Faulkner’s invocation of his ‘printed books’ in his letter to Cowley, the urn is a self-renewing, self-perpetuating artefact, whose beauty is fixed and unchanging. As Joan S. Korenman writes, ‘The stasis (“silent arrested motion”) represented here by art is for Faulkner the ultimate peace, immunity from the destructive march of time. The achievement of this peace [...] may be one reason for writing.’<sup>12</sup>

As Hamblin identifies, and as the influence of Shakespeare and Keats makes clear, Faulkner was concerned with the effect of mortality upon the individual, their community, and their place in society from his earliest fiction. In his debut novel, *Soldiers’ Pay* (1926), Faulkner explored the horror and disgust that the community of Charleston, Georgia exhibit when confronted with the facial disfigurement of Donald Mahon. Mahon returns home from the Great War, after having been “‘shot down in Flanders last spring.’”<sup>13</sup> The community’s dismay and pity towards Mahon because of his experiences cause him to be branded as having “‘life and death and dishonour in his face’” (57). The catastrophic impact of death during the Great War is also prevalent in Faulkner’s first novel set in Yoknapatawpha County, *Flags in the Dust* (1973, originally published in a truncated form as *Sartoris* in 1929). In that novel, Bayard Sartoris is haunted by the death of his brother, John, during the Great War. Returning home, Bayard laments that John “‘could never fly anyway, I kept trying to keep him from going up there in that goddam popgun.’”<sup>14</sup> Bayard returns

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<sup>12</sup> Joan S. Korenman, ‘Faulkner’s Grecian Urn’, *The Southern Literary Journal*, Volume 6, Issue 1 (Fall, 1974), 5. See also: Blanche H. Gelfant, ‘Faulkner and Keats: The Identity of Art in “The Bear”’, *The Southern Literary Journal*, Volume 2, Issue 1 (Fall, 1969): 43-65. References to Keats appear repeatedly Faulkner’s fiction, such as in *Flags in the Dust* (1929/1973), *Light in August* (1932), *Go Down, Moses* (1942), and *The Mansion* (1959).

<sup>13</sup> William Faulkner, *Soldiers’ Pay* (London: Vintage, 2000), 56. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>14</sup> William Faulkner, *Flags in the Dust* (New York: Vintage International, 2012), 124. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

home afflicted with trauma because of John's death, and it is this trauma which leads to his own suicide towards the novel's end (389-391). As this thesis will attempt to demonstrate, Faulkner's narratives are obsessed with death: both what the living have to say about the dead and what the dead have to say about the living and the process of dying.

A number of critics have previously noted the importance of death in Faulkner's narratives. Most recently, for example, Charles Reagan Wilson has written that 'The reflections upon death in his characters and narrators suggests a preoccupation with mortality.'<sup>15</sup> In his early attempt to explain the obsession with death in Faulkner's fiction, Hamblin argued that 'Faulkner was extremely apprehensive concerning death', and that these fears 'originated in early childhood and may have derived from [...] his brush with death from scarlet fever at age four, or from the successive deaths of his beloved grandmothers when he was nine years old' (6-7). More significantly, Hamblin concluded that 'it was not merely death which Faulkner feared, but death as obliteration' (8). In the biographical sketch which Hamblin provided here, concerns with mortality textured and informed Faulkner's life from his earliest moments; they went on to inform his conception of the South in his major works as a place which was profoundly affected by its lost glory and which struggled to maintain its survival in some form after the Civil War. As such, Faulkner perhaps shared, as Wilson writes, an 'awareness of, and sometimes [...] obsession with, death' that is characteristic of Southern culture (269).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, 'William Faulkner and the Southern Way of Death', in Jay Watson and Ann J. Abadie (eds.), *Fifty Years After Faulkner* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 271. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>16</sup> In *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), Mark Schantz argues Southerners 'came to fight the Civil War in the midst of a wider cultural world that sent them messages about death that made it easier to kill and be killed. They understood death awaited all who were born and prized the ability to face death with a spirit of calm resignation. They believed that a heavenly eternity of transcendent beauty awaited them beyond the grave. They knew that their heroic achievements would be cherished forever by posterity. They grasped that death itself might be seen as artistically fascinating and even beautiful' (2).

Building upon and challenging Hamblin's arguments, this thesis examines representations of mortality in a selection of Faulkner's fiction. Through a series of close readings of five key Faulkner texts ("A Rose for Emily" [1930], "Pantaloon in Black" [1942], *The Sound and the Fury* [1929], *Absalom, Absalom!* [1936], and *As I Lay Dying* [1930]), the thesis adopts as its central line of inquiry the ways in which Faulkner's characters respond to and negotiate the traumas and ambivalences which death creates. More importantly, I will argue that the traumas and ambivalences towards death that Faulkner's characters exhibit in these works actually drives them towards accepting and 'saying Yes to death.' The thesis's overarching argument, therefore, directly contradicts Hamblin's view that 'Faulkner's heroes more often than not are those individuals who, like the artist, say No to death, who choose life even when that choice entails a considerable amount of anxiety, guilt, or pain' (21). In stark contrast to Hamblin's claim, this thesis explores those marginalised characters in Faulkner's fiction who find themselves on the boundary between life and death, and ultimately 'say Yes'. While Hamblin's work is clearly foundational to the study of Faulkner's oeuvre, there is nevertheless a counter argument to be made to his hypothesis about Faulkner's fiction. The argument and approach to Faulkner's fiction which this thesis advances remains unexplored in Faulkner scholarship. In consequence, this thesis ventures to fill that critical gap, acknowledging a key aspect of Faulkner's work that he himself actively ignored throughout his career. This thesis thus makes a distinction between Faulkner's belief in art as, in Hamblin's terms, the 'means by which man might [...] achieve a measure of immortality' (8) and the desire for death that the principal characters in the works explored herein exhibit. It will argue that, Faulkner's literary quest for immortality notwithstanding, to a range of his characters, from Miss Emily Grierson to Rider, from Quentin Compson to Wash Jones, and certainly Addie Bundren, death is not a profoundly negative state of annihilation.

## **The American Way of Death? The denial of death in the twentieth-century and Faulkner scholarship**

Alongside the aesthetic tradition of immortality through art, as exemplified by Shakespeare and Keats and later adopted by Faulkner, the socio-cultural insistence upon ‘saying No to death’ has its origins in the early-twentieth-century and the chaos and loss of life which resulted from the Great War, which, as we have seen, Faulkner himself addressed in his earliest works. As Wilson outlines, ‘The scholarship on death in the United States suggests that since the nineteenth century the American Way of Death has aimed at denial of death’ (268). In an important essay of 1915, Sigmund Freud promulgated the idea that death was denied in Western culture, writing that ‘We have shown the unmistakable tendency to push death aside, to eliminate it from life. We have tried to keep it deadly silent’:

Our own death is indeed unimaginable, and however we try to imagine it, we realize that we are actually present as onlookers. [...] Where the death of someone else is concerned, civilised man is careful not to speak of this possibility in the hearing of the person who may be about to die.<sup>17</sup>

In the context of the fatalities in the Great War, however, Freud asserts that ‘Death can no longer be denied; we are obliged to believe in it. People are really dying, not individually now, but in large numbers, often tens of thousands in a single day’ (185). Though Faulkner proclaimed himself to be ignorant of Freud’s work,<sup>18</sup> there are clear parallels between Freud’s ruminations on the Western world and its attitudes towards death at the onset of war and Faulkner’s own representation of the South and its reaction to, and in the aftermath of, both the Great War and the earlier Civil War. These representations are often inflected with a sense of loss, decay, and destruction. An example of this association of the

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<sup>17</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Timely Reflections on War and Death’, in Adam Phillips (ed.), *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, translated by Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 2005), 183. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>18</sup> At the University of Virginia in 1958, when questioned about his views on psychology, Faulkner claimed that ‘What little of psychology I know the characters I have invented and playing poker have taught me. Freud I’m not familiar with’ (268).

South with loss and decay in Faulkner's fiction is Sutpen's Hundred, the 64,000-acre slave-plantation in his 1936 masterwork, *Absalom, Absalom!* In that novel, one of the narrators describes Sutpen's Hundred, near the end of the Civil War, as being 'reserved for [...] some desolation more profound than ruin.' As Wilson notes, 'The antebellum South's violence, from dueling among elites, frontier brawling, or plantation brutality towards slaves, resulted in dramatic, regionally specific examples of human deaths. The Confederacy's massive death rates disrupted normal Victorian expectations of the "good death," an idealized hope for a peaceful deathbed scene with family nearby.'<sup>19</sup>

Social anthropologists and historians have benefitted from and expanded upon Freud's work. In the mid-1950s, Geoffrey Gorer likened mentioning death in the twentieth-century to the consumption of pornography in the previous century. Gorer claimed that 'The natural processes of corruption and decay have become disgusting, as disgusting as the natural processes of birth and copulation were a century ago; preoccupation about such processes is (or was) morbid and unhealthy, to be discouraged in all and punished in the young.'<sup>20</sup> The ideas of Freud and Gorer later influenced the work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, Ernest Becker, and Philippe Ariès during the 1960s and 1970s. Kübler-Ross, for example, acknowledges that:

[I]n our unconscious, death is never possible in regard to ourselves. It is inconceivable for our unconscious to imagine an actual ending of our own life here on earth, and if this life of ours has to end, the ending is always attributed to a malicious intervention from the outside by someone else. In simple terms, in our unconscious mind we can only be killed; it is inconceivable to die of a natural cause or of old age. Therefore death in itself is associated with a bad act, a frightening happening, something that in itself calls for retribution and punishment.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, 'The Cultural Context and Expressions of Deathways in the US South', *Southern Quarterly*, Volume 53, Issue 1 (Fall, 2015): 7.

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Gorer, 'The Pornography of Death', *Encounter*, Volume 4 (October, 1955): 51.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death & Dying* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 2-3. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text. Despite encapsulating the fear of death in the collective unconscious, Kübler-Ross's overarching argument echoes the stance this



Becker states that ‘the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity – activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man.’<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Ariès notes that ‘one must avoid – no longer for the sake of the dying person, but for society’s sake, for the sake of those close to the dying person – the disturbance and the overly strong and unbearable emotion caused by the ugliness of dying and by the very presence of death in the midst of a happy life.’<sup>23</sup>

Writing specifically about the early-twentieth-century American perspective, Charles O. Jackson follows up on Kübler-Ross, Becker, and Ariès, arguing that ‘This period was characterised by a major withdrawal on the part of the living from communion with and the commitment to the dying and the dead. Death became alienated from life and the world of the dead was essentially lost to the living.’<sup>24</sup> Framing his discussion of death from an explicitly white Southern context, Christopher Crocker describes how dying in the modern age ‘initiates the rites of passage that is the Southern funeral’:

[I]t sets in motion a chain of patterned sequential actions and attitudes beginning with preparation for the announcement that death has occurred. Thus “dying” is regarded as a private rather than a public matter, and therefore only those considered nearest the afflicted person are informed of the gravity of the situation.<sup>25</sup>

Crocker’s account contrasts with Randy J. Sparks’s exploration of the white antebellum evangelical South, where ‘death was a public ritual, one where friends and family joined

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thesis takes when conceptualising death in Faulkner’s fiction: ‘we may achieve peace [...] by facing and accepting the reality of our own death’ (17).

<sup>22</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), ix.

<sup>23</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, translated by Patricia M. Ranum (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1974), 87.

<sup>24</sup> Charles O. Jackson, ‘American Attitudes to Death’, *Journal of American Studies*, Volume 11, Issue 3 (December, 1977): 298.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Crocker, ‘The Southern Way of Death’, in J. Kenneth Morland (ed.), *The Not So Solid South: Anthropological Studies in a Regional Subculture* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971), 116-117. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

together in what amounted to a deeply religious worship service.<sup>26</sup> Crocker's account also contradicts Wilson's assertion that 'For generations after the Civil War, this pattern of denying death did not fully take root in the South, which preserved ways of dealing with the social crisis of death that reflected the rural predominance, evangelical worldview, environmental constraints, and racial caste features of Southern culture' (269). The contrast between Crocker's and Sparks's sketches of the Southern way of death signals a clear shift in pre- and post-twentieth-century thinking on death.<sup>27</sup> These insights into the denial of death throughout the twentieth-century led Jonathan Dollimore, towards the end of the 1990s, to question conventional wisdom:

Occasionally one wonders if the advocates for the denial-of-death argument are not themselves in denial. They speak about death endlessly yet indirectly, analyzing not death so much as our culture's attitude towards it. To that extent it is not the truth of death but the truth of our culture they seek. But, even as they make death signify in this direct way, it is still death that is compelling them to speak.<sup>28</sup>

Dollimore's stance applies to Faulkner's critics such as Hamblin, Wadlington, and Wilson. Each of these critics remains faithful to the idea of the denial of death both in Faulkner's fiction and in the twentieth-century world. Such scholarly practices reflect and perpetuate the ambivalence and fear that twentieth-century American society held towards death.

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<sup>26</sup> Randy J. Sparks, 'The Southern Way of Death: The Meaning of Death in Antebellum White Evangelical Culture', *Southern Quarterly*, Volume 44, Issue 1 (Fall, 2006): 37.

<sup>27</sup> Recent thanatological studies have further contextualised the denial of death in the twentieth-century and beyond.

In *A Brief History of Death* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), W.M. Spellman notes that 'Today in the developed West death and dying are often kept tidily out of sight, relegated to hospitals, skilled care facilities or nursing homes. Indeed, it is not impossible to go through life without ever encountering a dead body outside the cosmetic setting of a funeral parlour. [...] And funerary practice—burial or cremation—takes place at the periphery of the community, both physically and culturally. Death today is commonly at a distinct remove from life, very nearly clandestine, almost always unwelcome' (7).

Similarly, in *Confronting Death: Values, Institutions, Human Mortality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), David Wendell Moller writes that 'The twentieth-century crystalized a new attitude toward death and dying. In this modern era, dying and death were no longer considered to be important experiences that would absorb the attention and energies of humanity. To the contrary, death and dying became something to be shunned, avoided, denied, and, if possible, conquered' (15). All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), 126.

Scholars such as Hamblin who do not overtly question Faulkner's stance towards his work ultimately reinforce, rather than challenge, cultural fears towards human mortality.

This thesis aims to counteract this critical complicity with Faulkner's authorial intentional and aesthetic endeavour to 'say No to death.' As will be seen, there are instances within Faulkner's best-known works which contradict Wadlington's claim that 'literary immortality is continuous with the No to death that is ongoing life' (23). Instead, as highlighted earlier, this thesis signals a shift from Faulkner's authorial claim of immortality in writing towards an emphasis on the acceptance of and desire for death by some of his characters. The approach this thesis adopts in countering Hamblin's claims is bolstered by the work of Michael Millgate, who argues that there exist "two voices" in Faulkner's fiction. These voices engage in 'a dialogue between despair and hope, suicide and rebirth, negative and positive thinking, resolved in favour of the latter but in terms that leave one wondering whether the defeated voice might not after all have had the better of the argument.'<sup>29</sup> These voices, Millgate claims, demonstrate 'a way of insisting upon the pervasiveness of dialogue, debate, and opposition throughout William Faulkner's work' (69). Ultimately, Millgate says, 'Many of Faulkner's texts are "open" almost in the sense in which one speaks of an open forum or an open debate' (71). In line with Millgate's argument, this thesis will add an alternative voice to a debate within Faulkner studies which is long thought to have ended.

### **I listen to the voices: speech in Faulkner criticism**

Faulkner's rendering of the human voice and of speech acts in his fiction provides the basis for a substantial amount of critical material and occupies a central place in the study of his work. John T. Matthews observes that 'Faulkner's fiction is propelled by a

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Millgate, *Faulkner's Place* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 69. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

commitment to the freely inaugural motions of language. [...] Faulkner displays a preoccupation with the way in which language produces idea, sense, meaning, and personality.<sup>30</sup> More precisely, when describing his authorial method to Malcolm Cowley, Faulkner admitted that “I listen to the voices [...] and when I put down what the voices say, it’s right. Sometimes I don’t like what they say, but I don’t change it.”<sup>31</sup> Shortly before his death, Faulkner declared to Simon Caxton:

I’m a storyteller. I’m telling a story, introducing comic and tragic elements as I like. I’m telling a story – to be repeated and retold. I don’t claim to be truthful. Fiction is fiction – not truth; it’s make believe. Thus I stack and lie at times, all for the purposes of the story – to entertain.

(*Lion in the Garden*, 277)

These statements make clear, as Calvin S. Brown observed decades ago, that Faulkner’s fiction responds to and extends the ‘strong tradition of oral-storytelling in the South of (his) boyhood’<sup>32</sup> and, indeed, as Allen Tate outlines, this tradition ‘presupposes somebody at the other end silently listening.’<sup>33</sup> The creation of fiction was, for Faulkner, the means by which ‘man will not merely endure: he will prevail’, because ‘The poet’s voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.’<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> John T. Matthews, *The Play of Faulkner’s Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 9. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Malcolm Cowley (ed.), *The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories, 1944-1962* (New York: Viking, 1966), 114.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin S. Brown, ‘Faulkner’s Use of the Oral Tradition’, *Georgia Review*, Volume 22, Issue 2 (Summer, 1968): 160.

<sup>33</sup> Allen Tate, ‘A Southern Mode of the Imagination’, in Joseph L. Kwiatt and Mary C. Turpie (eds.), *Studies in American Culture: Dominant Ideas and Images* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960), 100-101.

<sup>34</sup> William Faulkner, ‘Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature’, in James B. Meriwether (ed.), *William Faulkner: Essays, Speeches & Public Letters* (New York: Random House, 2004), 120. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text. In the Nobel Prize speech, Faulkner adapts, as Michaela Bronstein has identified, Joseph Conrad’s essay ‘Henry James: An Appreciation’ (1905): ‘Conrad does not say that man endures, but that ‘consciousness’ does, while man himself and his physical works both perish’ (‘Conrad’s Faulkner’, *Essays in Criticism*, Volume 62, Issue 1 [2012], 93).

Discussing the ‘influence of the Southern oral tradition upon William Faulkner’,

Helen Swink opines that:

The impulse that led Faulkner into patterning some of his fiction upon the forms of Southwestern tales is the same impulse that led him into developing a prose style that seems to create for the reader an illusion of “voice,” *i.e.*, the illusion of an oral storyteller. The pervasiveness of “voice” throughout Faulkner’s fiction – the various devices that he uses to achieve that oral quality – indicate that his style, in fact, is basically rooted in the spoken word. He constantly attempts to recreate in the novelist-reader relationship the experience that exists between storyteller and reader.<sup>35</sup>

From these early considerations of the human voice in relation to storytelling in Southern culture and in Faulkner’s fiction emerges the work of Stephen M. Ross, Donald M. Kartiganer, and Blair Labatt, each of whom provide examples of the best, most successful examinations of this feature of Faulkner’s fiction. Identifying four modes of speech within Faulkner’s writing (phenomenal, mimetic, psychic, and intertextual), Ross posits that:

The South’s oral tradition exerted a profound effect on Faulkner’s storytelling, from his admiration of the literary heritage of Twain and Southwest humour [...] to his development of narrative techniques derived from an oral tradition of gossip, swapping yarns and telling and retelling stories about fellow humans.<sup>36</sup>

With closer attention to Faulkner’s practices, Kartiganer defines the voices in Faulkner’s fiction as ‘the voices of a vast array of characters demanding to be heard; the voices of interpreters inside the action, probing the mysteries and meaning of long-ago reports; the voices of outside narrators, reporting with apparent accuracy the scenes taking places as

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<sup>35</sup> Helen Swink, ‘William Faulkner: The Novelist as Oral Narrator’, *Georgia Review*, Volume 26, Issue 2 (Summer, 1972): 183.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen M. Ross, *Fiction’s Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 3. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text. In *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), Patricia Meyer Spacks outlines Faulkner’s representation of voice similarly to Ross: ‘part of Faulkner’s great myth of the South involves celebration of an oral culture, a set of habits and procedures by which people tell and retell, adding details, modifying interpretations, the happenings of a community conceived as an entity in time. Faulkner’s fiction includes’, Spacks asserts, ‘a fiction of its own making: an interwoven texture of talk’ (242). All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

well as commenting with apparent authority on their significance in value.<sup>37</sup> Discussing Faulkner's authorial function and intention, Labatt asserts that the 'purpose of calling William Faulkner a storyteller is not to suggest that he has an affinity with some sort of primitive and garrulous oral narrative, but rather to recenter the fact that he is a writer interested in the making of stories, a writer to whom stories matter.'<sup>38</sup> The insights of these scholars allows fellow critics and readers to appreciate the significance that Faulkner places on creating oral narratives about Southern society. In addition to writing about the aftermath of the Civil War long after the South's devastating loss, he fictionalises a key historical moment which led to the fracture and death of an entire mode of existence within American culture. In this context, therefore, the rendering of speech in his work evinces a desire to resurrect those voices within his cultural tradition which have long been silenced, voices that are characterised by the South's pro-Confederate, regressively conservative and secessionist ideological outlook.

Given the abundance of narratological explorations of Faulkner's fiction (as seen by the works of Ross and, more recently, Michael Toolan and Katarzyna Nowak<sup>39</sup>), this thesis is not designed to offer a traditionally narratological study. As such, although the thesis is interested in voices, it does not engage in a stylistic analysis of Faulkner's fiction which reads voice along the lines of, for example, order, frequency, tone, and mood, as established by Gérard Genette.<sup>40</sup> Instead, this thesis is concerned with emphasising the numerous ways the characters explored speak about death, focusing on the content of

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<sup>37</sup> Donald M. Kartiganer, "Listening to the Voices": Public and Fictional Language in Faulkner', *Southern Quarterly*, Volume 45, Issue 2 (Winter, 2005): 28.

<sup>38</sup> Blair Labatt, *Faulkner the Storyteller* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 1. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Toolan, *The Stylistics of Fiction: The Literary-Linguistic Approach* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Toolan's work is a narratological examination of language of *Go Down, Moses*. Katarzyna Nowak, *Faulkner's Polyphonic Discourse*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2018. Nowak's thesis explores *As I Lay Dying*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and the Snopes trilogy through a Bakhtinian lens. It is currently embargoed and unavailable for reading.

<sup>40</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, translated by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

these individual stories, novels, and chapters as spoken statements which demand close reading to reveal their meaning and purpose, rather than analysing their stylistic and formal features and qualities. Furthermore, the thesis attempts to show that speaking about death is not limited to the living providing retrospective accounts of the recently deceased (as with the narrator in “A Rose for Emily” or the deputy sheriff in “Pantaloon in Black”). Instead, the thesis also examines what those on the boundary between life and death (for example, Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*) and, indeed, those who have crossed that boundary into death (most notably Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*) have to say about the process, experience, and aftermath of death. The thesis makes the case that, when confronting death as a disturbing, confounding reality, Faulkner’s marginal characters do not merely ‘reduce the complexity of death to simple ideas and images’, as Wilson claims (271). Rather, I argue that Faulkner’s characters often speak with difficulty about death, struggling to conceptualise and comprehend mortality.

In that sense, therefore, the thesis builds upon Ross’s concept of the “psychic” voice, ‘the silent voice of thought heard only in the mind and overheard through fiction’s omniscience’ (132). In particular, it expands Ross’s claim that ‘As a character moves into sleep or death, he or she usually wrestles with some idea or insight that hovers just on the other side of full comprehension, some special awareness that might explain suffering or bring comfort’ (137). From this, Ross concludes that ‘Self-awareness comes most powerfully in Faulkner to those passing from one mental state to another, from wakefulness to oblivion, from life into death. Those in Faulkner who meditate do so at the surface of oblivion, about to fall into its depths’ (139). With these ideas in mind, one of the thesis’s many concerns with voice is the “self-awareness” that characters such as Rider, Quentin Compson, and Wash Jones exhibit as they transition between modes of being and confront their mortality. Despite Faulkner’s claims, and contrary to the critics who

unquestioningly accept his credo of ‘saying No to death’, the characters explored herein do not reject but, rather, accept and ‘say Yes to death’ completely.

### **Refuting Wilson’s ‘decorum of death’ argument**

This thesis also directly contradicts and aims to refute Wilson’s claim that:

If Faulkner graphically portrays death as a highly visible, inevitable, unpleasant occurrence, he still does not succumb to a dark fatalism of death. A major theme in his discussion of death and its relationship to Southern culture is the centrality of a decorum of death: the need for ritual to preserve human continuity in the face of the terrors of death.

(274)

Wilson further defines “decorum” in Faulkner’s fiction as ‘A proper funeral, tombstone, and burial ground’ which, he asserts, ‘are essential for a proper Faulknerian death’ (274). As this thesis will show, Wilson’s claims are wide of the mark: the works discussed here lead one to question how any suggestion of a ‘decorum of death’ can be gleaned from Faulkner’s work. Instead, the violence which abounds in the stories and novels studied herein highlights exactly the opposite: the violence of the community breaking down the door of Emily’s locked room and discovering the decayed corpse of Homer Barron; the sudden death of Mannie and Rider’s resultant rampage and eventual lynching; the misadventures which Quentin experiences on the day of his suicide; the slaying of Thomas Sutpen by Wash Jones after Sutpen dares to dishonour Wash and his female kinfolks; and the defilement and putrescence of Addie’s body – all of these factors render Wilson’s claim of decorousness within Faulkner’s exploration of human mortality highly dubious. Indeed, if there is a sense of decorum within any of these events, it is ultimately disrupted and shown in all of its futility, as signified by the brief moment of peace which follows the barbarity of Rider’s lynching, or the understated burial of Addie, which is immediately disrupted by the frenzy of Darl’s arrest in the Jefferson cemetery. Wilson’s argument here implies that, even as late as the twenty-first-century when his work was published, the



myth of 'saying No to death' in Faulkner's fiction maintains its dominance in Faulkner scholarship. The beautification of Faulkner's fictional corpses and gravesites continues to be performed.

### **Chapter outlines**

The chapters of this thesis are organised in terms of thematic connections, and the works discussed are not considered in their original, sequential publication order. The structure of the thesis instead aims to show how the seemingly binary issues of life and death often intersect with one another in Faulkner's fiction. As Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin argue: "To give a voice to the corpse is [...] to return it to life: the voice represents not so much the dead as the once living, juxtaposed with the needs of the yet living."<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, Chapter One on "A Rose for Emily" is concerned with the implications for the living speaking of and for the dead. The chapter analyses the conflict between the story's two distinct, opposing generations: the new, industrialising, modern South (represented by the story's narrator); and the old, moribund, and decayed antebellum aristocracy (embodied by Emily and her milieu). The chapter argues that the narrator and his community actively attempt to coerce Emily and her defunct generation into accepting their mortality and surrendering to oblivion. In other words, the new generation demands supremacy over the modern space of the South in the decades following the Civil War, vanquishing and burying these fallen monuments of the dead Southern past. During his account of Emily, the narrator attempts to justify why such an erasure must take place, transforming Emily's voice into a dead sound which, nevertheless, still speaks the resistance of her generation.

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<sup>41</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin, 'Introduction', in Bronfen and Goodwin (eds.), *Death and Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 7.

The thesis then shifts focus from the narrator of “A Rose for Emily” to Faulkner’s use of third-person distanced voice in “Pantaloon in Black”, the third story from *Go Down, Moses*. Chapter Two discusses Rider, the story’s grief-stricken, dangerously bereaved African-American protagonist. The chapter begins by exploring the distance which Faulkner places between himself as a white, Southern writer, his white readership, and Rider as a man unable to express his feelings of mourning in his own words. In that respect, the chapter argues that, in this story, Faulkner is reluctant to fully engage in depicting a cultural experience separate to his own (namely death and mourning from an African-American perspective). Instead, both in this story and throughout his career, Faulkner refuses to allow African-Americans to verbalise their bereavements, sentiments, and everyday lived experiences to any meaningful degree. Then, the chapter discusses how Faulkner deliberately establishes a dichotomy between Rider and his relatives by characterising him as a man who is ill-equipped to ‘say No to death.’ Instead, Rider wishes to be reunited with his deceased wife, Mannie, but can only do so by ‘saying Yes to death’. As a result, he murders the white night-watchman Birdsong, which guarantees Rider’s own untimely death by lynching. The chapter ends by discussing the final part of the story, which is partly told from the perspective of a deputy sheriff who provides a racist, wilful misrepresentation of both Rider’s death and African-American experiences of bereavement, grief, and mourning.

From here, the thesis proceeds to the first-person voice of Quentin Compson in Chapter Three. Like Rider, Quentin stands on the threshold between life and death. Unlike Rider, however, Quentin can express an all-encompassing need to die, to ‘say Yes to death’ in his own words. Indeed, Quentin never deviates from his plan to enact, in Charles Chappell’s terms, his ‘ardently desired death.’<sup>42</sup> Focusing on Quentin as he readies himself

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Chappell, ‘Quentin Compson’s scouting expedition on June 2, 1910’, *Essays in Literature*, Volume 22, Issue 1 (1995): 119.

for death by water, the chapter posits that he always speaks of himself as already being dead throughout June Second, 1910. The chapter then highlights that, while Quentin does desire death, he never directly acknowledges his impending suicide because his speech is saturated by Southern society's prejudices towards death by one's own hand.

From the violence and harm which Quentin inflicts upon himself, the thesis then considers the murder of Thomas Sutpen by his poor white farmhand Wash Jones in Chapter Four. This chapter also signals a transition from Quentin's singular voice on the cusp of death to his place among a group of narrative voices speaking about the past and the long-dead Sutpen, bringing the thesis back to the concerns of Chapter One. The chapter examines the relationship between Sutpen and Wash during their twenty-year association; in Quentin's retelling of events, Wash exchanges his grand-daughter, Milly, with Sutpen, in return for recognition for his efforts. However, Sutpen fails to fulfil his obligation to Wash, revoking the conditions of their exchange on the day that Sutpen's daughter with Milly is born. Quentin's narrative implies that, in retaliation, Wash reacts according to the culture of honour in the South, punishing Sutpen for his crime. The chapter concludes by positing that, by committing murder, Wash is also placed (like Rider and Quentin) upon the borderline between life and death. Confronted by the arrival of law enforcement, Wash must 'say Yes to death', rushing towards oblivion with his scythe raised.

Finally, the thesis ends with the voice of Addie Bundren in Chapter Five. Having crossed the threshold between life and death that Emily, Rider, Quentin, and Wash all ultimately traverse, Addie offers a posthumous, first-person account of her life, explaining why her existence was, in effect, a preparation for her inevitable acceptance of mortality. The final chapter, therefore, responds to the arguments in Chapter One (and what the living say about the dead) by exploring what the dead have to say about the living and the concept, purpose, and necessity of dying. The chapter asserts that Addie's sole chapter in

the centre of the novel is her final judgement upon the words of her father and the demands of her family, both of which caused her life to become an unrelenting figuration of death. Addie's request to be buried in Jefferson after her death, therefore, constitutes her revenge upon her husband, Anse. With that idea in mind, the chapter then outlines how each Bundren child, during the journey to Jefferson to bury her, experiences a transformative, life-altering confrontation with mortality.

## Chapter One

### Burying the “fallen monument”: Mortality, social prejudice, and the narrator in “A Rose for Emily”

Anonymous and unnamed, the narrator of “A Rose for Emily” speaks of the recently-deceased Miss Emily Grierson and her life within the community of Jefferson, Mississippi. In line with the community, the narrator places himself in opposition to the definition of the South that Emily and her older, defunct social order adhere to, which refuses to adapt to the demands of modernity and post-bellum society. In part, this chapter builds upon the insights of Thomas Dilworth, who argues that ‘the way the story is told is determined by the narrator’: ‘In the process of telling it, he implies his own and his society’s cultural values, which influence attitudes and behaviour towards Emily in a way that implicates him and the townspeople in her fate.’<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, this chapter examines the narrator as a representative of the community’s ‘next generation, with its more modern ideas.’<sup>44</sup> This chapter thus works in opposition to critics such as Clay Morton, who claims that ‘oral narrative has a special relationship to the past.’<sup>45</sup> Morton writes that because ‘persons from oral cultures do not feel as though they are removed from the past’, ‘what they know of the past is a useful, even vital part of their lives’ (14). This chapter aims to show that the narrator, in contrast to Morton’s views, seeks to systematically erase the values of the Old South as embodied by Emily and the remaining survivors of her milieu. On behalf of his community, the narrator evinces an anxious desire to bury this ‘fallen monument’, effectively coercing the Old South, and Emily herself, into ‘saying Yes to death.’

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas Dilworth, ‘A Romance to Kill for: Homicidal Complicity in Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily”’, *Studies in Short Fiction*, Volume 36, Issue 3 (Summer, 1999): 251. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>44</sup> William Faulkner, “A Rose for Emily”, *Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 1995), 110. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>45</sup> Clay Morton, ““A Rose for Emily”: Oral Plot, Typographic Story”, *Storytelling*, Volume 9, Issue 5.1 (2005): 14. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

“A Rose for Emily” is one of the most frequently discussed stories in Faulkner’s oeuvre, to the extent that Hans S. Skei warns any critic seeking to eke out further interpretations from it that ‘we do not need more—general or specialized—interpretations of this story unless they build on what has already been written.’<sup>46</sup> The story has attracted far-reaching, often contrasting readings from its original publication to the present day. At the outset of the chapter, and in line with Skei’s advice, it would be useful to explore a selection of representative critical opinions on the narrator.

Cleanth Brooks outlines a commonly held view of the narrator: ‘It is evident that the man who tells the story of Miss Emily is consciously speaking for the community, and his story is finally about what Miss Emily’s life and death meant to the community.’<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Ruth Sullivan states that ‘we cannot understand Miss Emily until we have understood the narrator, for he is the medium of consciousness through whom she is filtered.’<sup>48</sup> More importantly, however, Sullivan continues: ‘the narrator is an emotional participant in Miss Emily’s life and therefore cannot be objective’ (160). In short, as Menakhem Perry notes, ‘The narrator of the story is not omniscient, but is one of the narrated “world” – one of the townspeople. Nowhere does this narrator clearly express his own personal feelings towards Emily; he merely serves as their common mouthpiece.’<sup>49</sup> Dilworth upholds these views, arguing that the narrator represents ‘the town of Jefferson and the South in general during the early decades of the twentieth-century’ (251). Likewise, Patricia Thompson Rizzo claims that ‘the use of a plural narrator, which is now a “we”,

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<sup>46</sup> Hans S. Skei, *Reading Faulkner’s Best Short Stories* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 154. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>47</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *On the Prejudices, Predilections, and Firm Beliefs of William Faulkner* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 32. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>48</sup> Ruth Sullivan, ‘The Narrator in “A Rose for Emily”’, *Journal of Narrative Technique*, Volume 1, Issue 3 (September, 1971): 160. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>49</sup> Menakhem Perry, ‘Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates Its Meanings (With an analysis of Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily”’, *Poetics Today*, Volume 1, Issues 1 and 2 (Autumn, 1978): 336. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

but turns at times into a “they” is, of course, a kind of communal, choral voice for the whole town.<sup>50</sup> In this chapter, the approach taken toward the narrator corresponds to this consensus, but makes the additional case that the narrator’s rhetoric is deliberately primed towards dismantling and burying Emily.

Helen E. Nebeker’s account of the community the narrator represents is useful here: ‘we have ambiguously but definably presented before us three groups – the general townspeople of the inclusive *our*; the *they* of a contemporary society functioning when Miss Emily was in her late fifties or early sixties and to whom she refused to pay taxes; and the *they* of the earlier group.’<sup>51</sup> Nebeker’s insight helps readers understand not only that the community has changed over time, but also that the contemporary community’s animosity towards Emily does not begin with the narrator, nor is it exclusively attributable to him. Instead, the narrator’s account of Emily emerges from hostilities which have existed between Emily and the community for decades. The conflict that Emily is involved in with the community results from a clash of ideological outlook between a bureaucratic, industrialising modern society and the bygone era of the slave-holding, Southern aristocracy. As Paul A. Harris recognises, “The conflicts between the townspeople and Emily Grierson are themselves only signs of a deeper incommensurability between the orders constituted by the narrative voice and Emily.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, the fact that the narrator tells the story only after Emily’s death demonstrates the extent to which modern society within this text desires to have the final, definitive word on Emily and the events of her life. By doing so, the narrator advocates the necessity of the South’s modernisation on the

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<sup>50</sup> Patricia Thompson Rizzo, ‘Free Indirect Discourse vs Interior Monologue: “A Rose for Emily” and *As I Lay Dying*’, in Rosella Mamoli Zorzi and Pia Masiero Marcolin (eds.), *Faulkner in Venice* (Venice: Marsilio, 2000), 283. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>51</sup> Helen E. Nebeker, ‘Emily’s Rose of Love: Thematic Implications of Point of View in Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily”’, *Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association*, Volume 24, Issue 1 (March, 1970): 4. Italics Nebeker’s.

<sup>52</sup> Paul A. Harris, ‘In Search of Dead Time: Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily”’, *Kronoscope*, Volume 7 (2007): 172. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

one hand and the virtue of condemning Emily and her anachronistic social order to oblivion on the other.

The case this chapter makes against the narrator is in the critical lineage of Jean O'Bryan-Knight and Stephen L. Sniderman. O'Bryan-Knight argues that:

We can learn as much about the narrator from what he reports as from what he does not report. For example, it is telling that the narrator never expresses remorse for the way in which the town watched and whispered about Miss Emily. We can infer from the silence on this point that the narrator feels confidence that he enjoys the support of the community and that, as a group, they have nothing to regret or hide.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, Sniderman compares the narrator to a tabloid journalist who exposes Emily's 'frailties and peccadillos [...] before the world for the entertainment of the masses': 'Worst of all, her vilest sins are never named outright, so no one can begin to defend her against the unspoken charges of incest, fornication, murder, necrophilia, and cannibalism.'<sup>54</sup> Like O'Bryan-Knight and Sniderman, this chapter makes much of the threat and menace that the narrator and his community exhibit towards Emily as they try to control and censure her behaviour. O'Bryan-Knight and Sniderman are useful to work alongside because they reveal the mechanics behind the narrator's speech, exposing the fact that the narrator and his community attempted to force Emily and her generation to accept their demise. The chapter will aim, by its end, to reach a balanced, nuanced conclusion, which recognises that the narrator and Emily are both insistent upon ensuring that their wildly different conceptions of the South achieve supremacy.

The chapter accordingly rejects the claims of Joseph M. Garrison, Jr., Issac Rodman, and Renee R. Curry as misreadings of the story. Garrison states that the narrator

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<sup>53</sup> Jean O'Bryan-Knight, 'From Spinster to Eunuch: William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and Mario Vargas Llosa's *Los Cachorros*', *Comparative Literature Studies*, Volume 34, Issue 4 (1997): 338. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen L. Sniderman, 'The Tabloidization of Emily', *Journal X*, Volume 6, Issue 1 (Spring, 2002): 194. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text. This chapter does not adopt Sniderman's view that the narrator's rhetoric resembles tabloid journalism.



‘seems to grant himself a special status, promising that he is not susceptible to the formal, personally disinterested, or merely curious impulses of his contemporaries.’<sup>55</sup> Likewise, Rodman claims that the narrator is ‘as isolated as Emily herself’ because ‘the narrator, while part of the town and speaking for the town, has distanced himself from the town and retains for himself the sanity and the loneliness of the literary perspective.’<sup>56</sup> Finally, Curry states, when discussing the story’s first section, ‘We do not know immediately whether this narrator feels affection toward or turns a curious eye on Miss Emily and the funeral events, and these options provide the engendered distinctions by Faulkner at the beginning of the tale.’<sup>57</sup> In opposition to these readings, this chapter argues that the narrator’s account has a large bearing on how Emily is perceived by the reader and how the events of her life are relayed. As regards Curry’s argument specifically, this chapter seeks to prove that Faulkner’s narrator feels nothing but animus towards Emily during the years they reckoned with her. In addition, the narrator only recounts these events after having listened to and absorbed the cacophony of different voices within the town, and indeed repeats the hostility of the community.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, this chapter builds upon and questions the insights of Charlton D. McIlwain. McIlwain notes that, during a funeral:

The authority to speak on behalf of an individual who has passed away conveys a great deal of information about the type of relationship that existed between the speaker and the deceased. First, this ability confers power on whoever is speaking, as the language appears to be derived from that of the deceased. Second, it acknowledges the high status of

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<sup>55</sup> Joseph M. Garrison, Jr., “Bought Flowers” in “A Rose for Emily”, *Studies in Short Fiction*, Volume 16, Issue 4 (Fall, 1979): 341.

<sup>56</sup> Isaac Rodman, ‘Irony and Isolation: Narrative Discourse in Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily”’, *Faulkner Journal*, Volume 1, Issue 3 (Spring, 1993): 4.

<sup>57</sup> Renee R. Curry, ‘Gender and Authorial Limitation in Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily”’, *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 47, Issue 3 (Summer, 1994): 393. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>58</sup> Faulkner developed this communal perspective throughout his career, most notably in *The Town* (1957). As he tells the story, Chick Mallison reveals that ‘when I say “we” and “we thought” what I mean is Jefferson and what Jefferson thought’ (New York: Vintage, 1999), 3. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

the chosen speaker, and third, it signals a sharing of the orator's perspective of the deceased. In such a situation, it is as if the wishes of a departed loved one are being expressed through the honored relative's statements.<sup>59</sup>

McIlwain's analysis of funeral oratory here allows readers of Faulkner's narrator to question what precisely gives the narrator the authority to tell Emily's story after her death. Though the narrator initially appears to honour and venerate Emily, he incriminates himself and his community the more he tells of her life. Indeed, though the narrator does have the power to speak about Emily, it becomes increasingly apparent that this power has not been bestowed upon him by Emily herself but, rather, by the community. In other words, when speaking about Emily, the narrator gives voice to the community's judgement on how she lived her life. On the other hand, Emily's behaviour during her life indicates that, regardless of the stories the narrator tells about her after her death to keep her memory alive, she refuses to succumb to their manipulative silencing. Emily's resistance is demonstrated instead through her active withdrawal from society and, more importantly, her macabre conduct with her Northern suitor, Homer Barron.

### **A fallen monument**

In recalling Emily's life, along with her fraught relations with the community, the anonymous narrator begins his story by establishing her recent death. 'When Miss Emily Grierson died', the narrator says, from a retrospective vantage point, 'our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house' (109).<sup>60</sup> Immediately highlighting Emily's demise, the narrator signals what will become a key factor within both the story and this chapter's analysis of it – the narrator utilises Emily's death to their

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<sup>59</sup> Charlton D. McIlwain, *Death in Black and White: Death, Ritual, and Family Ecology* (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2003), 62. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>60</sup> The opening sentence of the story makes clear the maleness of the narrator, and therefore justifies the present chapter's decision to refer to the narrator as 'he' throughout.

advantage. He relates the events of her life with neither respect nor affection, but instead speaks about her in a manner that suits his social prejudices towards members of the Old South and its aristocracy. Juxtaposing the singularity of Emily's death to 'our' collective 'whole town', the narrator foreshadows the sense of division and separateness that inflected Emily's relationship with the community throughout her life, intimating that she refused to be assimilated into their overarching culture. The narrator actively engages in combative rhetoric against Emily throughout his story in order to manipulate the reader. At the same time, this manifest attempt at manipulation serves to warn the reader of the narrator's unreliability. As Richard Walsh states: 'In "unreliable narration" the narrator's account is at odds with the implied reader's surmises about the story's real intentions. The story undermines the discourse.'<sup>61</sup> However, at the story's opening, death has already conquered Emily: she has become a 'fallen' monument. As McIlwain writes, 'The deceased do not usually leave verbal, or even written, instructions regarding what will be said at his or her funeral. Thus, regarding the thoughts and wishes of the deceased, people accept, without question, the chosen speaker's statements and believe them to be accurate and true' (62). With McIlwain's point in mind, one could argue that, by using this anonymous, unreliable narrative voice, Faulkner urges readers to interrogate the narrator's claims about Emily and consider the posthumous representations of the deceased created by the biased, socially prejudiced views of the living.

Juxtaposing the 'respectful affection' of the men to the 'curiosity' of the women, the narrator implies that Emily, both in life and after death, was objectified by the community as a 'monument.' The image of the monument, according to Perry, 'suggests something elevated, important, a testimony to the memory of something of major significance, a kind of lasting symbol, fixed, massive, commanding respect' (312). Emily is

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<sup>61</sup> Richard Walsh, 'Who Is the Narrator?', *Poetics Today*, Volume 18, Issue 4 (Winter, 1997): 293.

seen as a reminder of the South's earlier social goals, an approach which intensifies when Emily later openly rejects this categorisation of herself. At the same time, this opening sentence intimates to the reader that the community's insistence upon attending Emily's funeral is an entirely self-serving exercise. As a result, the narrator's deliberate usage of the image of the 'fallen monument' highlights his and his community's ideological standpoint: Emily is a figure that must be eulogised, buried, and spoken of thereafter in terms antithetical to how she was considered during her life.

The falsity of the narrator's view is also suggested by the community's use of Emily's funeral as a pretext to access 'the inside of her house.' The duplicity within both the narrator's discourse and the behaviour of the community is underlined by the fact that the house has been closed to them 'for at least ten years' (109). This utterance must be treated as suspicious because it establishes the intrusive fixation that the community developed for Emily throughout her life. She has long been an object of their collective gaze and discussion, to such an extent that they are instinctively aware that she harbours secrets she will not divulge. The narrator and his community responds to Emily's willed reclusiveness by actively seeking to invade her privacy, using her death to unlock and reveal information she has long kept hidden. As Richard Gray writes, 'In Faulkner's narratives [...] character is irrevocably private and yet implicated in history, a complex set of *social* relations. Each of Faulkner's texts, in these respects, enacts his special notion of "privacy," as a mode or activity of simultaneous disclosure and concealment.'<sup>62</sup> The narrator's unreliability can be perceived from the opening moments of the story: dead and buried, Emily cannot rebut any of the claims the narrator retails on behalf of his community as he recollects her life. As Harris argues, Emily's 'death is the necessary condition for it to be

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<sup>62</sup> Richard Gray, 'On Privacy: William Faulkner and the Human Subject', in Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie (eds.), *Faulkner and Ideology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 56. *Italics* Gray's. See also Faulkner's essay "On Privacy—The American Dream: What Happened to It?" in Meriwether (ed.), *William Faulkner: Essays, Speeches & Public Letters*, 62-75.

possible to tell the story' (174). As I will show, the narrator works towards delivering a final, devastating blow to Emily, her reputation and standing within the town, and her defunct social order. At the same time, the narrator strives to ensure that his recollection of her life becomes the definitive, communally accepted version of events.<sup>63</sup>

The narrator's disdain for Emily is further emphasised through the description of her house, which, Timothy O'Brien claims, implies 'an inevitable fall, a succumbing to decay, ordinariness, and the gravity of human mortality and desire.'<sup>64</sup> Like its occupant, the house has succumbed to old age, and has become vulnerable to scrutiny and criticism by those with more modern sensibilities, like the narrator: 'It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street' (109). The narrator uses the phrase 'had once been' twice here as a self-conscious refrain to suggest that the house, the surrounding area, and, in turn, Emily, all now suffer a diminished sense of glory. The 'once white' house is now rotting in full view of the community and is slowly being confronted by its own deathliness by the narrator. The narrator draws the reader's attention to the house's physical attributes in order to further his combative strategy, highlighting that what was once pure ('white'), beautiful (the 'cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies'), and exclusive (the house being situated on 'what had once been our most select street') has now lost its claim to majesty. Indeed, the

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<sup>63</sup> In her documentary on Russian iconoclasm under communism, Laura Mulvey argues that 'Monuments are built as a bond with our past, and destroyed at times of cataclysm. Then new monuments are raised. This process is very much like judgement day – pulling down old idols and raising up new ones. Having human idols has only served to make this connection stronger. Every turning point in our society has begun its new history in a struggle with old monuments. This was a struggle with the past, which was realized primarily in a struggle with monuments' (in Laura Mulvey and Mark Lewis [dirs.], "Disgraced Monuments", Channel Four/Global Image, 1994, 36:26-37:13). In that sense, therefore, by destroying Emily's position within Jefferson, the narrator works to transform his version of events into a monument in itself, which is erected after the New South's struggle with the Old South ends.

<sup>64</sup> Timothy O'Brien, 'Who Arose for Emily?', *Faulkner Journal*, Volume 29, Issue 1 (Spring, 2015): 103. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

house is now deliberately spoken of as a relic after years of being the epitome of aristocratic antebellum architecture. In the narrator's view, both the house and its occupant evince a jarring discontinuity with the rest of modern society.

The narrator immediately reinforces his advocacy of Emily's erasure by noting that modernity, as signified by 'garages and cotton gins', has 'encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores' (109). The relation between the narrator and these technological advancements suggests that they both represent an element within postbellum society that is in conflict with the outmoded, antebellum past. As the narrator frames it, the erasure of the Old South is inevitable, especially given the rise of these technological fixtures; at the same time, in a textual double-voicing, these same features reveal the mechanical emptiness of the modern age. However, the narrator does not question the violence within this erasure, as he himself works to 'obliterate' Emily and the position she occupies. Modern society, therefore, reclaims and colonises the physical space of the South in order to affect change within this moribund society and allow the development of a new South, although that new South is itself questioned by Faulkner's narrative. These issues directly relate to the South's defeat in the Civil War, a topic at the centre of the long critical history of both Faulkner's work in general and this story in particular. This is best exemplified by Douglas T. Miller's mid-twentieth-century view that 'With the war and defeat a new South emerged, dominated by the amoral or naturalistic forces of modernism, typified by the Northern carpetbaggers and the Southern scalawags.'<sup>65</sup> From the narrator's perspective, however, the obliteration of Southern tradition is only opposed by those members of an aristocratic, conservative social milieu such as Emily, Colonel Sartoris, and Judge Stevens (as will be

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<sup>65</sup> Douglas T. Miller, 'Faulkner and the Civil War: Myth and Reality', *American Quarterly*, Volume 15, Issue 2.1 (Summer, 1963): 204.

discussed shortly). The emergence of modernity demands, from the narrator's point of view, that the Old South 'say Yes to death.' Nonetheless, even in her state of 'decay', Emily remains resilient. She evinces an ability to resist modernity's unrelenting attack on what it perceives as antithetical to modern values, in order to counteract modern society's encroachment for as long as she can.

Emily's initial refusal to accept death leads to the narrator adopting a combative, verbal stance and cruelly dismissing the house as 'an eyesore among eyesores', an utterance that completely dismantles the house's formerly glorious representation. The narrator's view here actualises Faulkner's ambivalences towards the encroachment of modernity upon the South, a region that Faulkner once claimed was 'old as dead [...] killed by the Civil War.'<sup>66</sup> Faulkner maintained that "There is a thing known whimsically as the New South to be sure, but it is not the South' (411). Instead, Faulkner asserted that the New South is 'a land of immigrants who are rebuilding the towns and cities into replicas of towns and cities in Kansas and Iowa and Illinois, with skyscrapers and striped canvas awnings instead of wooden balconies' (411). If one reads Faulkner's statements here alongside what Wayne C. Booth terms as a "dramatized" narrator, who is 'often radically different from the implied author who creates' them,<sup>67</sup> one could argue that the anonymous voice within in "A Rose for Emily" does not represent Faulkner's own views on the New South or its proliferation of modernity. While Faulkner might be seen to lament the passing of the Old South through the figure of Emily, he adopts the voice of the narrator to dramatize his ambivalence towards the generational conflicts and tensions within the South at the beginning of the twentieth-century, depicting two generations in intense conflict with each other.

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<sup>66</sup> William Faulkner, 'An Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*', *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 26, Issue 3 (Summer, 1973): 410-411. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>67</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 152.

Matching Emily's refusal to acquiesce to their demands, the narrator and his community refuse to consider Emily 'a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town' (109). Instead, the narrator exposes the falsity of this tradition, which began 'in 1894 when Colonel Sartoris, the mayor [...] remitted her taxes, the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity' (109-110).<sup>68</sup> Because Emily was connected to those at the core of Jefferson's earlier political power structure (who, through their 'edicts', insist upon living 'on into perpetuity'), the narrator perceives her as operating unjustifiably at an elevated level of privilege, living with the everlasting, undying support of men like Sartoris. The narrator's animosity is manifested further through their claim that:

Sartoris invented an involved tale to the effect that Miss Emily's father had loaned money to the town, which the town, as a matter of business, preferred this way of repaying. Only a man of Colonel Sartoris' generation and thought could have invented it, and only a woman could have believed it.

(110)<sup>69</sup>

Here, the narrator becomes a conduit for the community's resentment towards the lies perpetuated by Emily and her social order. The narrator's utterances render Emily's position in the town as a false one built upon a hollow foundation. In this version of events, Sartoris becomes a figure wholly unworthy of respect and admiration. Instead, he is as much a figure of derision as Emily is. His grandiose display of power and influence leads him to become, as Ulf Kirchdorfer writes, 'a stalwart contributor to ineffective legislation and economic irresponsibility', to the extent that the narrator's conception of

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<sup>68</sup> Another example of Sartoris's edicts against modernity appears in *The Town*. Chick recalls that, during the coming of the automobile into Yoknapatawpha, 'Sartoris appeared in person before the next meeting of the board of aldermen, who passed an edict that no gasoline-propelled vehicle should ever operate on the streets of Jefferson' (12).

<sup>69</sup> The narrator's comment here points towards the division in the community's perception of Emily across gender lines. The story as a whole can therefore be read as a patriarchal, prejudicial account of a woman who refuses to fulfil the role of 'Southern Belle' which has been assigned to her.



him effectively displays ‘a comical and disrespectful attitude towards figures of authority.’<sup>70</sup> The treatment of Emily and Sartoris here signals the disparity between the different generations within this story from the narrator’s perspective. As evidenced by Sartoris’s elaborate tale, the older generation fabricated falsehoods to enforce their own agenda, ensuring that the edicts of the Old South survived. The new, modern generation, by contrast, works towards revealing the elder generation’s hypocrisy and false morality. The deaths of both Emily and Sartoris allow the narrator the luxury of speaking about the past and the deceased in a hostile manner conducive to his own socio-cultural agenda.<sup>71</sup> Yet, as will be addressed shortly, the narrator never fully acknowledges that the Old South, as embodied by Emily, is acutely aware of its own inevitable deathliness, of the ‘decay’ that has set in, but that it refuses to acquiesce to death through coercive means.

### **A body submerged in water**

From the narrator’s (metaphorical) attempt to bury both the Old South and Emily’s reputation following her death emerge the literal symbols of the Old South’s destruction, embodied by the modern generation. These citizens have not only been established as ‘mayors and aldermen’, but also express ‘some little dissatisfaction’ regarding Sartoris’s arrangement regarding Emily’s taxes (110). The introduction of these modern bureaucrats into the story provides pertinent examples of the narrator’s combative strategy being deployed.

Following the new generation’s ascension to power, the narrator mentions that ‘on the first of the year they mailed (Emily) a tax notice. February came, and there was no

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<sup>70</sup> Ulf Kirchdorfer, ‘Weak Men in William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily”’, *Explicator*, Volume 75, Issue 1 (2017): 145. Following on from Kirchdorfer, the narrator’s reference to Emily’s ‘belief’ in Sartoris’s ‘involved tale’ can be read as his humorous mockery of both Sartoris’s chivalrous, genteel response to Emily’s destitution, and Emily’s own desperate clinging to these outmoded ways of thinking, especially since, as the narrator acknowledges, ‘Miss Emily would not have accepted charity’ (110).

<sup>71</sup> The narrator’s strategy contrasts markedly to the nostalgic view of the South in *Flags in the Dust*, a novel that, ironically, depicts the struggles of the Sartorises following the Great War.

reply' (110). 'The new generation refuses to engage with Emily in a manner she is accustomed to, writing instead 'a formal letter, asking her to call at the sheriff's office at her convenience' (110). Emily responds by sending 'a note on paper of an archaic shape, in a thin, flowing calligraphy in faded ink, to the effect that she no longer went out at all. The tax notice was also enclosed, without comment' (110). Almost immediately, the new generation attempts to correct Emily's dismissive behaviour. Unlike Sartoris, they engage with her on formal, legal grounds, implying that they have established a new, impersonal language with which to operate within the town. This approach treats all citizens equally, with neither preference nor bias, and which stands in marked contrast to the social codes and hierarchies of the Old South. On the other hand, their repeated attempts to correspond with Emily could be seen as their forcing communication with her, to remind her that, despite her self-imposed social isolation, the community will make their presence known to her, even at the expense of disrespecting her privacy.

Indeed, Emily's resistance is manifested further after 'a special meeting of the Board of Aldermen.' Following this meeting, 'A deputation waited upon her, knocked at the door through which no visitor had passed since she ceased giving china-painting lessons eight or ten years earlier' (110). The narrator describes that, within her 'parlor [...] heavy, leather-covered furniture' is revealed to be 'cracked', emitting 'a faint dust' (110). Both Emily and her house no longer match the grandeur of the bygone, slave-holding past. Instead, given the narrator's description, they are effectively dying from the inside out, existing in the presence of death. The images the narrator evokes of Emily's parlour implies a sense of bewilderment on the community's part, as he considers Emily to be emblematic of a defunct, outmoded South which is caught between two forces of history – the lost antebellum past and the industrialising present day. These images also suggest that Emily is aware of her own mortality, and is beginning to accept and 'say Yes to death.' In contrast to the remainder of this thesis, where figures such as Rider, Quentin, or Wash 'say Yes to

death' as a suicidal gesture, in this story, Emily's resignation to her own mortality is a gradual process that is marked by various forms of external coercion. Where the tensions between the Old South and the new generation are concerned, Aubrey Binder's argument is instructive: 'Although the town and its politics have changed considerably since the death of Colonel Sartoris and with the passage of time, the visit with Emily uncovers reminders of a past generation.'<sup>72</sup> Binder recontextualises Emily's resistance to the demands of the modern generation as 'a strong though "tarnished" reminder of Southern class distinction' (7). The copious amounts of dust in Emily's parlour implies that the house, the memories of the antebellum South that it evokes, and, of course, Emily herself are all deathly reminders to the new generation of her era's own inevitable mortality even as she insists on the codes of that Old South. At the same time, her continued survival (and silent insistence on those codes) disturbs their sense of orderliness and decorum.<sup>73</sup>

When the narrator introduces Emily to the reader directly (during the deputation's visit), it is a key moment which exemplifies the modern generation's conception of her: 'They rose when she entered—a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head' (111). Both the deputation and the readers are confronted by a woman who emerges from the depths of her house as a failed, fragile signifier of the long dead Southern past, which has been discarded and buried. Rather than treating her as 'a tradition, a duty, and a care', however, both the narrator and his community see Emily as 'tarnished' and 'cracked.' The narrator deliberately uses unflattering descriptions

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<sup>72</sup> Aubrey Binder, 'Uncovering the Past: The Role of Dust Imagery in "A Rose for Emily"', *Explicator*, Volume 70, Issue 1 (2012): 6-7. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>73</sup> In that respect, Emily resembles Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861). For more on this connection between Faulkner and Dickens, see Maryhelen C. Harmon, 'Old Maids and Old Mansions: The Barren Sisters of Hawthorne, Dickens, and Faulkner', in Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker (eds.), *Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective* (Westport: Praeger, 1999), 103-114.

(specifically the details of her being ‘small’ and ‘fat’) in a barely concealed exhibition of his contempt for her. The emphasis given to her chain and ebony cane suggests that, as far as the narrator’s perception of her is concerned, Emily’s attempt to project an aristocratic image is largely a futile endeavour. Instead, her presence here points towards a vain self-preservation ritual performed for her own benefit, rather than for the deputation. Emily’s chain in particular relates, as Thomas Robert Argiro outlines, to her being ‘both chained to the past, as well as within her own time.’<sup>74</sup> This moment also represents an encounter between two distinct cultures that, at times, must feign societal appeasement towards one another to further their own agendas and self-interests.

Images of deathliness abound in the narrator’s description of Emily during the deputation’s visit, showing her performance of Southern female gender roles to ultimately be futile, monstrous, and grotesque. The narrator reveals that:

She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and that of the pallid hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough as they moved from one face to another while the visitors stated their errand.  
(111)

The narrator employs these images with the express intention of presenting Emily as an alienating figure, who actively inspires disgust and revulsion within her visitors and, by extension, the readers. The narrator’s approach here contradicts Dilworth’s claim that the narrator ‘and his society idealize Southern womanhood as part of a general idealization of antebellum society’ (253), an idealisation which, as Elizabeth M. Kerr writes, was ‘rooted in the social system of the South and in the cultural trends of the nineteenth century.’<sup>75</sup> Instead, as this chapter is attempting to demonstrate, the description of Emily’s body

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas Robert Argiro, ‘Miss Emily After Dark’, *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 64, Issues 3 and 4 (Summer and Fall, 2011): 460. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>75</sup> Elizabeth M. Kerr, ‘William Faulkner and the Southern Concept of Woman’, *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 15, Issue 1 (Winter, 1961): 2.

shows, in microcosm, that the narrator and his modern generation despise and are repulsed by, rather than idealise and are attracted to, the antebellum South. The narrator expresses the deeply unsettling feeling Emily's appearance evokes within the community, reinforcing the need to come to terms with and vanquish the past for their own peace of mind. This argument is closely aligned to Dieter Miendl's claim that Emily is 'limned as a grotesque death-in-life figure, a quaint, persistent heirloom out of the twilight of the nineteenth century.'<sup>76</sup> Miendl's reading leads to my argument that it is specifically certain elements of the narrator's speech that present Emily as an example of the grotesque. As defined by Alan Spiegel, the grotesque 'always appears in Southern fiction as either a physically or mentally deformed figure.'<sup>77</sup> To Spiegel, the grotesque represents 'the absolute and incontrovertible close of the old order' (431). This is particularly relevant to Emily, as are Spiegel's subsequent comments that 'Whether he represents the death of the old order or the aberrations of the new, the grotesque is always a thorn in the side of the society that produces him' (431). Seen in the context of Miendl's and Spiegel's comments, the narrator's rendering of Emily here shows the extent to which she has fallen from her status as one of the 'high and mighty Griersons' (112). Her familial lineage, coupled with her relation to the figures of high socio-political power in the previous generation, no longer signifies anything. Instead, the narrator presents her as being, in Edmond L. Volpe's terms, an 'embodiment of the dead past.'<sup>78</sup>

When Emily is first heard speaking, engaging in one-sided dialogue with the deputation, the narrator's representation of her voice indicates that it is a voice which adamantly refuses to surrender to her visitors' demands. Speaking with great power and

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<sup>76</sup> Dieter Miendl, *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 145. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>77</sup> Alan Spiegel, 'A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction', *Georgia Review*, Volume 26, Issue 4 (Winter, 1972): 428. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>78</sup> Edmond L. Volpe, *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner: The Short Stories* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 99.

menace, her exchange with the spokesman signifies that she is capable of rejecting the pressures that the new generation apply to her to be a compliant, obedient member of the community:

Her voice was cold and dry. "I have no taxes in Jefferson. Colonel Sartoris explained it to me. Perhaps one of you can gain access to the city records and satisfy yourselves."

"But we have. We are the city authorities, Miss Emily. Didn't you get a notice from the sheriff, signed by him?"

"I received a paper, yes," Miss Emily said. "Perhaps he considers himself the sheriff [...] I have no taxes in Jefferson."

"But there is nothing on the books to show that, you see. We must go by—"

"See Colonel Sartoris. I have no taxes in Jefferson."

"But Miss Emily—"

"See Colonel Sartoris." (Colonel Sartoris had been dead almost ten years.)

(111)

In contrast to the spokesman's 'stumbling halt' (111), Emily's voice exhibits no fear or dread but, instead, defends her position with authority. As such, her voice shows no signs of malleability, despite having to live among the (equally hostile) new social order. Instead, Emily's voice is rigid and intractable, vocalising vehement opposition to the deputation and inspiring dread and terror within them. Her voice is, literally, a voice from the past. As Perry recognises, Emily 'belongs to (Sartoris's) world, she too has the same mental characteristic of his generation' (318). Emily stands in marked contrast to the 'city authorities', whom she perceives as having no rightful claim to the power they wish to wield over her.

'Vanquishing' the deputation, 'just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell' (111), the narrator intimates that the hostilities between Emily and the deputation are part of an ongoing, bitterly fought battle which spans generations and that does not begin with the narrator nor the events he is relating. The abrupt mention of the smell leads to the subsequent information that the odour emerged 'two years after her

father's death and a short time after her sweetheart—the one we believed would marry her—had deserted her' (111-112). As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Sniderman argues that details within the narrator's speech, such as the smell, are symptomatic of the fact that the narrator 'employs the smallest possible number of incriminating facts' (177) to implicate Emily in the murder of her 'sweetheart', Homer Barron. Sniderman's view follows on from Perry, who characterises 'a technique recurring in the story: information that depreciates the value of Emily is introduced into a context that specifically subordinates it to her aristocratic pride' (317). In itself, the mention of the smell is visceral, sensory, and alarming, arguably a by-product of a long rotting house; the presence of the smell further indicates that Emily has lived an ignominious, wasted life, thoroughly undeserving of the status of an idol.

As with the dust in her parlour, the smell is part of an intricate array of symbols and details that the narrator deploys to associate Emily with deathliness and decay. These images are informed by the overriding influence of the Gothic on Faulkner's work. In the Southern Gothic, David Punter writes, 'the worlds portrayed are ones infested with psychic and social decay, and coloured by the heightened hues of putrescence.'<sup>79</sup> Moreover, as Charles L. Crow notes, 'Gothicism records our disgust or rejection of a fallen, haunted, cursed or diseased world that we know should be something else.'<sup>80</sup> The revelation of the smell raised the community's suspicions towards Emily thirty years before she ejects the deputation, and intimates to the reader the possibility of murderous foul play towards Homer.<sup>81</sup> As far as the narrator's version of events is concerned, Emily is a volatile person with a history of attracting the community's suspicion – if not anger. These aspects of

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<sup>79</sup> David Punter, *The Literature of Terror* (London: Routledge, 2013), 2-3.

<sup>80</sup> Charles L. Crow, *American Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), 9.

<sup>81</sup> Dilworth observes that 'About the force and duration of the odour, which would be extremely incriminating, the narrator says nothing. The murder occurred in 1896, when wakes were held in private homes and bodies were not embalmed. People were more familiar then with the smell of putrefaction and the length of time it took for corpses [...] to rot' (256).

Emily's actions reconfigure the narrator's behaviour (albeit very conveniently on his part), challenging the negative opinion that one is inclined to have of him and which this chapter advocates. As a result, the view that one has of Emily shifts from her as a victim of social prejudice to one who rightly attracts suspicion. These disparate, contentious elements within Emily's life lead the narrator to feel that his misgivings towards her are justified; he has a moral duty to his community to speak of her in these terms after her death, which bolsters his claim that she is a 'fallen monument.'

To add further credence to his suspicion of Emily, the narrator compiles a contrasting chorus of voices within the community. These voices not only do not reveal any concrete facts about Emily, but instead inadvertently expose the various biases and prejudices of the people who speculate and gossip about her.<sup>82</sup> Their gossip suggests that if the narrator is the communal voice, his voice is also split. Indeed, Faulkner's method points towards an alternative way of reading the story which does not place Emily as its central focus. Instead, the narrator and the townspeople can be seen as Faulkner's main concern; in that context, the story becomes an examination of the lengths that a particular community will go to in order to demonise a person. As Cleanth Brooks highlights while discussing *Light in August* (1932), these 'persons are not simply a collection of disparate individuals, often at odds with each other. In their attitudes and judgements they tend to act as one body' (37), a view also applicable to "A Rose for Emily." Revealing that 'the only sign of life about the place was the Negro man', Tobe, Emily's 'old man-servant', the narrator presents the chorus of voices thus:

"Just as if a man—any man—could keep a kitchen properly," the ladies said; so they were not surprised when the smell developed. [...]

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<sup>82</sup> In *Conrad, Language, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Michael Greaney makes a point about the nature of gossip which illuminates Faulkner's depiction of gossip in this story: 'gossip [...] is a dangerous supplement to authentic language, a groundless, parasitic discourse, propagating itself freely in the absence of an originating Voice' (27). 'Gossip', Greaney continues, 'has a supervisory function, creating a vigilant neighbourhood of potential narrators on the watch for the slightest impropriety that might threaten the stability of the "us" group' (28).



A neighbour, a woman, complained to the mayor, Judge Stevens, eighty years old.

“But what will you have me do about it, madam?” he said.

“Why, send her word to stop it,” the woman said. “Isn’t there a law?” [...]

The next day he received two more complaints, one from a man who came in diffident deprecation. “We really must do something about it, Judge. I’ll be the last one in the world to bother Miss Emily, but we’ve got to do something.”

(112)

Contrary to the ‘high and mighty’ self-perceptions of Emily and the Griersons, the smell reveals that Emily has always been part of the ‘gross, teeming world’ that the narrator and these voices inhabit. Though this opinion of the Griersons has never been directly acknowledged, it is revealed with the fullness of time and the exposure of the South to modernity. Through the narrator’s depiction of them, the prejudices inherent within the Griersons’ perception of the world are now cast back upon themselves. Yet Judge Stevens, who is accused of sharing the same worldview as the Griersons, cannot acknowledge or corroborate the truth of the smell: “It’s probably just a rat that nigger of hers killed in the yard. I’ll speak to him about it” (112). Because of his kinship with the Griersons, Stevens is framed as defending Emily against these accusations. From the narrator’s point-of-view, Stevens’s age and willingness to excuse Emily both defines him and negatively implicates him, providing yet another instance of the previous generation refusing to acknowledge their own inadequacies and failings. In retaliation, the narrator portrays Stevens as an ineffectual man who, ironically, cannot accurately judge the situation. In marked contrast to Stevens’s approach, the narrator refuses to remain silent. Instead, with the knowledge of Emily’s crime as yet a secret, he works to expose the insidious prejudice that Stevens exhibits by upholding the virtue of Southern womanhood by any means necessary.

Mirroring the narrator’s refusal to remain silent is the callousness of the ‘younger man’ present during a meeting with ‘the Board of Aldermen’, a meeting presided over by

‘three graybeards’: “‘It’s simple enough,” he said. “Send her word to have her place cleaned up. Give her a certain time to do it in, and if she don’t...” (112). Speaking directly and succinctly, the young man evinces no consideration for the pleasantries which adorn Steven’s speech. Instead, he speaks in commands and directives, proposing to forcibly impose order upon Emily’s domain. His speech demonstrates that her friends and social allies are now either all dead, dying, or completely overpowered. For instance, despite their number, the ‘graybeards’ are effectively silenced by him. ‘Four men’ subsequently trespass on Emily’s property: “They broke open the cellar door and sprinkled lime there, and in all the outbuildings. [...] After a week or two the smell went away.” (112-113). Curry and Perry both misread this passage. Curry claims that the men ‘collude to comply with and to shield a lady and a murder’ (396). Likewise, Perry asserts that the men act as they do ‘in order to not embarrass her about the bad smell’ (333). This chapter entirely rejects these readings. As signified by the younger man, the townspeople’s concern is not in any way to protect or defend Emily. Instead, they trespass upon her property under cover of darkness to ‘vanquish’ a smell that they are disturbed by, paying no regard to Emily’s thoughts and feelings on the matter – whether their actions ‘embarrass her’ is irrelevant. Therefore, the younger man, alongside the above-mentioned chorus of gossiping, complaining voices, once again shows that the narrator does not act alone. Instead, the narrator is part of a community of voices that consider Emily to be a disturbing figure. The narrator depicts the community’s anxiety to override her lineage and ancestry which the old South would have honoured.

The animosity within Emily’s posthumous representation here extends to her father and the wider Grierson lineage. Her familial dynamic and its relation to Southern society as a whole is outlined thus: “We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the

back-flung front door' (113). This image is punctuated by the narrator's revelation that 'when her father died, it got about that the house was all that was left to her, and in a way, people were glad. [...] Now she too would know the old thrill and the old despair of a penny more or less' (113). Brimming with *schadenfreude*, this utterance emphasises that the death of Grierson is not to be viewed in a respectful or honourable fashion. The narrator evinces no desire to eulogise him because he is framed as a tyrannical figure who wields a literal 'horsewhip' over his daughter. The violence within this image implies that, to the narrator, Grierson does not deserve pity because, in a sense, the community welcomes his death. More importantly, it presents the reader with a picture of the young Emily as having been bullied and victimised by her father. Despite saying that 'The day after his death all the ladies prepared to call at the house and offer condolence and aid, as is our custom' (113), the narrator's sentiments imply that the community treats Grierson's death unsympathetically. Indeed, any commiserations they offer Emily are merely superficially adopted poses. Death itself is not spoken of as a sacred, sacrosanct event that affects the living and disrupts one's social role.<sup>83</sup> Instead, the community's appearance at Grierson's funeral and, later, at Emily's, contradicts Jessica Mitford's observation that, 'From colonial days until the nineteenth century, the American funeral was almost exclusively a family affair, in the sense that the family and close friends performed most of the duties in connection with the dead body itself.'<sup>84</sup> In fact, the way in which the narrator frames Grierson's funeral echoes Moller's point on modern funerary culture: 'The importance of death itself as an event to be recognized and celebrated has decreased, and attendance at the funeral has assumed secular meanings associated with the transient sense

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<sup>83</sup> Faulkner makes a similar criticism in *The Town*, through the figure of Mrs Rouncewell, who 'ran the flower shop; not [...] because she loved flowers not even because she loved money but because she loved funerals; she buried two husbands herself and took the second one's insurance money and opened the flower shop and furnished the flowers for every funeral in Jefferson since' (73).

<sup>84</sup> Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 199.

of social obligation' (86). Instead, Grierson's death can be seen as an opportunity to try and force Emily to assimilate into the community's culture.

Despite the community's customary 'offer' of 'condolence and aid', in the narrator's words (113), Emily prevents them from entering her house, thereby disrupting their elaborate performance of mourning:

Miss Emily met them at the front door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them that her father was not dead. She did that for three days, with the ministers calling on her, and the doctors, trying to persuade her to let them dispose of the body. Just as they were about to resort to law and force, she broke down, and they buried her father quickly.

(113)

Initially refusing to adopt the mask of grief that the community so readily assumes, Emily's denial of her father's death points towards a profoundly disturbed mental and emotional state. She has been driven to extremes of behaviour because of her father's death, which prefigures her ultimate macabre treatment of her lover, Homer. From one perspective, Emily must deny Grierson's death, because if she fails to do so, the metaphorical, social death of the Griersons as pillars of esteem in the town will also take place. The threat of 'law and force' the community represents by insisting that Grierson be quickly buried implies that, to Emily, it is they who now stand 'clutching a horsewhip', poised and ready to discipline her for her behaviour and integrate her into the mainstream fold. This contradicts Mary Arsenberg and Sara E. Schyfter's interpretation of the horsewhip as being 'taken up and displaced by a secondary fiction invented by Colonel Sartoris, the next father in Faulkner's narrative.'<sup>85</sup> Instead, the remainder of this chapter reads Emily's actions as resulting from her insistence upon defending herself against the forces that seek to harm

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<sup>85</sup> Mary Arsenberg and Sara E. Schyfter, 'Hairoglyphics in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"/Reading the Primal Trace', *boundary 2*, Volume 15, Issues 1 and 2 (Autumn 1986-Winter 1987): 128. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

her, correcting the one moment that she ‘broke down’ and, in her view, allowed the community to force their will upon her.

### **I want some poison**

Following Grierson’s death, Emily purposefully conceals herself from the community, withdrawing from society. In consequence, the narrator relates how the community actively combatted her concealment, without ever realising that they have created a mythology around her based on stories traded amongst themselves, which rely heavily upon their few direct interactions with her. With regards to the narrator’s tactics, Arigo notes that ‘The “we” that ironically purports to “know” (Emily) only succeeds in making her more remote’: ‘She appears visible enough to the townspeople bent on scrutinizing her every move, yet she remains well beyond their comprehension’ (445-446). After Grierson’s funeral, the narrator reveals that Emily ‘was sick for a long time’: ‘When we saw her again, her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl [...] sort of tragic and serene’ (114). Offering no further details regarding Emily’s sickness, the narrator inadvertently reveals their limitations as a controlling, dominant authority on her life. The narrator also fails to ascribe feelings of grief or mourning as a possible explanation for her prolonged seclusion. Perhaps her continual shunning of the community explains why, from the narrator’s point-of-view, Emily’s suffering is considered with neither pity nor sympathy precisely because she conducts her grief away from the public eye.

Despite the dismissive attitude the narrator expresses towards Emily’s experience of mourning, readers can discern the extent to which grief has affected her, as implied by the change to the length of her hair. The narrator’s revelation of this detail can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, Emily has allowed the death of her father to affect her in a visible, physical manner. She has, therefore, been rendered ‘tragic and serene’ by her own hand after being exposed to the reality of death and allowing it encroach upon

her life. This moment, Rochelle Almeida argues, must be read in the context of ‘abnormal or unwholesome grieving’, which manifests after ‘prolonged and extreme forms of denial.’<sup>86</sup> On the other hand, by subsequently appearing in Jefferson with Homer Barron and with her hair ‘cut short’ (as shall now be discussed), perhaps she gestures towards accepting Grierson’s death in another way. By making herself look once more ‘like a little girl’, she perhaps registers a sense of youthful rejuvenation and renewal, in an attempt to negotiate and, indeed, deny the ‘tragic’, traumatic experiences which she has endured. As evidenced in the passage cited here, the narrator obviously does not consider this possible new beginning.

The arrival of Homer, a Northern construction foreman, furthers Emily’s socially unacceptable behaviour. Homer is responsible for renovating the physical space and architecture of Jefferson. As described by John F. Birk, Homer ‘occasions laughter, activity, *change*. What better figure to tempt Emily Grierson down off her perch?’<sup>87</sup> As the narrator observes:

The town had just let the contracts for paving the sidewalks, and in the summer after her father’s death they began the work. The construction company came with niggers and mules and machinery, and a foreman named Homer Barron, a Yankee—a big, dark, ready man with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face. [...] Pretty soon, he knew everybody in town. Whenever you heard a lot of laughing anywhere about the square, Homer Barron would be in the centre of the group.

(114)

Like Grierson and the patriarchs of the Old Southern aristocracy, Homer is an imposing, forceful man, whose ‘big voice’ immediately allows him a central position in the town. By scornfully describing him as a ‘Yankee’, however, the narrator demonstrates that Homer

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<sup>86</sup> Rochelle Almeida, *The Politics of Mourning: Grief Management in Cross-Cultural Fiction* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), 72.

<sup>87</sup> John F. Birk, ‘Tryst Beyond Time: Faulkner’s “Emily” and Keats’, *Studies in Short Fiction*, Volume 28, Issue 2 (Spring, 1991): 207. Italics Birk’s. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

is aligned with the forces which have already irrevocably changed the South. In their hostility towards Homer, the narrator once again inadvertently signals the hypocrisy of the community as a whole. Like the narrator, Homer is a symbol of the Old South's death and unnatural rebirth, bringing with him the tools which change the Mississippi landscape, a change which the modern generation so craves. By signing these 'contracts', the modern generation acts in the knowledge that they will effectively revise Southern ways and overwrite Southern history. In consequence, the North will invade and colonise this space with the New South's authorisation. However, what the community cannot tolerate is Emily's ensuing, possibly sexual relations with Homer, because such liaisons emphasise the degree to which Emily has 'fallen' in their estimations from an idealised Southern lady symbolising virtue and chastity.<sup>88</sup> The community's animosity towards their courtship exposes a tension between the 'new generation' which upholds Southern gender archetypes while at the same time working to disavow the old culture of the South. Though the new generation appears to have fully embraced the South's modernity, there are also aspects of its history that cannot be vanquished entirely, especially in relation to women, African-Americans, and working-class Northerners. Emily's relationship with Homer, therefore, increases the community's fevered speculation and gossip about her. In the narrator's retrospective, posthumous account of Emily's life, her liaison with Homer is yet another reason why the narrator continuously advocates the destruction of her generation and their regime – the community cannot tolerate the socio-cultural transgression which this relationship signifies.

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<sup>88</sup> The hypocrisy within the narrator's view of Homer is symptomatic of a recurrent view of the North in Faulkner's fiction. Richard H. King explains: 'Because of his ambiguous self-location among received regional and national narratives of collective origins, Faulkner found it difficult [...] to believe unequivocally the accepted narrative of regional decline—Southern humiliation caused by the power of the Union army and the ethos of the Yankee (read "modern") capitalism—or the civil republic story of the foundation of the democratic republic ('Faulkner, Ideology, and Narrative', in Kartiganer and Abadie [eds.], *Faulkner and Ideology*, 27).

No explanation for Emily's attraction to Homer is ever provided by the narrator, but the sudden, extremely public manner in which they conduct their relationship can be read as a form of attack by Emily upon the community. The narrator says that '[p]resently we began to see (them) on Sunday afternoons driving in the yellow-wheeled buggy and the matched team of bays from the livery stable' (114). Through her appearance in public with a Northerner, Emily shows that she is not as bound by or obligated to Southern gender roles as the narrator assumes she is. Such an idea highlights the disparity between the words and opinions of outside observers when compared to one's own actions and lived experiences (as will become evident during the discussion of *As I Lay Dying* in Chapter Five). With Homer, Emily behaves unapologetically, by the narrator's standards: 'She carried her head high enough—even when we believed she was fallen. It was as if she demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson' (115). Emily's conduct with Homer points towards a contradiction in relation to the status of women that the narrator and the community do not openly acknowledge. Though the new generation feigns an insistence upon progressivism and modernity, they continue to function under a deeply reactionary cultural mind-set. Daring to “think seriously of a Northerner” as a mate (114), Emily provides ample justification for the narrator to cast her in the role of the town's fallen monument in another sense. The stress the narrator places upon the word 'fallen', in the context of Emily's relationship with Homer, is loaded with connotations of illicit, extramarital sexual behaviour. The view of Emily has 'fallen' suggests, from the narrator's perspective, that Emily 'carried her head high enough' to assert a defunct class position and, therefore, support socially unacceptable sexual congress. To have 'fallen' is a concept that is wielded over Emily repeatedly, if only to demonstrate the extent of her corrupt status; it permeates the remainder of the story, and is a view of Emily perpetuated long after her death. This echoes Diane Roberts's insight that Emily 'ought to be a Confederate Woman propping up heroic verities', especially since



she is considered ‘a relic of the town’s own supposedly noble past. Yet Miss Emily harbors a covert sexuality that destabilises not only the integrity of the spinster lady but the whole edifice of southern history and class.’<sup>89</sup>

The extent to which Emily wishes to ‘reaffirm her imperviousness’ to the community is coupled, in the narrator’s account of events, with the moment ‘when she bought the rat poison, the arsenic’ (115). The sudden mention of Emily purchasing this item causes the narrator’s utterances to gain a threatening, macabre subtext as they continue to examine her sinister nature. Instead of respecting Emily’s demand to be seen as ‘the last Grierson’, the narrator provides the reader with the antithesis of that demand, illustrating Emily as capable of inflicting violence and undeserving of dignity after her death as a result:

“I want some poison,” she said.  
“Yes, Miss Emily. What kind? For rats and such?  
I’d recom—”  
“I want the best you have. I don’t care what kind.”  
The druggist named several. “They’ll kill anything  
up to an elephant. But what you want is—”  
“Arsenic,” Miss Emily said. “Is that a good one?”  
“Is... arsenic? Yes, ma’am. But what you want—”  
“I want arsenic.”

(115)

Presenting Emily’s exchange with the druggist thus, the narrator yet again employs a manipulative strategy when depicting Emily’s actions to the reader, especially through the use of her voice. O’Bryan-Knight points out that ‘any assessment we may make of Emily’s personality is based on hearsay. Since we see (her) through the eyes of the (narrator), (she) never gets a chance to speak for (herself)’ (334). Even when she speaks, as here, her voice and words are mediated by the narrator. During her purchase of the arsenic, Emily’s

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<sup>89</sup> Diane Roberts, *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 158. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text. For further feminist readings of this story, see Anna Machinek, “‘That Troubling Presence’: Female Characters of William Faulkner’s Fictional World”, in Wojciech Kalaga and Tadeusz Slawek (eds.), *Discourse and Character* (Katowice: Uniwersytet Slaski, 1990); and Judith Fetterly, ‘A Rose for Emily (1978)’, in Henry Claridge (ed.), *William Faulkner: Critical Assessments* (Robertsbridge: Helm, 1999).

utterances are presented as brief, direct, and inflexible, but in line with her exchanges with the deputation. She makes no attempt to engage in proper dialogue with the druggist – their interaction is purely transactional, with Emily occupying a position of power and authority. More importantly, however, her speech here, along with her insistence upon procuring arsenic, effectively connects her to an (implied) murderous crime. During this exchange, the narrator frames Emily as a woman who never accepts modernity's laws, but instead becomes a dangerous, imposing figure, acting in 'absolute defiance of what others think', as Brooks argues (41). The menace she displays during this exchange is such that she once again justifies the narrator's prejudices and suspicions. Purchasing the arsenic and, therefore, being indirectly accused of plotting murder, Emily epitomises all that the narrator says is depraved and violent about the Old South. Isolated from polite society, Emily and her generation are as poisonous as the arsenic she purchases here and cannot be tolerated. Acting as an intermediary between Emily and the reader, the narrator ensures that Emily is never allowed to communicate directly with them (in contrast to Addie in *As I Lay Dying*). Instead, her death appears to cause her voice to be irrevocably silenced and manipulated, since all the reader has access to are the narrator's claims that these events occurred. Faulkner provides no external vocal or narrative medium through which the readers can verify or cross-reference the information they are given.

Homer's disappearance following Emily's exchange with the druggist is revealed in the narrator's following utterance: 'we were not surprised when Homer Barron—the streets had been finished some time since—was gone' (117). To the community in general, and the narrator in particular, Homer is free to leave, having fulfilled his necessary function by contributing to the new generation's changes to the South. Even the prospect of marriage that his presence in Emily's life signifies is disregarded, despite the fact that, had they married, Emily's spinsterhood would no longer be a blight on the community, as the narrator suggests by saying that:

At first nothing happened. Then we were sure they were to be married. We learned that Miss Emily had been to the jeweler's and ordered a man's toilet set in silver, with the letters H.B. on each piece. Two days later we learned that she had bought a complete outfit of men's clothing, including a nightshirt, and we said, "They are married." We were really glad.

(116)

However, the fact that the narrator fails to link Homer's disappearance with Emily's purchase of the arsenic shows that, at that time, he could not directly acknowledge the macabre reality of what the violence and oppression of her father and the actions of the community have both wrought – the truth of what became of Homer was too horrific for the collective imagination of the town to consider. Only in retrospect can the narrator link the two incidents.

What the narrator can consider, however, is Emily's apparently adverse reaction to Homer's disappearance: 'When we next saw Miss Emily, she had grown fat and her hair was turning gray. During the next few years it grew grayer and grayer until it attained an even paper-and-salt iron gray, when it ceased turning' (117). Here, Emily is presented visibly wearing the marks of age upon her face and person, awaiting the eventual arrival of death on her own terms. As will become clear, Emily does not deny the aging process, for, if she did, she would exhibit precisely the vanity the narrator accuses her of throughout the story. Instead, Emily purposefully devolves from being 'a slender figure in white' into a fat woman, dressed in black, with 'vigorous iron-gray' hair (117). Indeed, the repeated references to her grey hair implicitly links her to the grey uniforms of the Confederate Army, a connection which further emphasises her association to the antebellum past, wearing her allegiance to the Old South upon her body. Such a manoeuvre on Emily's part suggests that she replicates and enacts the image of the Old South as both defeated and

ravished but nevertheless enduringly defiant.<sup>90</sup> Anticipating her death and accepting the ravages of age, Emily places herself beyond the realm of modern public opinion and legal prosecution – these voices cannot cross the barrier she places between them.

After the fall of the house of Grierson, Homer's disappearance, and Emily's complete seclusion from the community, all that remains for her, and all that remains for the narrator to address, is her death: 'And so she died. Fell ill in the house filled with dust and shadows, with only a doddering Negro man to wait on her' (118). Because of her life lived in obscurity, the narrator's tone implies that death is all that Emily deserves. The narrator does not see a glory in Emily's death and certainly does not see that her acceptance of death is a valorising, empowering gesture, which this thesis argues is at play at numerous instances in Faulkner's fiction. Instead, the narrator sees her death as an extension of her ignominious life. A relieved tone in his voice can be inferred from his utterance here, as though now the dilemma Emily poses is finally solved through death's triumph over her. Emily died, the narrator says, 'in one of the downstairs rooms, in a heavy walnut bed with a curtain, her gray head propped on a pillow yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight' (118). As the narrator describes the event, Emily's death is inflected by silence and loneliness. She denies access to her death scene, passing as privately as she can. She dies withered and alone, enwrapped in the remnants of the antebellum past that are now in a state of prolonged decay. The narrator does not consider her death as a potentially liberating moment. Instead, he attempts to frame it (as he does with all the events of her life he talks about) in negative, subtly derisive tones. Despite the narrator's claims to the contrary, however, Emily does triumph over the community in the moment of her death; she dies in the manner of her choosing, no longer subjected to their voyeuristic watching

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<sup>90</sup> Many thanks to Allan Simmons for alerting me to the connection between Emily's hair and Confederate Army uniforms.

and whispering. To die alone becomes Emily's ultimate desire; she attains a degree of dignity she never truly had in life.

### **A strand of iron-gray hair**

"A Rose for Emily" comes full circle with Emily's death, ending where it began – with her funeral. During her funeral, the community's desire to triumph over her appears to be fulfilled, thereby seemingly proving the success of the narrator's efforts:

The Negro met the first of the ladies at the front door and let them in, with their hushed, sibilant voices and their quick, curious glances, and then he disappeared. He walked right through the house and was not seen again.

The two female cousins came at once. They held the funeral on the second day, with the town coming to look at Miss Emily beneath a mass of bought flowers, with the crayon face of her father musing profoundly above the bier and the ladies sibilant and macabre.

(118-119)

As the narrator presents the community's appearance at her funeral, Emily can no longer control her relation to the community because they immediately swarm upon her house. Imposing themselves upon her personal space by attending her funeral, they bury her under a 'mass' of false sympathies and condolences. In addition, the community undoes all that she has tried to maintain and keep private in her life, taking advantage of her posthumous powerlessness to feast upon what she has denied them for years. In their conduct, the ladies resemble the buzzards that threaten to devour Addie's corpse in *As I Lay Dying*. The community ravenously consumes the interior of Emily's house, infiltrating her space with their 'voices' and 'glances.' The narrator confirms as much by admitting that 'Already we knew that there was one room in that region above stairs which no one had seen in forty years, and which would have to be forced. They waited until Emily was decently in the ground before they opened it' (119). To ensure that she is 'decently' buried could be read as an ironic critique or parody of Southern decency, particularly the efforts of Sartoris and Stevens to ensure she be treated with dignity and respect. The narrator's

remarks here highlight that the old order has finally been erased – his words demonstrate an insincere, shallow consideration of moral and social respectability. Burying Emily, the new generation appears to have inherited her space and are free to do with it as they wish.

Their entrance into Emily's locked room is vigorously enacted: 'The violence of breaking down the door seemed to fill this room with pervading dust. A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal' (119). The role of dust in this passage has been read in diverse ways throughout the story's critical history. For instance, Arsenberg and Schyfter write that the narrator and the community 'encounter a scene that is altered by their entrance; they disturb the dust that had settled on the bridal still-life' (132). Similarly, Harris claims that 'in reading the story one in effect is stirring up the rotted contents of long-undisturbed things' (173), thus implying that the readers are complicit with the actions of the community here and, indeed, throughout the story. On the other hand, Binder notes that 'The slow accumulation and obscuring nature of dust symbolises not only how the passage of time and change "cover" yet do not erase events but also reflect how the past is uncovered' (5). Time and decay have completely ravaged this bridal setting, stripping it of its romantic atmosphere, and leaving behind a deathly, rotted remnant of its former self. Nevertheless, the various items within the room (especially 'the man's toilet things') implies that Emily maintained her agency, engaging in intimate, perhaps even sexual relations with Homer in private, away from the prying eyes and communal scorn of Jefferson. Entering this space, the community continues to act under the illusion that they are entitled to discover Emily's secrets and violate her privacy without consequence.

The narrator's final revelation is that, among 'the delicate array of crystal and the man's toilet things [...] The man himself lay in the bed':

The body had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love [...] had cuckolded him. What was left of him, rotted beneath what

was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay; and upon him and upon the pillow beside him lay that even coating of the patient and bidding dust.

(119-120)

Acknowledging that 'For a long while we just stood there', both the narrator and their community stand speechless before the rotten corpse of Homer Barron. For at least one moment, Emily transforms them from the gossiping voyeurs who lingered perversely in the immediate background of her life to completely silent, hapless observers. Having wanted to enter this space for decades, the narrator and their community must now reckon with what awaits them inside. The corpse in the centre of the room ensures that Emily will not simply be cast into oblivion by the community – she will have at least one final say before 'saying Yes to death'. By engaging in a sexual relationship with Homer and carrying out a secret murder, Emily was not only never capable of being a monument within the town, she never actually desired to be one. Instead, in Curry's words, Emily 'daily refuse[d] to participate in the symbol-making of her as a precious lady of the Old South, an idol, and icon' (402). Having consummated her relationship with Homer (as implied by his presence in her bed, along with his clothes about the room), Emily was not at all as innocent or pure as the community would have expected her to be, nor was she as much of a spinster or victim of Homer's lechery as the narrator portrays her as.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> A recurring interpretation of the story, spanning its critical history, involves Emily engaging in necrophilia with Homer's corpse. Several critics have argued this. Included here are four examples. Kellie Donovan-Condrón writes that 'By the time the narrator discloses the irrefutable evidence of Miss Emily's acts of murder and necrophilia, she is so thoroughly vilified that the story simply ends; there is nothing left to say' ('Twisted Sisters: The Monstrous Women of Southern Gothic', in Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow [eds.], *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic* [London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016], 342). Miendl argues that 'In clinging to the past, the dead body of her sweetheart, in committing (symbolically at least) necrophilia, (Emily) "comes alive" for the reader, is humanized as a woman in the grip of an obsession, under a quasi-aesthetic to defy time' (145), a point which, when linked to Faulkner's insistence upon 'saying No to death', can be interpreted as a parodic version of his aesthetic, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis. Roberts asserts that 'Emily poisons her lover and sleeps with his corpse (the source of the smell) and is as unconcerned with committing murder and necrophilia as she is with refusing a postal address. [...] She is a murderess and a necrophiliac, but above all she is a lady' (160). Finally, Scherting claims that 'Emily simultaneously murdered and "married" Homer Barron. Because the

“A Rose for Emily” ends with the narrator providing readers with a final, tantalising detail about the bridal: “Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head. One of us lifted something from it, and leaning forward, that faint and invisible dust dry and acrid in the nostrils, we saw a long strand of iron-gray hair” (120). The narrator, his community, and the readers are led to the horrifying conclusion that Emily murdered Homer. More than this, the presence of the ‘iron-gray hair’ implies that she had shared the bed with Homer’s corpse for years, and perhaps did so shortly before her death. This point contradicts Dilworth’s estimate that ‘Emily had apparently last slept with the corpse of Homer Barron years, perhaps, decades before—not since the door to the upper room had become fixed shut’ (256). One of the motivating factors for Emily committing murder could be said to lie within the community; the murder functions as her final, defiant rejection of their prying on and impositions upon her. Again, this possibility contradicts Dilworth’s claims, especially his assertion that Emily ‘killed Homer largely to placate society’ (251). The fact that the narrator will use the community’s discovery of Homer’s corpse to fully illustrate Emily’s perversity was considered by her with total indifference. Instead, she simply wanted the act acknowledged, as it is the culmination of a lifetime of hostilities between her and Jefferson’s new generation. Argiro similarly argues that Emily ‘leaves the corpse as an abject reminder rudely signifying that she believes the intrusive community has been victimising her, driving her to behave in such a deranged fashion’ (454). Likewise, O’Bryan-Knight observes that ‘What the narrator is totally oblivious to, and the sensitive reader is well aware of, is that Emily was, to a certain point,

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people of Jefferson had taken her beloved father’s body from the Grierson house, Emily insured that they would not take away its surrogate by concealing, in an upstairs bedroom, the corpse of the man who gratified her unresolved Oedipal desires. Now he would never leave her bed, he would always be there to comfort her’ (402). The possibility that Emily engaged in necrophilia with Homer’s remains is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, the suggestion that she murdered him is sufficient in proving the overarching point this chapter is making. As far as this chapter’s analysis is concerned, their relationship appears to have been consummated during life. What uses Emily made of Homer’s body after his death is of relatively minor importance.



forced to the desperate measure she took. [...] Thus, in a sense, all of Jefferson had a hand in administering the arsenic' (342). By 'saying Yes to death' and carrying the secret of Homer's murder to her grave, Emily can no longer be prosecuted under the modern generation's version of the law – her crime goes unpunished. In her struggles against the community, Emily always maintained a degree of power. Emily's mental disturbance, which was first manifested in her denying her father's death 'for three days' (113), is replicated and extended in her deranged act of keeping Homer's body locked within her room for forty years, showing the extent of her psychological collapse. In contrast to the views of both Argiro and O'Bryan-Knight, the act of murder that Emily committed implies, albeit unwittingly on her part, that the narrator's accusations are valid – the murder of Homer reveals a darkness, malevolence, and madness deep within Emily's core and, by extension, the memory of the Old South she attempted to keep alive.

#### **A note on the rose**

In conclusion, the revelation of Homer's corpse in Emily's bed can be interpreted as a victory for the community; the narrator succeeds in vanquishing the stranglehold that the Griersons and their ilk had over the town by exposing Emily's murderous conduct. Emily's image as 'dear' and 'tranquil' (118) is summarily obliterated as a result of the community's discovery. She will be spoken of as the deranged murderer who hid the corpse of her lover in a locked room for forty years. Like Shakespeare's sonnets or Keats's Grecian urn, the story is the vessel through which the narrator immortalizes Emily: her legend will endure and gain significance every time the story is told (as is the case with Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*). As Geoffrey Scarre acknowledges, 'The best remembered lives are often odd or unusual ones; more conventional lives do not provide the same material for

striking anecdotes and cautionary tales.<sup>92</sup> Nonetheless, the question remains as to whether Emily would be concerned with how she is perceived after her death. As this chapter has attempted to show, she lived as she pleased, behaved as she liked, and succeeded in preventing the community from ever discovering Homer's corpse until after her death. Through this murder, she defended herself against those citizens who worked to destroy her.

Finally, the image of the rose in the story's title has attracted a variety of critical interpretations. It helps readers fully understand the extent of the narrator's disdain for Emily and her milieu. Faulkner asserted that: "The meaning was, here was a woman who had had a tragedy, an irrevocable tragedy and nothing could be done about it, and I pitied her and this was a salute" (*Lion in the Garden*, 127).<sup>93</sup> Miendl claims that by "Reserving "a rose for Emily," Faulkner pays tribute to the aesthetic impulse at work in her challenge to life's transitoriness, one writer saluting another" (143). Dilworth explains the meaning of the rose thus: "For the dead, you place a rose on the grave. In this context, such a rose resembles the iron-gray hair inadvertently left by Emily beside the corpse of her lover" (261). However, the suggestions that Harris and Rizzo make are the closest that these critics come to reaching the explanation of the rose that this chapter ends with. Harris asserts that "the narrative conveys the story of Emily, and hence Emily only takes on

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<sup>92</sup> Geoffrey Scarre, 'On Caring about One's Posthumous Reputation', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 38, Issue 2 (April, 2001): 214.

<sup>93</sup> Faulkner elaborated upon the meaning of the story's title and its relation to the role that Emily's father and the community had in her murder of Homer, saying that her story was a 'sad and tragic manifestation of man's condition in which he dreams and hopes, in which he is in conflict with himself or with his environment or with others': 'In this case it was the young girl with a young girl's normal aspirations to find love and then a husband and a family, who was brow-beaten and kept down by her father, a selfish man who didn't want her to leave home because he wanted a housekeeper, and it was a natural instinct (which) [...] you can't repress [...] you can mash it down but it comes up somewhere else and very likely in a tragic form, and that was simply another manifestation of man's injustice to man, of the poor tragic human being struggling with its own heart, with others, with its environment, for the simple things which all human beings want. In that case it was a young girl that just wanted to be loved and to love and to have a husband and a family' (*Faulkner in the University*, 184-1).

existence by virtue of the tale being told. In this sense, the story itself can be taken as the town's "rose for Emily" (173). Similarly, Rizzo argues that 'Perhaps the rose is nothing but the text itself—a gallant Faulknerian tribute to a world gone by' (163). Given the degree to which the narrator tries to discredit and destroy Emily in his posthumous account of her, his offering of a rose in the title is as ironic and barbed an utterance as any he issues throughout the story. Indeed, the story becomes the rose, the narrator's final gesture to damn Emily and the perverse, corrosive society she represents from a safe, unimpeachable distance. While the story is the narrator's rose to the fallen murderess 'Miss' Emily Grierson, the strand of hair Emily leaves behind in her locked room is her 'iron-gray', mad rose for him.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Faulkner once said that the story 'came from a picture of the strand of hair on the pillow. It was a ghost story. Simply a picture of a strand of hair on the pillow in the abandoned house' (*Faulkner in the University*, 26). Many thanks to Keith Carabine for suggesting this idea to me.

## Chapter Two

### **“Ah’m goan home”: Narration, whiteness, and the subversion of African-American funerary culture in “Pantaloon in Black”**

Following on from the concerns of Chapter One, particularly issues of self-representation and misrepresentation after death, this chapter offers a tripartite reading of “Pantaloon in Black”, the third story in *Go Down, Moses*. As André Bleikasten writes, this story and several others in the short story collection is about ‘a black man in the rural South in the twentieth-century, subject to the laws of white men and the implacable tenancy system in force in Mississippi.’<sup>95</sup>

The chapter initially explores the depiction of African-American funerary rituals throughout the story, arguing that there are two concurrent levels of subversion related to this theme. On one level, there is the idea of Faulkner as a white Southern author, writing about a cultural tradition he was not part of, but nevertheless witnessed from a distance (as evidenced by the responsibility he took for organising the funeral of Caroline Barr, his lifelong “Mammie”). In this respect, the chapter argues that, when writing the story, Faulkner projects his own cultural standards as a white man upon the story’s African-American protagonist Rider, who suffers from extreme grief after the death and burial of his beloved wife, Mannie. This aspect of the chapter engages with Greg Chase’s argument that, when depicting Rider’s experiences of bereavement and mourning, ‘Faulkner shows his caution in writing about black experience, indicating certain aspects he does not want to pretend to understand.’<sup>96</sup> To further signal Faulkner’s subversion of these rituals and customs, the chapter draws upon work by Judith L. Sensibar, and an assortment of letters

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<sup>95</sup> André Bleikasten, *William Faulkner: A Life through Novels*, translated by Miriam Watchorn and Roger Little (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 312. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>96</sup> Greg Chase, “‘Ah just cant quit thinking’: Modernist Narrative Voice in Faulkner and Ellison”, *Arizona Quarterly*, Volume 71, Issue 3 (Autumn, 2015): 120. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

and statements Faulkner made about race and race relations throughout his life, particularly during and after the 1940s and the emergence of the Civil Rights movement.

The second level of subversion in the story is figured through Rider's refusal to engage in African-American funerary traditions, which his elder relatives encourage and expect him to uphold following Mannie's death. To illuminate this analysis, the chapter draws upon sociological and anthropological literature by Karla F. C. Holloway, Suzanne E. Smith, and others. The chapter then discusses how Faulkner deliberately establishes a dichotomy between Rider and his relatives by characterising him as a man who is ill-equipped to face and 'say No to death.' While Rider may implicitly believe that these customs and traditions hold weight, he deliberately subverts them to suit his own needs and 'say Yes to death' to return home to Mannie. In other words, by refusing to heed the warnings issued by his aunt and uncle, Rider displays a desire for death as much as he wishes to deny Mannie's own. In this context, critics such as Linda Wagner-Martin characterise the story as 'the narrative of a great loss that strikes Rider and leaves him dumbfounded, able to contextualize only death.'<sup>97</sup> Alongside Wagner-Martin's view, this chapter also elaborates upon the arguments of scholars such as Dirk Kuyk, Jr., who argues that 'though Rider is young and full of life, his world falls apart when Mannie dies.'<sup>98</sup> In particular, it considers Kuyk's contention that 'After her funeral, no ties of family, society, race, religion, or property can hold him. Not even his own vigor can keep him alive' (73).

Alongside these concerns, the chapter considers the implications of the first half of the story being narrated by a third-person voice, rather than being told in the first-person by Rider. The analysis will explore the distancing effect that Faulkner's use of third-person narration has upon the reader in terms of African-Americans experiencing and reacting to

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<sup>97</sup> Linda Wagner-Martin, 'Go Down, Moses: Faulkner's interrogation of the American Dream', in Joseph R. Urgo and Ann J. Abadie (eds.), *Faulkner in America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 137. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>98</sup> Dirk Kuyk, Jr., *Threads Cable-strong: William Faulkner's Go Down, Moses* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983), 73. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

death first hand. Then, the chapter concludes by considering the second and final part of the story. This part is told using the first-person voice of a deputy sheriff who has arrested Rider for his murder of Birdsong, a white night-watchman; the deputy relates Rider's capture, imprisonment, and lynching by Birdsong's relatives. The circumstances surrounding Rider's death are deliberately misrepresented by the deputy, who argues that Rider's refusal to follow conventional funerary practices justifies his bigoted opinion that 'even a nigger couldn't want no better excuse for a holiday than he had just buried his wife, when a white man would have took the day off out of pure respect no matter how he felt about his wife [...] But not him.'<sup>99</sup> Because the deputy's speech is centred upon Rider's lynching and death, it abounds with instances of racism. More significantly, it displays a wilful misunderstanding of African-American experiences of death, grief, and mourning in general, and Rider's own death in particular. Faulkner's representation of the deputy will be viewed through the lens of film scholar Richard Dyer's theory that 'when whiteness *qua* whiteness does come into focus, it is often revealed as an emptiness, absence, denial, or even a kind of death.'<sup>100</sup> The use of Dyer's theory to explore the juxtaposition of the deputy's whiteness to Rider's experience of bereavement, grief, and mourning will be one of the contributions this chapter makes to the study of the story.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (New York: Vintage International, 2011), 148-149. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>100</sup> Richard Dyer, 'White', *Screen*, Volume 29, Issue 4 (1988): 44. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>101</sup> In 'The Impenetrable Lightness of Being: Miscegenation Imagery and the Anxiety of Whiteness in *Go Down, Moses*', Ted Atkinson cites Dyer's argument to interrogate whiteness throughout the novel. Atkinson writes that 'Faulkner's representation of race' goes 'beyond the reductive imagery of juxtaposition into the gray areas of ambiguity that call into question the integrity of the black/white racial binary code and [...] expose whiteness to the light of critical scrutiny' (in Annette Trefzer and Ann J. Abadie [eds.], *Faulkner and Formalism* [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012], 131). Interestingly, however, Atkinson does not apply Dyer's theory to "Pantaloone in Black", nor does he analyse the story during his essay.

### **Faulkner's narration and the subversion of African-American funerary culture**

The opening sentence of "Pantaloon in Black" foregrounds the distance that Faulkner, as a white Southern writer, and we, as readers, are expected to have to Rider: 'He stood in the worn, faded clean overalls which Mannie herself had washed only a week ago, and heard the first clod strike the pine box' (129). By repeatedly referring to Rider as 'he' throughout the story, Faulkner characterises Rider as a man who cannot be fully connected with or understood. This is primarily because of Rider's race (the readers of this story are largely assumed by Faulkner to be Caucasian, a common aspect of twentieth-century American literature<sup>102</sup>), but also because of Rider's experience, namely the sudden, unexplained death of his beloved wife. Neither Faulkner nor the readers can share in Rider's grief because of their distance from him across racial lines. Greg Chase acknowledges this when he writes that 'Faulkner suggests that certain aspects of black experience remain essentially unimaginable, as though neither his previous renderings of white internal life nor his own experiences as a white man give him a language for articulating what is distinctive about a black man's interiority' (124-125). Therefore, throughout much of the story, there is a tripartite stance towards Rider consisting of a respect for his plight, a disavowal of his subsequent, grief-stricken behaviour, and an ambivalence on Faulkner's part towards bridging this distance between Rider and the reader.

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<sup>102</sup> Toni Morrison acknowledges this in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992): 'until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all American fiction have been positioned as white' (xii). All further references to this work are incorporated into the text. Evidence of Faulkner's intended white readership for the story, which was originally published in *Harper's Magazine* on August 9<sup>th</sup> 1940, is present in a letter dated May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1940 to Robert K. Haas of Random House. Faulkner informed Haas that he had written 'four stories about niggers', and suggested that he could 'build onto them, write some more, make a book like *The Unvanquished*' (in Blotner [ed.], *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, 124). That book became *Go Down, Moses*. Of the letter, Thadious M. Davis writes that Faulkner's 'use of the offensive term *nigger* in a letter to someone not part of the Deep South culture of Mississippi reflects the extent to which *nigger* was naturalized in his discourses and in his ideology' (in *Games of Property: Law, Race, Gender, and Faulkner's Go Down, Moses* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2003], 25. Italics Davis's. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text).

Standing in his work-clothes, Faulkner implies that Rider wears these overalls because they are amongst the last articles of clothing belonging to him that Mannie handled prior to her death. Rider's decision to wear these clothes can be read as a desire to remain within the recent past, to remind himself of the domestic harmony he had with Mannie which has now been replaced with an all-encompassing sense of loss. Further to this, the emphasis on the words 'clod' and 'strike' in the opening sentence brings to the forefront the profound impact of Mannie's death upon Rider, and the bitter anguish which is already consuming him. At the same time, despite his depth of feeling and love for her (which will become increasingly evident as this chapter progresses), what inevitably awaits them both is death itself – a 'pine box.' The degree to which Mannie's death affects Rider and his interactions with those around him is established when he is tenderly implored to relinquish the shovel he is using to bury Mannie with:

Another member of his sawmill gang touched his arm and said, "Lemme have hit, Rider." He didn't even falter. He released one hand in midstroke and flung it backward, striking the other across the chest, jolting him back a step, and restored the hand to the moving shovel, flinging the dirt with that effortless fury so that the mound seemed to be rising of its own volition[.]

(129)

Rider's behaviour demonstrates that the extremity of his sorrow has led to his alienation from those around him. His grief over Mannie's death has damaged his connections with his family and friends. As Judith L. Sensibar claims, 'Rider deliberately marginalizes and ultimately obliterates himself from the text.'<sup>103</sup> To Rider, Mannie's death is an abomination that should never have occurred, but, as a result, he allows it to become a fact of life he cannot ever counteract.

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<sup>103</sup> Judith L. Sensibar, *Faulkner and Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 109. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.



Rider's self-imposed alienation and exile from those closest to him is further evidenced in his conduct with his aunt, 'an old woman' who emerges 'out of the meagre clump of his kin and friends and a few old people who had known him and his dead wife both since they were born [...] She had raised him. He could not remember his parents at all' (130). As a result of Rider's 'meagre' interpersonal dynamics with his 'kin', he has attempted to forge a new family through his union with Mannie. This 'meagre clump', even before Mannie's death, did not hold much significance to Rider. Indeed, just as neither Faulkner nor the readers can fully comprehend Rider's emotions, neither can those around him. As Kuyk notes, 'No voice within (the story) fully expresses Rider's pain' (70). After Mannie's death, Rider's grief and longing to join her reverberate in the echo chamber of his unrelieved sorrow. His immersion in this sorrow must be seen in the context of the emphasis Faulkner places upon Rider's inability to 'remember his parents at all.' This revelation implies that Rider has experienced lifelong feelings of loss and alienation, together with a sense of depersonalisation and disenfranchisement, factors which are now sharply in focus because of Mannie's death. Unlike his long-deceased parents who are outside his frame of reference and identification, Mannie was not an abstraction. Instead, she was a person that Rider deeply loved and desired.

As will be elaborated in due course, Rider's emotional state and his volatile behaviour forsakes and subverts the decorum required in the African-American funerary tradition. Though Wilson's claim that, in the story, 'Faulkner draws upon the lore of ghosts and the afterlife in rural black culture' (2012, 275) is plausible, the cultural ignorance and indifference that Faulkner evinces while writing the story also explains Rider's contrarian, subversive behaviour.<sup>104</sup> In particular, despite the depths of his anguish and the undeniable

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<sup>104</sup> In *Faulkner and Love*, Sensibar pinpoints Faulkner's ignorance in three areas. The first is within the novel's dedication: 'TO MAMMIE CAROLINE BARR Mississippi [1840-1940] Who was born in slavery and who gave to my family a fidelity without stint or calculation of recompense and to my childhood an immeasurable devotion and love.' Sensibar argues that the dedication 'perpetuates the conventions of white masters' eulogies for faithful black slaves (and later,

sincerity of his emotions here, Rider's actions hinder rather than help Mannie as she transitions from life to death. This transition, as McIlwain outlines, is integral to traditional African funerary culture: 'African culture did not view death as a dichotomous experience wherein a clear line delineated the experiences between life and death. In Africa, death was seen as part of life, or more particularly, a continuation of life itself' (27). McIlwain also argues that African death rituals demanded 'a smooth transition – one that neither upsets the natural balance between the human and natural world nor between the individual and his or her ancestors. To put it succinctly, the meaning of death extended beyond the individual' (28). From this perspective, by allowing his fear of death to consume him utterly, Rider compromises Mannie's journey, her "homegoing", which Suzanne E. Smith outlines thus: 'Historically, death in the African American cultural imagination was not feared but rather embraced as the ultimate "homegoing," a welcome journey to a spiritual existence that would transcend the suffering and injustices of the mortal world.'<sup>105</sup> At least initially, Rider refuses to acknowledge that Mannie's death might, as Smith highlights,

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servants)', to the extent that 'it functions as an introduction to and extension of its fictions' (105). Secondly, within Faulkner's eulogy at Barr's funeral, he declared that she displayed 'fidelity to a family which was not hers, devotion and love for people she had not borne' (106). Regarding the eulogy, Sensibar writes that Barr 'existed not for herself or her black family but in order to serve her white family' (106). Sensibar locates the third area of Faulkner's ignorance within the consternation that Barr's family displayed towards his insistence that Barr's funeral be held at Rowan Oak. Sensibar cites the opinions of Mildred Quarles, the daughter of Barr's grandniece, thus: "'It was awful that he had it in his parlor. William said he was gonna have it at his house and they had her in the parlor! You know, white folks call it parlor. In his parlor! My mother and Aunt Dora told me some things you don't do. And my mother and all of them told me about William speaking over Aunt Callie. One aunt, she said, 'Hell, he drunk. He don't know any better than to have it in the parlor!'"' (107). Crucially, for the purposes of this chapter, Sensibar argues that Barr's family 'felt that Faulkner showed an indifference to local black rituals that have to do with burying your relatives', an indifference which was also manifested, this chapter argues, in Faulkner's composition of the story.

<sup>105</sup> Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American way of Death* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 17-18. The concept of "homegoing" is present in other stories in *Go Down, Moses* in a variety of senses. For example, in "Go Down, Moses", the titular, final story in the collection, Mollie Beauchamp insists that her estranged grandson, Butch, be brought home for burial after he is executed for the murder of an (implicitly white) police officer. As Gavin Stevens ruminates at the story's end: '*she doesn't care how he died. She just wanted him home, but she wanted him to come home right. She wanted that casket and those flowers and the hearse and she wanted to ride through town behind it in a car*' (365).

actually grant her sanctuary, freeing her from the tribulations of life (The story, and by extension Faulkner, appears to have misunderstood or exhibited indifference towards these traditions). Instead, Rider places his own longing for relief from his sorrow by reuniting with Mannie above any benefit that Mannie herself may reap in the hereafter. Rider's all-consuming grief and pain over the loss of Mannie implies that he cannot view this moment as a conventional funeral but, instead, a burial, an occasion which results from the loss of his beloved. Rider, therefore, displays an indifference towards or a disregard for the ceremonial aspects of African-American funerary culture, as critics such as McIlwain, Smith, or Karla F. C. Holloway outline. Both Faulkner and the story itself actively fail to mention this background or account for this cultural blank in the telling of the story. For example, Smith writes that:

As the modern funeral developed in the 1920s and 1930s, African Americans continued to honour venerable slave burial traditions, to which they added their own distinctive rituals. The twentieth-century African American funeral involved several characteristic features, including viewing at a wake or "settin' up" – usually held the night before the funeral; a highly emotive and unusually lengthy funeral service punctuated by spirited gospel music and numerous eulogies; the presence of uniformed female attendants to aid mourners; and a plentiful meal or "funeral banquet" after the service to honour the memory of the deceased.  
(83-84)

Emphasising the sense of community and solidarity that funerals engendered in the African-American community, Smith continues:

Although the tradition of a wake was not unique to African American culture, it was particularly valued in black communities, not only as a means to celebrate communal bonds in a racially segregated world, but also as an opportunity to process grief in a tangible way by viewing the deceased's embalming remains in an open casket. [...] The funeral service that followed the wake was the centrepiece of the African American homegoing ceremony. Here, the community gathered in the sanctuary of the black church not just to mourn the dead but to exalt the triumph of the deceased's spirit entering the next world.  
(85)

Similarly, Holloway notes that:

In the 1900s, it was traditional in African American communities to leave the casket open for viewing sometime during the wake and church services. A laying-on of hands, touching, kissing, and expressing one's grief by viewing the remains have traditionally mattered deeply. [...] It was a practice that additionally recalled west African funeral traditions in which the family and the deceased were honoured with visitations that indicated respect and esteem.<sup>106</sup>

Holloway continues:

In African America, the cultural tradition of going home for a funeral was strong and seriously attended to. Warren Harrison left Detroit in the 1930s as a young man to return to his birthplace in Alabama [...] In reflecting on the cultural expectations surrounding death and funeralizing, Mr. Harrison was quite explicit about the expectations surrounding a death in a black family. "We went *home* for a funeral. No questions. Nobody worried about what it cost or what we were doing with jobs or whatever. When somebody died – and I don't care *how* you were related – if you were family you went back home where you were supposed to be. With your family."

(29, italics Holloway's)

In stark contrast to these examples, Rider initially seems to bury Mannie in a vain attempt to lay his beloved wife to rest and disregard any obligation to his family or community during this time of intense grief. However, what becomes clear as the story progresses is that he cannot simply vanquish either Mannie or his extended family, because he is afflicted by deeply painful, contradictory emotions. Specifically, regarding Mannie, he initially refuses to allow her to 'go home' in a spiritual rather than a geographical or physical sense. By keeping her memory alive in his consciousness, he forsakes his culture's customs.

In "Pantaloons in Black", Faulkner writes self-consciously as a white writer. I have noted already the absence of much of the funerary customs that McIlwain, Smith, and Holloway outline, which might be attributed to ignorance or to a deliberate authorial

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<sup>106</sup> Karla F. C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories – A Memorial* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 25. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

strategy. Faulkner explicitly draws attention to the racial differences at play within the story in the following passage:

[T]he grave, save for its rawness, resembled any other marked off without order about the barren plot by shards of pottery and broken bottles and old brick and other objects insignificant to sight but actually of a profound meaning and fatal to touch, which no white man could have read.

(129)

Faulkner's elision of numerous elements of the African-American funerary experience stems from the notion that he writes about a subject and a culture that he, because of his race and social standing, is fundamentally excluded from. This passage tacitly reveals that, while Faulkner evinces an awareness of the meaning and worth within these 'objects', he either cannot or refuses to articulate and reveal that meaning precisely because it is beyond the remit of his cultural and racial understanding.<sup>107</sup> This idea accords with Chase's observation that, in this passage, Faulkner is 'simultaneously asserting that these objects have "profound meaning" and omitting any explication of that meaning' (120). In contrast, Hans S. Skei argues that the presence of these objects 'seems to imply the impenetrability to the master race, the white man, of the traditions, culture, and rituals of the black race' (127). Roberta Hughes Wright and Wilbur B. Hughes III suggest that these objects do have a basis in African-American funerary culture: 'Ceremoniously broken possessions of the deceased should be placed on the top of the grave to prevent the spirit from returning to this world in search of them. Breaking objects breaks the chain of death, or saves other family members from immediately following the deceased to death.'<sup>108</sup> One can interpret Faulkner's tactic here as a symbol of respect for the African-American community on his

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<sup>107</sup> Indeed, Faulkner's elision of the meaning within these objects can be found in his earliest fiction. In *Flags in the Dust*, the grave of the recently deceased Simon is described as being 'bordered with tedious rows of broken gaudy bits of crockery and of colored glass' (397).

<sup>108</sup> Roberta Hughes Wright and Wilbur B. Hughes III, *Lay Down Body: Living History in African American Cemeteries* (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1996), 19. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

part; he attempts to maintain a sense of distance and not traverse into territory he can never fully comprehend because he will never be a member of this race. However, one could also argue that, through this insistence upon racial detachment, Faulkner remains true to the historical reality of segregation between the races inaugurated by the system of slavery. While Faulkner does evince a consciousness of the meaning within these objects, it is not a meaning he can access. Therefore, he highlights the differences between Caucasian and African-American funeral cultures and traditions, along with the social distances between them in the South at the time of the story's composition. Similarly, David A. Davis writes that 'By drawing attention to Mannie's grave, Faulkner focuses on the boundaries that separate the living from the dead, and he also focuses attention on the boundaries that separates blacks from whites.'<sup>109</sup> As Holloway notes, 'Even in death, the color line was a persistent – albeit somewhat ambiguous – line of demarcation' (16). As a result, Faulkner's rendering of and solidarity with Rider's plight is limited on the grounds of his race, his social standing, and his life experiences.

Faulkner's rendering of African-American speech within "Pantaloon in Black" itself, as evidenced by the following exchange between Rider and his aunt (the first within the story), should be read in this context:

"Whar you gwine?" she said.  
 "Ah'm goan home," he said.  
 "You dont wants ter go back dar by yoself," she said. "You needs to eat. You come on home and eat."  
 "Ah'm goan home," he repeated, walking out from under her hand, his forearm like iron, as if the weight on it were no more than that of a fly, the other members of the mill gang whose head he was giving way quietly to let him pass.

(130)

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<sup>109</sup> David A. Davis, 'Faulkner and the Inheritors of Slavery', in Watson and Abadie (eds.), *Fifty Years after Faulkner*, 189. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

Faulkner's rendering of African-American voices here resembles his presentation of black Southern voices from the beginning of his career, from *Soldiers' Pay* onwards, and most notably in *The Sound and the Fury*, emulating a tradition within the literature of the American South that reaches back to the nineteenth-century.<sup>110</sup> As Sharon Wallace Holton makes clear:

For Rider [...] speech is not a meaningful medium of expression. [...] Rider is not a verbally articulate man, and is thus unable to talk freely about his grief. When he speaks, he speaks Black English in very short sentences, and he uses language only to assert the simplest of facts and feelings.<sup>111</sup>

In line with Holton's observations, Rider's utterances during his exchange with his aunt are repetitive and monosyllabic. They are communicated with a simplicity of intention and an obvious refusal to articulate himself further. His refusal to speak indicates that he wishes to remain locked within his grief, rejecting all offers of help or any logical and reasonable suggestions from his kinfolk to negotiate his bereavement. As Erskine Peters argues, 'Dislocated from the context of his own reality, the language of his grief sets him apart from the Yoknapatawpha community, black and white. The blacks feel the depths of his sorrow, but in their efforts to assist, they only make his sense of helplessness more acute.'<sup>112</sup> Nevertheless, despite the distance which Faulkner maintains as he narrates Rider's story (as discussed above), some critics argue that he attempts to compensate for Rider's inarticulacy by utilising imagery and phrasing to communicate the poignant, tragic depths of Rider's situation. For example, Richard Gray insists that 'Faulkner finds a language – or, rather, languages – to render Rider's human presence': 'Rider is there for us in the

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<sup>110</sup> For, arguably, the most famous example of this, see Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). For an examination of Southern dialects across races, see Cleanth Brooks, *The Language of the American South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985).

<sup>111</sup> Sylvia Wallace Holton, *Down Home and Uptown* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984), 151. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>112</sup> Erskine Peters, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha World and Black Being* (Derby: Norwood Editions, 1983), 85. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

narrative, via his patterns of speech of course, but even more thanks to a complex interplay of sense impressions that enables us both to see him and see with him.<sup>113</sup> Similarly, Arthur F. Kinney surmises that the story is ‘Faulkner’s sole attempt to get into the mind of a repressed black consciousness.’<sup>114</sup> Gray’s and Kinney’s views point towards a contradiction at the heart of the story, namely that while Faulkner does not claim to share Rider’s grief, he nonetheless uses narrative techniques to make his emotions palpable to the reader, which Skei echoes by writing that ‘the third-person narrative is both limited in its intimate focus on the black protagonist and the use of a language which clearly belongs to the narrator’ (126). Moreover, critics such as Gray and Kinney fail to question what gives Faulkner the inclination to ‘get into the mind of a repressed consciousness’ in this story. Typically, when Faulkner’s narrative focuses explicitly on African-American subjects (such as Rider, Dilsey Gibson, or Ringo in *The Unvanquished* [1938]<sup>115</sup>), he not only insists upon using a third-person distanced voice, but also constructs a dialect which Franz Fanon terms as “pidgin-nigger”, a dialect that ‘closes off the black man’, because ‘Nothing is more astonishing than to hear a black man express himself properly.’<sup>116</sup> Faulkner’s repeated insistence upon rendering African-American voices to appear inarticulate and capable of only barely functional expression implies that, as a white Southerner, he gives an extremely limited, arguably prejudiced estimation of what he believes black Southern voices sound

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<sup>113</sup> Richard Gray, ‘Across the Great Divide: Race and Revision in *Go Down, Moses*’, in Hans S. Skei (ed.), *William Faulkner’s Short Fiction* (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1997), 191.

<sup>114</sup> Arthur F. Kinney, *Go Down, Moses: The Miscegenation of Time* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 108. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>115</sup> Michael Grimwood notes, during a discussion of Capsey, a Great War veteran in *Flags in the Dust*, that ‘When Faulkner allowed Capsey to recount his own adventures, in one of the very rare passages of narration that he ever granted to a Negro voice, the result was a blackface routine rather than a characterization’ (‘Faulkner and the Vocational Liabilities of Black Characterization’, in Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie [eds.], *Faulkner and Race* [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987], 258).

<sup>116</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 23.



like.<sup>117</sup> It is not the case, as Philip M. Weinstein argues, that ‘the language to which Faulkner has access to “say” Rider is a language foreign to Rider’s own terms for articulating his subjectivity.’<sup>118</sup> Instead, as John Carlos Rowe states, it is rather that ‘Faulkner cannot speak for Southern African-Americans, no matter how profoundly he claims to understand the history and social psychology of African-American disenfranchisement and disempowerment in the South.’<sup>119</sup> However, Faulkner’s rendering of African-American voices in this manner cannot be seen as a respectful, courteous authorial gesture either, because he repeatedly insists upon inoculating his African-American speakers with inarticulacy.<sup>120</sup>

Returning to the passage discussed above, Rider’s repeated insistence upon “goan home” is, at surface-level, not a “homegoing” in the traditional, religious sense where, as Smith argues, ‘the community gathered in the sanctuary of the black church not just to mourn the dead but to exult in the triumph of the deceased’s spirit entering the next world’ (84-85). Instead, Rider’s insistence reiterates the disavowal of his bonds with his family and friends, despite how ‘meagre’ and ‘few’ those bonds admittedly are. Rider’s conduct causes African-American funerary rites to, once again, be flouted and denied. Rider’s insistence upon returning home can, as this chapter will soon argue, be interpreted as a suicidal “homegoing” similar to that of Quentin Compson’s (as will be explored in Chapter Three).

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<sup>117</sup> For more on Faulkner’s representation of African-American voices, see Mark Balhorn, ‘Paper Representations of the Non-Standard Voice’, *Visible Language*, Volume 31, Issue 1 (1998): 56-74; Laurel Bollinger, ‘Narrating Racial Identity and Transgression in Faulkner’s “That Evening Sun”’, *College Literature*, Volume 39, Issue 2 (Spring, 2012): 53-72; and Mark W. Lencho, ‘Dialect Variation in *The Sound and the Fury*: A Study in Faulkner’s Use of Black English’, *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 41, Issue 2 (Summer, 1998): 403-419.

<sup>118</sup> Philip M. Weinstein, *Faulkner’s Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 145.

<sup>119</sup> John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson’s Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 222. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>120</sup> This complicates Ross’s claim in *Fiction’s Inexhaustible Voice* (1989) that “‘Pantaloon in Black’ dramatizes Faulkner’s starkest parodic reversal of linguistic stereotyping. He gives to Rider and the other black characters the heaviest dialect in all his fiction. [...] This is the idiom of the stage dandy, the minstrel-show clown, the pantaloon’ (106).

His entire life from here onwards hurtles towards his own death, rather than becoming a refutation of mortality or ‘saying No to death’, in Faulkner and Hamblin’s terms. Rider declines to heed the warnings of those around him, who prophesy that “‘You dont wants ter go back dar. She be wawkin yit’” (130). Not only is this claim revealed to be true, but it is also clear that, regardless of Rider’s defiance, his actions evince an ironic, implicit belief in African-American folklore, which states that ‘People who die from the sick bed may walk any night [...] According to testimony all except those who died in the dark may visit their former homes every night at twelve o’clock.’<sup>121</sup> By continuing his journey in defiance of these warnings, Rider casts aside his link to life to engage in behaviour that is, at its core, improper and destructive.

After Rider leaves the cemetery, Faulkner notes that, ‘at this hour of Sunday evening’, there is ‘no family in wagon, no rider, no walkers churchward to speak to him and carefully refrain from looking after him when he had passed’ (131). On the one hand, this passage illustrates a sense of unity and solidarity within the black community during times of grief and mourning which Smith and Holloway identify, but which Rider refuses to engage with. On the other hand, this passage also emphasises that this community is absent here, and would have been unacknowledged by him even had they been present. Rider’s walk home is a projection of the utter desolation he experiences from the moment Mannie dies; the images he encounters on the road to their house become, in T. S. Eliot’s classic term, an ‘objective correlative’: ‘a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such as that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.’<sup>122</sup> Rider’s insistence upon going home becomes, therefore, an exercise in tragic futility,

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<sup>121</sup> Langston Hughes and Arna Botemps, *The Book of Negro Folklore* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1958), 191. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>122</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Hamlet and His Problems’, *The Sacred Wood* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920), 92. Italics Eliot’s.

because from the moment of Mannie's burial through to his own untimely death by lynching, Rider is bombarded by symbols which remind him of his loss. Therefore, he both longs for and is marked by death from the opening moments of the story. Faulkner says that Rider notices, 'in the annealing dust' he encounters on his walk home, 'the narrow, splay-toed prints of his wife's bare feet where on Saturday afternoons she would walk to the commissary to buy their next week's supplies while he took his bath'; onto these images are superimposed 'his own prints, setting the period now as he strode on [...] his body breasting the air her body had vacated, his eyes touching the objects – post and tree and field and house and hill – her eyes had lost' (131). Faulkner demonstrates here what is apparent to an outsider: Rider, through his behaviour and actions, rather than his words, actively immerses himself in the loss of his wife. He desires relief from a life without Mannie's presence, servitude, and care. The air he breathes and the sights he sees are textured by and gain significance because of Mannie's presence in his life. Accordingly, at this stage, he cannot experience life without being reminded of his loss at every turn.

Faulkner juxtaposes Rider's implicit desire for death in the above passage with the subsequent descriptions of his house which he has meticulously maintained, despite it being owned by Carothers Edmonds, 'the local white landowner':

[I]n just six months he had refloored the porch and rebuilt and roofed the kitchen, doing the work himself on Saturday afternoon and Sunday with his wife helping him, and bought the stove. Because he made good money: sawmilling ever since he began to get his growth at fifteen and sixteen and now, at twenty-four, head of the timber gang itself [...] never without work even in the old days when he had not actually needed the money, when a lot of what he wanted, needed perhaps, didn't cost money – the women bright and dark and for all purposes nameless he didn't need to buy[.]

(131)

Though it becomes increasingly clear that every white person Rider encounters throughout the story is an authority figure, Rider's enterprising character and his diligence in preserving

his house suggests that, in the years after the cessation of slavery, Rider has reaped the (theoretical) societal benefits which are now available to emancipated African-Americans. He establishes his own financial independence in the South post-slavery, instead of migrating North, which therefore shows the degree of stability and strength that a minority of African-Americans were able to experience after 1865. Thadious M. Davis notes that “Pantaloone in Black” is set in the early twentieth-century South – a South modern enough to have motion pictures (“picture shows”) as a form of entertainment but still reflecting the post-Reconstruction era in which blacks were held in economic peonage and social subordination and still controlled by law though unprotected by law’ (71). As such, the story initially serves as a counter to the other stories by Faulkner on African-American persecution in general and within *Go Down, Moses* in particular. As Rowe argues, ‘Rider tries to break the family bonds of obligation that continue to subordinate African-Americans to their old slave masters. [...] He is a new kind of self-reliant man, who knows [...] *why* independence is so important’ (236, italics Rowe’s). Rider, through his labours with the house and his rapport with Mannie, transcends the stereotypical, bigoted view of African-Americans which prevailed in the South at this time through this assertion of independence.

Despite his misrepresentation of the African-American voice as discussed above, Faulkner constructs Rider as a virtuous, forward-thinking man who creates for himself a livelihood and a presence within his community, occupying a position of authority and respect and becoming a man capable of love and commitment. When he first ‘saw Mannie, whom he had known all his life, for the first time’, for example, Rider ‘said to himself: “Ah’m thu wid all dat,” and they married’ (132). Mannie, therefore, constituted the turning point in Rider’s existence from a life marked by frivolity to an overarching sense of order and progression. Faulkner says how ‘they would eat [...] without haste or hurry [...] the cake which she baked every Saturday now that she had a stove to bake in’ (132). Together,

Rider and Mannie established a haven which functioned because of their mutual respect and insistence upon working as a team. As John T. Matthews writes, ‘the pride in order, cleanliness, thrift, and consumption mark Rider and Mannie as New Negroes in the making.’<sup>123</sup> There is the overwhelming sense that, with Mannie, Rider achieved stability and normalcy.<sup>124</sup> However, all of Rider’s personal progress is suddenly rendered void when the reality of the present moment disrupts his reminiscence: ‘when he put his hand on the gate it seemed to him suddenly there was nothing beyond it’ (132). Rider is (or was) a figure who takes control of what is happening within his life. The fervour with which he rebuilt and maintained the house can also be seen in the frenzy with which he flung the dirt onto Mannie’s grave – he takes ownership and control of both her life with him and her burial. In other words, with Mannie, Rider made good on the intentions of the Emancipation Proclamation, and was living a version of the American dream.

It is in this context of having returned to the house in a state of frenzied grief that Mannie herself appears to Rider from beyond the grave:

She was standing in the kitchen door, looking at him. He didn’t move. He didn’t breathe nor speak until he knew his voice would be all right, his face fixed too not to alarm her. “Mannie,” he said. “Hit’s awright. Ah aint afraid.” Then he took a step toward her, slow, not even raising his hand yet, and stopped. Then he took another step. But this time as soon as he moved she began to fade. [...] She was fading, going. “Wait,” he said, talking as sweet as he had ever heard his voice speak to a woman: “Den lemme go wid you,

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<sup>123</sup> John T. Matthews, *William Faulkner: Seeing Through the South* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 208. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>124</sup> In ‘Homeplace (a site of resistance)’, bell hooks offers a conceptualised account of African-American dwelling places in the early-to-mid twentieth-century that further illuminates the significance of Rider’s home with Mannie: ‘Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one’s homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world’ (in Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald [eds.], *Available Means: An Anthology of Women’s Rhetoric(s)* [Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001], 384).

honey.” She was going fast now; he could actually feel  
between them the insuperable barrier[.]

(134)

*The Book of Negro Folklore* states that ‘the living are frightened of seeing ghosts at times’ (191). This is clearly not the case with Rider. Indeed, this deeply ambiguous passage causes readers to question what form Mannie takes, why she is presented as being silent, and why she fades from view as rapidly as she does. Faulkner deliberately does not make her ontological status clear when Rider sees her; she could either be a ghost or a delusional, hallucinatory product of Rider’s grief. Her appearance is an example of those “undecidable” elements within Faulkner’s fiction that cannot be definitively understood or reckoned with. For example, Kinney asserts that ‘The apparition is as powerful as any ghost can be – Rider wills his wife back, if only for a moment, before the vision fades. Mannie does not leave his consciousness.’<sup>125</sup> Kinney here attempts to argue across both lines of interpretation; she is, at one and the same time, a ghost and an emanation of Rider’s consciousness. Lee Jenkins is less ambiguous; he argues that ‘When Rider sees his wife’s spirit, the reader is given to understand that this is a real physical emanation, not a delusion [...] because of the care taken to evoke the fact of her actual presence.’<sup>126</sup> If her appearance is ghostly (which, given the repeated references to her ‘fading, going’, is what Faulkner partially leads readers to suspect), then perhaps her presence in this form confirms what Wright and Hughes III write, that in African-American funerary tradition, ‘Every effort must be made to carry out the wishes of the dead, carefully. For if this is not done, the dead person will haunt the family or the individual responsible for going against his actions’ (18). Therefore, Mannie’s sudden appearance suggests that Rider is culpable for her brief return to the mortal realm; his single-minded and extreme grief has disturbed Mannie’s

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<sup>125</sup> Arthur F. Kinney, ‘Unscrambling Surprises’, *Connotations*, Volume 15, Issues 1-3 (2005/2006): 22. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>126</sup> Lee Jenkins, *Faulkner and Black-White Relations: A Psychoanalytic Approach* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 250. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

journey. Her appearance in this form challenges Rider's arrogant, grief-stricken demand for his family not to disturb or "mess wid" him (130). Her appearance confirms to Rider the validity of the beliefs in African-American folklore that his family attest to and which he, thus far, has appeared indifferent towards.

On the other hand, if, despite the assertions of Kinney and Jenkins, Mannie's appearance is a delusional, hallucinatory manifestation of Rider's grief, then perhaps her presence points towards a disintegration within Rider's psyche. Returning to the house, Rider evinces a desire for life to return to how it was during those blissful 'six months' (131) before Mannie's death. He yearns for a figure who, by standing 'in the kitchen door, looking at him', represents somebody who both loves and sustains him, who serves him but is also comforted and maintained by him and his endeavours. Rider's yearning here perhaps explains Mannie's silence, as she appears to be a projection of his own fantasies and his desire to restore a sense of order within his life, rather than the chaos which has taken over. Mannie's manifestation can perhaps also be seen as an idealised version of the person she was, a product of Rider's despairing imagination, which echoes Benjamin H. Ogden's argument that, 'from beginning to end, Mannie is presented impersonally': 'At no point in the story does Rider humanise Mannie in his thoughts; in fact, she has no thoughts, opinions, feelings, ideas, or desires. [...] [H]is memories of her are clearly centered on her role as house cleaner and clothes cleaner, and as cook.'<sup>127</sup> Therefore, Mannie cannot speak in this moment or, indeed, at any point during the story. Instead, she appears to serve Rider, both in life and after death, becoming the figure that Rider speaks to 'as sweet as he had ever heard his voice speak to a woman', who gives him momentary comfort and soothes the extremity of his grief.

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<sup>127</sup> Benjamin H. Ogden, 'Rethinking Rider's Love: The Less-Romantic Logic of Property and Space in "Pantaloons in Black"', *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 61, Issue 3 (2008): 386-387.

However, Rider's imploring utterances to Mannie to "lemme go wid you, honey" reinforces the notion that Rider, in his current mindset, desires death just as much as he longs to be with Mannie. Indeed, death, at this stage, is the sole way they can ever be reunited. As mentioned earlier, Rider wishes to return to a point at which the tranquillity of his union with Mannie is restored. In contrast to Hamblin's claims, Rider cannot 'say No to death.' Being only twenty-four years old, Rider is still a youth in several respects. Therefore, he cannot face Mannie's death in a mature, sensible manner. Instead, the overwhelming implication here, in Quentin's section in *The Sound and the Fury*, and the works studied in this thesis as a whole is that, in numerous cases, Faulkner presents his readers with portraits of sad, marginalised characters who actually wish to 'say Yes to death.' Following Mannie's appearance, Rider seems to relinquish himself to the overwhelming, all-encompassing power that death holds. Being permitted to "go wid" her is Rider's own "homegoing", which recontextualises Smith's characterisation of this concept as 'a welcome journey to a spiritual existence that would transcend the suffering and injustices of the mortal world' (17-18). Rider's life loses the significance it gained because of Mannie; her death, therefore, gives him justification to refuse to continue with this travesty of living without her. Instead, he can now make the journey out of the mortal world that the concept of homegoing signifies. As Richard Godden notes, "To rejoin (Mannie), as a spectral partner, Rider must not simply die, he must do so in a manner which brings from hiding the meaning of her spectrality. Grief-stricken, he acts to ensure his own lynching."<sup>128</sup> Similarly, Kuyk observes that "The vision fixes in Rider's mind an aim and a pattern of action, a ritual for attaining that aim. [...] He wishes to die, to commit suicide; but in that instant he feels an "insuperable barrier" between them, between his wish to go with (Mannie) and the act of suicide' (66). The remainder of the story, then,

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<sup>128</sup> Richard Godden, *William Faulkner: An Economy of Complex Words* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 90. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.



sees Rider initiating this journey home to Mannie, crossing ‘the insuperable barrier’ which divides them into a space where Mannie no longer fades from his gaze.<sup>129</sup>

With the apparent endpoint to Rider’s life in sight, he prepares for his journey home, eating ‘cold and glutinous pease’ shortly after Mannie has gone:

The cold and lifeless mass seemed to bounce on contact with his lips. Not even warmed from mouth-heat, pease and spoon splattered and rang upon the plate; his chair crashed backward and he was standing, feeling the muscles of his jaw beginning to drag his mouth open, tugging upward from the top half of his head. But he stopped that too before it became sound, holding himself again while he rapidly scraped the food from his plate onto the other and took it up and left the kitchen[.]

(135)

Faulkner emphasises that this is food ‘which his aunt had brought yesterday and of which he had eaten yesterday though now he did not remember when he had eaten it nor what it was’ (135). Food is a cornerstone of African-American funerary traditions in the South; as

Smith notes:

The first stage of the modern African American funeral was the wake, or settin’ up, an expression dating to slavery, when mourners would “set up” all night praying and singing over the remains of the deceased. During the 1910s and 1920s, the settin’ up evolved into a more traditional wake that was held in the home of the deceased, where friends and relatives would gather to offer emotional support and home-cooked food to the grieving family as well as share cherished memories of the deceased.

(84)

By drawing attention to the aunt’s conduct (reminding readers of her plea that Rider “needs to [...] come on home and eat” [130]), Faulkner reinforces the fact that a network of family and friends wait to comfort and help Rider, willing to give him solace and sympathy for his loss, a loss which they know will adversely affect him but which they are

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<sup>129</sup> Also relevant to the issue of Rider’s “homegoing” is Arthur F. Kinney’s point in *Faulkner’s Narrative Poetics: Style as Vision* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978). Kinney argues that ‘When Mannie leaves again [...] Rider devotes his life not only to grieving for her but to finding ways of joining her’ (236). All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

willing to try and soothe.<sup>130</sup> Regardless, Rider's conduct here shows that he yet again actively subverts ordinary funeral practices by eating alone and disregarding his kin's endeavours to comfort him. In Rider's view, their sympathy is meaningless, because he adopts an affectless, final view on life in which all joy fades away with Mannie's death. The 'congealed and lifeless mass' of food 'spattered' on Rider's plate demonstrates that Rider cannot take comfort in even the necessities of life; grief overwhelms him to the extent that even his own actions seem alien to him. He experiences a sense of self-imposed dehumanisation as a result of Mannie's death, functioning (as we shall also see in Chapter Three on Quentin) on a mechanistic level, 'the muscles of his jaw beginning to drag his mouth open.' Immediately after Mannie's burial, Rider devolves from a figure of respectability and progressivism into a man who chooses to remain perpetually entrenched within his state of extreme grief, seeking no respite from his pain.<sup>131</sup>

No aspect of "Pantaloone in Black" better exemplifies the breakdown in Rider's relationships with people than his interactions with his elder relatives, his Uncle Alec and his aunt, which has been previously touched upon and which will now be explored fully. Shortly after leaving his house, Rider finds that:

His aunt's husband was waiting for him – an old man, as tall as he was, but lean, almost frail, carrying a tin pail in one hand and a covered plate in the other[.] [...] The bucket contained a fruit jar of buttermilk packed in a clean damp tow sack. The covered dish was a peach pie, still warm. "She baked hit fer you dis mawnin," the uncle said. "She say fer you to come home." He didn't answer [...] holding the pie in both hands, wolfing at it, the syrupy filling smearing and trickling down his chin, blinking rapidly as he chewed, the whites of his eyes covered a little more by the creeping red. "Ah went to yo house last night,

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<sup>130</sup> Rider's network of support is counter to the questionable motives of the community in "A Rose for Emily" when they attend Grierson's funeral. Also, the loss of those closest to Emily and Rider leads them to exhibit irrational, frenzied behaviour.

<sup>131</sup> Kübler-Ross (1969) outlines the symptoms of and meaning within extreme grief, which illuminates Rider's emotions here: 'If someone grieves, beats his chest, tears his hair, or refuses to eat, it is an attempt at self-punishment to avoid or reduce the anticipated punishment for the blame he takes on the death of a loved one' (4).

but you want dar. She sont me. She wants you to come on home. She kept de lamp burnin all last night fer you.”

“Ah’m awright,” he said.

“You aint awright. De Lawd guv, and He tuck away. Put yo faith and trust in Him. And she kin help you.”

“Whut faith and trust?” he said. “Whut Mannie ever done ter Him? Whut He wanter come messin wid me and—”

“Hush!” the old man said. “Hush!”

(138)

Faulkner deliberately introduces voices of reason and logic which attempt to bring Rider out of his profoundly mournful state, but to which Rider is reluctant to listen. Faulkner also juxtaposes the overwhelming grief that Rider experiences with the measured, poised responses of his elder relatives. A dichotomy is created between the two generations within the story, which exposes Rider as a man who, despite his ability to lead people and earn ‘good money’ (131), cannot define or handle his emotions after Mannie’s death.<sup>132</sup> Instead, he scorns and attacks those around him, casting himself further afield from those who wish to guide and comfort him. His actions widen the barrier not only between himself and those who attempt to interact and reason with him, but also between himself, Faulkner, and the readers. On the other hand, what is heavily implied in Rider’s exchange with his uncle is that his elders, who are so willing to help him, have never experienced the pain that Rider feels now. In Rider’s view, his elders have never lost loved ones in the way Rider has lost Mannie. They, as far as Rider is concerned, cannot comprehend his grief and are incapable of giving him the relief and consolation he requires. His uncle, for instance, has grown old and ‘frail’, and his wife is still living. Rider, perhaps, sees in the image of his aunt and uncle the actualisation of the future which he should have had with

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<sup>132</sup> Indeed, this disparity between different generations can be seen throughout Faulkner’s fiction, especially Emily’s interactions with Jefferson’s modern generation (as discussed in Chapter One) and Quentin Compson’s difficult relationship with his father, to be discussed in the following chapter. Also inherent in this disparity between Rider and his uncle is Faulkner’s acute awareness of differences in generational perception across races, along with the impact of socio-historical change, especially regarding issues of fledgling modernity.

Mannie but now never can. Therefore, his resentment towards his family emerges out of the loss and absence of his wife, whom he still holds dear.

Rider's hostility is manifested in his rejection of the "faith and trust" his uncle implores him to have in "De Lawd." Rider's vitriol stems from the idea that his aunt and uncle have never been the victim of "De Lawd" taking away and "messin wid" them, as Rider perceives himself to have been. Therefore, Rider renders their wisdom illusory and fallacious, and their dependence upon and belief in the folklore of the afterlife becomes a clichéd, hollow rhetoric. The words of religion and African-American funerary culture become unpalatable to Rider; he will not swallow and ingest them as he does with the food he wolfs down. As Christina Thyssen observes, 'Rider fundamentally rejects the biblical law as the reference point for subjectivity and narrative agency, an act that separates him from his community and the history of its place within the plantation.'<sup>133</sup> The old credos and doctrines (as will become apparent in Chapter Five on *As I Lay Dying*) provide cold comfort in Yoknapatawpha County.

Rider's resentment towards his kin is also manifested in the language which describes Rider's uncle: 'His aunt's husband', 'The uncle', 'The old man.' This language points towards an unacknowledged truth which is on the verge of emerging here – to Rider, his aunt and uncle never signified "home". Indeed, "home" as a location in this story and throughout *Go Down, Moses* is purposefully rendered nebulous and ambiguous,<sup>134</sup> and is at one and the same time Rider's rented house with Mannie and the spiritual location

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<sup>133</sup> Christina Thyssen, "Ah kin pass wid anything": Blackness as Figural Excess in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, *Faulkner Journal*, Volume 25, Issue 2 (Fall, 2015): 103. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>134</sup> For example, in "Go Down, Moses", Butch is depicted similarly to Rider: 'orphaned of his mother at birth, and deserted by his father, whom the grandmother had taken and raised, or tried to' (354). Also, like Rider, the relationship between Butch and Mollie is strained. Asked by a census-taker at the beginning of the story if Mollie is "still living", Butch replies: "I dont know [...] If she is, she's on Carothers Edmonds' farm seventeen miles from Jefferson" (352). As previously mentioned, the central narrative thrust of "Go Down, Moses" is for Mollie to bring Butch home for burial. Like Rider's aunt and uncle, Mollie aims to emphasise the presence of and solidify Butch's connection to "home", even after death and despite their undeniable estrangement.

which Smith and Holloway highlight. Following his encounter with Uncle Alec, Rider returns to their house, and the impression that he has of it is of a location he has not occupied since his adolescence and which evokes distant memories. '[P]assing the black-and-silver yawn of the sandy ditch where he played as a boy', he sees this house as a place which is insignificant to him now. It is not referred to as "home" by Faulkner's narration during any description given of it. The narration therefore colludes with Rider by withholding this word and refusing to apply it to this place. His aunt and uncle and their house become, in the absence of his parents, merely a 'shape to fill a lack', as Addie puts it in *As I Lay Dying*. Rider has, it is implied, never felt any rapport or connection with them, and with Mannie now gone, he erases these long-held pretences. In particular, the house is a place which has decayed and become meaningless to Rider, worthy of being discarded. He sees in the objects littered about this house (the 'empty snuff tins and rusted harness buckles' [143]) the fragmentary, distant relation he has with the rest of his family. This house is the antithesis of the home he built with Mannie – it is a place which is not laboured over but, instead, has fallen into disrepair, offering Rider no respite.

In terms of his relationship with his aunt in particular, this passage reveals another unacknowledged truth regarding his feelings towards her. As he passes 'the garden patch where he had hoed in the spring days', he recalls how she 'stood sentry over him from the kitchen window' as he went about his work in his adolescence (143). Rather than being a figure of love and warmth which she considers herself to be in Rider's life, Rider has always viewed his aunt as an authoritarian, distant figure, who never signified anything to him other than as the person who kept him at work. Faulkner makes Rider's ambivalence towards his aunt felt further when he presents her standing in 'the kitchen window' in his memories. This moment recalls Mannie's posthumous appearance by 'the kitchen door'; by contrasting the attitude Rider has towards these women in this single domestic space, Faulkner implies that the aunt is a figure Rider is repulsed and repelled by. Unlike Mannie,

she is not a figure whom he actively seeks. Neither is she the substitute mother she has cast herself as since his childhood. As far as Rider is concerned, he has never been able to put his sense of discomfort and disconnection from his family, and especially his aunt, into words. Now, however, he can make clear through his actions what he has perhaps always thought of them.

Rider's repulsion towards his aunt is exemplified further through the language of negation and refusal that is within nearly every utterance he makes during his conversation with her:

“Unc Alec say you want see me,” he said.

“Not just to see you,” his aunt said. “To come home, whar we can help you.”

“Ah’m awright,” he said. “Ah doan needs no help.”

“No,” she said. She rose from the chair and came and grasped his arm as she had grasped it yesterday at the grave. Again, as on yesterday, the forearm was like iron under her hand. “No! When Alec come back and tole me how you had wakwed off de mill and de sun not half down, Ah knowed why and whar. And that cant help you.”

“Hit done awready hope me. Ah’m awright now.”

“Dont lie to me,” she said. “You aint never lied to me. Dont lie to me now.”

(143)

In his speech and dialogue with her, Rider combats and counteracts her grasp, diminishing her desperate attempt to keep him within the grip of life itself. Her engagement with him is now tinged with an overwhelming sense of incomprehensibility, stemming from the fact that Rider, after Mannie's death, is not the man she raised and presided over during his youth. Instead, the person she is confronted with here has been profoundly changed because of his recent bereavement, to the extent that her utterances and pleas are consistently disregarded. The incomprehension she experiences is marked further because, despite Rider's lack of feeling towards her, Faulkner makes clear that the aunt genuinely loves and feels affection for him. Despite Rider's scepticism, she has a large degree of

insight into the grief he feels as she valiantly attempts to draw him back towards the centre of family and friends that await him.

This moment precipitates Rider's sole moment of self-awareness, when he admits out loud, 'without either grief or amazement' that his descent into destructive behaviours "aint done me no good" (143). Rider's self-reflection and his (apparent) acquiescence to the word of his aunt notwithstanding, with his grief continuing to bear down upon him, an element within him demands action more profound and significant than the chaos which Mannie's death has wrought. Rider feels the fundamental, yet unutterable, need to die, to 'be gone in a moment' (143). His relationship with his aunt disintegrates from the moment she implores him to call upon God for relief from his torment because "Cant nothing help you but Him! Ax Him! Tole Him about hit! He wants to hyar you and help you!" Rider replies, "Efn He God, Ah dont needs to tole Him. Efn He God He awready know hit. Awright. Hyar Ah is. Leff Him come down hyar and do me some good" (144). In part, Rider's blasphemous utterances come from his need to sever ties with his aunt before his death. He refuses to "ax Him!" because Rider, unlike his aunt, no longer feels any obligation to any ideological superstructure. As Wagner-Martin writes, Rider, 'as the child of God-fearing people, who provide both spiritual and physical succor for him [...] casts away the worldly success he has known during his brief twenty-four years: even his aunt and uncle cannot save him from himself' (141). Instead, he insists upon joining Mannie in death without any of the religious implications or punishments that such a reunion entails. Rider rejects God just as he will later reject the authority of white, Southern men. In certain instances in Faulkner's fiction, at the point of death or the passing of a loved one, all conventional and spiritual wisdom is rendered hollow. Rider's denial of God and his refusal to believe that religion can "do me some good" is the final, deathly blow he casts to vanquish his aunt's controlling presence from his life. Rider actively attempts

to nullify any claims to a home or family that are available for him in this life in order to justify his journey into the afterlife, to his home with Mannie.

### Whiteness

There is a recurrent pattern within “Pantaloons in Black”, wherein all of the white males Rider encounters and engages with are figures of authority that he, in his bereaved mindset, deliberately challenges and provokes. Floyd C. Watkins identifies a similar pattern, observing that ‘during the entire course of the story there is not one good white man or even a good word or a good action by one white man – or anything bad (without great provocation) by the black.’<sup>135</sup> For instance, the ‘unshaven white man’ Rider encounters after abandoning his shift at the mill (140), refuses to give Rider a “jug” of alcohol which he demands after he “done paid for hit” (140). In the context of Rider’s rapid descent into the chaos and anarchy within his life, the white man attempts to assert a sense of order and control upon the situation. The look the white man gives Rider, staring ‘suddenly and sharply at his eyes’ (140) is an attempt to enforce his “authority” over Rider as a white man in order to intimidate and threaten him. As Kidada E. Williams writes, ‘After slavery, white supremacists in politics, conviction, and behaviour employed various strategies to subjugate African Americans. Many black women and men challenged white people’s efforts to assert their authority over their lives, and their reactions to demonstrations of white supremacy determined whether and to what degree they experienced racialized violence.’<sup>136</sup> At the verbal level, the white man enacts this by addressing Rider as “nigger”, the use of which constitutes that word’s first appearance in the story up to this point: “Here’s your money. Put that jug down, nigger” (140). Using derogatory language to

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<sup>135</sup> Floyd C. Watkins, ‘What Stand Did Faulkner Take?’, in Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (eds.), *Faulkner and the Southern Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1982), 58.

<sup>136</sup> Kidada E. Williams, ‘Resolving the Paradox of Our Lynching Fixation: Reconsidering Racialized Violence in the American South After Slavery’, in William D. Carrigan (ed.), *Lynching Reconsidered: New Perspectives in the Study of Mob Violence* (London: Routledge, 2008), 98-99. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.



address Rider, the white man attempts to remind Rider how he and the members of his race are perceived by the white community at this point in Southern history. Such language is intended to reduce Rider from a challenging, arguably (self-)destructive figure, into an obedient, tamed subject. This idea is echoed Randall Kennedy, who notes that ‘*nigger* is a key word in the lexicon of race relations and thus an important term in American politics’, because it ‘has been a familiar part of the vocabularies of whites high and low’ and ‘has often been the calling card of so-called white trash—poor, disreputable, uneducated Euro-Americans.’<sup>137</sup> Kennedy continues: ‘Given whites’ use of *nigger*, it should come as no surprise that for many blacks the N-word has constituted a major and menacing presence that has sometimes shifted the course of their lives’ (12, italics Kennedy’s). Also, by specifically rejecting Rider’s money, the white man effectively undoes Rider’s claims to financial autonomy, which Rider demonstrated through his renovation of his house and his comparatively prosperous life with Mannie, which he knows (theoretically, at least) is his because of emancipation and Reconstruction.

With the white man’s figurative power in mind, along with Rider’s aggrieved, mournful mental state, Rider unsurprisingly refuses to acquiesce to the white man’s demands that he obey him. Instead, Rider reasserts his autonomy and his desire to be enveloped by the chaos and disorder that arises because of Mannie’s death by defiantly claiming the jug as his own: “Hit’s mine,” he said, his voice quiet [...] “Ah done paid for hit,” turning on, turning his back on the man and his gun both, and recrossed the clearing’ (140). A theme which recurs throughout the story is Rider’s obsession with and insistence upon ownership: his house, his position as head of the timber gang, and his relationship with Mannie. This fixation perhaps stems from his having been orphaned during childhood, as previously acknowledged in this chapter; having had no stable family to call

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<sup>137</sup> Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 4-9. Italics Kennedy’s. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

his own, Rider has been haunted by a feeling of dispossession since his youth. His attempts to become a self-made man and prosper in the South are overturned because of Mannie's death. Instead of taking possession of his house, wife, profession, and overall position in society, Rider must, instead, reckon with the disorder that being dispossessed of Mannie creates. He must make a virtue of his vulnerability, grief, and bereavement, which he accomplishes, in part, by continuing to take solace in self-destructive behaviours: 'gulping' the 'uncured alcohol' from the jug, 'swallowing the chilled liquid tamed of taste or heat either while the swallowing lasted, feeling it flow solid and cold with fire, past then enveloping the strong steady panting of his lungs' (141). Rider does so knowing that his approach will lead him only towards death. However, as he asserts during a subsequent encounter with his uncle, "Ah'm awready home. Ah'm snakebit now and the pizen cant hawm me'" (141). Elizabeth Fielder observes that "The reference to "snakebit" suggests that an external power has entered his system that should have the potential to kill him, but instead seems to drive his actions."<sup>138</sup> Only by acknowledging his mortality and acquiescing to the metaphorical "pizen" of the snakebite can Rider traverse this treacherous territory filled with violent white men who attempt to assert themselves over him, in order to create the context in which his death can be enacted and he can "goan home'" to Mannie in death.<sup>139</sup>

Rider's insistence upon completing his journey home leads him to Birdsong, 'the white night-watchman with the heavy pistol in his hip pocket', who is engaged in a game

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<sup>138</sup> Elizabeth Fielder, 'Faulkner's Deathways: The Race and Space of Mourning', in Eric Gary Anderson, Taylor Hagood, and Daniel Cross Turner (eds.), *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature and Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2015), 105. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>139</sup> Similarly, Thyssen writes that 'Rider follows Mannie's footsteps not in order to appropriate them into his own narrative as an effort to restore and project it onto the future but in an effort to follow her, to enter her space by exiting the narrative logic that prescribes models of identification and representation. Rider is a figure beyond mourning, or perhaps a figure of a going beyond, of abandonment from which there is no return' (104). Rider, Thyssen concludes, is 'not yet dead, but also fundamentally beyond the living in a space of liminal indistinction between so-called life and so-called death, beyond definition' (105).

of dice in a 'boiler shed' (145). The scene Rider encounters from without, 'the surge and fall of living shadow, the mutter of voices, the mute click and scutter of the dice' (145) registers that there is a reality outside of his which does not even acknowledge his grief. Instead, Rider's grief is his alone, demarcated from the white community. Mannie, his feelings for her, and their former union are insignificant to the exterior, white world, and certainly cannot be comprehended by the men in the shed. Indeed, Rider's presence here intrudes upon the secluded world of illicit gambling and rampant cheating which Birdsong and his ilk have engaged in for fifteen years: "“You're drunk,” the white man said. “Get out of here”” (145). At this stage, Rider deliberately fashions himself as a disobedient, disruptive figure, emerging unwanted and unexpectedly onto this scene. Indeed, he can be seen as a figuration of death, as the 'dead muscles of his face' that are now 'shaped into smiling while the white man stared up at him' signify (145). Rider repeatedly orders the men to ““Make room, gamblers. [...] Make room. Ah'm snakebit and de pizen cant hawm me”” (145). At this stage, Rider exhibits the stereotypical image of African-Americans which he envisages people like the white night-watchman have of people like himself. Enacting the role of the rambunctious, drunken “nigger” that men like Birdsong always already cast him as in their minds, Rider endeavours to provoke an appropriate, desired, and certainly violent reaction from Birdsong.

Rider's behaviour here, coupled with his use of 'the other six dollars of his last week's pay', casting 'the soiled and palm-worn money in front of the white man' (145-146) implies that he is now one step closer towards casting his life away, a life now as 'soiled and palm-worn' as his money and as compromised as the dice Birdsong conceals in his hand. The money, which Rider has had in abundance according to Faulkner's narration, now ceases to have any value to him because he cannot spend it on the one person who most sustained his life – Mannie. Instead, he uses the money to another, more destructive end – a pretext for entering Birdsong's dice game:

“Shoots a dollar,” he said, and cast, and watched the white man pick up the dice and flip them back to him. [...] “Ah lets hit lay,” he said, and cast, and moved as the white man moved, catching the white man’s wrist before his hand reached the dice, the two of them squatting, facing each other above the dice and the money, his left hand grasping the white man’s wrist, his face still fixed in the rigid and deadened whitening, his voice equable, almost deferential: “Ah kin pass even wid miss-outs. But dese hyar yuther boys—” until the white man’s hand sprang open and the second pair of dice clattered onto the floor beside the first two and the white man wrenched free and sprang up and back and reached the hand backward toward the pocket where the pistol was.

(146)

Through his participation in the dice game, Rider operates safely within the systems of financial autonomy that were promised to freed slaves after emancipation and Reconstruction. Yet, his subsequent violent and threatening actions (grabbing Birdsong’s wrist) radically challenges the dominant presence of white supremacy within the South. Immediately thereafter, Faulkner writes that after this:

The razor hung between his shoulder-blades from a loop of cotton string round his neck inside his shirt. The same motion of the hand which brought the razor forward over his shoulder flipped the blade open and freed it from the cord, the blade opening on until the back edge of it lay across the knuckles of his fist, his thumb pressing the handle into his closing fingers, so that in the second before the half-drawn pistol exploded he actually struck at the white man’s throat not with the blade but with a sweeping blow of his fist, following through in the same motion so that not even the first jet of blood touched his hand or arm.

(146)

In this moment, Rider becomes the snake, the predator he claimed to have been bitten by; he becomes the force of violence, threat, and menace which Birdsong, though armed with a pistol, could only pretend to be. Rider uses his considerable strength and size (described at the beginning of the story as ‘better than six feet and weighed better than two hundred pounds’ [129]) to quash the tyranny of white Southerners such as Birdsong. In doing so, Rider must be punished. As Peters writes, “The terror of the white victimiser is that his

black victim can and does think, and that the black victim's thoughts could turn into vengeful action at any moment' (87). Similarly, Hoke Perkins acknowledges that 'The recompense he finds in killing Birdsong may seem impalpable, only part of a suicidal urge, but what he is killing is the unfairness in his world, the injustice that killed Mannie, and that binds him in the straitjacket of his race's place in the South.'<sup>140</sup> Indeed, Faulkner relays the moment that Rider slashes Birdsong's throat with an extremely objective, clinical eye; his narration here is at a further remove from Rider than it has been throughout the story. There is a mechanical, robotic quality in the words which describe Birdsong's death, emphasising that Rider is performing a series of scripted gestures which culminate in the desired 'first jet of blood.' As Godden notes, by killing Birdsong, Rider 'offends murderously against the ethnic order' (106) of the South; in Bleikasten's terms, he 'countersigns his own death warrant' (312). In contrast to stories such as "Dry September" (1931) (where the guilt of Will Mayes is heavily contested by Hawkshaw) or novels such as *Light in August* (where some critics have debated whether Joe Brown is responsible for Joanna Burden's murder, rather than Joe Christmas<sup>141</sup>), Rider is explicitly guilty. He does kill Birdsong, and by doing so, Faulkner deliberately complicates the view that readers have of him. As Sandra Lee Kleppe acknowledges, 'Rider's murder of Birdsong is not a random and meaningless act of violence. It is a carefully planned manoeuvre which serves the purpose of liberating him from his bodily prison so that he may join his wife.'<sup>142</sup>

Despite Faulkner's aforementioned reluctance and 'hesitation to write black characters', as Chase notes (116), he does take at least partial responsibility for the white voices at work within the story, and is not reluctant in his unflinching exposure of the

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<sup>140</sup> Hoke Perkins, "'Ah Just Cant Quit Thinking': Faulkner's Black Razor Murderers', in Urgo and Abadie (eds.), *Faulkner and Race*, 230. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>141</sup> See, for instance, Stephen E. Meats, 'Who Killed Joanna Burden?', *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 24, Issue 3 (Summer, 1971): 271-277.

<sup>142</sup> Sandra Lee Kleppe, 'Reconstructing Faulkner's "Pantaloons in Black"', in Skei (ed.), *William Faulkner's Short Fiction*, 216.

white voices' bigotry and racism. Faulkner accomplishes this exposure, in part, because of an acute understanding of a particular subsection of lower-middle class whites within the South at this time, who still, even long after the end of slavery and Reconstruction, forcibly imposed themselves upon blacks. Therefore, Faulkner shows his awareness of the disparity in power, authority, and social standing between the races at this point in the South's history, particularly the often-violent obsession with instating white power. This aspect of Southern whiteness is concentrated in the figure of the deputy sheriff, 'who had been officially in charge of the business' of Rider's lynching after his arrest (147), to whom this chapter now turns before its end.

### **Whiteness as a form of death**

Following the murder of Birdsong and the lynching of Rider, Faulkner's narration states that:

After it was over – it didn't take long: they found the prisoner the following day, hanging from the bell-rope in a negro schoolhouse [...] and the coroner had pronounced his verdict of death at the hands of a person or persons unknown and surrendered the body to its next of kin all within five minutes – the sheriff's deputy who had been officially in charge of the business was telling his wife about it.

(147)

By being referred to as 'the prisoner', both the dehumanisation of Rider and the captivity of his frenzied grief is complete. Faulkner does not show the readers the moment of Rider's hanging, but instead merely presents the aftermath of the violence, in stark contrast to the graphic murder of Joe Christmas by Percy Grimm in *Light in August*. This is a common element within Faulkner's fiction, where, Victoria M. Bryan notes, 'as Faulkner introduces acts of violence, he turns the novel's narrative eye away from them at the moment when they take place, refocusing the reader on the aftermath of the violence by

showing them how characters react to it.<sup>143</sup> Similarly, Sarah E. Stunden argues that ‘By hiding the death from both white society and the reader, Faulkner’s unnarrated lynching dramatizes the historical practice of private lynchings that served to quell the fear that black autonomy might successfully contest white supremacy.’<sup>144</sup> At precisely the moment when the narration is at its most stoic and objective, refusing to refer to Rider by name and instead assigning functional, impersonal titles to people involved with the case (the coroners, those responsible for Rider’s death), Faulkner’s narration nonetheless does attempt to discuss Rider with a degree of dignity. Despite the savagery of the lynching itself, the image of Rider hanging silently from the bell rope can actually be interpreted as a moment of peace, calm, and a surrender to death.

Regarding the detail that the lynching was committed by ‘people or persons unknown’, this aspect of Rider’s death directly corresponds to the reality of the South in the early twentieth-century. Neil R. McMillen writes that, ‘In the most blatantly open circumstances, coroners’ juries routinely found that mob victims met “death at the hands of unknown parties.” Grand juries even when in session often took no official notice of a popular execution.’<sup>145</sup> Both the historical accounts of lynching and the story itself depict a reluctance to implicate people who committed these crimes. By passively classing Rider’s murderers as ‘persons unknown’, there is the implication that, even before the deputy begins his speech, Rider’s murderers will not face justice; instead, the ‘business’ of his death will simply be forgotten. As McMillen acknowledges, ‘Condoned, if not always openly contended by community leadership, those who took the law into their own hands had

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<sup>143</sup> Victoria M. Bryan, ‘William Faulkner in the Age of the Modern Funeral Industry’, *Southern Quarterly*, Volume 53, Issue 1 (Fall, 2015): 28. All further reference to this work are incorporated in the text.

<sup>144</sup> Sarah E. Stunden, “‘Room to Breathe’: Narrative Anachrony and Suffocation in William Faulkner’s “Pantaloon in Black””, *Faulkner Journal*, Volume 25, Issue 2 (Fall, 2015): 59. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>145</sup> Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 272. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

little to fear from local authorities' (238). Indeed, the nonchalance with which the verdict of death is decreed and the rapidity with which Rider's body is released suggests that, to people in governmental authority and power, his death is not a profound tragedy but, instead, a commonality, a case to be closed swiftly before moving onto more pressing matters. The sheriff's department gladly allows this episode of vigilante justice to go unpunished – there will be no justice for Rider or any persecution of these people. From this perspective, the law always cooperates with white vigilante justice. This is especially because, as the deputy acknowledges, the Birdsong clan cast ““forty-two active votes”” to help elect the sheriff, Maydew, to his position of power (148). As Skei acknowledges, ‘the sheer manpower of the Birdsongs indicates that the law enforcers are reluctant to protect their prisoner when they have arrested him. They know that the Birdsong people will come and claim their kind of justice, and the sheriff and his deputy are not likely to make much resistance’ (133). In this story, Faulkner implies that lynching goes far beyond any morally sanctioned form of corporeal punishment. Lynching, Faulkner appears to argue, goes against every edict of decency and humanity in the United States, far beyond any morally sanctioned form of corporeal punishment. Faulkner seems to be rallying against this perverse, grotesque form of justice in the story, which overthrows legal authority and allows vigilante justice to prevail.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> I hesitate to ascribe to Faulkner a complete disavowal of lynching practices because, as Neil R. McMillen and Noel Polk have discussed, there exists a letter, purportedly written by Faulkner in 1931, which McMillen and Polk characterise as a ‘virtual defence of lynching as an instrument of justice.’ The letter responds to W.H. James’s letter regarding the necessity to ‘fight the evils of lynching.’ Within his letter, Faulkner states that ‘the people of the black race who get lynched are not representative of the black race, just as the people who lynch them are not representative of the white race. [...] Lynching is an American trait, characteristic.’ Though Faulkner states that ‘It is the black man’s misfortune that he suffers’ lynching, he concludes that ‘There is one curious thing about mobs. Like our juries, they have a way of being right’ (‘Faulkner on Lynching’, *Faulkner Journal*, Volume 8, Issue 1 [Fall, 1992]: 3-15). Seen in the context of this letter, the horrifying implication is that Rider’s lynching not only reflects the predominant socio-historical reality African-Americans faced at this point in Southern history. Instead, his death also implies that he deserved vigilante punishment. One could also infer that, to Faulkner, Rider and all the African-Americans who are lynched in his works were justifiably murdered.



Upon being introduced into the story, the deputy appears to have all that Rider does not: he is with his wife in their kitchen, relating Rider's story to her. Initially, therefore, the readers have the sense that the deputy has a complete marital unit and domestic harmony. However, there is a common trend within much of the scholarship on the story, wherein critics are inclined to misread the deputy and his intentions. Critics typically explain the frenzy of his speech, which Faulkner characterises as resulting from sleep deprivation,<sup>147</sup> as a means of sympathising with Rider and displaying implicit, unacknowledged revulsion at his lynching. Cleanth Brooks, for instance, argues that 'the deputy sheriff's function is not to call attention to himself or even to what he represents, but to provide a means for our understanding.'<sup>148</sup> Likewise, Kinney insists that 'The deputy is Faulkner's strongest and finest portrait of the poor white who struggles to understand a world that cultural stereotypes and racial prejudice have forever closed to him. [...] At the same time Faulkner insists we understand what it is to be a black in a white society, he is also insisting that we get inside a white man whose every instinct is right but whose breeding has closed the door to sufficient understanding' (1996, 111). Elsewhere, Kinney asserts that 'The deputy is not just voicing bewilderment – the recognition that his white culture has taught him that black men are not really human, when everything he lists suggests the humanity that characterizes Rider and that, moreover, seems to bond the two men. The deputy is not arguing with himself. He does not want to be black. He wants to understand. He is not black. He is compassionate' (2005/2006, 26). Perkins offers a further misreading of the deputy by arguing that he 'is not merely educable, he is in a state of near empathy. His story is told obsessively, and I believe he feels honest anguish [...] over his

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<sup>147</sup> The deputy, Faulkner writes, 'had been out of bed and in motion ever since the jail delivery shortly before midnight and had covered considerable ground since, and he was spent now from lack of sleep and hurried food at hurried curious hours, and sitting in a chair beside the stove, a little hysterical too' (147)

<sup>148</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 255.

lifelong misapprehension of blacks' (232). Finally, Noel Polk makes a similar misstep when he writes that, in relation to 'America's racial problems', Faulkner 'tried to force us, like that deputy, at least to understand that we had not been asking the right questions.'<sup>149</sup> Despite offering a more reasonable assessment than the other critics cited here, Polk's view is not fully convincing because it does not appear that the deputy comprehends the point being made in the manner Polk argues that he does. In large part, the critical consensus on the deputy is, I suggest, incorrect. Instead, I argue that the deputy's 'hysterical' speech is, in part, a summation of all the hysterical, irrational fears whites had about blacks at this period in Southern history.

The deputy's primary speech function is to fully relate the death of Rider. Death forms the foundation of their interaction. By centring his speech upon Rider's lynching and death (which even Faulkner's narration refused to do), and in a manner which wilfully misunderstands and misrepresents Rider and his actions, the deputy becomes an example of Richard Dyer's argument that "Trying to think about the representation of an ethnic category [...] is difficult, partly because white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be about anything in particular, but also because, when whiteness *qua* whiteness does come into focus, it is often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial or even a kind of death' (44). Where Rider's behaviour was marked by disorder, disintegration, and brute force, the deputy here seeks to enforce a sense of order and logic to the chaos that Rider's actions represent, as did the white foreman. Rider's dysfunction only becomes worth acknowledging after he murders a white man and not out of sympathy that his grief over Mannie's death engenders. Furthermore, the deputy's speech functions to fill the narrative gap of Rider's lynching within Faulkner's narration. The deputy's words explicitly bring the moment of Rider's death into the text through his presence. As Susan V. Donaldson

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<sup>149</sup> Noel Polk, *Children of the Dark House: Text and Context in Faulkner* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 241. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

notes, ‘it is the deputy, after all, who sums up the white perspective of Rider’s grief and relates the seemingly inevitable outcome of Rider’s rebellion – a lynching.’<sup>150</sup>

The deputy’s speech begins thus:

“Them damn niggers,” he said. “I swear to godfrey, it’s a wonder we have as little trouble with them as we do. Because why? Because they aint human. They look like a man and they walk on their hind legs like a man, and they can talk and you can understand them and you think they are understanding you, at least now and then. But when it comes to the normal human feelings and sentiments of human beings, they might as well just be a damn herd of wild buffaloes. Now you take this one today –”

(147)

The deputy takes Rider, an individual subject, and uses his specific situation to speak for all African-Americans. The deputy only sees African-Americans as a racially inferior subspecies. He lacks a depth of insight into human conditions or traumatic emotions such as grief and bereavement, and he certainly cannot comprehend that these emotions apply to African-Americans. Through the bigotry and racism inherent in his every word at the beginning of his speech, the deputy corresponds to a point Dyer makes elsewhere: ‘as long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.’<sup>151</sup> Subsequently, Dyer says that ‘There is no more powerful position than that of being “just human.” The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can’t do that – they only speak for their race’ (1997, 2). Dyer’s argument culminates in his assertion that ‘At the level of racial representation, in other words, whites are not of a certain race, they’re just the human race’ (1997, 3). As per Dyer’s argument, the deputy always already assumes his superiority over black people and cannot

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<sup>150</sup> Susan V. Donaldson, ‘Contending Narratives: *Go Down, Moses* and the Short Story Cycle’, in Evans Harrington and Ann J. Abadie (eds.), *Faulkner and the Short Story* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 145.

<sup>151</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

differentiate between Rider and other people of colour – they are all inhuman, in his view.<sup>152</sup>

The deputy's belief in and perpetuation of his abhorrent views goes against what Faulkner has attempted to show throughout the story: touched by his profound grief, Rider exhibits violence because of his profoundly human depth of emotion, which Jenkins also highlights by claiming that 'The more his sensitive nature is tormented by his loss, the more he appears only a crude unfeeling brute' (252). However, the deputy cannot see this, because his whiteness metaphorically blinds him to the extent that his speech is as barbaric and savage as he condemns African-Americans as being.<sup>153</sup> Through his speech, the deputy indicts himself as a narrator and a law-enforcer, incapable of displaying any real insight into African-American behaviours and culture. Rather than being "a damn herd of wild buffaloes", the African-Americans Faulkner presents his readers with throughout

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<sup>152</sup> As a point of comparison to Dyer, in her essay 'Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination', bell hooks contends that 'black folks have from slavery on shared in conversations with one another "special" knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people [...] to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society', a strategy which has caused whites to be viewed as 'the white Other.' 'Black people, especially those living during the historical period of racial apartheid and legal segregation', hooks writes, 'have similarly maintained steadfast and ongoing curiosity about the "ghosts," the "barbarians," these strange apparitions they were forced to serve.' In similar terms to Dyer (whom hooks cites), she states: 'In white supremacist society, white people can "safely" imagine that they were invisible to black people since the power they have historically asserted, and even now collectively assert over black people, accorded them the right to control the black gaze.' This strategy leads to white society 'denying the subjectivity of blacks' and 'relegating them to the realm of the invisible' (in hooks's *Black Looks: Race and Representation* [Boston: South End Press, 1992], 165-178).

<sup>153</sup> Sentiments similar to the deputy's here can be found in, for example, Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) (in *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by G.R. Thompson [New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004], 429-563). Following a skirmish with 'the party of Too-wit (the whole hundred and ten savages of the canoes)' (531), Pym describes these tribespeople as 'the most barbarous, subtle, and blood-thirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe' (538). Pym's derision of them is such that he declares: 'When I now think of our egregious folly, the chief subject of astonishment seems to be, that we should have ever ventured [...] so completely into the power of unknown savages' (539). Pym's final assessment of the people of Too-wit is that they are 'the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, bloodthirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe' (556). The underlying, irrefutably racist implication in both the deputy's speech and Pym's narration is that the behaviour of the 'savage' is beyond all reason and humanity. Therefore, the dehumanisation and defeat of the racialised Other is necessary, because to do so is to not only to assert one's whiteness, but, by extension, to affirm one's humanity.

“Pantaloon in Black” (and, indeed, throughout his fiction) are clearly in communication with “the normal human feelings and sentiments of human beings”, which is best exemplified by the conduct of Rider’s aunt and uncle, and, of course, Rider himself. The deputy refuses to acknowledge the humanity of African-Americans in general, and Rider and his family in particular; ironically, in consequence, the deputy “‘might as well be a damn wild buffalo’” because of his ignorance.<sup>154</sup>

The deputy continues: “His wife dies on him. All right. But does he grieve? He’s the biggest and busiest man at the funeral. Grabs a shovel before they even got the box into the grave they tell me, and starts throwing dirt onto her faster than a slip scraper could have done” (148). As I have attempted to make clear throughout this chapter, Rider is consumed by his grief. The deputy’s subsequent questioning of his emotions, then, exhibits the extent to which Rider’s crime of killing Birdsong, a white man, colours and perverts the deputy’s perception and judgement of him. From the deputy’s perspective, Rider killed Birdsong, committed a heinous crime against a member of the white, “master” race, and so therefore he must be condemned, killed, and forever spoken of in the harshest, most dehumanising terms. Rider’s actions have directly challenged white supremacy, which must always be upheld and defended, through the enactment of lynching itself. As Williams outlines: ‘Emancipation inaugurated a dialectic struggle for white supremacy and black advancement and survival in which the two races clashed daily for power and authority’:

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<sup>154</sup> Numerous critical views accord with my argument here. Bleikasten (2017) states ‘The inhumanity’ within the story ‘is not that of “them damn niggers” but that of the white man who flatters himself by thinking of himself as normal and, to an even greater extent, that of Rider’s lynch mob’ (312). Stunden observes that “Throughout the deputy’s dialogue, all traces of Rider as an autonomous and deliberate agent have been removed and replaced with a rhetoric of animality that shows Rider as inhuman. [...] The original meanings inherent in Rider’s killing of Birdsong are replaced with a culturally constructed text of “black man as animal”’ (63). Finally, Wagner-Martin states that Rider’s actions are ‘Incomprehensible to the white man of law’, and that his ‘willingness to give up his life (in order to both stifle his grief and rejoin Mannie), his willingness to opt out of the American Dream, is described by this observer as inhuman [...] Faulkner’s irony makes clear his views about the shallowness of the judgements some whites make about some blacks, and returns the reader to the authorial comment at the burial scene’ (141).

‘Southern whites eventually settled on lynching, formal segregation, and disenfranchisement when everyday violence – the individualized and collective incidents of rape, whipping, assaults, deportations, detentions, and shootings – failed to yield the desired results’ (98-99). By demonstrating the deputy’s profound misunderstanding of both Rider as a subject and his role as a husband, Faulkner shows how the deputy’s misapprehension is inevitable when an outside perspective (that is, at its core, unsympathetic and deliberately critical) utilises its privileged speech to pass misjudgement upon a situation it never fully comprehends. As Dyer argues:

White people have power and believe that they think, feel, and act like and for all people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people’s; white people create the dominant images of the world and don’t quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image; white people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail.  
(1997, 9)

The deputy crosses into sensitive territory, which even Faulkner, as the controlling narrator, dares not. Indeed, there is a clear shift in power between the narrator in Rider’s section and the deputy’s speech here, which brings the focus of this thesis back into the territory advanced in its reading of “A Rose for Emily” in Chapter One. The deputy sheriff engages in burying this fallen monument of agonized grief, just as the narrator of Emily’s story engaged in burying a fallen monument of Old Southern culture.

The deputy continues:

“So he comes to work, the first man on the job, when McAndrews and everybody else expected him to take the day off since even a nigger couldn’t want no better excuse for a holiday than he had just buried his wife, when even a white man would have took the day off out of pure respect no matter how he felt about his wife, when even a little child would have had sense enough to take the day off when he would still get paid for it too. But not him.”  
(148-149)

The deputy explicitly judges Rider by white funerary standards here, projecting onto him what an average “white man” would do in this situation. The deputy makes a judgement about the virtue of white funerary customs as opposed to the supposedly callous nature of African-American mourning practices. The deputy revels in his ignorance: his identification with his white racial identity becomes the medium through which he delivers his judgemental message about Rider. His whiteness blanches his entire conception of Rider, from his behaviour at Mannie’s funeral, to his return to work, through to his leaving ‘the job in the afternoon without a by-your-leave or much obliged or goodbye’ (149). All of Rider’s behaviour and actions are filtered through the deputy’s extremely prejudiced white gaze, and all of his speech seems to justify Rider’s eventual death. To the deputy, Rider’s conduct renders him both a self-fulfilling prophesy and a menace which threatens the security of Jefferson’s white community. After leaving work, the deputy says, Rider ‘gets himself a whole gallon of bust-skull white-mule whiskey [...] goes straight to the same game where he has been peacefully losing a probably steady average ninety-nine per cent of his pay [...] and cuts Birdsong’s throat clean to the neckbone five minutes later’ (143). Here, the deputy does not question either Rider’s awareness of the racist stereotyping at play within Birdsong’s milieu or the destructive element within these games of crooked dice. The deputy cannot acknowledge either the illegitimacy of Birdsong’s practices or the crimes perpetuated by the dominant members of the white race against blacks in the South, because to do so would be antithetical to his position as a working-class, white Southern deputy. Rider’s conduct disrupts the deputy’s acceptance of African-Americans suffering at the hands of crooked whites. The deputy’s views are so saturated with the values of white supremacy that he does not consider whether Birdsong deserved punishment because of the adverse effect that years of cheating these workers out of their financial earnings would have had on them. The deputy does not acknowledge Birdsong’s guilt, only Rider’s guilt for having murdered him.

Following Birdsong's death, the deputy and the sheriff, Maydew, "go by Rider's house": "[A]nd there he is. Sitting behind the barred front door with an open razor on one knee and a loaded shotgun on the other? No. He was asleep" (149). The sight of Rider sleeping challenges the deputy's assumption and expectation of the frenzied, wild "nigger" which Rider is described as being prior to their encounter here, and which his murder of Birdsong implies. Instead, the scene upon which the deputy and Maydew enter suggests that Rider is contented and relaxed, with the brutality of the previous night now (seemingly) vanquished. Arguably, Rider is cognisant of the fact that he is about to die, as implied by his ready admission to his crime when he awakens: "Awright, white folks. Ah done it. Jest dont lock me up" (150). Rider confesses so freely in the hope that he will be hastened towards his punishment and death. This explains his insistence that he not be locked up, because to be held in captivity would delay the inevitable, desired outcome of having killed Birdsong to begin with – joining Mannie in death. Imprisonment would delay this reunion, keeping Mannie waiting. Rider, therefore, exhibits an acceptance of and acquiescence to death, which again signals the central argument of this thesis. Nonetheless, Rider's composure also reinforces the abhorrence of his act from the perspective of Maydew and the deputy, making him more deserving of punishment because there seems to be an unashamed, remorseless tone to his actions and speech. Interestingly, the deputy's impression of Rider's speech is rendered in the same "pidgin-nigger" English dialect that Fanon identifies, and which abounds throughout Faulkner's oeuvre in general and this story in particular. There is a commonality in white representations of African-American voices in Faulkner's corpus that is difficult to avoid. This equivalence suggests, then, that Faulkner shared the cultural and racial prejudices and ignorance of characters such as the deputy, which, as a result, was then manifested in the white Southern voices in his fiction.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Perhaps the most notorious example of Faulkner's racial biases is in his interview with Russell Howe, conducted March, 1956. Questioned on Civil Rights, Faulkner proclaimed: 'I don't like



The analysis of the deputy now returns this chapter full circle to Rider, whom the deputy repeatedly describes as “yelling” in his cell and acting violently and erratically (his aunt, having accompanied Rider to the sheriff’s station, witnesses his behaviour):

“[T]hat nigger had done tore that iron cot clean out of the floor it was bolted to and was standing in the middle of the cell, holding the cot over his head like it was a baby’s cradle, yelling, and says to the old woman, ‘Ah aint goan hurt you,’ and throws the cot against the wall and comes and grabs holt of that steel barred door and rips it out of the wall, bricks hinges and all, and walks out of the cell toting the door over his head like it was a gauze window-screen, hollering, ‘It’s awright. It’s awright. Ah aint trying to git away.’”

(151)

Imprisoned against his wishes, Rider is forced to enact this focused violence. He neither wants a remedy (embodied by his aunt being in the cell with him as, in Maydew’s terms, “a good influence on the Birdsong boys if anything started” [150-151]) nor for his punishment to be deferred – he only wants death. It is at this stage in the present chapter’s analysis that Dyer’s theory of whiteness as a form of death reaches its fullest expression, returning the analysis to the theme of Rider’s insistence upon ownership and possession. Rider is fully aware of the cultural and racial impact that Birdsong’s murder will have on his kin, the law, and local Southern culture and society. As such, he takes advantage of what the overarching whiteness of Southern society at this moment has morphed into – a symbol of death and retribution for his having dared to murder a white man. As Skei acknowledges, ‘Rider knows exactly what he is doing, planning his own death by violence’ (131). Similarly, Thadious M. Davis notes that ‘Fuelled by his recognition of the consequences of his breaking out of the racial social codes, Rider acts aggressively, certain

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enforced integration any more than I like enforced segregation. If I have to choose between the United States government and Mississippi, then I’ll choose Mississippi. What I’m trying to do now is not to have to make that decision. As long as there’s a middle-road [...] I’ll be on it. But then if it came to fighting I’d fight for Mississippi against the United States even if that meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes. After all, I’m not going to shoot Mississippians’ (*Lion in the Garden*, 260-261).

of white retaliation and punishment for attacking a white man' (73). Rider also knows that whiteness itself has become and, indeed, is always on the verge of becoming an embodiment of death should he breach the laws of white Southern society. Furthermore, he knows that the pretence and respectability of law is rendered moot the moment that a "nigger" is found guilty of causing the death of a white person. Faulkner advanced a similar argument in *Light in August* through Percy Grimm's savage murder of Joe Christmas and the ineffectuality of law enforcement in that novel. Therefore, Rider intends to use Southern society's prejudice, bigotry, and insistence upon bloodshed when responding to black-on-white crime to his advantage, in order to die and "goan home" to Mannie.

In the end, white Southern society, embodied by both the deputy and, more significantly, his wife, is blind to the meaning of Rider's action. In the final sentence of the story, the deputy's wife, after being asked for her thoughts on Rider's story, simply says: "I think if you eat any supper in this house you'll do it in the next five minutes [...] I'm going to clear this table and then I'm going to the picture show" (152). To both the deputy and his wife, Rider's tragedy is trivial; his insistence upon "goan home" to Mannie is simply beyond their comprehension. Rider is, in their view, just another dead "nigger." As far as the deputy is concerned, he embodies the dysfunction of the law in the South at the time, which his wife acknowledges when she berates him, saying "You sheriffs! Sitting around that courthouse all day long, talking. It's no wonder two or three men can walk in and take prisoners out from under your very noses" (148). Substantively, the deputy's wife is correct – Faulkner introduces the deputy into the story sitting around and talking, having apparently learned little from Rider's situation, and exhibiting no sense that he will apply any new insights from this experience to future circumstances. The deputy has not reached an epiphanic moment because of Rider's death by the story's end, nor will he be able to prevent future lynchings from happening. The law will continue to be violated because of this deeply faulty law presence in Jefferson. The deputy's speech reveals what happens

when a black man in a majority white, racist Southern state oversteps the boundaries established by white people. His speech gives voice to a powerfully felt cultural belief that death at the hands of a lynch mob is the final, fatal, necessary consequence of blacks being disobedient and insubordinate to their white “superiors.”

### Chapter Three

#### **The word that Quentin cannot say: Suicide in *The Sound and the Fury***

Whereas Emily Grierson battled ardently against the narrator and their community's insistence upon coercing her into 'saying Yes to death' in "A Rose for Emily", Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* actively seeks his own erasure, like Rider in the previous chapter. Accordingly, this chapter explores Quentin's first-person speech as he readies himself to commit suicide by drowning on June Second, 1910, an act which Andrew Bennett calls 'the central event' of the novel.<sup>156</sup> Faulkner incorporates numerous muted references to death into Quentin's speech from its beginning, such as the description of time as 'the mausoleum of all hope and desire.'<sup>157</sup> A palpable despondency characterises Quentin's tone of voice, and this chapter argues that Quentin deliberately expresses himself in a mechanised, affectless manner, similar to Rider's all-encompassing enactment of his grief. In Dorrit Cohn's words, Quentin uses 'sober reportorial language' to illustrate his metaphorically lifeless existence.<sup>158</sup> Also, like Rider, Quentin invokes death upon himself and ultimately surrenders to it. Unlike Rider, however, Quentin has the opportunity to express his thoughts about death in the first-person, in his own words, and can communicate his meaning with greater articulacy and clarity than Rider possesses.

This chapter draws upon a range of secondary materials on voice, speech-acts, and suicide. It relies upon Mikhail Bakhtin's influential work, specifically the concepts of heteroglossia and double-voiced discourse. Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as the incorporation of 'another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way':

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<sup>156</sup> Andrew Bennett, *Suicide Century: Literature and Suicide from James Joyce to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 55. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>157</sup> William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, edited by Michael Gorra (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 50-51. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>158</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 251.

Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse. It serves two narrators at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions.<sup>159</sup>

As a result, Bakhtin says, ‘Double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized. [...] A potential dialogue is embedded in them, one as yet unfolded, a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages’ (324-325). Bakhtin’s work enables the analysis in this chapter to focus substantially on Quentin’s incorporation of external voices into his speech, building upon the arguments of critics such as Stephen M. Ross, whose view on the use and function of these voices differs from Bakhtin’s outline of the homologous voice. Ross notes that ‘the vocal imagery and the nature of remembered dialogue most clearly define the quality of Quentin’s relationship with other people’; ‘Like a listener’, Ross writes, ‘Quentin allows others’ words to formulate his subjective life for him, passively absorbing experiences that he should actively engage in’ (1989, 181).

From the literature on suicide, this chapter is influenced by Émile Durkheim’s *On Suicide* (1897), which defines suicide as ‘the name given to any death that results indirectly or directly from a positive or negative act by the victim him- or herself.’<sup>160</sup> In terms of the intersection between suicide and language, this chapter is indebted to the work of David Daube, who observes that ‘no language [...] has a genuinely separate word for suicide, a word neither a composite nor receiving the sense from an added specification. (“Suicide” itself is, of course, a composite of “self” and “killing.”)’<sup>161</sup> Though ‘English’, Daube opines, ‘has genuinely separate words for loving, drinking, dressing’, he claims there is ‘no separate

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<sup>159</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Discourse and the Novel’, *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist and translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 324. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>160</sup> Émile Durkheim, *On Suicide*, translated by Robin Buss (London: Penguin, 2006), 17. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>161</sup> David Daube, ‘The Linguistics of Suicide’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Volume 1, Issue 4 (Summer, 1972): 390. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

word for suicide' (390). 'To describe the act, Daube states, 'you must employ a word of wider range and qualify it so as to arrive at your meaning' because 'the words denoting (suicide) are always qualifications of others, mostly either "to die" or "to kill." Suicide, that is, is exhibited as a dying, a killing, with a twist' (390). Also, this chapter acknowledges the work of Albert Camus. Camus's statements that 'many people die because they judge life not worth living' and that 'others paradoxically die for ideas and illusions that give them a reason for living' inform the chapter's argument that Quentin's fate is due to numerous idealised 'illusions', including the sexual purity of his younger sister, Caddy, and the adverse effect of Southern masculine gender roles on his life.<sup>162</sup> Finally, this chapter is informed by the work of Al Alvarez, who notes that 'A serious suicide is an act of choice, the terms of which are entirely those of this world; a man dies by his own hand because he thinks the life he has not worth living.'<sup>163</sup> However, Alvarez also highlights that, from a socio-cultural perspective, suicide is often considered to go 'against the most basic of instincts, that of self-preservation' (74). These observations are useful in showing that Quentin's voice and speech is influenced by Southern society's prejudices and anxieties towards death by one's own hand.

Quentin's suicide has informed a significant aspect of the criticism on the novel.

Arthur A. Brown, for example, neatly summarises Quentin's narration thus:

Quentin's narration takes place on the day of his death. Unlike his brothers, who are either less able or less dramatic than he, Quentin imposes his actual death onto his symbolic one. He insists upon living out the meaning of his life—or on denying the meaninglessness of it—by killing himself. In other words, he insists on holding himself responsible for Caddy's loss of virginity and on stopping time, which, according to his father, reduces all human actions to absurdity.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, translated by Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2000), 11-12.

<sup>163</sup> Al Alvarez, *The Savage God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), 74. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>164</sup> Arthur A. Brown, 'Benjy, the reader, and Death: at the fence in *The Sound and the Fury*', *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 48, Issue 3 (June, 1995): 409.

William H. Rueckert pointedly states that ‘the central fact about Quentin is his suicide, his self-destruction. He escapes his various entrapments by this means.’<sup>165</sup> Others, like Donald M. Kartiganer, argue that Quentin’s ‘act of suicide is his supreme creation, his tour de force.’<sup>166</sup> Kartiganer contextualises his view by referencing ‘the Faulknerian sense of implying art more perfectly accomplished than profound’, positing that ‘The lack of profundity is exactly the point, for Quentin’s final gesture is the triumph of a real action emptying itself of its reality’ (87). Recent critics like Heather Fox partly follow Kartiganer’s line of inquiry, writing that Quentin’s ‘suicide resembles a carefully constructed last act from a tragic play; but instead of returning to the stage once the curtain closes, Quentin’s final performance relegates his physical presence to a physical absence at the narrative’s end.’<sup>167</sup> Similarly, Agnieszka Kaczmarek notes that: ‘With his elegiac language, Quentin Compson visualizes beforehand the act of self-destruction. He anticipates his actions and the impressions that he believes will take place shortly before and at the moment of his demise.’<sup>168</sup>

Nathaniel A. Miller introduces a cultural dimension to Quentin’s suicide, arguing that Quentin ‘approaches the fantastical unity of suicide by not enacting a cultural logic of modernity, but rather by meticulously enacting his version of his historical roles, the logic of Southern honour.’<sup>169</sup> In contrast to Miller, however, Erin E. Edwards writes that Quentin’s ‘suicide represents a symbolic refusal to return to the South and assume the

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<sup>165</sup> William H. Rueckert, *Faulkner from Within: Destructive and Generative Being in the Novels of William Faulkner* (West Lafayette: Parlor Press, 2004), 42. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>166</sup> Donald M. Kartiganer, “‘Now I Can Write’: Faulkner’s Novel of Invention”, in Noel Polk (ed.), *New Essays on The Sound and the Fury* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 87.

<sup>167</sup> Heather Fox, ‘A Circlin’ Buzzard: Positioning in Quentin’s Narrative’, *Faulkner Journal*, Volume 27, Issue 1 (Spring, 2013): 65. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>168</sup> Agnieszka Kaczmarek, *Little Sister Death: Finitude in William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013), 151. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>169</sup> Nathaniel A. Miller, “‘Felt, Not Seen Not Heard’: Quentin Compson, Modernist Suicide and Southern History”, *Studies in the Novel*, Volume 37, Issue 1 (Spring, 2005): 48. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

patriarchal position that is expected of him.<sup>170</sup> While this chapter takes all these viewpoints into account, it also deviates from traditional readings of the novel by not locating one overriding, concrete reason for Quentin's suicide, and therefore does not place any single reason at the forefront of its analysis. Instead, the chapter initially aims to show that Quentin's fate relies upon a number of often contradictory though nonetheless interconnected reasons, ranging from his incestuous desires for Caddy, his own violent tendencies, and the corrosive influence of exterior voices, among several others.<sup>171</sup> As Michael C. Kearl acknowledges, 'Suicides are ambivalent and dyadic: they reflect contradictory feelings and attitudes towards one's relationship with others.'<sup>172</sup> Therefore, as Moller states, 'An understanding of why human beings kill themselves may never be fully attained. The personal and sociocultural factors of suicide, taken individually and in combination, are so complex that it would be impossible to arrive at a definitive explanation' (171).

### **June Second, 1910: Morning – An affectless voice**

As its heading states, Quentin's chapter takes place entirely on June Second, 1910, the very day he plunges into the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts.<sup>173</sup> Quentin's decision

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<sup>170</sup> Erin E. Edwards, *The Modernist Corpse: Posthumanism and the Posthumous* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 74. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>171</sup> Rueckert argues that 'The novel is more about loss, decline, anguish, and suffering, as conditions in the Compson Family, than it is about the causes of them. If it were about causes', he wagers, 'Caddy would not be the mystery at the center of the novel, nor would so much of the novel be concerned with the refraction of her through the consciousness of others' (37).

<sup>172</sup> Michael C. Kearl, *Endings: A Sociology of Death and Dying* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 138. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>173</sup> Jerre Collins acknowledges an interesting aspect of the timing of Quentin's suicide: 'Quentin aims at a kind of fusion of horizons or historical resonance by choosing to die on or just before Jefferson Davis's birthday, June 3. [...] If the hour is midnight then he dies on June 3, but in any case he dies within a few hours of midnight. In choosing the time of his suicide Quentin associates himself with the failure of the South (in losing the Civil War) and with the hero of that failure, and attempts to assimilate his personal fate to the communal destiny of the South' ('Time After Time: The Temporality of Human Existence in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*', in Anne-Teresa Tymieniecka [ed.], *Existence, Historical Fabulation, Destiny* [Dordrecht: Springer, 2009], 264. All further reference to this work are incorporated into the text). In an accompanying footnote, Collins asserts that 'Even if Quentin dies before midnight, the close association with the birthday of the hero of the South's failure could not be accidental. No Southerner would be unaware of the date



to commit suicide is firmly in his mind from the moment his day begins; he communicates this to his readers in two primary ways – his affectless speech, and the actions he performs shortly after waking up:

When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight oclock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch [...] It was propped against the collar box and I lay listening to it [...] I got up and went to the dresser and slid my hand along it and touched the watch and turned it face-down and went back to bed.

(50)

Faulkner immediately establishes Quentin's vocal style as a mechanical transcription of events by characterising his speech as largely unembellished, with the significant exception of the various voices he absorbs into his consciousness. This style mirrors the 'mechanical hands on an arbitrary dial which is a symptom of mind-function' that Quentin notes his father once compared to the movement of a clock (51). Ineke Bockting similarly notes that 'the repeated parataxis gives this passage a certain mechanical quality.'<sup>174</sup> Faulkner's authorial technique when presenting Quentin here thus complements Quentin's own resolve to commit suicide, because it soon becomes clear that he has reached a decision to die long before June Second. André Bleikasten writes that 'when Quentin records "present" actions and perceptions, he often uses strings of one-unit kernel sentences.'<sup>175</sup> Bleikasten then says that 'it is probably not mere chance that makes (Quentin) choose the most passive form of death: death by water. His suicide, however well prepared, is less an act of will, a free decision than an entranced surrender' (1976, 118). Bleikasten is partly

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of Jefferson Davis's birthday' (277, footnote 4). For an earlier examination of the implications behind Quentin dying on Davis's birthday, see Arthur Geffen, 'Profane Time, Sacred Time, and Confederate Time in *The Sound and the Fury*', *Studies in American Fiction*, Volume 2, Issue 2 (Autumn, 1974): 175-197.

<sup>174</sup> Ineke Bockting, *Character and Personality in the Novels of William Faulkner: A Study in Psychostylistics* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), 61. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>175</sup> André Bleikasten, *The Most Splendid Failure: Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 92. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

correct in his assertions, but this chapter seeks to adopt, develop, and ultimately challenge his argument regarding Quentin's active engagement with death as an 'entranced surrender.' Quentin does attempt to willingly acquiesce and 'say Yes to death', but is hindered by societal norms at various stages. The simplicity with which Quentin describes hearing his roommate 'Shreve's bed-springs and then his slippers on the floor hissing' (51), for example, implies that he merely transitions through life, describing what he sees and hears. In passages like these, he displays a profound indifference and disconnection towards life, feelings which manifest through his subdued mode of speech; he has, it appears, already accepted and embraced his death, and is past the point of anxiety or fear. Quentin, therefore, mirrors Moller's outline of suicidal tendencies amongst young persons: 'Suicide is seldom a totally impulsive, unpremeditated act. Rather, the road to suicide passes through many preliminary options and alternatives. The young person turns to suicide when other attempted solutions fail' (193).

Indeed, the extent to which Quentin purposefully disengages with life complicates the idea of whether his chapter is actually spoken with active or intended readers in mind. As Quentin's affectless, passive voice implies, it is possible that he is merely speaking to himself, while ritualistically preparing for death, in order to make his decision to die all the more definite and real. Shortly after waking up, for example, Quentin records the following:

I went to the dresser and took up the watch, with the face still down. I tapped the crystal on the corner of the dresser and caught the fragments of glass in my hand and put them into the ashtray and twisted the hands off and put them in the tray. The watch ticked on. I turned the face up, the blank dial with little wheels clicking and clicking behind it[.]  
(53)

The unexpected act of smashing the watch is, in itself, the first of many destructive or self-destructive acts that Quentin performs, and these escalate in severity as his day progresses. At the same time, the absence of any response from Quentin towards exterior stimuli

shows the extent of his desensitisation and depersonalisation from life. 'The same affectless style of voice is used when Quentin describes the minutiae of events occurring moment-by-moment, such as when he notices 'a red smear on the dial' of the watch: 'When I saw it my thumb began to smart. I put the watch down and went into Shreve's room and got the iodine and painted the cut. I cleaned the rest of the glass out of the rim with a towel' (53). By describing the injury on his thumb as simply 'the cut', rather than providing any detailed responses to his pain, Quentin implies that his suicidal mindset renders him incapable of registering or describing even the most conventional human responses to the outside world. Instead, he engages in a self-imposed form of alienation from life, as with Rider and Emily. Daniel J. Singal observes that Quentin's 'body is so detached from his consciousness that he doesn't even realise when he cuts himself by breaking the crystal on his grandfather's watch. Not until he finally notices the blood he has shed, allowing himself to conceptualize what has happened, does he experience pain.'<sup>176</sup> The act of cutting himself with the watch's broken glass is, therefore, a subdued, almost subliminal form of self-harm.

Quentin exhibits further signs of his willed alienation from life through his organisation of his personal effects: 'I laid out two suits of underwear, with socks, shirts, collars and ties, and packed my trunk. I put in everything except my new suit and an old one and two pairs of shoes and two hats, and my books' (53). Quentin simply glosses over his motives for organising these belongings, cataloguing and stowing them away as if to suggest that they are no longer significant to him. Indeed, he feels no attachment towards nor ownership for these items because, to him, they are now merely objects which he will never use again. Quentin erases any connection he has to them in order to be primed solely towards suicide and the finality of his death. He also performs these acts alone and in silence, secluding himself from the world around him. As Jerre Collins notes, 'What ties

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<sup>176</sup> Daniel J. Singal, *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 28.

these for the most part ordinary but puzzling actions into a meaningful configuration, what gives them their intelligibility or “readability,” is Quentin’s intention to commit suicide. This intention is not mundane, however’ (262).<sup>177</sup> Quentin’s cold, clinical distance from these belongings recalls Durkheim’s argument that, in the lead-up to suicide, ‘the subject disconnects himself from the object and removes himself from it in order to return into himself’ (308). It is precisely this ‘return to the self’ which justifies the idea that all the actions Quentin performs at the start of his chapter are part of a self-performed funerary ritual.

These acts culminate in his bathing and shaving (54) and are intensified through his depersonalised tone of voice. Therefore, Quentin supplements his desire and readiness for death, purifying himself because, as Bleikasten observes, purity is an important issue for him: ‘In Quentin’s daily behaviour [...] concern for purity and impurity is reflected by a magic need for order and cleanliness. [...] At no moment, however, is his preoccupation with cleanliness and order more conspicuous than during the elaborate preparations for his suicide’ (1976, 101). Bleikasten continues: ‘Quentin is determined to leave everything in impeccable order. His death, at least, shall leave no mess. As if to reassert *in extremis* the aristocratic code he failed to live by, he wants his exit to be a gentleman’s’ (1976, 102). As this chapter will examine, Quentin’s need to display Southern masculinity of the kind that Bleikasten identifies, along with his insistence upon alienating himself from those around him at home in the South and away at Harvard in the North, causes him to feel as if he has nobody to perform his burial ritual. As such, he organises and enacts it himself, treating himself with the respect, pomp, and circumstance that he feels nobody else ever did, especially Caddy because of her rejection of his incestuous desires for her. According to

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<sup>177</sup> Collins also says that ‘These mundane actions are puzzling to the reader because Quentin’s intention to commit suicide remains unexpressed in the Quentin section of the novel. It is not until the next section that we learn that Quentin has committed suicide. At that point, and all at once, much of the action of the Quentin section “makes sense” (277, footnote 3).

Irene Visser, 'Quentin's long liminal rite demonstrates his absolute rejection of social connectivity, and his willingness to accept the violence and pain of a lonely crossing.'<sup>178</sup> His voice, speech-acts, and overall behaviour throughout his chapter highlight Karen Ann Butery's point that 'as an adult, he copes with life primarily through withdrawal': 'Neither aggressive nor rebellious as Jason and Caddy are, he avoids the risks of rejection, failure, and disappointment by diminishing his expectations of others and curtailing his own ambitions.'<sup>179</sup> However, despite never openly acknowledging his impending suicide, Quentin does not evade the concept of death itself but instead always faces and embraces his mortality, 'saying Yes to death.'

With these elements of Quentin's characterisation in mind, his preparations for suicide at the beginning of his day are of the utmost importance, because they are acts which he must perform in order to successfully transition from life to death. Indeed, one could also argue that, even at his chapter's start, Quentin already considers himself as dead. As Pardish Dabashi notes, Quentin's 'consciousness' is 'acquainted with its own moment of termination.'<sup>180</sup> Along similar lines, Fox observes that 'Quentin's living is a mock performance since, in life, he is actually dead or in the process of dying' (65). In other words, Quentin has come to terms with his own mortality. Therefore, his acceptance of death is manifested on the level of speech when he anticipates the moment where he will 'see (his) murmuring bones and the deep water like wind' (53). Accordingly, Quentin begins and progresses through his day as if he is an animated corpse, preoccupied with repeatedly uttering concealed, muted references to death throughout his chapter. As noted

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<sup>178</sup> Irene Visser, 'Getting Ready to Stay Dead: Rites of Passage in William Faulkner's Novels', *English Studies*, Volume 93, Issue 4 (June, 2012): 476. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>179</sup> Karen Ann Butery, 'From Conflict to Suicide: The Inner Turmoil of Quentin Compson', *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Volume 49, Issue 3 (1989): 212. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>180</sup> Pardish Dabashi, 'The Compsons Were Here: Indexicality, the Actuality, and the Crisis of Meaning in *The Sound and the Fury*', *Modernism/modernity*, Volume 24, Issue 3 (September, 2017): 541.

earlier, when Quentin recalls his father giving him his Grandfather's watch, his father conflates time and mortality by bestowing upon Quentin 'the mausoleum of all hope and desire' (53). Quentin subsequently recollects how his father compared time and mortality to 'the good Saint Francis that said Little Sister death, that never had a sister' (51).<sup>181</sup> These passages highlight the extent to which Quentin's voice is already deeply infused with references to death and show how his speech is permeated with direct quotations of his father's voice. As Bockting writes, Quentin is 'dependent on his father's views. His abstract thinking contains virtually nothing but his father's words, incorporated almost seamlessly into his own text; and the roles that Quentin adopts seem to be those his father considers appropriate for him' (63). Nevertheless, his language also plainly demonstrates that he places himself at the edge of human experience and interpersonal identification with others.

This aspect of Quentin's speech, along with his subdued outlook on life on the day of his suicide, leads me to disagree with Kartiganer's assertion that 'The whole tenor of Quentin's elaborate preparations is that of one who is imitating the gestures of suicide without seriously intending to realise them.'<sup>182</sup> 'Quentin', Kartiganer argues, 'behaves as someone who is nothing if not well-practiced in the niceties of suicide, yet his very efficiency colors his conduct with a decidedly theatrical tint' (393). As I have argued, however, Quentin's speech is deliberately primed towards suicide – there can be no escape or evasion of his fate. In Jean-Paul Sartre's classic terms, 'not for a second does Quentin envisage the possibility of *not* killing himself.'<sup>183</sup> These aspects of his speech refute Kartiganer's suggestion that Quentin is not 'seriously intending to realise' or enact his own

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<sup>181</sup> See pages 137-138 of this chapter for more on the relationship between suicide and incest in the novel.

<sup>182</sup> Donald M. Kartiganer, 'Quentin Compson and Faulkner's Drama of the Generations', in Arthur F. Kinney (ed.), *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Compson Family* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Company, 1982), 392. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>183</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the Work of Faulkner' (1955), in Gorra (ed.), *The Sound and the Fury*, 322. Italics Sartre's.

death. As this chapter will show later, Quentin actually actively works towards his suicidal endpoint – every action he performs drives him closer to his end. Quentin demonstrates this fact further by describing how he ‘folded the trunk key into a sheet of paper and put it in an envelope and addressed it to Father, and wrote the two notes and sealed them’ (54). These acts further emphasise Quentin’s insistence upon severing ties with all those around him, while, at the same time, leaving a muted, blank expression of his motivations to his family. It is as though his decision to die cannot be put into words – the experience is either too profound to be voiced or too scandalous and socially unacceptable to be justified.

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Thus far, this chapter has attempted to highlight how Quentin’s behaviour and overall mindset at the start of his day shows that he has displaced himself from the world around him, living as if in the presence of death. Adopting this approach to life signifies a sense of hopeless resignation that is immediately palpable. The remainder of this section will show how Quentin consistently evinces a desire to escape life, time, and above all the words of his father, Jason Compson III.

As we have seen, Quentin is deeply affected by his father’s words – they brand themselves upon his consciousness from his initial waking thoughts, such as when he recalls his father’s opinions on the practicalities of giving him the watch:

[I]t’s rather excruciating-ly apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his (Quentin’s Grandfather) or his father’s. I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you may forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.

(50)

Compson's voice is, for all intents and purposes, the first voice heard outside of Quentin's in this chapter. As Ross notes, 'Compson appears in his son's memory only as a voice, never being described in any other way' (1989, 182). However, what is more important here is the fact that Compson does appear as a voice, because as will be seen, Quentin is profoundly shaped by other people's voices. Because he seems to pay excess credence to the words and voices of, amongst others, Compson, Caddy, Caddy's lover Dalton Ames and, later, her fiancé Sidney Herbert Head, it appears as though Quentin's actions result from his internalisation of these voices. Bleikasten notes this aspect of Quentin's characterisation, observing that 'the speech attributed to him can hardly be called his, for it is not the discourse of a single person'; instead, Bleikasten writes, 'many voices, past and present, are heard, and within this polyphonic ensemble Quentin's own enjoys no special privilege' (1976, 95). Similarly, Judith Lockyer argues that 'Quentin sees people as voices – they and their words are one and the same for him.'<sup>184</sup> This aspect of Quentin's narration also chimes with Bakhtin's theory of double-voiced discourse, as noted earlier:

The transmission and assessment of the speech of others, the discourse of another, is one of the most widespread and fundamental topics of human speech. In all areas of life and ideological activity, our speech is filled to overflowing with other people's words, which are transmitted with highly varied degrees of accuracy and impartiality.

(337)<sup>185</sup>

Bakhtin's claim directly applies to Compson, whose voice is often cited by Quentin but is not demarcated by speech marks, as in the passage above. When Quentin initially discusses his incestuous desires for Caddy and his anxieties towards virginity, it is his father's voice that is heard:

In the South you are ashamed of being a virgin. Boys. Men.  
They lie about it. Because it means less to women, Father

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<sup>184</sup> Judith Lockyer, *Ordered by Words: Language and Narration in the Novels of William Faulkner* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 39-40. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>185</sup> For a recent narratological study of Faulkner's fiction, see Nowak, *Faulkner's Polyphonic Discourse*, 2018.



said. He said it was men invented virginity not women. Father said it's like death: only a state in which the others are left and I said, But to believe it doesn't matter and he said, That's what's so sad about anything: not only virginity and I said, Why couldn't it have been me and not her who is unvirgin and he said, That's why that's sad too: nothing worth the changing of it[.]

(52)

Compson's voice saturates Quentin's voice through his chapter, leading to Quentin's speech being largely made up of his father's sentiments rather than his own. Compson's opinions, particularly regarding issues of sexuality and gender roles in the South, adversely affect Quentin, deepening his self-consciousness of and shame towards his virginity, alongside his rampant incestuous feelings for Caddy. Quentin's reaction to Compson's speech also highlights the contradiction in Quentin's desire to be an archetypal Southern gentleman (a powerful, financially independent man respected by his society), whilst also harbouring outlandish, socially unacceptable sexual desires for his sister. When these desires are left unfulfilled, Quentin seeks resolution in the equally taboo act of suicide. The dilemmas that Quentin is faced with throughout his life and in his relationship with his father point towards Compson being the voice that, above all others, influences and ultimately destroys Quentin. At the same time, Quentin's own transgressive desire marks his resistance to the force which these words have, a fact which makes his own self-destruction another major component of his death. As James G. Watson observes: 'Quentin's recall of Father's cynicism and several specific cruelties is a function of his need for self-torment, not comfort.'<sup>186</sup>

When Quentin packs his trunk, he notes how 'I carried the books into the sitting-room and stacked them on the table, the ones I had brought from home and the ones *Father said it used to be a gentleman was known by his books; nowadays he is known by the ones he has*

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<sup>186</sup> James G. Watson, *William Faulkner: Self-Presentation and Performance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 66.

*not returned*’ (53-54). Despite packing away the majority of his belongings, it is significant that Quentin keeps his books present, as it is these that remind him most of home and, by extension, his father. Calling attention to Compson’s opinion that ‘*nowadays*’ a gentleman is ‘*known by the books he has not returned*’ to the library, Quentin makes clear the power that Southern masculinity in general and his father in particular has over him. Even at the point where Quentin is attempting to disconnect completely from life, family, and society, he is conditioned to acknowledge certain societal and patriarchal demands. A moment typifying this is when, after leaving his dormitory, Quentin visits ‘the hardware store’, where he purchases ‘two six-pound’ flat-irons, ‘because they would look like a pair of shoes wrapped up’: ‘They felt heavy enough together, but I thought again how Father said about the *reducto absurdum* of human experience, thinking how the only opportunity I seemed to have for the application of Harvard’ (57).<sup>187</sup> The recollection of Compson’s ‘*reducto absurdum*’ is a deliberate perversion on Quentin’s part of his father’s words in order to justify and explain his decision to kill himself.<sup>188</sup> The constant references to Compson’s voice on Quentin’s final day suggests that, if there are figures in Quentin’s life who can be held accountable for his untimely death, it is not merely Quentin himself for committing the act but Compson too for precipitating it. Compson, his words, and their impact upon Quentin are all part of what drives him to his death.<sup>189</sup> As Richard Gray argues:

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<sup>187</sup> Faulkner makes the functional significance of Harvard in Quentin’s life purposefully unclear here, because it is difficult to discern whether the ‘application of Harvard’ is a reference to the teachings and academic principles he likely would have gained during his Freshman year or the process of actually applying for entry into the university. In terms of the former, one could infer from this utterance that all his learning and experiences at Harvard have led to and are incorporated in his preparations for his suicide. There is a jetblack, humorous irony in the fact that Quentin’s purchase of the flat-irons and his logic in doing so (they resemble ‘a pair of shoes wrapped up’) is executed with all the apparent methodology of a highly intelligent undergraduate.

<sup>188</sup> Note also how Compson’s ‘*reducto*’ is itself ‘a corruption of the Latin phrase *reductio ad absurdum*’, as Gorra acknowledges in his annotations to the novel (50, annotation 1).

<sup>189</sup> This tension between father and child recurs throughout Faulkner’s fiction. See, for example, Addie’s father in *As I Lay Dying*, who told her that ‘the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time’, or Sutpen’s relationship with his abandoned son, Charles Bon, and his accountability for authorising Charles’s death in *Absalom, Absalom*, moments which will be explored later in this thesis.

Quentin speaks [...] in a speech [...] that is not just full of other people's words but overpowered by them: voices from the narrative present and the past colonize Quentin's mind, mastering him even while he is trying to achieve mastery. [...] One voice, in particular, tends to drown out the others, and it is what Bakhtin would call "the voice of the fathers": [...] an authoritative discourse issuing out of some epic past, which requires not active collaboration but passive repetition – resignation and obedience.<sup>190</sup>

Compson's voice is so engrained into Quentin's consciousness that it is always present and audible. Quentin is disturbed and influenced by Compson's voice to the extent that he compulsively recalls it, thereby constantly affirming its power over him. Quentin thus demonstrates the extent to which his father's voice has intercepted his speech, largely in reaction to societal prejudices towards death by one's own hand. These prejudices arise because suicide is an act which, in Bennett's terms, 'undermines and disturbs personal, social, and cultural certainties, formations, and identities' (7). Quentin has not developed his own vocabulary to combat the issues which plague him, and his voice has not developed enough for it to be emancipated from his family or from Southern society. Instead, Quentin relinquishes himself to half-remembered credos and teachings which have a corrosive, lethal influence upon him. As Karl F. Zender acknowledges, 'Quentin's speech is largely made up of the catchphrases of schoolboy philosophy, turn-of-the-century melodrama, and the southern code of honor.'<sup>191</sup> Quentin's suicide can therefore be interpreted as an attack on or refutation of all the ideas Compson bestowed upon him. As Kaczmarek writes, 'On his final day, once and for all, Quentin Compson sets himself free from the phantom of his father and his theories' (167). The remainder of this chapter follows this argument, demonstrating how Quentin works to overcome and vanquish the

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<sup>190</sup> Richard Gray, *The Life of William Faulkner: A Critical Biography* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 143. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>191</sup> Karl F. Zender, 'Faulkner and the Power of Sound', *PMLA*, Volume 99, Issue 1 (January, 1984): 95. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

patriarchal voice that overpowers and eclipses all that he has to say. His suicide is a challenge to the entire way – and code – of Southern living.

### **The word that Quentin cannot say**

The words which Quentin uses and is fixated upon in his speech range from ‘father’, ‘virgin’, and ‘incest’, to ‘Mother’ and ‘Caddy’, through to ‘water’ and ‘shadow’. Throughout the critical history of his chapter, much has been made of his usage of these words. For instance, Robert A. Martin states that, in the novel as a whole, ‘Faulkner installs these key words and phrases to let the reader become aware of the individual character’s preoccupations.’<sup>192</sup> He continues:

As characters consciously or unconsciously move in one direction or the other, their own perceptions of this movement are made apparent to the reader through certain phrases or key words that indicate either movement or perception, and the reality or permanence of both in relation to the overall story and what Faulkner would have the reader glean from it.

(47)

Bockting, too, notes that ‘Quentin’s language is full of abstract terms: *time, hope, desire, experience, needs, folly, despair, victory, illusion, mind, habit*. Close reading [reveals], however, that these terms are almost all his father’s words, repeated by Quentin and presented without quotation marks’ (60, italics Bockting’s). Related to these critical preoccupations with the words Quentin, his brothers, and Faulkner’s narrative voice utilise, several critics have attempted to deduce a single, specific reason for Quentin’s decision to commit suicide. This is a method which echoes attempts by people to justify the act of suicide in their lived experiences, because as Kears writes, ‘If death cannot be avoided, it must at least be explained so as to seem manageable’ (134).<sup>193</sup> These reasons range from ‘despair’ (Butery,

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<sup>192</sup> Robert A. Martin, ‘The Words of *The Sound and the Fury*’, *Southern Literary Journal*, Volume 32, Issue 1 (Fall, 1999): 46-47.

<sup>193</sup> In the years following his death, Quentin’s mother, Caroline, laments: “‘What reason did Quentin have? Under God’s heaven what reason did he have?’” (195).

1989) to ‘guilt’ because of his cruelty towards Caddy;<sup>194</sup> from ‘madness’<sup>195</sup> and a ‘lack of faith’ in Christianity<sup>196</sup> to the influence and pressure of Southern gender norms<sup>197</sup> and Southern history more generally (Miller, 2005). However, it appears as if the words Quentin does not or cannot use have gone unexplored, because one of the words he does not utter at any point during his chapter is the word “suicide”, a fact which seems to have gone unnoticed by all critics working on Quentin. Throughout his entire chapter, Quentin makes no direct acknowledgment of his intention to commit suicide whatsoever. Instead, he offers veiled references to it through the actions he performs. His aforementioned purchase of the flat-irons, for instance, seems at first to be entirely incidental. Though most critics are conscious of and have discussed the significance of suicide in Quentin’s section (most successfully by Qui-Phiet Tran and Christopher Chung<sup>198</sup>), Quentin’s language and word choices when addressing his intention to commit suicide has gone unexplored.

Noel Polk, discussing the language of the novel, comes closest to this area when he argues that the ‘conventions of the writing [...] reveal things other than what the characters are saying; they work, in fact, to reveal things that the narrators are incapable of

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<sup>194</sup> Margaret D. Bauer, “‘I Have Sinned in that I Have Betrayed the Innocent Blood’: Quentin’s Recognition of His Guilt”, *Southern Literary Journal*, Volume 32, Issue 2 (Spring, 2000): 70-89. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>195</sup> Erin E. Campbell, “‘Sad Generations Seeking Water’: The Social Construction of Madness in O(phelia) and Q(uentin Compson)”, *Faulkner Journal*, Volume 20, Issues 1/2 (Fall, 2004/Spring, 2005): 53-69.

<sup>196</sup> Norman W. Jones, *Provincializing the Bible: Faulkner and Postsecular American Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 49.

<sup>197</sup> Kevin Railey, ‘Cavalier Ideology and History: The Significance of Quentin’s Section in *The Sound and the Fury*’, *Arizona Quarterly*, Volume 48, Issue 3 (Autumn, 1992): 77-94.

<sup>198</sup> Qui-Phiet Tran, ‘The Question of Suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*’, *New Orleans Review*, Volume 14, Issue 4 (Winter, 1987): 52-57; Christopher Chung, “*Almost Unnameable*”: *Suicide in the Modernist Novel*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2008. All further references to these works are incorporated into the text.

saying or are specifically trying to keep from saying, things that have caused them pain and shame.<sup>199</sup> Polk goes on:

Words are, for Quentin and Jason at any rate, lids they use to seal that pain in the unconscious, though it constantly insists on verbalizing itself. We have access to their pain largely through what they *don't* say, and also through the visual forms of the language in which Faulkner has inscribed their thoughts and feelings on paper.  
(143, italics Polk's)

Polk continues:

The substance of (Quentin's) monologue is his effort to sort out, analyse, and come to terms with those scenes of pain that he *can* handle, and to evade, to repress, those he cannot. He is trying to shape his memory into an acceptable version of his life that will both explain his present misery and justify his decision to commit suicide, and language is the only tool he can use to effect the shape he wants.  
(150, italics Polk's)

Polk concludes: 'The mechanics of the written representation of language become Faulkner's device to let readers know how successful Quentin is: the most painful senses are the farthest removed from representational normalcy' (151).<sup>200</sup> This section of the present chapter rectifies these critical omissions, arguing that Quentin cannot say the word "suicide" because the negative connotations within that word match neither his ideals nor his sensibilities. Suzanne Stern-Gillet observes that 'the word "suicide" has, from certain religious points of view and in many people's minds, a derogatory emotive connotation.'<sup>201</sup> As a result of just such a negative connotation, Quentin develops a need to redefine both the act signified by the word "suicide" and the word itself, in order to vanquish the

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<sup>199</sup> Noel Polk, 'Trying Not to Say: A Primer on the Language of *The Sound and the Fury*', in Polk (ed.), *New Essays on The Sound and the Fury*, 143. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>200</sup> What Polk means here is that the emotions which most affect Quentin are precisely those he cannot express verbally. Though Quentin attempts to verbalise the impact of 'the sum of his misfortunes' (69), his anguish cannot be represented in language – any attempt to do so leads to a collapse in his ability to express himself.

<sup>201</sup> Suzanne Stern-Gillet, 'The Rhetoric of Suicide', *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Volume 20, Issue 3 (1987): 168.

debilitating, overbearing influence that society has over him. Faulkner juxtaposes Quentin's dependence upon language and words to his failure to act in order to dramatise his paralysis. By doing so, Faulkner implies that Quentin can only be released from this paralysis by performing the self-destructive act of suicide. This argument creates an interesting counter to Daube's claims when discussing a person's suicide in everyday conversation:

In English gossip, the vivid "Jim has drowned himself," "has shot himself through the head," is far more usual than the colorless "Jim has committed suicide." [...] In sophisticated communication, contrariwise, the general "to commit suicide" may be preferred not only where objective thoroughness requires it but also as a means of escaping from the too upsetting, rough specific.

(394)

Despite Quentin's affectless, mechanised voice, as discussed above, it is as if even his reliance upon 'sophisticated communication', in Daube's terms, proves an insufficient 'means of escaping from the too upsetting, rough specific', and so he seeks to avoid the word "suicide" altogether.

Visser notes that 'In many cultures, suicide is seen as a crime: it is robbing society of one of its members, and is therefore punishable by withholding death rites' (476). Visser continues:

Suicide is often, though not always [...] interpreted as a failure[.] [...] While, clearly, Quentin's suicide may be read as a failure, it is more than that: it is also an expression of his need for a belief in an alternative condition. For while it is true that he despairs of positioning himself in the status quo in his family and society, he also expresses a measure of hope in finding a realm beyond it that provides the affirmation of a positive value system that the paternal system lacks.

(477)

With Visser's views in mind, this section will show that the reasons and motivations for Quentin's suicide are manifold, and cannot be attributed to any single factor. In fact, the reasons he points towards change throughout his day, which makes his actions as rich,

complex, and contradictory as his speech and turns of phrase are. There are moments when one feels that they have arrived at a definitive justification for his suicide, only to discover that his reasoning is contradicted and counteracted by another equally valid reason. For instance, his admiration of his father and his shame for having failed his patriarchal lineage is then offset by his growing resentment towards Compson and the standards the family force upon him. As Chung observes, 'Quentin does not know why he wants to commit suicide, spends his final day searching for a justification he fails to find, and finally drowns himself without having articulated the meaning of his suicide to himself or to others' (197). Thus, Quentin again matches Moller's portrayal of suicide amongst young people in America: 'the combination of factors that drive individual young people to suicidal behavior is highly complex. Typically involved in every adolescent suicide are some of the following: psychological state of being, family context and history, interpersonal relationships, patterns of coping with stress, traumatic life experiences, and lifestyle' (193). These arguments demonstrate why this chapter hesitates to ascribe one catchall explanation to Quentin's decision, as critical tradition has dictated. Instead, this chapter will show that it is inadequate to ascribe one particular, overriding motive to his act.

With his death drawing ever closer toward the end of his day, Quentin states that in 'A quarter of an hour yet [...] I'll not be. The peace fullest words. Peace fullest words' (115). Before continuing the analysis of Quentin's chapter in chronological order, we will focus on this moment towards the end of his chapter to establish a key point that the remainder of the present chapter advances. One can infer through his refusal to utter the word "suicide" that Quentin considers it an abhorrent, violent word which is loaded with connotations of societal prejudice. It does not accurately communicate Quentin's longing for peace and comfort. Instead, it is seen as an act that an individual has committed to affront society, as Visser's arguments cited above make clear. Quentin's impending death



is described in the simplest terms here; he characterises it as simply not being. By doing so, he actively redefines what the word and, by extension, the act of killing himself means to suit his own purposes. The strategy Quentin employs here, therefore, subverts what J.L. Austin terms ‘performative utterances’: ‘the issuing of the utterance is the performance of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something.’<sup>202</sup> Following on from Visser’s arguments, one possible meaning for Quentin’s avoidance of the word “suicide” is that the word is loaded with a specific, social stigma of failure. It is precisely this failure that Quentin ardently attempts to avoid. Therefore, he does not utter the word because he intends to completely redefine the act. This reading of Quentin’s suicide complicates points by critics such as John T. Matthews and Judith Lockyer. Matthews argues that ‘Quentin avoids words because he senses that they displace and substitute, but he also identifies his silence as a failure of nerve’ (1982, 83). Likewise, Lockyer notes that ‘Quentin believes that words preserve as long as they aren’t spoken. Utterances turn them loose in the public realm where other voices can defile them.’ She continues: ‘Language creates experience, but language is also communal and thus mutable’ (31). As this chapter will make clear, Quentin transforms the concept and utterance of the word “suicide” from a morally corrupt act of weakness into an act of the utmost strength, or such is his intention. As Lindsey L. Osterman and Ryan P. Brown note, ‘the act of suicide itself might, ironically, seem to serve as a form of social proof of a person’s strength and fearlessness, if people reason that it takes courage to face and embrace one’s own death.’<sup>203</sup>

During Quentin’s morning preparations, there emerges a key contributing factor in his suicide – his unrequited desire for Caddy, his younger sister. These desires are initially communicated thus:

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<sup>202</sup> J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 6-7.

<sup>203</sup> Lindsey L. Osterman and Ryan P. Brown, ‘Culture of Honor and Violence Against the Self’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Volume 37, Issue 12 (August, 2011): 1612.

Because if it were just a hell; if that were all of it. Finished.  
If things just finished themselves. Nobody else there but  
her and me. If we could just have done something so  
dreadful that they would have fled hell except us. *I have  
committed incest I said Father it was I it was not Dalton Ames*  
And when he put Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. Dalton  
Ames. When he put the pistol in my hand I didn't. That's  
why I didn't. He would be there and she would and I  
would. Dalton Ames, Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames.  
(52-53)

This passage establishes three factors which contribute to Quentin's death: the violence and destruction which his desires for Caddy create; his belief that his performance of masculinity has malfunctioned because of Caddy's overwhelming desires for Dalton instead of him; and, above all, his failure to possess Caddy sexually, a carnal possession which Dalton has achieved. As Bleikasten argues regarding Quentin's incestuous proclivities, 'Quentin's is desire at its fullest, or rather emptiest, sense: a desire never to be satisfied, incommensurate with any real object, gliding from substitute to substitute down to the very last – death' (1976, 91). Quentin's shameful attitude towards incest, described as 'something so dreadful', is in turn substituted by the act of suicide, both of which are seen in mainstream society as transgressive, dreadful acts. In his work on suicide, Alvarez writes that 'In the Middle Ages suicide was [...] a mortal sin, a horror, the object of such total revulsion that the outrages against the corpse of the suicide were carried out not only with all due ecclesiastical and legal solemnity but also gratefully' (167). Given that the imagery Quentin evokes of the act of suicide explicitly invokes hell and eternal punishment, Alvarez's depiction of medieval attitudes towards suicide is applicable to Quentin's situation. In Quentin's mind, suicide becomes incest's twin – it is the act for which he longs that he and Caddy would have committed together but never could.

Quentin's desires for Caddy are coupled with his intense tendencies towards violence, especially during childhood, in response to Caddy's disobedient behaviour. Faulkner establishes this element of their relationship in the novel's opening pages, which

coincide with Quentin's direct introduction to the readers. The following confrontation is told from the point-of-view of Benjy, the youngest Compson child who is born with a mental disability:

She was wet. We were playing in the branch and Caddy squatted down and got her dress wet and Versh said,  
"Your mommer going to whip you for getting your dress wet."

"She's not going to do any such thing." Caddy said.

[...]

"You just take your dress off." Quentin said. Caddy took her dress off and threw it on the bank. Then she didn't have on but her bodice and drawers, and Quentin slapped her and she slipped and fell down in the water.

(12-13)

Quentin insists upon inflicting violence upon Caddy to try to control and discipline her. He adopts the role of the threatening 'mommer' that Versh assures will 'whip' Caddy in order to, as Diane Roberts notes, 'control his sister's body' (117). During his childhood, Quentin uses these moments to establish himself as a watchful, intimidating presence in Caddy's life. He actively seeks to correct her for her petulant flouting of his commands, particularly where her sexuality is involved (as suggested here by the image of her wet dress and underwear). As Erin Penner highlights, Caddy's 'sexuality remains a threat [...] in Faulkner's novel, and it is complemented by Quentin's swift, if ineffectual violence.'<sup>204</sup> Throughout the novel, Caddy is not seen as a person in her own right.<sup>205</sup> To Quentin,

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<sup>204</sup> Erin Penner, 'For Those "Who Could Not Bear to Look Directly at the Slaughter": Morrison's *Home* and the Novels of Faulkner and Woolf', *African American Review*, Volume 49, Issue 4 (Winter, 2016): 348.

<sup>205</sup> In *The Novel: A Biography* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), Michael Schmidt outlines the distorted, multifarious impression of Caddy that Benjy, Quentin, and Jason evoke: 'We meet Caddy first through the dependent voice of Benjy, who sees what is there but never why, who cannot infer the emotional content of situations and whose own emotions run the gamut from a need to fear, not knowing what he needs or what he fears. Caddy is scents to him, and textures; she attends to him, she is there for him, and then she is gone. When Quentin and then Jason evoke her, she is the same person differently experienced. Though Quentin loves her, her disgrace and absence exacerbate his self-destructive state of mind. What for Benjy is a simple impression, for Quentin becomes heavily symbolic. The stained drawers are as virulent to him, in memory, as a scarlet letter. And Jason, who was cruel to Caddy from the outset, drives her away. She is not a symbol of the end of the family's distinction but the cause. There are no

Caddy challenges his idea of the South as a patriarchal, male-dominated world which insists upon the obedience and silence of women. Quentin, arguably, seeks to discipline her body as a means of disciplining his own, keeping his desire for her under control.

Quentin supplements the physical violence he inflicts upon Caddy with verbal taunts and threats, especially after he discovers her loss of virginity and her subsequent sexual trysts with Dalton: *'Why wont you bring him to the house, Caddy? Why must you do like nigger women do in the pasture the ditches the dark woods hot hidden furious in the dark woods'* (61). About this passage, Roberts writes that "The "blackness" of sexuality becomes a metaphor for Caddy's life and subsequent fall from ladyhood to exile' (116). From his adolescence, Quentin sees Caddy as his property; she, like the African-American women whom he crudely compares her to, must be controlled and regulated. Therefore, Quentin fashions himself as a tormentor to Caddy, demeaning her for her apparent transgressions, and communicating to her his willingness to harm her and her lover. Quentin's persistent, sustained aggression towards Caddy is intertwined with his libidinal investment in her sexual activity. The torment he experiences because of his desires for her lead him to insist that his presence in her life be both respected and feared. The fact that Caddy never acquiesces to Quentin's punishments, or the authority he attempts to enforce upon her, subverts Michel Foucault's claim that: 'One must calculate a penalty in terms not of the crime, but of its possible repetition. One must take into account not the past offence, but the future disorder. Things must be so arranged that the malefactor can(not) have [...] any desire to repeat his offence [...] One must punish exactly to prevent repetition.'<sup>206</sup> Instead, by taking Dalton as a lover and repeatedly rejecting Quentin's sexual advances, Caddy renders Quentin's self-created position as her judge and tormentor an outright failure.

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contradictions between narratives, just different ways of reading the facts' (748-749. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text).

<sup>206</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), translated by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), 93.

Quentin's suicide confirms, therefore, the life-destroying impact that her sexuality and loss of innocence has had upon him, thereby ironically confirming Compson's dictum that 'man is the sum of his misfortunes' (61). As Tran notes, 'By killing himself, Quentin projects his guilt and anger onto Caddy, disturbs her, makes her suffer [...] Death for him is a way of taking revenge, of telling Caddy he cannot be readily forgotten and that she will be sorry for having neglected him' (56).

Quentin's violent behaviour is not merely directed at Caddy, but also, for instance, at T. P., a Compson farmhand who becomes intoxicated during Caddy's wedding (15). Quentin, enraged and frustrated by Caddy's marriage to Herbert Head, displaces his anger onto T. P., beating and dragging him after the ceremony. More importantly, Herbert is also targeted by Quentin, such as when he fantasises during Caddy's engagement party that he has '*shot Herbert he has shot his voice through the floor of Caddy's room*' (70). Bleikasten notes that there are numerous 'scenes of potential or overt violence', and 'each time Quentin turns out to be its agent or its cause' (1976, 105). Faulkner repeatedly draws attention to Quentin's violence to suggest that his behaviour is not merely socially or culturally driven, but is also instinctively enacted. The violence he attempts to enact upon both Herbert and Dalton is meant as a deterrent against these men who impinge upon Quentin's sexual fantasies for his sister. Alternatively, Quentin also enacts violence to vanquish those whom he rightly believes threaten his self-appointed position as Caddy's disciplining patriarch. In his endeavour to shoot 'his voice through the floor of Caddy's room' at Herbert, Quentin evinces a desire to have his voice and actions destroy all those exterior voices that infiltrate his speech, thoughts, and above all, his erotic desires for Caddy. As Zender recognizes, Quentin endures an 'unequal struggle with these voices', evincing an 'inability to defend himself against the invasive power of his culture': 'About all he can do in self-defence is put his own voice into contention with the voices and sounds that threaten him, by making of it an instrument with which to either escape or attack the world' (95). Zender's point

illustrates the idea that Quentin's predicament entails a need to reconcile his inability to act over his reliance upon language.<sup>207</sup> Quentin's endeavour is also an attempt to vanquish these figures that, in Roland Barthes's terms, cause his voice to become 'a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.'<sup>208</sup> To vanquish these voices would allow Quentin's actions to actually gain significance, rather than be overpowered by the influences and perspectives of others (such as his father).

Shortly after remembering the formal announcement of Caddy's wedding (62), Quentin recalls an extended conversation with Herbert. During their exchange, Quentin uses the same taunting, confrontational rhetoric he did with Caddy in order to coerce Herbert into terminating the engagement, to no avail. Ricky Floyd Dobbs observes that 'in duels and fistfights, Quentin attempts to act out Southern manhood, to defend his family's honor, and his own sexual honor. His opponents repulse his bluster [...] illuminating his failure as a Lost Cause "man".'<sup>209</sup> Herbert is a Harvard alumnus who Quentin discovers was 'dropped from his club by cheating at cards' (81). During their exchange, Quentin teases:

I'm not going to tell Father and Mother if that's what you are getting at [...] I don't give a damn whether you tell or not understand that a thing like that unfortunate but no police crime I wasn't the first or the last I was just unlucky you might have been luckier

(72)

Refusing to waver from his taunts, Quentin retorts: 'I don't know but one way to consider cheating I don't think I'm likely to learn different at Harvard' (72). Attempting to buy

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<sup>207</sup> Quentin's situation also anticipates Addie's dilemma in *As I Lay Dying*, when she realises that, though words 'go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless', actions travel 'terribly [...] along the earth [...] so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other' (100).

<sup>208</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Death of the Author', *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142. Kartiganer (1982) echoes Barthes when he writes that by 'focusing on the adolescent years that culminate in his suicide, Quentin's character is a tissue of gestures reflecting the duties of that birthright' (390).

<sup>209</sup> Ricky Floyd Dobbs, 'Case study in social neurosis: Quentin Compson and the Lost Cause', *Papers on Language and Literature*, Volume 33, Issue 4 (1997): 376.

Quentin's silence, Herbert offers him money, which Quentin refuses, telling him to 'keep (his) damned money.' Herbert finally warns Quentin:

Tell and be damned then see what it gets you if you were  
not a damned fool youd have seen that I've got them too  
tight for any half-baked Galahad of a brother your mother's  
told me about your sort with your head swelled up[.]

(73)

Throughout his life, Quentin encounters a variety of men who all perform their masculinity with far greater self-assurance and confidence than he does. This neatly counters Janet St. Clare's claim that 'Even the so-called Southern gentlemen Quentin encounters seem to be nothing but veneered aristocrats like Gerald Bland or swaggering "papier-mâché" stereotypes like Dalton Ames who cultivate the trappings and manners but fail to appreciate the respect for individuals implicit in the code of conduct.'<sup>210</sup> The opposition he faces and the fundamental difference between himself and these men is exemplified by Herbert here. Quentin is relegated to an inferior position within the family in favour of Herbert because of the mutual benefit that both Caddy and their mother, Caroline, will reap. Indeed, Caroline relishes the attention Herbert lavishes on her, boasting that 'Herbert has spoiled us all to death Quentin did I write you that he is going to take Jason into his bank when Jason finishes high school' (63). These boasts give Herbert the authority to claim that 'I belong to the family now' (73), effectively neutralising Quentin's endeavours. Discovering her pregnancy after her relationship with Dalton ends, Caddy resolves to 'marry somebody' (75); in desperation, she turns to Herbert to release herself from her predicament, rather than relying upon Quentin.<sup>211</sup> Quentin, in consequence, must respond to Herbert's invasive presence and challenge to his authority, and can only do so by

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<sup>210</sup> Janet St. Clare, 'The Necessity of Signifying Something: Quentin Compson's Rejection of Despair', *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 43, Issue 3 (Summer, 1990): 322. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>211</sup> It is important to note, however, that Herbert does not know that Caddy is pregnant with Dalton's child when he marries her. After discovering the pregnancy, Herbert divorces Caddy, which also deprives Jason of his coveted position at Herbert's bank.

neutralising the competition Herbert symbolises to both Caddy's affections and to his own desired position at the head of the Compson family. The fact that Quentin remembers this confrontation on the day of his suicide implies that his death allows him to finally confront both his lifelong failure at performing Southern masculinity and issues about sex which he finds abhorrent and cannot fully acknowledge. As Anna Foca argues, 'privileging a sex-class within which his power can at any time be undermined by reminders of physical weakness, Quentin lives under the constant threat of emasculation and humiliation because he has no space from which to issue an appropriately authoritative utterance into his male world.'<sup>212</sup> Though Quentin encounters genuinely nurturing male figures during his time at Harvard (namely Shreve and the Deacon<sup>213</sup>), the men he is raised amongst in the South (Compson, Herbert, Dalton, Grandfather, and Colonel Sartoris) all function much differently and more successfully than Quentin ever does. Quentin is damned to forever remain the 'half-baked Galahad' that Herbert accuses him of being – he will never become

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<sup>212</sup> Anna Foca, "'I'm Stronger Than You': Quentin Compson's Suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*", *Men and Masculinities*, Volume 4, Issue 4 (April, 2002): 351.

<sup>213</sup> The relations Quentin forms with people while at Harvard are less strained and troubling than his relationship with Caddy and their father in the South. His relations with Shreve McCaslin and the Deacon are instructive here.

Shreve enters the narrative just after Quentin has awakened, warning him that the bell for first period will ring "in two minutes" and that Shreve will "have to hustle. I can't stand another cut. The dean told me last week—" (51). His utterances show that he is concerned with the negative repercussions that wasted or misused time will have on his academic career. By hastening to class, Shreve has thoughts about the future, which in turn implies a sense of connection to the flow, rhythm, and demands of life. In contrast, Quentin languishes behind and continues to recall his past in the South. Therefore, Quentin can only think of the future as it is confined to June Second. Where the Deacon is concerned, despite Quentin's rancour towards him, he does express a rare moment of (admittedly grudging) warmth and gratitude towards another person during their encounter: 'he had been guide mentor and friend to unnumbered crops of innocent and lonely freshmen, and I suppose that with all his petty chicanery and hypocrisy he stank no higher in heaven's nostrils than any other' (65). Quentin's encounters with both Shreve and the Deacon are fleeting glimpses into emotional and convivial connections that people attempt to forge with him. Passing his letter onto the Deacon (66), a document which presumably explains his reasons for committing suicide, Quentin inadvertently confirms what the Deacon directly acknowledges: 'you and me's the same folks, come long or short' (66). Quentin and the Deacon have a shared, mutual understanding of the South's meaning and the significance of their respective positions in Southern society.

Ultimately, Shreve and the Deacon both show genuine concern for Quentin, noticing his erratic behaviour. In doing so, they give Quentin the few, sincere expressions of genuine kinship that he ever experienced during his short life.



the archetypal, heroic Arthurian knight.<sup>214</sup> Such is Quentin's inability to act like a (stereotypical) Southern man that, in one sense, Herbert's insult is actually a fact – his newfound position in the Compson family allows him to see through and cruelly expose Quentin's façade. These arguments, therefore, suggest that while Quentin does echo Compson's values (especially regarding sexual matters and women), his inability to defeat Dalton and Herbert, alongside his refusal to continue living in the aftermath of these failures, renders him emblematic of a defeated South in some sense. In other words, Quentin's suicide, in May Cameron Brown's words, 'reveals not only his own limitations, but also the failure of his heritage to provide values by which he can live.'<sup>215</sup>

Quentin's thoughts subsequently adopt a mode of address that appears to be aimed at Caddy, given the context of his unfulfilled sexual desires: *'If it could just be a hell beyond that: the clean flame the two of us more than dead. Then you will have me then only me then the two of us amid the pointing and the horror beyond the clean flame'* (77). At these moments, Quentin reveals his cognisance of the fact that what he engages in (desire for Caddy and, ultimately, suicide) are considered by society at large to be worthy of the severest form of divine punishment. Kayoko Shimanuki acknowledges the connection between this passage and *The Divine Comedy* (1320), specifically the Paolo and Francesca episode. Shimanuki argues that, in *The*

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<sup>214</sup> Interestingly, Faulkner experimented with Arthurian legend in his 1926 novella *Mayday*, which features a knight named Sir Galwyn of Arthgyl and, crucially, a spectral figure called Little Sister Death, which leads Galwyn to his untimely death – suicide by drowning – at the end of the text. Critics have acknowledged the connection between Galwyn and Quentin, most notably Gail Moore Morrison's essay "'Time, Tide and Twilight': *Mayday* and Faulkner's Quest toward *The Sound and the Fury*", *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 31, Issue 3 (Summer, 1978): 337-357. Morrison argues that 'Galwyn and Quentin [...] find death at the hands of their women in white—Little Sister Death white and shining for Galwyn, Caddy white and shining in her bridal veil for Quentin. Their journey through "time, tide, and twilight" does not yield a vision of "Light," but brings them to the darkness of death by water' (357).

<sup>215</sup> May Cameron Brown, 'The Language of Chaos: Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*', *American Literature*, Volume 51.4, Issue 1 (January, 1980): 544.

*Inferno*, ‘bodies of water play an important role as a boundary among different worlds.’<sup>216</sup>

Shimanuki continues:

There are several rivers and bodies of water that Dante encounters as he crosses into Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, and Quentin presumes that he needs to go beyond the Charles River, like Dante crossing the Acheron River, in order to enter hell. Quentin, thus, looks for a place where he can see through water and evoke the image of Caddy.  
(63)

In this context, Alan Friedman’s observation that ‘Christianity is traditionally held to condemn suicides unequivocally in this world and the next’ is instructive: ‘Long deemed the one unforgivable sin, the deliberate ending of one’s life was inappropriate for individual determination, and lay under the severest moral and legal interdiction.’<sup>217</sup> Quentin’s efforts are enacted despite knowing that, where society is concerned, only ‘pointing’ and ‘horror’ will result from his actions. However, he actively seeks this judgement and punishment – only within the realm of ‘*the clean flame*’ can his desires be achieved. Only by being placed in ‘the clean flame’, subjected to eternal punishment and hellfire, can Quentin finally consummate his incestuous longing for Caddy.<sup>218</sup> Envisaging a hellish eternity for them both, Quentin seeks an environment where not only can Caddy be free of ‘sickness’ and

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<sup>216</sup> Kayoko Shimanuki, ‘A River Runs Through Him: Quentin’s Suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*’, *Journal of the American Literature Society of Japan*, Issue 10 (February, 2012): 63.

<sup>217</sup> Alan Friedman, *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 54.

<sup>218</sup> In the “Appendix: Compson 1699-1945” (1946), Faulkner asserted that Quentin ‘loved not the idea of the incest which he would not commit but some Presbyterian concept of its eternal punishment: he, not God, could by that means cast himself and his sister both into hell, where he could guard her forever and keep her forevermore intact amid the eternal fires’ (in Gorra [ed.], *The Sound and the Fury*, 263). In my opinion, however, Faulkner failed to acknowledge here what he heavily implied in the novel – it is precisely by being condemned to an eternity in hell ‘beyond the clean flame’ that led Quentin to believe his incestuous desires would be fulfilled, the argument which this chapter is making.

Also, ‘the clean flame’ anticipates the purgatorial flame that T. S. Eliot describes in ‘Little Gidding’, the last of his *Four Quartets*: ‘The dove descending breaks the air/With flame of incandescent terror/Of which the tongues declare/The one discharge of sin and error./The only hope, or else despair/Lies in the choice of pyre or pure –/To be redeemed from fire by fire’ (in Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* [London: Faber and Faber, 2004], 827-833).

her need to ‘marry somebody’, but Quentin himself can evade the shame that the (apparently) overt, hyper-sexual proclivities of his beloved sister-lover engenders.

In contrast to the hellishness ‘beyond the clean flame’ is the water of the Charles River, which Quentin at one point watches as it ‘twinkled and glinted like breathing’, with its ‘debris half submerged, healing out of the sea and the caverns and the grottoes of the sea’ (60). These images are both alluring and aestheticised, and they are above all peaceful and silent, allowing Quentin an alternative to his suffering in the realm of enveloping death. The mysterious, poetic image of ‘the grottoes of the sea’ invokes shades of Poe’s poem ‘Annabel Lee’ (1849), specifically the moment where the poetic voice lies ‘down by the side/of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,/In the sepulchre there by the sea—/In her tomb by the sounding sea.’<sup>219</sup> With this possible reference to Poe’s poem in mind, self-inflicted death by water perhaps offers Quentin ‘a kingdom by the sea’ (2/8/14/20/24) to inhabit with Caddy. Quentin uses these poetic devices to comprehend his death through a lens that denies the abhorrent nature of his suicide as far as society is concerned.

Quentin’s repeated ruminations as he stands at the bridge, contemplating his suicide and society’s negative outlook on the act, are most useful to explore at this stage. At one point, Quentin acknowledges his above-mentioned purchase of the flat-irons, saying that he has hidden them ‘under the bridge’ (77). This revelation is preceded by references to the divine judgement he believes he will receive following his suicide: ‘maybe when He says rise the eyes will come floating up too, out of the deep quiet and the sleep, to look on glory. And after a while the flat irons will come floating up’ (77). Despite reminiscing upon the injustices of events past, Quentin never loses sight of his final suicidal act. Every gesture he performs is directed towards his death – he never once forgets that

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<sup>219</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, ‘Annabel Lee’, in Thompson (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, 75-76. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

this is the end he is striving for. Thus, Quentin watches ‘The shadow of the bridge, the tiers of the railing, my shadow leaning upon the water, so easily had I tricked it that it would not quit me’ (60). He continues:

At least fifty feet it was, and if I only had something to blot it into the water, holding it until it was drowned, the shadow of the package like two shoes wrapped up lying in the water. Niggers say a drowned man’s shadow was watching him in the water all the time. It twinkled and glinted, like breathing [...] What a sinful waste, Dilsey would say.

(60)

The fact that Quentin observes his shadow in the water, wishing he was ‘holding it down until it was drowned’, is clearly proleptic of his own death. In this moment, he tries to make of his impending suicide ‘an incontrovertible fact as people will when their desires become words’ (78). Also, his references to sayings by “niggers” appears to serve two simultaneous functions. On the one hand, these references emphasise that Quentin’s suicide is an inevitable, predestined event, which is largely, and fatalistically, out of his control. In the context of suicide, “‘Fatalism’ as a sociopsychological concept’, says Moller, ‘means that an individual feels unable to change or improve important circumstances that affect his or her life’ (194-195). On the other hand, the invocation of the ‘drowned man’s shadow’, with its alleged provenance in African-American culture, implies that suicide is an alienating, taboo act which is antithetical to genteel Southern standards and can only be comprehended from the perspective of the “other.” Yet, by attempting to substitute a direct reference to suicide with a crude reference to what ‘niggers say’, Quentin’s method ultimately works against him here, because Dilsey, the prominent African-American voice in the novel,<sup>220</sup> holds exactly the same view of suicide that mainstream, white Southern

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<sup>220</sup> Numerous critics share this view, including: Thadious M. Davis (1988), Donald M. Kartiganer (1988), John Pilkington (1981), and Diane Roberts (1994). In *The Novel*, Schmidt writes that ‘In *The Sound and the Fury*, the sole character we can more or less depend upon is the black servant Dilsey’ (741), who is ‘the most stable, the least vexed, presence in the book, holding together the frayed threads of the family’ (748).

society does. Indeed, as far as Quentin's characterisation of Dilsey here is concerned, she too would dismiss and condemn his act, and so Quentin repeatedly encounters views of suicide which are inherently negative. Thus, the tactics which he employs to excuse his actions, especially where issues of race intersect with his suicide, work against him.

Despite whatever sanctuary Quentin believes exists in 'the clean flame' or 'the caverns and the grottoes of the sea', during a remembered exchange with Caddy at home, he inadvertently reveals that he did not fulfil an obligation she placed upon him after he discovers her pregnancy. Caddy beseeches him to protect Benjy from the family, who wish to have him committed to the mental asylum in Jackson: '*just promise [...] dont let them send him to Jackson, promise*' (74). Quentin attempts to comfort Caddy, proposing that:

*we can go away you Benjy and me where nobody knows us [...]  
On what your school money the money they sold the pasture  
for so you could go to Harvard dont you see you've got to finish now if  
you dont finish he'll have nothing*

(82)

Despite Quentin's bravado and reassurance, he fails as a man and as a brother to protect and honour his sister by not following through with his promise.<sup>221</sup> Perhaps this aspect of himself contributes to his inability to utter the word "suicide", because by saying the word and performing the act, he feels that he forsakes Caddy and Benjy for his own single-minded, personal reasons, and his family's investment in him. To not say the word, therefore, functions as an ironically indirect admission of shame at having to rely upon suicide as an exit strategy. Quentin is forced, therefore, to reflect upon the failure of his promises, promises which were made, ironically, to emphasise that he is an authority figure and to demonstrate the reliability of the words he spoke and the threats he made.

Forced, therefore, to repent for his sins against Caddy, Quentin serendipitously encounters 'a little dirty child' at a bakery (83). Quentin, despite his aforementioned efforts

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<sup>221</sup> In the Appendix, Faulkner reveals that Benjy was 'Committed to the State Asylum, Jackson 1933', which makes Quentin's failure to protect his younger brother all the more palpable (269).

to alienate and disconnect himself from the world around him, is unusually warm and affectionate with this girl, and even repeatedly refers to her as his “sister.” Amongst other kind gestures, Quentin buys her a ‘bun’, ‘a five-cent loaf’ and an ice cream (83-85), defends her against the bigoted clerk who dismisses the girl as ‘one of them foreigners’ (83-84),<sup>222</sup> and attempts to escort her home. Through interacting with the girl in this manner, Quentin attempts to fulfil the promise he made to Caddy through a surrogate, in miniature, in order to ensure the girl’s safety and survival. As Matthews argues, ‘this “sister” represents a Caddy who, in her defilement and absence, shadows Quentin’s mind.’<sup>223</sup> At the same time, however, Quentin attempts to evade his self-imposed responsibility to the girl when he abandons her after they reach a neighbourhood replete with houses that ‘all seemed empty’ (87): ‘I ran fast, not looking back. Just before the road curved away I looked back. She stood in the road, a small figure clasping the loaf of bread to her filthy little dress, her eyes still black and unwinking. I ran on’ (88). Quentin, once again, fails to enact his responsibilities; despite his apparent care for the girl, she causes him to deviate from the rigid measures he has taken throughout his day to ensure his suicide is enacted. She also causes him to misuse his time, essentially jeopardising his end-of-day deadline. Quentin implies as much when he tells her: “‘There’s town again, sister. You’ll have to go home now. I’ve got to go back to school. Look how late it’s getting’” (91).

Quentin’s encounter with the girl leads directly to his violent altercation with her brother, Julio, whose ‘hands were jabbing at my face [...] “I killa heem,” Julio said’ (92). Quentin is arrested following this altercation, during which he is accused by Julio of trying to “‘steela my seester’” (92). More significantly, this incident leads to his subsequently violent altercation with Gerald Bland, his classmate, who along with Gerald’s mother,

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<sup>222</sup> The girl is, apparently, Italian.

<sup>223</sup> John T. Matthews, *The Sound and the Fury: Faulkner and the Lost Cause* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 60. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

Shreve, and fellow schoolmate Spoade, happen upon the scene (93). The course which Quentin's day takes shows that despite his protracted, mechanical behaviour during the day's beginning, along with the measured, poised sentences he uses to describe his behaviour (sentences which, in fact, barely conceal the torrent of emotions flowing within him), Quentin cannot isolate himself from his environment, nor can he extricate himself from his senses. His endeavours to live life as a dead person prove futile. During his altercation with Bland, time periods within Quentin's narrative collapse as he recalls the disintegration of his relationship with Caddy. Despite his obsessive attempt to control and stop time by smashing his watch (53), the misfortunes and consequences of his past upon his present situation cannot be avoided. Furthermore, during the altercation, Quentin experiences a disconnection from his surroundings that, on the level of the text, is rendered as a complete breakdown in language proper. His speech devolves from his initial transcriptive mode to a basic, barely functional vocal expression. As Bockting characterises this moment, Quentin's 'inner world overpowers the outer world' (66):

*did you how can you not know it if youll just wait Ill tell you how it was it was a crime we did a terrible crime it cannot be bid you think it can but wait Poor Quentin youve never done that have you and Ill tell you how it was Ill tell Father then itll have to be because you love Father then well have to go away amid the pointing and the horror the clean flame Ill make you say we did Im stronger than you Ill make you know we did you thought it was them but it was me listen I fooled you all the time it was me you thought I was in the house where that damn honeysuckle trying not to think the swing the cedars the secret surges the breathing locked drinking the wild breath the yes Yes Yes yes*

(98)

What becomes clear during Quentin's altercation with Bland is that he always oscillates between protecting Caddy on the one hand and coercing her into admitting incestuous sexual congress on the other. The pressures that both Quentin and the family in general exert upon Caddy, combined with her unwanted pregnancy and her strained relations with Dalton, cause her to contemplate suicide. Quentin recollects that he discovered Caddy

floating in the river by their house, 'lying in the water her head on the sand spit the water flowing about her lips' (99). Quentin's chosen method of death on June Second could therefore be interpreted as an imitation or fulfilment of what Caddy could not accomplish at her most desperate – suicide by drowning.

In the aftermath of this moment, Quentin recalls how he tried to enact a murder/suicide pact with Caddy:

poor Quentin  
she leaned back on her arms her hands locked about her  
knees  
youve never done that have you  
what done what  
that what I have what I did  
yes yes lots of times with lots of girls

Then, Quentin remembers how:

I held the point of the knife to her throat  
it wont take but a second just a second then I can do mine  
I can do mine then  
alright [...]  
will you close your eyes  
no like this youll have to push it harder

(100)

During his exchange with Caddy here, Quentin is on the precipice of fulfilling his murderous, violent urges to control and discipline his young sister. These urges, both in this instance and throughout his memories, seem to be confused by Quentin with his intense, sexual hunger for her. Matthews similarly observes that, in this passage, 'the language of sexuality and the language of death intertwine, reflecting Quentin's consistent association of the two' (1990, 51). Quentin, however, begins to falter and cry. Noticing this, Caddy, attempts to comfort him, saying:

dont cry  
Im not crying Caddy  
push it are you going to  
do you want me to  
yes push it [...]  
but I couldnt stop she held my head against her damp hard  
breast



With Quentin's failure confirmed, Caddy hastens away from him:

what is it what are you doing  
her muscles gathered I sat up  
its my knife I dropped it [...]  
she rose to go to her feet I fumbled along the ground  
Im going let it go

(100-101)

Quentin initiates the pact with simplicity, opening his knife automatically, which suggests that his actions are conducted with the thought of committing violence prior to this moment. In the aborted murder/suicide which unfolds throughout this passage, Quentin clearly wants Caddy to die first. His wish leads to the question of whether he would have actually committed suicide had his plan to kill Caddy succeeded. Perhaps, by killing her, Quentin would have ensured that she was protected and isolated from Dalton – Quentin threatens that ‘tomorrow Ill kill him I swear I will’ (99) – thereby granting both her and himself relief from the situation. Through Caddy's death, Quentin could have created a context in which she is positioned within ‘the clean flame’, awaiting him within that realm. Quentin's actions here are not as straightforward as Bauer's claim that their encounter is solely and explicitly about sexual matters. ‘When Quentin draws his knife on her’, Bauer asserts, he is ‘asking her to commit incest with him, given the language of the dialogue and the connections made between sex and death’ (77). Bauer's claims elide the control that Quentin tries to exert over Caddy, by not giving her a choice in the matter of her own death but, rather, striking quickly and using coercive tactics to ensure that both his sexual desires and his violent need for control eclipse her subjectivity. Quentin chooses to act when Caddy is at her most vulnerable and in need of his help – pregnant and with few options to relieve her difficulties. Quentin acts opportunistically here, taking advantage of her piteously calling him ‘poor Quentin’ and wilfully misinterpreting her utterance as an

invitation to perform this sexually-charged homicidal act rather than it being a gesture of fraternal love and kindness.<sup>224</sup>

Caddy enacts a further betrayal when she immediately meets Dalton by the fence. Quentin notes how he 'could see her face a blur against his shoulder he held her in one arm like she was no bigger than a child' (102), an act which effectively disavows what has just transpired between him and his sister. Quentin is rendered incapable of being either Caddy's lover or murderer. There is a constant need for him to reiterate his position and respond to her transgressions through action, showing her that he refuses to be betrayed. He attempts repeatedly to atone for his failure to be a forceful, menacing figure in her life by constantly calling himself into action, confronting Dalton days later:

I came to tell you to leave town [...]  
I said you must leave town  
he looked at me  
did she send you to me  
I say you must go not my father not anybody I say it  
listen save this for a while I want to know if shes all right  
have they been bothering her up there  
(105-106)

Quentin aims, by talking to Dalton in this manner, to imitate the kind of man he perceives Dalton to be; he compensates for a lack of physical strength by using assertive, intimidating language, presenting himself as an 'obverse reflection' of the man he thinks Dalton is and what he believes Southern society demands he be.<sup>225</sup> However, Quentin yet again fails to exert any violence or influence over Dalton, who is rational, measured, and composed.

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<sup>224</sup> Following this exchange, Quentin continues to cry and threaten Caddy. He is told twice in response to 'hush.' 'Hush' is the word Caddy uses to quieten Benjy when he yells and screams. By using the same words here with Quentin as she does with Benjy, Quentin briefly takes Benjy's place in Caddy's affections. As Rueckert observes, 'Quentin [...] is Ben raised to a much higher level of human possibilities and [...] howls and roars at his sister's inevitable loss of purity' (26).

<sup>225</sup> Quentin ironically reverses his behaviour here once he arrives in Cambridge. After he encounters an African-American man dressed 'in a derby and shined shoes' on a streetcar, he tells himself that he must 'remember to think of (African-Americans) as coloured people, not niggers' (57). Quentin concludes that 'a nigger is [...] a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among' (57). Following Quentin's logic, during his encounters with Dalton and Herbert, he is not a man as much as a parody of the masculine figures he encounters from Civil War history through to the present day.

Dalton does not perceive Quentin as a threat; instead, he takes advantage of his weaker opponent and patronises him, replying to Quentin's question of whether he 'ever had a sister' with the words 'no but theyre all bitches' (106). Despite using this utterance as an opportunity to 'hit (Dalton) with my open hand', Quentin is overpowered by him – Dalton blocks his blows, holding 'both (his) wrists in the same hand' (106). Quentin is revealed as the antithesis of Dalton, exposing his behaviour as a façade by shaking and, later, fainting while he talks to him. As Fox observes, Quentin's 'ultimatum is a performance, which ultimately diminishes his projection of authority' (69). Despite the poise in his execution of his last will and testament on the morning of June Second, Quentin wavered and failed to act during his confrontation with Dalton, which was precisely the moment that might have saved his life and prevented his death. In other words, if Quentin had successfully defeated and vanquished Dalton here, he would have circumvented the overwhelming feelings of defeat and failure he experiences during June Second; he would have asserted his masculinity and authority over Caddy and her lovers. On account of his failure, however, Quentin must now 'say Yes to death' or truly be left with 'nothing.'<sup>226</sup>

Finally, after Dalton resolves to abandon Caddy, she, in her fury, is stopped by Quentin from pursuing him. Despite demanding that Quentin 'let me go Ive got to catch up and ask him', Quentin refuses to do so, instead asking her if she loves Dalton (108). Caddy, refusing to answer, tells Quentin to 'put (his) hand against (her throat).' At this point, Quentin regains consciousness. Such subconscious recollections show that Quentin knows himself to be a failure in numerous respects, especially where Caddy's liaison with Dalton is concerned. These recollections show his awareness that he can never become a man like Dalton or Herbert. Try as he might to exhibit violent, controlling behaviour

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<sup>226</sup> This observation counters the ending of *The Wild Palms* (1939) (London: Vintage, 2005), which concludes with Harry Wilburne's iconic utterance that '*Between grief and nothing, I will take grief*' (193), after he refuses to commit suicide following the botched abortion he performs upon his lover, Charlotte Rittenmeyer.

throughout his life, Quentin will always be a ‘half-baked Galahad’ whose paralysis and impotence once again renders him an emblem of the defeated, arid South. Yet, Quentin’s failure is such that he can only acknowledge these events towards the end of his day, while unconscious, because he avoided these failures all day long through his affectless speech and his conscious preparations for and evasion of the word “suicide.” Quentin’s recollection of these numerous traumatic events are his crisis point – they inflect every word he utters (or fails to utter) throughout his chapter. His suicide is, therefore, the final, desperate plea he makes to rectify these issues.

### **June Second, 1910: Night – A fine dead sound**

Regaining consciousness after his altercation with Bland, Quentin reverts to the state he was in at the beginning of the day, ready to vanquish the voices that haunt him. His speech shifts from the erotically charged imagery of his subconscious thoughts during the altercation to oblique descriptions of Shreve, who tends to Quentin’s injuries:

It kept on running for a long time, but my face felt cold and sort of dead, and my eye, and the cut place on my finger was smarting again. I could hear Shreve working the pump, then he came back with the basin and a round blob of twilight wobbling in it, with a yellow edge like a fading balloon, then my reflection. I tried to see my face in it.

(109)

Quentin now returns to the passive, detached mode of speech he utilised at the beginning of his chapter, transcribing events and speech as they occur. Thus, Quentin does not describe any pain in this moment, but merely reuses stock phrases and words such as ‘the cut [...] was smarting again’ when referring to his injuries. It is as though these events, as with the packing and stowing away of his belongings in his trunk, hold no significance for him – his suicidal journey continues. The events of the afternoon have strengthened his resolve, placing him at an even further remove from himself.

Interestingly, what Quentin is most concerned about here is whether he successfully injured Bland during their altercation, as evidenced by his repeatedly asking if he “hurt him any?” (109). Added to this is his concern that he maintain and preserve his purity, which has now significantly diminished, as seen through the close attention Quentin pays to cleaning his shirt, collar, and face: ‘I wrung out the handkerchief and tried to clean the blood off of my vest. [...] But I wasn’t doing much good’ (109). Asking repeatedly if he hit Bland, Quentin exposes his desperation to assert his authority over others, especially those whom he perceives as a threat. However, he again fails to accomplish this with any of the men he encounters, from Dalton onwards. Therefore, Quentin relies ironically and, arguably, tragically and pathetically, upon tactics of violence, intimidation, and menace which he knows have failed him in the past (especially his encounter with Dalton). Even Shreve, his closest friend at Harvard, humorously dismisses Quentin, while at the same time emphasising Bland’s power and violence: “‘You may have hit him. I may have looked away just then or blinked or something. He boxed the hell out of you’” (109). Quentin is repeatedly marked by a failure of masculinity, which is coupled with his attempts at action that malfunction irreparably, through the splashes of blood and bruises that literally cover his face and body. His failure is so visible and apparent here that it simply cannot be denied.

Quentin repeatedly says that he wiped the blood off his face and vest, and is adamant that he remove the blood from his shirt and collar. He evinces an immediate insistence upon returning to his previous readying for suicide, correcting the digressions he enacted with Little Sister and Bland. In doing so, he desperately strives to lessen the impact of these indiscretions upon him: ‘I dipped the cloth again and held it to my eye. “Wish I had something to clean my vest.” [...] “I’m sorry I hit him,” I said. “Do I look too bad to go back and get it over with?”’ (110-111). Despite these attempts at purifying and re-purifying himself for death, in order to reach the realm of the clean flame, his efforts are sullied. The suit and clothes he meticulously prepared in the morning have, by nightfall,

become grotesque versions of themselves. They have transformed out of all proportion from clean, lovingly tendered garments to dirtied, bloodied 'rags' which offer no sense of resolution or reassurance. The destruction of his suit and clothes mirrors, perhaps, Quentin's own perceptions of both himself and Caddy (whom he once perceived as pure but then, in the course his life took and in his recollections of these events, later classed and dismissed as a 'whore' [105]). He perceived himself, initially, as being modelled after a quintessentially Southern mode of masculinity, but was then reduced to a bloody, bruised mess of a human being by those who actively challenged and ridiculed him, both at home and at Harvard (namely Compson, Dalton, Herbert, Bland, and, of course, Caddy).

After Shreve tends to Quentin's wounds, he and Spoade inform Quentin that, before the altercation, he "'jumped up all of a sudden and said 'Did you ever have a sister? Did you?'" and when he said No, you hit him.'" Spoade gives him a 'cold and quizzical' look and says:

"He ought to go back so they'll know he fights like a gentleman [...] Gets licked like one, I mean."

"Like this?" Shreve said. "With his clothes all over blood?"

"I'm not going back to town."

Shreve stopped, looking at me. [...]

"Look here," he said. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing. I'm alright. You and Spoade go on back. I'll see you tomorrow." I went on across the yard, toward the road.

"Do you know where the station is?"

"I'll find it. I'll see you tomorrow. Tell Mrs. Bland I'm sorry I spoiled her party."

(111)

Quentin adamantly refuses to acquiesce to either Shreve or Spoade, speaking in definite, authoritative tones and exhibiting an unwavering commitment to his plan. He will not bid these men farewell; instead, he ensures that he departs by telling them what he believes they wish to hear. Indeed, his utterances are as mechanical as they have ever been. As Durkheim writes regarding a person near to suicide, 'at the very moment when he is

breaking away from the social environment, he is still subject to its influence' (231). Quentin cannot reveal his plan because they will either attempt to prevent his suicide, insisting upon bringing him back to the fold of everyday life, or, in Spode's case, condemn him by expressing 'cold and quizzical' contempt and 'horror.' As Kearsley notes: 'How we die reveals not only the essence of personal values but also the adequacy of social arrangements for ensuring that good lives can be lived. [...] Most social systems cannot handle equivocal death' (134). Instead, it is essential that Quentin carry out the rest of his day alone, completing the tasks he has been performing throughout his day and fulfilling what is constantly on his mind – the act of killing himself. Quentin cannot confide in anybody about his troubles because, he fears, his desire to commit suicide will be treated as a stigma, with the people around him refusing to understand the factors and reasons which drove him to his death. Only he can reconcile the demons within himself by plunging into the Charles River. As Bleikasten notes, 'behind the mechanical succession of seemingly controlled gestures, one senses a consciousness no longer fully present to itself and to the world [...] a consciousness more than ever astray' (1976, 103).

Having returned to his dormitory, Quentin attempts to complete his ritualistic purification away from the concerned, prying eyes of people like Shreve, taking off his 'coat, vest, collar, tie, and shirt' and daubing each article of clothing with gasoline. As he does so, Quentin observes:

It took a lot of gasoline, and then I couldn't tell if it was still the stain or just the gasoline. It had started the cut to smarting again so when I went to wash I hung the vest on a chair and then lowered the light cord so that the bulb would be drying the splotch. I washed my face and hands, but even then I could smell it within the soap stinging, constricting the nostrils a little.

(114)

Unfortunately, despite his attempts to purify himself and maintain a sense of mechanical composure, the overpowering odour of the gasoline fills the dorm, to the extent that

Quentin can smell it even after he enters his bedroom (114). Quentin, therefore, never attains a true sense of purity because a ‘stain’ of the misfortunes of his life and his final day remains. Quentin is unable to wash away his failures – they constantly remind him of home, with the lingering scent of the gasoline triggering an association to his mother’s ‘*camphor soaked handkerchief*’ (114). By conceiving of death as the ‘peacefullest’ act, as discussed earlier, Quentin attempts to match the purity he never ceases to try and attain. The spectre of impending death brings him a great sense of joy and satisfaction, rather than anxiety or alarm. This is why Bleikasten’s assertion that, as his suicide draws nearer, Quentin evinces ‘an inability to welcome death, an inability to *want* it at the very moment it appears most desirable’ (1976, 103, italics Bleikasten’s), is patently incorrect. In fact, Quentin’s readiness to ‘welcome death’ is precisely what he believes allows him, at certain stages at the end of his life, to speak with clarity and equanimity, much like Rider in “Pantaloone in Black” when he orders Maydew and the deputy to not imprison him (150). In doing so, Quentin’s voice becomes ‘a fine dead sound’, filled with tranquillity and peace (115). He wishes to render his voice capable of only dictating and transcribing the events around him, and in a rare instance he successfully achieves a moment of clarity.

As far as his family is concerned, Quentin recalls that, as a boy:

Father was teaching us that all men are just accumulations dolls stuffed with sawdust swept up from the trash heaps [...] It used to be I thought of death as a man something like Grandfather a friend of his a kind of private and particular friend... waiting for old Colonel Sartoris to come down and sit with them waiting on a high place beyond cedar trees [...] Grandfather wore his uniform and we could hear the murmur of their voices from beyond the cedars they were always talking and Grandfather was always right[.]

(116-117)

To Quentin, death is associated with both masculinity and, by extension, his patriarchal heritage. Death is figured as always being in the immediate background of his history, never completely out of sight but, instead, an inextricable part of his socio-cultural makeup.



Given that Quentin's voice is saturated by the voice of his father, who in turn constantly quotes and is influenced by his father's voice, the words that each successive generation of Compson men speak is suffused with death and an irrevocable sense of loss and absence.<sup>227</sup> As Matthews observes:

The son of the South (he never becomes a son of Harvard) cannot escape the conviction that the past is nothing but catastrophe—the catastrophe of the Civil War, slavery, aristocratic decline in the New South, and the humiliation of a ruined family. Like so many other Southerners, Quentin sees nothing but a legacy of loss. His suicide suggests that he refuses to accept the repetition of that past into his future.

(1990, 62)

Given that Quentin always hears the 'murmur' of death's voice just as frequently as he can hear the voices of Grandfather and Sartoris, death becomes an inescapable aspect of existing within the South. It is an inevitability, an undeniable aspect of his lineage.

Time, as symbolised by the striking of the clock, 'the three quarters', the first of which was 'measured and tranquil, serenely peremptory, emptying the unhurried silence for the next one' (117), intercepts Quentin's rumination of Grandfather and Sartoris. Time cuts his thoughts off mid-sentence, urging him onto his final preparations for death. The self-imposed deadline he set himself at day's end finally overrides the voices which bombard him throughout June Second and which continue to influence and corrupt him. However, this is not the final time where the voices and 'whispers' of the South or his familial past threaten to keep Quentin grounded in the mortal world, away from the oblivion of 'the clean flame' and his final embrace of suicide. These voices, especially that

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<sup>227</sup> Compson's pessimism stems, largely, from his descent into alcoholism, which can be interpreted as his own prolonged, indirect suicide. In the Appendix, Faulkner says that Compson often 'sat all day long with a decanter of whiskey in his office' (262). Two years after Quentin's suicide, Compson dies because of his alcohol abuse. As his son Jason says to Caroline, while comparing himself to his deceased brother and father, "'I never had time to go to Harvard or drink myself into the ground. I had to work'" (119). See also Gary Storhoff, 'Jason's Role Slippage: The Dynamics of Alcoholism in *The Sound and the Fury*', *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 49, Issue 3 (Summer, 1996): 519-535, which explores the impact of Compson's drinking upon his children.

of Quentin's father (the last voice Quentin hears before leaving his dormitory and plunging into the Charles River) constantly remind Quentin of his failed responsibilities.

At this stage, Quentin is faced with two choices and must make a final, definitive decision. He can ignore time and the presence and concept of suicide and continue to allow the voices of the South and his family to regulate and dominate him. Alternatively, he can allow his longing for death to interrupt and, more importantly, vanquish these voices. Choosing the latter option, Quentin makes the transition away from his familial obligations and the socio-cultural precepts that characterise his outlook towards the irrevocability of death. Whichever choice Quentin makes, however, he is not left with a positive outcome by any means: if he leaves behind time and rejects his disposition towards suicide, he will continue to be imprisoned by societal obligation and conventional, communal standards; if he surrenders to suicide, all he will be capable of communicating during his final moments is a voice in the most basic, fundamental sense, expressing the outlook of a subjectivity pushed to the edge of human existence, stripped of any trace of life.

Before leaving his dorm room, Quentin recalls a conversation between himself and his father. By doing so, 'Quentin seems to silence his father's voice by internalizing it, and consequently what masquerades as a debate is actually a double-voiced soliloquy, the twin explanations of suicide as both surrender and defiance' (Matthews, 1982, 84-85). Their exchange unfolds thus:

and he we must just stay awake and see evil done for a little while its not always and i it doesnt have to be even that long for a man of courage and he do you consider that courage and i yes sir dont you and he every man is the arbiter of his own virtues whether or not you consider it courageous is of more importance than the act itself than any act otherwise you could not be in earnest and i you dont believe i am serious and he i think you are too serious to give me any cause for alarm you wouldnt have felt driven to the expedient of telling me you had committed incest otherwise and i i wasnt lying i wasnt lying and he you

wanted to sublimate a piece of natural human folly into a horror and then exorcise it with truth and i it was to isolate her out of the loud world so that it would have to flee us of necessity and then the sound of it would be as though it had never been and he did you try to make her do it and i i was afraid to i was afraid she might and then it wouldnt have done any good but if i could tell you we did it would have been so and then the others wouldnt be so and then the world would roar away and he [...] you are contemplating an apotheosis in which a temporary state of mind will become symmetrical above the flesh and aware both of itself and of the flesh it will not quite discard you will not even be dead and i temporary and he you cannot bear to think that someday it will no longer hurt you like this now were getting at it you seem to regard it merely as an experience that will whiten your hair overnight so to speak without altering your appearance at all [...] i think youd better go on up to cambridge right away you might go up into maine for a month you can afford it if you are careful it might be a good thing watching pennies has healed more scars than jesus [...] you will remember that for you to go to harvard has been your mothers dream since you were born and no compson has ever disappointed a lady and i temporary it will be better for me for all of us and he every man is the arbiter of his own virtues but let no man prescribe for another mans wellbeing and i temporary and he was the saddest word of all

(117-118)

Compson speaks to Quentin with directives, ordering him to go to Harvard because there is simply no other choice available to him. Compson uses manipulative tactics, impressing upon Quentin his obligations and trying to compel him to overthrow his incestuous desires for Caddy and the range of conflicting, damaging emotions he experiences because of this. Discounting Quentin's feelings as simply 'temporary', Compson calls attention to the seeming artificiality and hollowness of Quentin's emotions, instead of giving them the credence Quentin feels they deserve. Indeed, Quentin is repeatedly dismissed by his father, who does not try to soothe his son's pain. Compson also attempts to disqualify his eldest son's involvement in the taboo subject of incest; he wagers to render Quentin's troubles null and void, rather than addressing and facing them. Telling him to 'go on up to cambridge', Compson at first suggests an (ironically) 'temporary' solution to a long-term,

deeply rooted psychological dilemma, before effectively absolving himself of any paternal responsibility for his son's problem. As Bocking writes, "These last words show the very depth of Quentin's despair. His father has finally destroyed his only hope, his only reason for living" (76). Compson does not want to help his son, but instead places the onus onto Quentin himself, forcing him to find his own solution and treatment to his problem, a solution which, inevitably, becomes suicide.

The relationship between Compson and Quentin is further problematised by the fact that the voice which Quentin pays utmost attention to and allows to invade or, in Gray's words, 'colonize' his consciousness (1994, 143), ultimately abandons him. Compson absconds from his role as a father, failing to match the ideal which Quentin perceives him as being capable of fulfilling. Quentin's speech is thus corrupted by the internalisation of Compson's various teachings and philosophies, which offer no help or relief. Similarly, Ryuichi Yamaguchi claims that Compson's 'tragic error is in giving Quentin advice he himself knows better than to believe, while Quentin's is in being too naïve to question it.'<sup>228</sup> Quentin realises his naïveté much too late in the course that his life has taken, and as such the only choice for him is to kill himself. In doing so, he can perhaps drown out the voice of his father and all the other voices which point and yell in horror at his actions. Suicide becomes, amongst other things, Quentin's respite, but it is also a product or 'sum' of his various 'misfortunes.' Yet, the overwhelming impression one is left with at the end of Quentin's day is that his death would never have occurred had he successfully challenged and overcome these voices.

Quentin's chapter ends thus:

The last note sounded. At last it stopped vibrating and the darkness was still again. I entered the sitting room and turned on the light. I put my vest on. The gasoline was faint now, barely noticeable, and in the mirror the stain didn't

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<sup>228</sup> Ryuichi Yamaguchi, *Faulkner's Artistic Vision: The Bizarre and the Terrible* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), 110.

show. Not like my eye did, anyway. I put on my coat. Shreve's letter crackled through the cloth and I took it out and examined the address, and put it in my side pocket. Then I carried the watch into Shreve's room and put it in his drawer and went to my room and got a fresh handkerchief and went to the door and put my hand on the light switch. Then I remembered I hadn't brushed my teeth, so I had to open the bag again. I found my toothbrush and got some of Shreve's paste and went out and brushed my teeth. I squeezed the brush as dry as I could and put it back in the bag and shut it, and went to the door again. Before I snapped the light out I looked around to see if there was anything else, then I saw that I had forgotten my hat. I'd have to go by the postoffice and I'd be sure to meet some of them, and they'd think I was a Harvard Square student making like he was a senior. I had forgotten to brush it too, but Shreve had a brush, so I didn't have to open the bag any more.

(118-119)

Throughout all of June Second, 1910, this is the only passage which is entirely free from the interference of voices other than Quentin's own. This fact points towards an ironic, unintended paradox on Quentin's part as it implies that he internalises Compson's sentiments that 'every man is the arbiter of his own virtues' and can finally take control of his situation. Nevertheless, Quentin's voice is only heard functioning autonomously in the immediate lead-up to his suicide, which is a final, fleeting, and ironic attempt to exert and capture his individual agency. As Bakhtin writes, 'One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse' (348). By mentioning that 'the last note sounded', Quentin implies there is nowhere else for him to turn, because the last note interrupts and stops all other voices. From this point forward, Quentin rapidly plunges toward the undeniable reality of what he is going to do. The tone of the paragraph cited above recalls and extends the mechanical style at the beginning of the chapter, where a young man with nothing left to live for transcribes the last moments of his existence.

One question readers are left with at the close of Quentin's chapter is whether he finally overcomes his shame about suicide. The content of the final paragraph can be interpreted as being either his complete surrender to suicide and the darkness and chaos which lies within him, 'saying Yes to death.' Or, given the absence of all other voices, this can be seen as the moment where he finally reconciles himself to his fate because there are no further interruptions, his longings for death will finally be fulfilled. In either case, his death is guaranteed. Quentin ends the chapter with nothing else left to say – his decision has been made. By way of conclusion, Quentin does die, leaving others, like his younger brother, Jason, to reveal his fate.<sup>229</sup> The very fact that his death has been enacted proves that he was able to successfully alter the definition of "suicide" to suit his own intentions. Quentin's death ultimately goes beyond the limits of language and speech, eradicating all voices, transcending the word "suicide" and the negative views associated with it.

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<sup>229</sup> Jason acknowledges Quentin's death in 1928, immediately after discussing how he (Jason) has to 'wait' on customers during his day-job at the town hardware store: 'Well Jason likes work. I says I never had no university advantages because at Harvard they teach you how to go for a swim at night without knowing how to swim' (129). In contrast to Quentin, Jason was not sent to Harvard in exchange for a large familial and financial sacrifice (Quentin recalls how Compson said 'Let us sell Benjy's pasture so that Quentin may go to Harvard' [116]) and could not become a man of the leisured class who would restore the dignity and solemnity of the Compson name. Instead, as he caustically (and jealously) acknowledges, if Compson 'had to sell something to send Quentin to Harvard we'd all be a dam sight better off if [...] he bought himself a one-armed strait jacket with part of the money. [...] At least I never heard of him offering to sell anything to send me to Harvard' (130). Jason's bitterness here, coupled with his deep-seated but unacknowledged feelings of inadequacy, transforms Quentin's suicide into a cruel, trivial joke. Whenever Jason acknowledges Quentin's death, he displays no grief or signs of bereavement but only outrage over what he has suffered because of Quentin's actions. As Holli G. Levitsky observes, the barrier that Quentin's death creates between himself and Jason shows that, in Faulkner's fiction, 'the taking of one's life forces one's life to be read by others. A suicide is always questioned: the subject of the suicide loses authority and leaves her/his life completely open to interpretation' ('Suicide and Sex: The Cost of Desire (Is Death)', *Southern Quarterly*, Volume 41, Issue 1 [2002], 30).

## Chapter Four

### **“a bloody mischancing of human affairs”: Wash Jones and the murder of Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!***

At the core of *Absalom, Absalom!* lies the murder of Charles Bon by Henry Sutpen in 1865. Critics have often noted the significance of the event: Donald M. Kartiganer writes that ‘At the center of (the novel) there is a known fact, like a real stone enduring centuries of words: in 1865, a man named Henry Sutpen, the son of Thomas Sutpen and Ellen Coldfield, killed a man named Charles Bon.’<sup>230</sup> Likewise, Blair Labatt observes that the novel is ‘structured anecdotally’ but ‘it is built around one major event, the murder of Charles Bon. Faulkner adjusts the order of telling to emphasize the centrality of one event. Yet the murder takes only a few pages to tell’ (26). However, relatively little has been written about the novel’s second murder: the murder of Thomas Sutpen by Wash Jones. In similar terms to Kartiganer, Hugh M. Ruppersburg observes that in the novel ‘The one generally accepted fact is that Wash killed Sutpen. The rest of the story is based on the testimony, much of it speculative, of witnesses: customers of Sutpen’s store report that he fathered a child by Wash’s granddaughter Milly.’<sup>231</sup> On the subject of murder in American literature more generally, Karen Halttunen writes that ‘in literate societies, the cultural work on coming to terms with this violent transgression takes crucial form in the crafting and reading of written narratives on murder, the chief purpose of which is to assign meaning to the incident.’<sup>232</sup> She continues: ‘Any murder involves a fictive process, which reveals much about the mental and emotional strategies employed within a given historical culture for responding to serious transgressions in its midst’ (2). With the ideas of Ruppersburg

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<sup>230</sup> Donald M. Kartiganer, *The Fragile Thread: The Meaning of Form in Faulkner’s Novels* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 70-71. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>231</sup> Hugh M. Ruppersburg, *Voice and Eye in Faulkner’s Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 122. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>232</sup> Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1-2. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

and Halttunen in mind, this chapter argues that the novel's narrators (Rosa Coldfield, Jason Compson III, his son Quentin Compson, and Shreve McCannon) all work to demonstrate, through various verbal and storytelling means, why Thomas Sutpen deserved to die in 1869. In order to do so, the chapter begins by reviewing the various scholarly readings which explain and justify Sutpen's death. These readings include: Sutpen being introduced as a 'man-horse-demon' in the novel's opening, a strategy which suggests that the narrators actively engage in othering and alienating Sutpen, transforming him into a nonhuman entity;<sup>233</sup> Sutpen provoking the ire of the townspeople of Jefferson by becoming 'the single biggest landowner' in Yoknapatawpha County (86); Sutpen executing his 'design' at the expense of the lives and dignity of those around him (Rosa and Charles especially); and Sutpen authorising the death of Charles, his unacknowledged, mixed-race son.

The chapter then examines the murder of Sutpen by Wash Jones, using three key concepts in order to provide an original reading of this aspect of the novel: (1) the legal definition of 'crimes against the person' under Mississippi law, particularly homicide, which is defined as 'The killing of a human being, without malice, in the heat of passion, but in a cruel or unusual way, or by the use of a dangerous weapon, without authority of law, and not in necessary self-defense';<sup>234</sup> (2) two distinct codes of honour in Southern society, the first used by aristocrats such as Sutpen, the second used by poor whites such as Wash, and both of which Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen describe as the use of 'honor not in the sense of probity of character but in the sense of status and power';<sup>235</sup> and (3) the anthropological concept of gift giving, as highlighted by Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-

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<sup>233</sup> William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 4. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>234</sup> MS Code § 97-3-35 (2016), <https://law.justia.com/codes/mississippi/2016/title-97/chapter-3/section-97-3-35/>, accessed 31/12/2018.

<sup>235</sup> Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen, *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), XVI. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.



Strauss, and Luce Irigaray, and the implications within and consequences of such exchanges.

With these concepts at its forefront, this chapter's core argument is as follows: herder culture, as defined by Nisbett and Cohen, is intensely protective of its resources, particularly in times of scarcity and precariousness, such as at the end of the Civil War:

The southern preference for violence stems from the fact that much of the South was a lawless, frontier region settled by people whose economy was originally based on herding. Herding societies are typically characterised by having 'cultures of honor' in which a threat to property or reputation is dealt with by violence.

(4)

As Nisbett and Cohen then observe, 'Such cultures seem to be particularly likely to develop where (1) the individual is at economic risk from his fellows and (2) the state is weak or non-existent and thus cannot prevent theft of property' (4). In this context, Wash enacts a series of exchanges with Sutpen, including gifting his fifteen-year-old grand-daughter, Milly, to Sutpen in return for recognition, respect and, ultimately, partnership, as per the rules of exchange conceptualised by Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, and subsequently critiqued by feminist theorists such as Irigaray. Wash heavily implies to Sutpen that he fully expects a return on his investment after twenty years of servitude, fuelled by his admiration for Sutpen and his position in Yoknapatawpha. In Wash's view, Sutpen is a God among men; Wash casts himself as Sutpen's loyal servant in the hope that, one day, he will be recognised for his efforts and be lifted to his desired seat at Sutpen's right hand. Indeed, Wash fully expects Sutpen to honour his obligations to him after Milly falls pregnant with Sutpen's child. However, Sutpen fails to fulfil this obligation because there was another, unspoken condition – on Sutpen's side – to this exchange: the birth of a son. After Milly gives birth to a daughter, Sutpen revokes the basis upon which his exchange with Wash took place. As per Nisbett and Cohen's concept, Wash relies upon the herder's culture of honour to punish and murder Sutpen for his crime. From Wash's perspective, Sutpen's murder is

culturally justified, yet not legally so, which is why a posse of law enforcers arrive at Wash's cabin to arrest him after the murder. Milly and her daughter, returned to Wash despoiled and valueless, are also murdered in this primitive arena of exchange and honour. Having lost his own fractional value as Sutpen's servant and with his scythe raised defiantly, Wash rushes into oblivion, 'saying Yes to death'.

***his name was Sutpen***

The introduction of Thomas Sutpen as a 'man-horse-demon' during the novel's opening inaugurates the idea that his murder was socially and culturally sanctioned:

Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect with his air grim, haggard, and tatter-ran. [...] Then in the long unamaze Quentin seemed to watch them overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the *Be Sutpen's Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light*.

(4-5)

Faulkner initially characterises Sutpen as a powerful, havoc-wrecking beast that must implicitly be stopped and destroyed. Sutpen curses the land, rampaging against the town's inhabitants, and therefore must be slain. As Richard Pearce argues, 'Sutpen is a barbarian, a threat to the religion, manners, family, and destiny of the Southern white race. He is a threat because he embodies the urges repressed by decorous manners, religious formalities, and the institution of the family in its public manifestation – the paternalistic rule of the plantation.'<sup>236</sup> From that perspective, Sutpen is initially viewed as a scourge upon the earth

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<sup>236</sup> Richard Pearce, *The Politics of Narration: James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 116. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

and upon Jefferson's citizens. The violence he embodies and signifies also ultimately leads to and justifies his destruction. As Faulkner stated at the University of Virginia in 1957, Sutpen 'was amoral, he was ruthless, completely self-centred': 'He was going to take what he wanted because he was big enough and strong enough, and I think that people like that are destroyed sooner or later' (*Faulkner in the University*, 80-81). Indeed, in the opening of the novel, Sutpen emerges out of a 'vortex of destruction', in William H. Rueckert's terms: 'Before he was finished, and long before he was dead, Sutpen destroyed, incapacitated or polluted everything he got near, and especially all those directly related to and descended from him. In all of Faulkner no greater and more terrible vortex of destruction can be found than this man' (112).

Sitting with 'faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard', the novel's opening pages present a Sutpen who is not protected from his own destruction; he is directly implicated in his own demise, having already wrought damage and disorder upon himself. (This theme will be developed during the main discussion of Sutpen's encounter with Wash later in the chapter.) Yet, Sutpen's characterisation in the novel's opening is clearly not presented from an objective perspective. Instead, it is an aestheticised representation, self-consciously designed to trigger a visceral, outraged response from the extratextual readers and intratextual listeners (Quentin especially) in order to comprehend and even condone Sutpen's destruction. R. Rio-Jeliffe states that: 'The opening scene of the novel sets down the precise requirements for oral delivery, a narrator and a reader, or a storyteller in search of an author.'<sup>237</sup> He goes on: 'Oral narration assumes two conditions: that the story undergoes a degree or degrees of refraction in the teller's version; and the reader who interrupts or interprets will in turn refract it in memory, and in his retelling of it, and so on, endlessly. Oral narration also implies a performance – gestured, mannered, dramatic,

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<sup>237</sup> R. Rio-Jeliffe, 'Absalom, Absalom! as Self-Reflexive Novel', *Journal of Narrative Technique*, Volume 11, Issue 2 (Spring, 1981): 80. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

conditioned by an audience to hyperbole' (80). From which he concludes: 'The whole cast in the Sutpen story performs in this stylized, formal manner reflected in the intensified resounding quality of style notable even for Faulkner for its heightened, expansive gestures' (80). Insights such as Rio-Jeliffe's anticipate those by such critics as Stephen M. Ross, who argues that the novel's 'representation depends upon the power of voice to evoke a world':

The evocation takes the form of a repeated calling forth of the past into the present, a process that is akin to the anaphoric patterns characteristic of oratorical prose style and rhetorical structures in which an idea or word or image is named and renamed so as to be elaborated and reelaborated again and again.

(1989, 219)

With these comments on oral narration in mind, it is clear that Sutpen's characterisation at the beginning of the novel results from being 'the long-dead object of (Rosa Coldfield's) impotent yet indomitable frustration' (4), as generations of critics have identified. Kartiganer, for example, writes that 'The heart of Miss Rosa Coldfield's narrative is her re-creation of Thomas Sutpen as a diabolical and therefore incomprehensible being' (1979, 73). Rio-Jeliffe, in his later account, notes that 'Rosa's oral narration, refracted by her own piecemeal experiences and secondhand information filtered through decades of hatred, updates Quentin's knowledge with the only firsthand account in his twenty-year listenings' (81).

More recently, Jolene Hubbs suggests that 'Rosa's narrative form is the novel's narrative form; her story is inextricably intertwined with the novel's plot, and her style is indistinguishable from Faulkner's'.<sup>238</sup> More precisely, because the novel's opening episode is filtered through Rosa's perspective and transmitted to Quentin, the self-conscious bombast in Sutpen's introduction demonstrates the influence that exterior voices and perspectives have upon one's perception of past events which were not personally

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<sup>238</sup> Jolene Hubbs, "'She Wants It Told': Rosa Coldfield's Narrative Clout in *Absalom, Absalom!*", *Literature Interpretation Theory*, Volume 25, Issue 3 (2014): 255.

witnessed. In Quentin's case, his position is especially vulnerable, considering that he is 'preparing for Harvard in the South' and is 'still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost' (5), which deliberately recalls Quentin's suicide at Harvard in *The Sound and the Fury*, the topic of the previous chapter. In the opening of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Rosa immediately attempts to convince Quentin of the validity of her perspective, yet as John T. Matthews writes, 'Rosa's language only succeeds in representing a simulated Sutpen. One of the most striking qualities of the Sutpen who emerges from Rosa's tale is his deadness': 'Sutpen's commanding potency and violence necessarily drains out of the supplement which comes to stand for him. Rosa's voice willingly sacrifices itself to the ardors of recollection.'<sup>239</sup>

There appears to be a contradiction between the two perspectives of Sutpen in the novel's opening, which raises the question of how Sutpen can be perceived as, in Kartiganer's terms, 'diabolical' (emerging from the realm of the non-human and monstrous), and yet also be referred to repeatedly as "he", as in the passage below:

*It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen—(Colonel Sutpen)—Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation—(Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begat a son and a daughter which—(Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only—(Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died)—and died.*

(5-6)

The contradiction points, as many of the critics cited herein have intimated, towards the idea that Sutpen's story is in a constant state of rewriting and reshaping, even moments after his bombastic introduction. Therefore, one's understanding of Sutpen cannot be forced into a single frame of discourse; instead, his story, and the reasons given to explain and justify his murder, are multitudinous and subject to constant debate, speculation, and

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<sup>239</sup> John T. Matthews, 'The Marriage of Speaking and Hearing in *Absalom, Absalom!*', *ELH*, Volume 47, Issue 3 (Autumn, 1980): 582.

alteration. Thus, where Quentin's role in the Sutpen story is concerned, Ruppersburg notes that 'Rather than speaking directly to the reader, characters talk to each other, usually to Quentin. Denied a traditional relationship with first-person narrative – direct address by the speaking character – the reader instead finds himself an eavesdropper to the talk of two individuals about events which occurred forty years before the time of narration (1909-10)' (84). Moreover, the idea that Sutpen 'tore violently a plantation' justifies the point made earlier in this chapter – by presenting him as someone scourging the earth from his entrance into Jefferson, Faulkner sets up Sutpen for final punishment for his savagery by Wash. Having both destroyed and been destroyed by '*the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his own age*', Sutpen is fated to die indecorously, even from the narrative's opening moments. He is doomed to death – death conquers and destroys all creatures. Sutpen cannot be allowed to 'say No to death', both because the consequences of his actions bar him from issuing this utterance, and also because of death's centrality to the human condition.

Having arrived in Jefferson, Sutpen becomes engaged to and marries Ellen Coldfield, Rosa's sister. Quentin's father, Mr Compson, makes clear the profoundly negative view that the townsfolk have of Sutpen, speaking from their perspective on the matter: 'In their surprise they forgot that Mr Coldfield had a marriageable daughter. They did not consider the daughter at all. They did not think of love in connection to Sutpen. They thought of ruthlessness rather than justice and of fear rather than respect, but not of pity or love' (49). Sutpen is repeatedly shown to be a figure that the town is distanced from and, ultimately, dread. According to Compson, Sutpen becomes their 'public enemy':

Perhaps this was because of what he brought back with him this time [...] as compared to the simple wagon load of wild niggers which he had brought back before. But I don't think so. That is, I think it was a little more involved than the sheer value of his chandeliers and mahogany and rugs. I think the affront was born of the town's realization that he was getting it involved with himself; that whatever the

felony which produced the mahogany and crystal, he was forcing the town to compound it.

(49-50)

In Compson's account here, Sutpen is no longer the inhuman 'man-horse-demon' that he was introduced as in the beginning of the novel by Rosa. Instead, he becomes a figure clearly implicated in a felony, and he provokes the townsfolk's ire because of their fear in being indirectly involved in his illegalities and indiscretions. The townsfolk are justified in their hostility towards Sutpen and in their implicit wish for him to be punished because of his insistence upon using Jefferson as the base of operations for his misbegotten, highly suspect empire. As Charles Hannon writes, 'Sutpen is snubbed by moneyed and unmoneyed classes alike [...] because of (their) reluctance to "get involved" with another out of town huckster, who may well intend only to extract more wealth from this location before moving on'.<sup>240</sup> From the townsfolk's perspective, Sutpen is located on the borderline between human and criminal "other", and so can justifiably be murdered.

Indeed, Sutpen drives people to extremes of emotions and 'fear' because of his 'ruthlessness', along with his threat to alter the fabric of life irrevocably within the community. This includes Wash's life thirty-six years later. The justification for Sutpen's murder emerges from the idea that Sutpen must be controlled or, if he refuses to be tamed, he must instead be punished. Sutpen's initial time in Jefferson establishes the parameters for him to be set upon by providence, fate, and, above all, Wash for his misdeeds. Throughout his thirty-six years in Yoknapatawpha, Sutpen places a barrier between himself and the townsfolk, engendering much hostility and an inability to be identified with on a human, interpersonal level (an identification that Sutpen himself also rejects). In this context, critics have acknowledged Sutpen's similarity to Ab and Flem Snopes in the Snopes trilogy. Patricia Meyer Spacks, for example, offers an analysis of Ab in *The Hamlet*

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<sup>240</sup> Charles Hannon, *Faulkner and the Discourses of Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 92-94. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

(1940) which also illustrates the dread that Sutpen inspires within his community: ‘He becomes the focus of the community’s fears, made a demonic force not only by his actions and attitudes—sufficiently evil though they are—but by the talk people share about those actions and attitudes’ (1985, 233). It is also significant that, from his earliest days in town, Sutpen is targeted by focused violence, signified by the ‘clods of dirt and vegetable refuse’ that are hurled at him and Ellen during their wedding (67). Despite the ineffectiveness of the violence here, Faulkner lays a clear foundation of animosity and rage towards Sutpen which escalates in severity through the years and reaches a fatal pinnacle in 1869. As Suzanne W. Jones writes, ‘The citizens who inquire about Sutpen’s background and throw rotten food at his wedding are never named, but act together to provoke the crises in Mr. Compson’s story. In his narrative the crises are all public events, determined by the community to protect itself from anyone it cannot understand.’<sup>241</sup>

In one sense, Sutpen’s murder can be explained by the fact that he disrupted an entire culture, bringing total upheaval upon Jefferson while establishing his dynasty. Compson states that, in the years prior to Charles’s arrival and the beginning of the Civil War:

(Sutpen) was the biggest single landowner and cotton-planter in the county now, attained by the same tactics with which he had built his house – the same singleminded unflagging effort and utter disregard of how his actions which the town could see might look and how the indicated ones which the town could not see must appear to it. [...] He was not liked (which he evidently did not want, anyway) but feared, which seemed to amuse, if not outwardly please, him. But he was accepted; he obviously had too much money now to be rejected or even seriously annoyed anymore.

(86-87)

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<sup>241</sup> Suzanne W. Jones, ‘*Absalom, Absalom!* and the Custom of Storytelling: A Reflection of Southern Social and Literary History’, *Southern Studies*, Volume 24, Issue 1 (Spring, 1985): 94. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.



Compson's version of Sutpen's ascent into the culture of Jefferson makes clear that Sutpen asserted himself over each and every citizen within the town. Regardless of the thoughts or objectives of those around him, Sutpen made his presence forcibly felt, privileging his own authority, above those more established members of the community. As Compson states, Sutpen accomplished this through accumulating unrivalled, unbridled wealth, which enabled him to control whomever he pleased, in Yoknapatawpha and beyond. Sutpen's rapid ascension to power represents a source of great harm that openly threatens the older families within the community, in much the same way that the new generation in "A Rose for Emily" ultimately succeed in harming and overthrowing the old, as explored in Chapter One. At the same time, as Compson observes, Sutpen is 'unaware [...] that while he was still playing the scene to the audience, behind him fate, destiny, retribution, irony – the stage manager, call him what you will – was already striking the set and dragging on the synthetic and spurious shadows and shapes of the next one' (87-88). At this point, however, Compson's characterisation completely contradicts Rosa's view of Sutpen as a 'man-horse-demon' – Compson's views ultimately function as a foil to hers. As Suzanne Jones writes, 'Unlike Rosa, (Compson) pays strict attention to who tells which stories so he can account for bias. Also, unlike Rosa, he realizes that one cannot always judge correctly from appearances' (95).<sup>242</sup> To take two examples, as John E. Bassett notes, 'Sutpen is more palpably real, if grotesque, for Rosa than for Father. But Father is not an

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<sup>242</sup> Compson's profession as a lawyer aids one's understanding of his construction of Sutpen. In *The Legal Imagination: Abridged Edition* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 1985), James Boyd White writes: 'One might generalize and say that your mastery of the law gives you a way of connecting what people have said and done in the past with what you and your clients say and do today, a way of learning from the experience of others and using what you learn' (5). On the other hand, in *Forensic Fictions: The Lawyer Figure in Faulkner* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), Jay Watson notes that, in Faulkner's legal fiction, 'The stories that made up the greater part of the lawyer's raw materials are also wrought products, given shape and meaning by their original tellers in their original contexts, and while they too can be used again, reappropriated in a new structure (the case at hand), they can never be wrenched entirely free of their earlier history' (23). Both Boyd White's and Watson's ideas fit the strategy that Faulkner employs through Compson here.

ideal detached interpreter. His sceptical detachment, moreover, is a defence mechanism which his son cannot maintain.<sup>243</sup>

The significant attention that Sutpen attracts to himself is such that, arguably, it was to be expected that his provocations would be responded to and matched in their severity through the enactment of violence and, ultimately, the committing of murder. The fact that Compson closes the above passage by invoking the spectre of fate, ‘the stage manager’, reinforces the idea that Sutpen had a role in his demise. Added to this is the idea that the hierarchies and traditions within the South cannot so easily be ignored by Sutpen, and he will eventually be destroyed for his actions. As Kartiganer writes, ‘Fate is the basis of Mr Compson’s understanding of the Sutpen story’ (1979, 86). One has the sense, therefore, that Compson and his fellow narrators tell the story with a conscious sense of hindsight. As noted earlier, the novel is told fifty-nine years after Sutpen’s death, and so the narrators work within a predetermined set of parameters (chief among them being that Sutpen was, categorically, destroyed because of his design). Also, the narrators must fill in the gaps within the story by using as many storytelling techniques and vocal flourishes as possible.

In the course of Compson’s ruminations on the Sutpen affair, he provides the key to understanding the entire novel:

We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames [...] we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting, in this shadowy attenuation of time possessing now heroic proportions, performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time – Yes, Judith, Bon, Henry, Sutpen: all of them. They are there yet something is missing; they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from that forgotten chest, carefully, the

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<sup>243</sup> John E. Bassett, ‘*Absalom, Absalom!* The Limits of Narrative Form’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, Volume 46, Issue 3 (1985): 287. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

paper old and faded and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense, the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces; you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens; just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene, against that turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs.

(124-125)

As this passage suggests, the entire novel is a work of speculation among the narrators, each of whom must rebuild the reasons and justifications from people's past behaviour out of a few old stories, perhaps a few letters, plus their own intuition and subjective experiences. While reading the novel, one never necessarily uncovers the truth behind the Sutpen affair, because it is not possible to know why Sutpen acted as he did or why Wash decided to murder him. All the narrators and critics working on the novel can do is to supply a range of storytelling techniques, hypotheses, and theories. Quentin's representation of the events of Sutpen's murder is only one of several possible representations of Sutpen's death; even so, the conclusions one reaches after telling or analysing Sutpen's story can never be fully conclusive.<sup>244</sup> As Karen McPherson says, 'each repetition of the tale introduces a new authority, and the reader as listener plays a vital role

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<sup>244</sup> My observation here mirrors Faulkner's statement at the University of Virginia. After being asked if 'anyone of the people who talks about Sutpen has the right view', or whether 'it is more or less a case of thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird, with none of them right?', Faulkner replied: 'That's it exactly. I think that no individual can look at truth. It blinds you. You look at it and you see one phase of it. Someone else looks at it and sees a slightly awry phase of it. But then all together, the truth is in what they saw though nobody saw the truth intact. [...] But the truth, I would like to think, comes out, that when the reader has read all these thirteen different ways of looking at a blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird which I would like to think is the truth' (273-274). Critics have adopted this statement to explore the novel, such as Nancy E. Batty, 'The Riddle of *Absalom, Absalom!* Looking at the Wrong Blackbird', *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 47, Issue 3 (Summer, 1994): 461-488.

in constructing a personally authoritative (though never conclusive) version of the tale, through the “discourse” of his reading.<sup>245</sup> Similarly, Ross notes:

This novel questions what few do, the sources of discursive power that not only allows narrators to talk but also allows a novel to dramatize narrators narrating. The pertinent inquiry [...] is not how storytelling can (or cannot) achieve truth but how this novel’s evocation of an imagined past exposes unusually buried assumptions about how fiction’s discourse can (or cannot) represent reality.<sup>246</sup>

Compson’s utterance here is an extremely self-conscious authorial gesture on Faulkner’s part, and Faulkner offers critics and readers the idea that the novel is impervious to any rigid, totalising theoretical or critical approach. Heide Ziegler acknowledges this aspect of the novel when she states that ‘Despite the vast amounts of critical attention Faulkner’s fiction has received and continues to receive, his novels seem to resist easy assimilation by any single mode of literary theory.’<sup>247</sup> Indeed, Sutpen’s story depends upon an interpretation of events, rather than an account of facts relayed with complete accuracy or grounded in objective reality. Nevertheless, the idea that these exercises in interpretation occur ‘against that turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs’ implies that Sutpen’s story is, fundamentally, one of inevitable destruction. Sutpen’s story ends, as this chapter later explores, with tears, rage, and blood. The fact of death overrides the authority that any interpretation of the story has – death silences all voices.

Indeed, it is remarkable that, in a novel replete with voices speaking about Thomas Sutpen and his downfall, Sutpen himself is only rarely heard speaking at length. As Helen Lynne Sugarman writes, Sutpen’s ‘enforced silence ensures that the narrators’

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<sup>245</sup> Karen McPherson, ‘*Absalom, Absalom!*: Telling Scratches’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 33, Issue 3 (Fall, 1987): 438.

<sup>246</sup> Stephen M. Ross, ‘The Evocation of Voice in *Absalom, Absalom!*’, *Essays in Literature*, Volume 8, Issue 2 (Fall, 1981): 135. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>247</sup> Heide Ziegler, ‘William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)’, in Timo Muller (ed.), *Handbook of the American Novel in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), 219.

reconstructed view of him is the only access to him that Faulkner's readers receive.<sup>248</sup>

When he presents the voice of Sutpen in Chapter VII, Quentin supports the idea that there is a ruthless, obsessive, and entirely single-minded nature in Sutpen's actions:

“You see, I had a design in my mind. Whether it was a good or a bad design is beside the point; the question is, Where did I make the mistake in it, what did I do or misdo in it, whom or what injure by it to the extent which this would indicate. I had a design. To accomplish it, I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family — incidentally of course, a wife. I set out to acquire these, asking no favour of any man.”

(329)

Sutpen purposefully wrongs others for the sake of executing his plans and accomplishing his design. The lives of those around him have no meaning separate from the services which they can offer to help him. The fact that Sutpen cannot fathom the damage his design has wrought upon others is the key to his downfall years after he issues this utterance to Grandfather Compson. In other words, Sutpen is either fundamentally blind to, or does not care about the consequences of his actions, because all those who are affected by him are, ultimately, disposable. The people that Sutpen encounters or interacts with (especially Charles and Eulalia Bon, Rosa, and, inevitably, Milly) are all objectified by him, just as he objectifies the prerequisites he lists in the above passage. These people are all material possessions to Sutpen, nothing more.

The cruelty that Sutpen inflicts upon people is a fundamental, though unacknowledged, element of his design, predicated upon the cruelty Sutpen himself experienced during childhood because of the ““monkey nigger”” who denied him access through the front door of the Pettibone plantation (286). Sutpen then inflicts this racially framed cruelty upon his wife, Eulalia, and his firstborn son, Charles, abandoning them

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<sup>248</sup> Helen Lynne Sugarman, ““He was getting it involved with himself”: Identity and Reflexivity in William Faulkner’s *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*,” in Linda Wagner-Martin (ed.), *William Faulkner: Six Decades of Criticism* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 49.

both after discovering that Eulalia “*was part negro*” (443). To Grandfather Compson, Sutpen declares that:

“[T]his new fact rendered it impossible that this woman and child be incorporated in my design, and following which, as I told you [...] I declined and resigned all right and claim to this in order that I might repair whatever injustice I might be considered to have done by so providing for the two persons whom I might be considered to have deprived of anything I might latter possess[.]”  
(330)

Sutpen never acknowledges or ‘recognises’, in Reginald Martin’s terms, his firstborn son: ‘If (Charles) could receive the slightest recognition from his father, he could then become his father; he could be equal to that person and of that person who has always had the power to decide his fate.’<sup>249</sup> Sutpen also never exhibits any substantial moral misgivings or remorse for his actions; he repeatedly feels justified in pursuit of his design, using legal language to emphasise his transactional relationship with Eulalia and Charles here. By having “accepted them at their own valuation while insisting on my own part upon explaining fully about myself and my progenitors” (329), Sutpen does to Eulalia, her father, and Charles, what he later does to Wash and Milly. That is, he creates a context in which, if these people fail to fulfil their obligation to the design, they leave themselves vulnerable to victimisation, dishonour, and disposal – Eulalia, Charles, Rosa, and Milly all share this fate. When Sutpen tells himself that “more than thirty years after my conscience had finally assured me that if I had done an injustice, I had done what I could to rectify it—” (330), he effectively confirms his disregard towards the injustices he inflicts upon people.

After the Civil War, Sutpen is reduced to occupying a single square mile of land. In this reduced state, he proposes to Rosa in order to resurrect his design, suggesting, in

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<sup>249</sup> Reginald Martin, ‘The Quest for Recognition over Reason: Charles Bon’s Death-Journey into Mississippi’, *South Central Bulletin*, Volume 43, Issue 4 (Winter, 1983): 119.

Shreve's terms, that 'they breed like a couple of dogs together' (226). In the intervening years after his proposal, Rosa admits to Quentin that she '*will do him this credit: he had never once thought about what he asked me to do until the moment he asked it because I know he would not have waited two months or even two days to ask it*' (207). Rosa's admission anticipates what Sutpen would ultimately utter to Milly on the day she gives birth: "'Well, Milly; too bad you're not a mare too. Then I could have given you a decent stall in the stable'" (357). Or, as John Carlos Rowe writes: 'Just what Thomas Sutpen pronounces to Rosa is what he enacts with Milly Jones just one year after Rosa flees from Sutpen's Hundred in 1866.'<sup>250</sup> Rowe continues: 'As Thomas Sutpen's abuse of the child, Milly, suggests, women are not only treated as children by this paternalistic society, they are abused as children even before they become adults' (449). The abuse and mistreatment of people Sutpen considers his inferiors, specifically non-whites and women, is intrinsic to Sutpen's nature. Similarly, Andrew Gibson states that, 'In his wake, (Sutpen) leaves a trail of devastation and abuse of anyone who is touched by his demented personal project, notably women and blacks.'<sup>251</sup> As discussed earlier in this chapter, Sutpen sees a justification and, indeed, takes satisfaction in treating people however he pleases if they do not directly benefit his design. As Carolyn Porter writes:

Sutpen's infamous "proposal" to Rosa Coldfield in effect blurts out what the woman's function under patriarchy really is, "to become a womb to bring forth to men children," as Deborah Clarke puts it. [...] In rejecting Sutpen's proposal, Rosa chooses to remain a virgin, and in so far as her anger flows from her consequent exclusion from any legitimate domain from enacting her sexual desires, her protest is waged on behalf of her body.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> John Carlos Rowe, 'Faulkner and the Southern Arts of Mystification in *Absalom, Absalom!*', in Richard C. Moreland (ed.), *A Companion to William Faulkner* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 449.

<sup>251</sup> Andrew Gibson, *Misanthropy: The Critique of Humanity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 200.

<sup>252</sup> Carolyn Porter, '*Absalom, Absalom!*: (Un)making the Father', in Phillip M. Weinstein (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 193.

Thus, throughout the novel, there is a sense of reciprocal dehumanisation, whereby Sutpen both views and is viewed by people (and especially Rosa) as nonhuman and animal. This culminates in his utterance to Milly, an utterance that Rosa alludes to when she says that Sutpen ‘*spoke the bald outrageous words*’ to her ‘*exactly as if he were consulting with Jones or with some other man about a bitch dog or a cow or mare*’ (210). As Eric Casero writes, ‘Because of his design, the conscious product of his youth, Sutpen treats Rosa not as a human being but as a strictly instrumental aspect of his design.’<sup>253</sup>

Given the overarching concerns of this chapter (the reasons, justifications, and explanations given for the murder of Thomas Sutpen), Sutpen’s murder is the result of a long chain of decisions and actions implemented to further his design. These culminate in his final, fatal action: authorising and urging his son Henry to murder Charles because of his race and his intentions to seduce, marry, and bed his half-sister, and Sutpen’s daughter, Judith.<sup>254</sup> Ross notes that ‘(Sutpen) utters a word, “negro,” and death follows’ (1981, 147). Indeed, as I noted at the start of this chapter, Henry’s murder of Charles is the central murder in this novel. As Steve Price notes, ‘The murder stands at the centre of the narrative because it is the precipitating event that indicts Thomas Sutpen, drives his son from his home a fugitive, and destroys his other son.’<sup>255</sup> Through his authorisation of Charles’s

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<sup>253</sup> Eric Casero, ‘Designing Sutpen: Narrative and Its Relationship to Historical Consciousness in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*’, *Southern Literary Journal*, Volume 44, Issue 1 (Fall, 2011): 95.

In his malicious disregard for the impact of his behaviour upon people, a clear parallel can be drawn between Sutpen and figures such as Richard the Third or Macbeth, men who craved power, committed violent acts and were, inevitably, punished for their actions. Indeed, it is in their cruelty that the human elements of their downfall, is, ironically, located. This trope, of course, builds upon the Aristotelean flaw, an essential feature in Ancient Greek tragedy. Moreover, Sutpen’s actions contrast with the self-awareness and self-reflectivity of tragic figures such as Doctor Faustus or Othello; unlike those men, however, Sutpen declines to recognise that he has committed any wrongdoing or “injustice” (330). Thus, as Shelly Brivic in *Tears of Rage: The Racial Interface of Modern American Fiction* recognises, ‘few readers feel sorry for (Sutpen) when Wash Jones kills him. He is a little like Richard III, whose evil is so untragic that we are glad when he gets what he deserves’ (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 36.

<sup>254</sup> ‘I have seen Charles Bon, Henry. [...] He must not marry her, Henry. [...] His mother’s father told me that her mother had been a Spanish woman. I believed him; it was not until after he was born that I found out his mother was part negro’ (441–443).

<sup>255</sup> Steve Price, ‘Shreve’s Bon in *Absalom, Absalom!*’, *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 39, Issue 3 (Spring, 1986): 325.



murder, Sutpen becomes the extremist example of those aristocratic abusers of power he encountered as a child, one of those “‘certain few men (who) had the power of life and death and barter and sale over others’” (276-277). With the murder of Charles, as Robert Yarup notes, ‘Sutpen uses Henry as nothing but an instrument toward his own ends.’<sup>256</sup> But, in this instrumental use of Henry, Sutpen sets in progress another chain of events.

It is, perhaps, significant that the announcement of Charles’s murder is Wash’s first utterance in the novel: “‘Air you Rosie Coldfield? Then you better come on out yon. Henry has done shot that durn French feller. Kilt him dead as a beef’” (165). Despite the stereotypically poor-white voice which Compson adopts when channelling Wash here, Wash, to all intents and purposes, witnesses the violence and destruction which befalls the Sutpen clan both here and in the future. As such, he observes a great change unfolding not only within the wealthiest family in Yoknapatawpha but in Southern culture generally.<sup>257</sup> As David Minter writes, ‘Once a world undergirded by property – not only as conquered land but also as enslaved human beings – (the South) has become a world crippled by loss not only of property but almost of hope.’<sup>258</sup> From this perspective, Wash becomes a figure moulded by and inextricably linked to violence; he is as much a victim of violence as he becomes a perpetrator of it (as will become increasingly clear in the second section of this chapter). Given that it is he who announces Charles’s death at Rosa’s door, it is a matter of profound irony that Wash is also responsible for Sutpen’s death in 1869, who initiated, urged, and authorised this murder in 1865. The consequences of past actions have a direct impact upon the present day, an idea which brings this thesis neatly to one of the most

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<sup>256</sup> Robert Yarup, ‘Sutpen’s Delay in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Explicator*, Volume 67, Issue 3 (2009): 208.

<sup>257</sup> According to the novel’s chronology, Charles dies in 1865 (474), with the South on the cusp of losing the war to the North.

<sup>258</sup> David Minter, *Faulkner’s Questioning Narratives: Fiction of His Major Phase, 1929-42* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 26. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

famous sentences Faulkner ever wrote, quoted here for posterity: “The past is never dead; it’s not even past.”<sup>259</sup>

### **I’m going to tech you, Kernel**

As noted earlier, the murder of Thomas Sutpen by Wash Jones has been under-represented in the critical literature on the novel. John Rodden, a recent commentator on Wash’s function in the novel, writes that ‘Jones is almost entirely neglected in Faulkner’s scholarship.’<sup>260</sup> The purpose of the present chapter, from here onwards, is to pick up on Rodden’s suggestion and fill this critical gap, while also taking issue with Rodden’s own reading of the Sutpen/Wash affair.

In keeping with the demonization at the core of Rosa’s characterisation of Sutpen, it is unsurprising that deathliness and a perverse, Gothic tranquillity (similar to that in Emily’s parlour) pervades Sutpen’s Hundred after the loss of the Confederacy. As Rosa recalls to Quentin: ‘I remember yet the utter quiet of that house when we went in and from which I knew at once that he was absent without knowing that he would now be in the scuppernong arbor drinking with Wash Jones’ (27). Both Sutpen and Emily are victims of the silence and disrepair which befalls the South following the war. In Sutpen’s case, the silence stands in sharp contrast to the ‘thunderclap’ which summoned him into Jefferson at the novel’s beginning. From that perspective, Sutpen is repeatedly seen in a context of wastefulness and deathliness, with his design having long malfunctioned, and this once enterprising, prosperous landowner wasting his life away on drink and fraternising with Wash. As Minter acknowledges, “This alliance between Sutpen and Wash is supported in

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<sup>259</sup> William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) (London: Vintage, 1996), 85.

<sup>260</sup> John Rodden, “‘The Faithful Gravedigger’: The Role of “Innocent” Wash Jones and the Invisible “White Trash” in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*,” *Southern Literary Journal*, Volume 43, Issue 1 (Fall, 2010): 36. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text. Also, I must acknowledge that critical explorations of Wash often centre around the short story “Wash” (1933), which closely follows the events of *Absalom, Absalom!*, and which Faulkner adapted while writing the novel. As such, many of the sources cited within this chapter are taken from analyses of “Wash”, due to a paucity of criticism directly discussing Wash’s role in the novel.

part by Wash by his limitless admiration, his loneliness, and his need to feel the pride and satisfaction of knowing Sutpen. But it is also supported by Sutpen's loneliness and by his need of someone to take care of him' (26). Sutpen's reduced status at this point in the novel, and, indeed, at this stage in Southern history, raises the question as to what extent Wash recognises that Sutpen, for all his bravery and for all of Wash's apparent admiration of him, has nevertheless been irrevocably changed, drastically reduced from his monumental stature.

Indeed, the implications of this alliance between Sutpen and Wash is highlighted by their two distinct and opposing forms of life, as Compson highlights when he describes Wash's living conditions to Quentin:

“and Wash Jones, living in the abandoned and rotting fishing camp in the river bottom which Sutpen had built after the first woman – Ellen – entered his house [...] where he now permitted Wash and his daughter and infant granddaughter to live, performing the heavy garden work and supplying Ellen and Judith and then Judith with fish and game now and then, even entering the house now who until Sutpen went away had never approached nearer than the scuppernong arbor behind the kitchen where on Sunday afternoons he and Sutpen would drink from the demijohn and the bucket of spring water which Wash fetched from almost a mile away, Sutpen in the barrel stave hammock talking and Wash squatting against a post, chortling and guffawing[.]

(154-155)

Living in the vicinity of a hundred-square-mile slave-plantation in a 'rotting fishing camp', Wash occupies a physical space and social class vastly removed from Sutpen. Indeed, the emphasis on the word 'permitted' here carries with it the weight of class bias and sheer arrogance of men like Sutpen and Compson, both of whom realise and yet never acknowledge how little Wash has. In fact, what Sutpen gives Wash here by allowing him to live in the camp (and what he later gives Milly with the ribbons and the dress), is eclipsed by what he is given by Wash both by 'performing the heavy garden work' and, later, through the body and sexual services of a vulnerable fifteen-year-old girl. The fact that

Wash inhabits the fishing camp following Sutpen's marriage to Ellen implies that Wash gladly takes what Sutpen has not so much given as discarded. Whereas Sutpen lives in the luxury of a gargantuan plantation, Wash lives on scraps, performing exhausting physical labour. Significantly, Compson, though not oblivious to the social disparity between Sutpen and Wash, nevertheless declines to acknowledge the hardships wrought upon Wash's body. The physical torment which Wash likely experienced and endured throughout his years on the Hundred, where Sutpen and Compson are concerned, matters little.

The clear disparity of the master and servant relationship between Sutpen and Wash is signalled throughout the novel. In the above passage, for example, while Sutpen experiences pleasure, drinking 'from the demijohn' in the scuppernong arbour and performing 'a role of arrogant ease and leisure' which 'put flesh on him' (87), Wash is repeatedly described as "'a gaunt gangling man malaria-ridden'" (107). As Bertram Wyatt-Brown acknowledges, 'Poor health, small stature, or any other physical defect carried special opprobrium in the Old South, just as kinlessness did.'<sup>261</sup> Whereas Sutpen, by erecting Sutpen's Hundred, lives a life of decadent excess, Wash lives in a state of perpetual want and enforced frugality. Whereas Sutpen sits pampered in his hammock, Wash fetches the bucket of spring water from a considerable distance, which thereby creates a contrast between movement and stasis, repose and labour. Where Sutpen is in command of language, talking to Wash and dominating the conversation, Wash appears almost sub-verbal. As Ross notes, 'Sutpen's design requires him to assume a certain position within the discursive practices of his community. Along with implements of economic and social power, he must take possession of the language in which power expresses itself; his power becomes law' (1989, 214). Indeed, Compson attempts to communicate the depths of

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<sup>261</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 33.

Wash's degradation by highlighting the sounds he makes to signify his amusement ("chortling and guffawing"), showing obedience to his master. As Suzanne Jones writes, 'Wash and Sutpen interact as if according to a script, socializing only under the scuppernong arbor where they exchange set responses' (85). Within Compson's depiction of Wash's relationship with Sutpen are dimensions that Compson never intends to suggest. Compson's portrayal here might have been intended to convey a sense of brotherhood and companionship between Sutpen and Wash, a camaraderie which ultimately dissolves in an episode of extreme violence. However, the disparities and wildly uneven power dynamics between these two men is so apparent from an outside perspective that the fact that Compson does not acknowledge this is a sign of unintended ignorance on his part.

The telling of the murder of Thomas Sutpen by Wash Jones begins during an exchange that Quentin has with his Harvard roommate, Shreve McCannon, during which Shreve tells him to "Let me play a while now" (349). Shreve's utterance here draws attention to the importance of "play" when telling Sutpen's story. Rio-Jeliffe characterises the novel as a 'fabrication, unreal yet galvanic' wherein Faulkner 'charts Sutpen's life which designs Faulkner's novel, which, in turn, may re-create itself in human life which generates other fictional constructs.' He continues: 'In the generative circle of fiction, perpetual transmutations link history to artifice, artifice to human action, life to history and unreality, and so on' (75). Faulkner purposefully makes the task of accepting any part of the story as it is transmitted by the narrators ambiguous. This has particular relevance to Wash's murder of Sutpen because Faulkner emphasises that the events of the murder are being retold between Quentin and Shreve 'in the cold room dedicated to that best of ratiocination which was a good deal like Sutpen's morality and Miss Coldfield's demonising' (349-350). Quentin's interruption of Shreve, along with Faulkner's deliberate use of the word 'ratiocination' (which invokes the memory of Poe's Dupin stories), reinforces the fact that the novel as a whole is a fiction generated between two or more

narrators. This is particularly evident here in Chapter VII, where the story of Sutpen's death is finally told in the clearest, most explicit manner. Where Quentin and Shreve specifically are concerned, as David Paul Ragan writes, 'the young men are merely constructing a possible interpretation that has no more authority than Sutpen's or Rosa's means of defining their experiences.'<sup>262</sup> This account of Sutpen's murder is, therefore, not necessarily an accurate representation of events. As James B. Carothers identifies, 'It is the *story* of Wash and Sutpen which has objective existence for Mr Compson and Quentin and Shreve, while the facts upon which the story is based are elusive, ephemeral, transitory.'<sup>263</sup>

Wash's role in the murder is mediated by what has been said about him previously, particularly by Rosa and Compson, as discussed above. For instance, Rosa repeatedly refers to Wash as a 'brute', such as when she castigates him as '*that brute progenitor of brutes*' after he informs her of Henry's murder of Charles. As this suggests, the narrators repeatedly allow their class biases to corrupt their understanding of Wash and his murderous act. They use his low social status to comprehend and explain why Wash may have killed Sutpen. Being a poor, 'malaria-ridden' man, there is a primitive, barbaric nature in Wash's character that, the narrators imply, should never have interacted with the apparently "highborn" Sutpens. In Edward Clough's terms, to describe Wash as "malaria ridden" 'is to precisely articulate his [...] social condition and agency; it locates his marginality both in physical geography [...] and in social hierarchies': 'Wash's sickness is assumed because of his status, but his status is equally demarcated by his sickness.'<sup>264</sup> The implication, therefore, is that the interaction between Sutpen, "the single biggest landowner" in Jefferson, and Wash, a 'brute', is precisely what causes this "bloody mischancing of human

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<sup>262</sup> David Paul Ragan, *William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!: A Critical Study* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 120. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>263</sup> James B. Carothers, *William Faulkner's Short Stories* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 37. Italics Carothers's. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>264</sup> Edward Clough, 'Dying of the Stranger's Disease: Yellow Fever, Narrative Space, and Racial Exclusion in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*', unpublished journal article (circ. August, 2017): 10.

affairs.” This chapter challenges the assumptions of both the narrators and the critics as to why Wash interacted with and ultimately murdered Sutpen. There are aspects to Wash’s character, situation, and story that have not been discerned by any of the narrators, and which have long gone unacknowledged by critics working on the novel. As Carothers acknowledges, ‘Wash’s part in *Absalom, Absalom!* is seldom discussed, for in the novel his actions are reported rather than observed first hand, and his thoughts and feelings are guessed at, rather than shared’ (37).

Shreve’s image of Sutpen in his Confederate uniform with “the saddled charger” and his “sheathed saber” after being promoted to Colonel, emphasises that he is a God-like figure to Wash (349). Indeed, Wash opines, “*If God Himself was to come down and ride the natural earth, that’s what He would aim to look like*” (353). Sutpen, Shreve makes clear here, is a figure of power and authority, and is certainly Wash’s superior and antithesis. Yet, the fact that Sutpen later fails to live up to the divine image Wash has cast him as in his mind as, this chapter argues, one of several reasons why Wash is justified in murdering him. From a sociological perspective, Sutpen fails to fulfil the honourable act of riding the “saddled charger”, an honour which is inherent in the lifeblood of the South. Wash’s insistence upon honour relates to Nisbett and Cohen’s hypothesis on the Southern culture of honour:

Unlike the North, where population densities have been in general relatively high, the South was a low-population frontier region until well into the nineteenth century. In such regions the state often has little power to command compliance with the law, the citizens have to create their own system of power. The means of doing this is the rule of retaliation: If you cross me, I will punish you.

(xv)

In Nisbett and Cohen’s account of honour in Southern society, violence is necessary in order ‘To maintain a credible power of deterrence’. This helps explain Wash’s actions:

[T]he individual must project a stance of willingness to commit mayhem and to risk wounds or death for himself.

Thus he must constantly be on guard against affronts that could be construed by others as disrespect. When someone allows himself to be insulted, he risks giving the impression that he lacks the strength to protect what is his. Thus the individual must respond with violence or the threat of violence to any affront.

(xv-xvi)

Despite his lower-class, poverty-stricken situation, Wash both believes in and demands that Sutpen respect and uphold this admirable image; he will not allow the Southern notion of honour to be disrespected or ignored. As will be discussed, by insulting Milly and rejecting both her and her newborn daughter, Sutpen affronts Wash. By doing so, he creates the context in which Wash must enact violence to defend his honour. The chapter, therefore, adopts Nisbett and Cohen's arguments, which clarify precisely why Wash commits murder.

Shreve describes Wash as “the faithful grave-digger who opened the play and would close it, coming out of the wings like Shakespeare's very self: ‘Well, Kernel, they mought have whupped us but they aint kilt us yit, air they?’” (349). Like Shreve, critics have readily accepted Wash as Sutpen's “faithful” servant. For instance, Elizabeth M. Kerr characterises Wash as a ‘faithful but somewhat comic servant of peculiarly American nature.’<sup>265</sup> Similarly, Carothers says that ‘Wash is happy and proud of his lackey's relationship to Sutpen’ (34). Likewise, Caroline Miles asserts that Wash ‘holds no consciousness of his degraded position.’<sup>266</sup> Shreve's mocking imitation of Wash's voice, equipped with a white-trash accent and deliberate mispronunciation of words, reaffirms the class biases within the narrators' depiction of Wash. The narrators accept Wash as a simpleminded boor who proves himself to be a savage, primitive subhuman because of his murder of the great Thomas Sutpen. Likewise, the critics have too often cast Wash as a

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<sup>265</sup> Elizabeth M. Kerr, *William Faulkner's Gothic Domain* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1979), 35.

<sup>266</sup> Caroline Miles, ‘William Faulkner's Critique of Capitalism: Reading “Wash” and “Centaur in Brass” as Stories about Class Struggle’, *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 61, Issue 3 (Summer, 2008): 328. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.



put-upon, long-suffering confidant of Sutpen, without ever fully questioning or exploring Wash's own motivations for behaving as he does with Sutpen, both through his conduct with Milly, and his decision to murder Sutpen, along with the consequences of his action. For example, Rodden claims that Wash is 'blinded by his illusions about Sutpen', and, in consequence, 'sanctions the Colonel's seduction of his fifteen-year old granddaughter. Clearly, "Old Wash" sacrifices his life and dignity to a thankless master' (25). Yet, the extent to which Wash 'blindly' sacrifices Milly to Sutpen is debatable, because this sacrifice is not enacted purely out of loyalty to Sutpen but is, in fact, premeditated and geared towards a specific, intended outcome – a rise in social rank. Despite his protestations to the contrary following Sutpen's murder (362), Wash did expect a return on his exchange of Milly. As such, this chapter contends that Wash is not a stereotypical innocent who, in Rodden's terms, is 'encased in delusions [...] impervious to the lessons of worldly reality' (26). Instead, there is a complexity and expedience within Wash's character and motivations which critics have long allowed to go undeveloped and unacknowledged.

Quentin interjects upon Shreve's "play", speculating that "Maybe it was the first string of beads out of (Sutpen) and Wash's little store" that triggered the events leading to Sutpen's demise (350).<sup>267</sup> Considering the gift that Wash bestows upon Sutpen (Milly, the recipient of these beads), the trivial, cheap jewellery that Quentin mentions here implies Sutpen never gives more to Wash than he has to because, despite his social degradation,

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<sup>267</sup> In "Wash", Wash is explicitly described as the 'clerk and porter' of Sutpen's store (*Collected Stories*, 513). In *Absalom, Absalom!: A Critical Study*, Ragan describes Shreve's description of Wash as Sutpen's 'partner' as one of several 'mistakes' Shreve makes but which 'Quentin allows [...] to stand without comment' (94), a view I agree with.

Also, as the main storyteller of the murder, Quentin can be likened to Wash, as his dilemma in *The Sound and the Fury* implies. Both are inferior men forced to protect their female kin (Caddy, Milly) from the clutches of abusive, superior males (Dalton, Herbert, Sutpen). Quentin, perhaps, models this version of Wash after himself, identifying with Wash so closely that he embodies him, giving him voice at last. My reading of Quentin's identification with Wash counters numerous readings of the novel that compare Quentin's incestuous desires for Caddy with Henry Sutpen's (possible) sexual fantasies for Judith. For a classic example of this reading, see John T. Irwin, *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

he still controls and regulates the situation. Through giving Milly to Sutpen in exchange for anticipated recognition, respect, and social advancement, Wash surrenders himself and his kin to Sutpen: his effort to match or trump Sutpen proves futile because Sutpen never intends to honour the rules of exchange which social anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss or Claude Lévi-Strauss highlight. Mauss argues that a gift is a ‘present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism and social deceit, and when really there is only obligation and economic self-interest.’<sup>268</sup> Following on from Mauss, Lévi-Strauss hypothesises that ‘Goods are not only economic commodities, but vehicles and instruments for realities of another order, such as power, influence, sympathy, status and emotion.’<sup>269</sup> To Lévi-Strauss, ‘the skilful game of exchange consists in a complex totality of conscious or unconscious manoeuvres in order to gain security and to guard oneself against risks brought about by alliances and by rivalries’ (54). Sutpen’s refusal to respect and operate within the rules of exchange in general and in the Southern culture of honour in particular is precisely what leads to his death and Wash’s downfall. Miles and Hannon both touch upon the exchange of Milly between Sutpen and Wash. Miles states that ‘Both Wash and Sutpen reduce Wash’s granddaughter, Milly, to a labour commodity with exchange value, Sutpen hoping to gain a son and Wash hoping to gain economic security from Sutpen, both goals that in the language of Marx reduce women and children to “articles of commerce and instruments of labour”’ (30). Hannon writes that ‘Reproduction was all too commonly the grounds upon which the assumption of women’s inequality was reasserted in contract negotiations’: “This fact becomes most clear in Wash Jones’s attempts to negotiate his granddaughter’s sexuality as though it were his own property, an appropriation that is confirmed when he

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<sup>268</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, translated by W.D. Halls (London: Routledge, 2002), 4. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>269</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, translated by James Harle Bell, and edited by John Richard von Sturmer and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 54. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

feels personally affronted by Sutpen's insult toward the product of Milly's "labor" (98). However, despite the strengths of these insights, neither Miles nor Hannon expand upon these ideas further, nor do they use the work of Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, and Luce Irigaray to bolster the argument at hand. Nor do they reach the conclusion that Wash murders Milly because she is rendered valueless as a labour commodity.

At precisely the moment when Sutpen's exchange with Wash begins, Quentin reveals that Sutpen "would get mad at his customers, the niggers and the trash and the haggling, and turn them out and lock the door and drink himself blind" (350). The juxtaposition of Sutpen as a figure of nobility with his "sheathed saber" (349) and his subsequent erratic behaviour at the helm of his store implies that, following the war, Sutpen is no longer the decorated Colonel authorising the deaths of many (including his own mixed-race son). Instead, he has now established himself in a way unbefitting the design he has laboured to fulfil. Added to this degradation is the fact that Wash is now constantly in the foreground of Sutpen's life, to the extent that he, arguably, has become a fixture within it. The overriding implication of this scene, therefore, is that by associating himself closely with Wash, Sutpen has been reduced to depending upon "trash" for custom. Quentin then implies that Wash seeks, through partnership with Sutpen, to both elevate himself up the social ladder in Jefferson and, in exchange, restore Sutpen's former glory. This complicates Woodrow Stroble's claim that 'Sutpen surely sees in the male issue of the relationship the quintessential achievement of his nearly lifelong ambition – he will raise from brutehood not only his progeny, but Wash Jones's as well. The salvation that Milly's son will represent will be Sutpen's and Jones's too.'<sup>270</sup> Instead, my view is more aligned with Pia Masiero Marcolin's argument that 'Wash's venerating attitude is self-

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<sup>270</sup> Woodrow Stroble, 'A Brief for Thomas Sutpen', in Arthur F. Kinney (ed.), *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Sutpen Family* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996), 166-167. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

redemptive insofar as it purges his self of the disfigurement poverty inflicts on whiteness. Being near to Sutpen can nourish his self at the source which allows him a measure of self-esteem.<sup>271</sup> Thus, despite his own questionable morality, Wash does desire to repay his debt to Sutpen through creating a reciprocal kinship between them – his design is never as single-minded or cruel as Sutpen’s is. Instead, Wash appears to exhibit a more civilized sense of family than Sutpen. However, after having his own designs upon Sutpen fail, losing all that he gave to Sutpen, this loss is enough for Wash to demand vengeance. Twenty years of servitude fizzles out into nothing when Sutpen insults Milly. With that insult comes the justification needed to commit murder.

The extent to which Sutpen’s controlling presence leads Wash to develop profound resentment towards the poverty in his life is elucidated by Quentin. Quentin develops Compson’s illustration of Wash occupying the fishing camp, a space which guarantees Wash’s existence and survival:

“[A]fter (Sutpen) went away with the regiment (Wash) would tell folks that he [...] was looking after Kernel’s place and niggers until after a while maybe even he believed it. Father’s mother said when the Sutpen niggers first heard about what he was saying, they would stop him in the road [...] where the old fishing camp was that Sutpen let him and the granddaughter (she was about eight then) live in. There would be too many of them for him to whip them all [...] and they would ask him why he wasn’t at the war and he would say, ‘Git outen my road, niggers!’ and then it would be the outright laughing, asking one another (except it was not one another but him): ‘Who him, calling us niggers?’ and he would rush at them with a stick and them avoiding him just enough, not mad at all, just laughing.”  
(350-351)

As Quentin’s account here makes clear, Wash is in a precarious living situation that, as far as his grand-daughter’s childhood is concerned, is not conducive to a proper upbringing.

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<sup>271</sup> Pia Masiero Marcolin, “‘White Trash’: the Exemplary Naming of a Class in William Faulkner’s ‘Wash’”, in Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (ed.), *The Many Souths: Class in Southern Culture* (Tubingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 2003), 61. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

The narrators share this opinion; for example, Rosa reveals to Quentin that Wash's daughter '*died in a Memphis brothel*' (214). As a result, Rodden argues, 'Wash is far from a model father or even a good provider' (25). The consequences of Wash's fraught existence and the intrusion of reality upon his delusions (signified by the taunting and laughter of the Sutpen slaves) is manifested in the racism in both his behaviour towards them, and in his assumption that it is he who is in control. During this encounter, Wash is made painfully aware of his own social inferiority; yet, throughout the war and with Sutpen away in battle, Wash dares to hope for a better life which does not materialise, and makes claims of a closer relationship with Sutpen that has no basis in reality. In response to his humiliation during his encounter with the Sutpen slaves, Wash threatens to enact violence, a threat which proves to be ineffective. The fact that, later, Wash made good upon his threat to Sutpen that "I'm going to tech you, Kernel" (357), implies that he has recourse to violence in order to protect both his reputation and his 'herd'. In other words, Wash evinces an ability to enact violent socialised behaviour which is at the center of the culture of honour that Nisbett and Cohen outline.

Nonetheless, Quentin then explores how the Sutpens themselves are dependent upon Wash for their survival, despite how dubious a foundation that dependency is built upon:

"And he was still carrying fish and animals he killed (or maybe stole) and vegetables up to the house when that was about all Mrs Sutpen and Judith (and Clytie too) had to live on, and Clytie would not let him come into the kitchen with the basket even, saying 'Stop right there, white man. Stop right where you is. You aint never crossed this door while Colonel was here and you aint going to cross it now.'"

(351)

Despite the obvious importance of his service to the Sutpens during the Civil War and afterwards, Wash faces continual mistreatment. The mistreatment displayed in this passage, along with the tension between the privileged insider and the "othered" outsider,

is heavily implied but never directly acknowledged, either by Quentin or Wash. As the novel continues, however, it becomes clear that despite the exchange that Wash has long been enacting with the Sutpens, his services remain unrecognised. The utilisation of Milly when she reaches puberty is Wash's final bid to gain recognition from the Sutpens, specifically the Colonel. Wash responds to Clytie's refusal to allow him into the Hundred with, as Quentin says, "a kind of pride in it: that he had never tried to enter the house, even though he believed that if he had tried, Sutpen would not have let them repulse him" (351). Considering the doubt that telling Sutpen's story casts in the minds of readers and critics (as this chapter has previously acknowledged), several questions arise as to what extent the "pride" Wash is said to feel here is actually present, or even whether his belief in Sutpen is warranted. Indeed, Quentin may be projecting the class biases and social superiority he inherits from Compson onto Wash.

Quentin notes Compson's speculation that Wash "said to himself *The reason I wont try to (defy Clytie and enter the Hundred) aint that I refuse to give any black nigger the chance to tell me I cant but because I aint going to force Mister Tom to have to cuss a nigger or take a cussing from his wife on my account*" (351). What Quentin's utterance suggests is that Wash makes a calculated decision not to act violently here. Rodden asserts that 'Wash receives Clytie's snub impersonally' because he 'does not view the affront as an attack on Wash Jones the individual, but rather perceives it as directed towards a faceless poor white who is even more destitute than the Negroes who taunt him' (29). In contrast, I would argue that Wash is cognisant of his victimisation, and is also aware of the fact that he has been wronged. Yet, he cannot attack because he is conscious of his actual powerlessness, and that his poor white skin is worth little. Where Clytie is concerned, Wash's inaction signals his awareness of the rigidity of Southern honour, especially the fact that, despite her race, Clytie is Sutpen's acknowledged child. For Wash to 'cuss' her would affront Sutpen, leaving Wash vulnerable to violence, as per Nisbett and Cohen's definitions. Yet Wash does not view

himself as unfit to enter the Sutpen plantation at all. Once again, Wash is misrepresented by critics, such as Shirley Callen, who asserts that ‘Wash sees no degradation in his role.’<sup>272</sup> Considering that the novel has been reconstructed and told from biased viewpoints, Wash’s desire and desperation to improve his social standing, to ““whip”” the members of the Southern planter class and become the victor in this fight for supremacy, is only subtly acknowledged after Sutpen’s death. Wash’s plight is manifested in his silence here and in his inability to adequately answer the various injustices he experiences. Wash’s voicelessness leads to his failure to improve his social situation and attain the recognition he deserves.

Wash’s loyalty extends to his complicity in Sutpen’s seduction of Milly, a process of corruption which Wash clearly knows is transpiring, and an act which is devoid of any honour to her. Yet, to Wash, Sutpen’s long-term value is worth more than Milly is at this point (and, perhaps, ever is), especially considering the terms Wash uses to frame Sutpen as a figure of admiration and respect. In Wash’s view, Milly is given value many more times her worth because of her relationship with the revered Colonel Sutpen. Quentin hypothesises that ““Maybe (Wash) even delivered the first string of beads himself, and Father said maybe each of the ribbons afterward during the next three years while the girl matured fast like girls of that kind do”” (352). Quentin signals Milly’s social otherness through her burgeoning, overt sexuality, whilst also making clear that, through the ribbons, Milly is tagged as Sutpen’s property for later use. The completion of Sutpen’s design is made possible only through the use of Milly’s body. The possibility of a son (for Sutpen) and the prospect of respect, recognition, and acknowledgment (for Wash) is what draws Milly into the bargain. Luce Irigaray’s claim that ‘*The virgin woman is pure exchange value*’ is

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<sup>272</sup> Shirley Callen, ‘Planter and Poor White in *Absalom, Absalom!*, “Wash”, and *The Mind of the South*’, *South Central Bulletin*, Volume 23, Issue 4 (Winter, 1963): 32. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

instructive here: *'She is nothing but the possibility, the place, the sign of relations among men. In and of herself, she does not exist: she is a simple envelope veiling what is really at stake in social exchange. In this sense, her natural body disappears into its representative function.'*<sup>273</sup> Therefore, the question becomes whether Sutpen desires Milly on her own terms, or whether his entire endeavour with her is merely a sign of his need to accomplish the design. Callen agrees with the latter view, stating that "The degree of his desperation is evidenced in his compromise with his original design by resorting to the granddaughter of his tenant, Wash Jones, a poor white" (29). Where Wash is concerned, the fact that he permits the gift of the ribbons implies that he perceives clearly the liaison unfolding between Sutpen and Milly, yet nevertheless attempts to use it to his advantage. Indeed, through his closeness to Sutpen, there is the strong possibility that he is aware of Rosa's vehement rejection of Sutpen's proposal. In a sense, therefore, Wash perhaps acts as he does to correct the slight against Sutpen that Rosa's rejection signified, and also to benefit directly through assisting Sutpen.

Milly's appearance in Sutpen's store is, from Sutpen's perspective, a public display of gift giving. It is a self-conscious gesture, meant to attract the attention of Jefferson's citizenry. After the bestowal of the ribbons, Wash realises that "the customers and the loungers, the white and the black that would be sitting and squatting about the store's gallery to watch her pass, not quite defiant and not quite cringing and not quite flaunting the ribbons and the beads, but almost" (353). To Wash, the fact that Milly's affair with Sutpen is not at all private adds to his humiliation, and drives him towards changing his life and using this situation for his own (potential) betterment. Quentin later speculates that "Wash's heart was probably still quiet even after he saw the dress and spoke about it, probably only a little grave now and watching her secret defiant frightened face while she told him [...] that Miss Judith had given it to her, helped her to make it" (353). Making

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<sup>273</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter with Caroline Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 186. Italics Irigaray's.



the dress with Judith's assistance, Milly evinces a sense of personal self-sacrifice, displaying fear as a manifestation of her desire to honour her grandfather and not offend or affront him. More importantly, because of her young age, there is the sense that she does not know how to negotiate this situation. At the same time, however, by displaying an undercurrent of defiance towards Wash, Milly both acquiesces to Sutpen's design, and also initiates a design of her own. Dirk Kuyk Jr. writes that 'Those other than Sutpen have [...] their own plans and perhaps schemes; and all those designs bear upon Sutpen's and ultimately suffice to thwart it.'<sup>274</sup> Kuyk then argues that 'Milly, unlike Rosa, succumbs to Sutpen':

She is seduced by him and by his desire to complete her own design. [...] She must, of course, have been seduced by Sutpen's wealth, even though it's much diminished; by social prominence, and by his military fame. [...] But Wash's admiration must sway her too. And so must Wash's confidence in Sutpen, confidence that Wash expresses.

(66-67)

With Kuyk's statements in mind, there is a clear sense that Milly is being taken advantage of and worked upon by two much older people, each of whom hold their own interests above that of this vulnerable girl. Milly honours Wash, bears Sutpen's child in a mistaken belief that her desires for and design upon Sutpen will be fulfilled, and then loses her life because of this mistaken assumption. Under the economic system of the South which was still in operation following the Civil War (and in which Sutpen, even in his reduced state, still functions as a figurehead in Jefferson), both Milly and Wash are labourers. Through her relationship with Sutpen, Milly is exploited; she is expected to rear and raise a child obediently and unquestioningly, because this form of female labour is deemed appropriate to a woman of her low social standing.

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<sup>274</sup> Dirk Kuyk Jr., *Sutpen's Design: Interpreting Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 63. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

As previously acknowledged, Wash is not as ignorant as most readers, critics, the narrators, or even Sutpen himself believe him to be. This becomes apparent after he authorises Milly's relationship with Sutpen, reassuring her that "Ef Kernel and Miss Judith wanted to give (the dress) to you, I hope you minded to thank them'" (353). Nevertheless, Wash can perceive Sutpen's faults and attempts to bring him to account for his failure to honour Wash's heroic conception of him. Prior to outlining a heated confrontation between Wash and Sutpen, Quentin describes how:

"Grandfather rode out to see Sutpen about something and there was nobody in the front of the store and he was about to go [...] when he heard the voices from the back and he walked on toward them and so he overheard them [...] Sutpen having already told Wash to get the jug out and then Wash spoke and Sutpen beginning to turn, realising that Wash wasn't getting the jug before he comprehended the import of what Wash was saying[.]"

(354)

From here onwards, Milly's liaison with Sutpen signals a clear shift in the dynamics of Wash's relationship with Sutpen. Alongside Sutpen's design, Wash's design is now in motion, as he openly disobeys Sutpen here and begins acting in his own interests. Wash responds to his own concerns and subtly acknowledges the resentment which has plagued him for years. In the confrontation between Wash and Sutpen that Grandfather witnesses, Wash attempts to disrupt the impenetrable silence he has endured because of his inferiority and subordination to Sutpen. The relations between Milly and Sutpen, including Milly's subsequent pregnancy, gives Wash both the right and occasion to speak. For as much as Wash admires Sutpen, Sutpen categorically has intruded upon Wash's life. Wash must act quickly to control and regulate this disruption, staking his own claim within Sutpen's design, and thereby re-orienting their relationship to suit his own needs and conditions.

During the following exchange, Wash attempts to enact an exertion of control that, however subtle his attempts, Sutpen is wholly cognisant of. Having known Sutpen for

twenty years, Wash holds Sutpen answerable to his responsibilities, outlining the time he has sacrificed to the Sutpens:

“[A]nd Wash standing there [...] in that attitude dogged and quiet and not cringing, and Sutpen said, ‘What about the dress?’ and Grandfather said it was Sutpen’s voice that was short and sharp: not Wash’s; that Wash’s voice was just flat and quiet, not abject: just patient and slow: ‘I have knowed you for going on twenty years now. I aint never denied yit to do what you told me to do. And I’m a man past sixty. And she aint nothing but a fifteen-year-old gal.’ and Sutpen said, ‘Meaning that I’d harm the girl? I, a man as old as you are?’ and Wash: ‘If you was arra other man, I’d say you was as old as me. And old or no old, I wouldn’t let her keep that dress nor nothing else that come from your hand. But you are different.’ and Sutpen: ‘How different?’ and Grandfather said how Wash did not answer [...] and then Sutpen said: ‘So that’s why you are afraid of me?’ and Wash said, ‘I aint afraid. Because you are brave. It aint that you were a brave man at one second or minute or hour of your life and got a paper to show hit from General Lee. But you are brave, the same as you are alive and breathing. That’s why it’s different. Hit dont need no ticket from nobody to tell me that. And I know that whatever your hands tech, whether hit’s a regiment of men or a ignorant gal or just a hound dog, that you will make hit right.’ [...] But all Sutpen said was, ‘Get the jug.’—‘Sho, Kernel,’ Wash said.”

(354-355)

There is a limit to Wash’s obedience and loyalty which Sutpen perhaps never fully comprehends or acknowledges, despite Wash’s continued presence on Sutpen’s plantation and the lack of outward defiance he exhibits towards his degradation. Wash will give Milly to Sutpen on the condition of proper behaviour and recognition of the sacrifices Wash has endured over the years. As Mauss writes, ‘A gift is received “with a burden attached”. One does more than derive benefit from a thing or a festival: one has accepted a challenge, and has been able to do so because of being certain to be able to reciprocate, to prove one is not unequal’ (43). Thus, Wash demands recognition for the decades of humiliating, degrading service he has enacted. Where Sutpen’s ability to harm Milly is concerned, Wash knows that Sutpen could potentially harm them both. Wash, therefore, has a better

conception of who Sutpen is than Sutpen ever realises. While Wash is repeatedly underestimated and silenced by Sutpen and his clan, he is also cognisant of the fact that there are repeated cycles of abuse within Sutpen's relationships with people that Wash aims to break. Wash must prevent this harm from occurring, and so he gives Milly to Sutpen despite the moral misgivings he inadvertently reveals he has during this passage ("she aint nothing but a fifteen-year-old gal"). As Lévi-Strauss writes, 'the woman herself' is 'the supreme gift among those that can only be obtained in the form of reciprocal gifts' (65). By doing so, Wash attempts to set conditions and limits for Sutpen's conduct, because he has something to gain from Sutpen's difference to "arra other man." Giving Sutpen an ultimatum here, Wash seeks to make his own presence known and authority felt. He attempts to assert control over both Milly and Sutpen, and in so doing proves that his loyalty to Sutpen is multifaceted and conditional. He only calls Sutpen "Kernel" once in this passage, to remind Sutpen of the significance of his place in Yoknapatawpha, and to emphasise the honour and respect of his rank.

As he begins telling the events of the morning that Milly gave birth, Quentin references the end of Rosa's relations with Sutpen, saying that the child is born "three years after (Sutpen) had suggested to Miss Rosa that they try it first and if it was a boy and lived, they would be married" (355). To Quentin, the two events are inextricably linked, to the extent that the choice of Milly affords Sutpen the chance to fulfil the quashed promise in his offer to Rosa, a fulfilment that Wash stands to benefit from substantially. However, before revealing Sutpen's utterance to Milly, the utterance which causes his death, Quentin tantalisingly reveals that "a halfgrown boy", sent by Judith "to go down to the old fish camp and ask Wash where Sutpen was", discovers Sutpen's mutilated corpse: "the boy walked whistling around the corner of the rotting cabin and saw maybe the scythe first, maybe the body first lying in the weeds which Wash had not yet cut, and

as he screamed he looked up and saw Wash in the window, watching him” (356). The references to the grass, the scythe, and the body recall Charlotte Fairlie’s argument that:

The scythe carries a conventional symbolic value, that of time’s passage and mortality. Both Father Time and the Grim Reaper bear scythes. The rhythmic quality of the swing echoes both time ticking away, the falling of the grass in the scythe’s path suggests the inevitability of death, and the swish and slash of the reaper’s blade will get us all.<sup>275</sup>

From a material perspective, on the day that Milly gives birth to Sutpen’s child, the gift of manual labour which Wash has given to the Sutpens irrevocably ceases. The birth of Sutpen’s child, along with the fulfilment of Wash’s and Sutpen’s respective designs, is supremely more important than the day-to-day operations around the plantation. During and after the birth, all pretences cease – both Sutpen and Wash reveal to themselves and to each other exactly what their intentions have been since they have known each other. One could argue that Sutpen had a further, literal hand in his own death by hiring Wash to begin with, bestowing upon him the scythe to cut the weeds, abusing his relationship with Wash, and ultimately suffering a fatal penalty for this abuse. Both Wash and Sutpen are fated to be one another’s undoing, as Rodden suggests by describing Wash as Sutpen’s ‘analogue and foil’ (24). The fact of Sutpen’s corpse lying in the weeds signals the failure of the new, better life that Wash longed for. Standing by the window, Wash rests upon the cusp of death itself. As Hans S. Skei writes, at this moment, ‘Wash has passed a point of no return’ (1999, 215). By murdering Sutpen and having the body discovered, Wash is positioned, in circumstances similar to Rider and Quentin, upon the borderline between life and death as he awaits the law’s arrival. Indeed, Wash’s similarity to these two men highlights the central point of this thesis – man cannot escape or ‘say No to death’ in all situations in Faulkner’s work. Instead, Faulkner makes clear numerous times throughout

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<sup>275</sup> Charlotte Fairlie, “Whispering to the Ground”: The Environmental Message of the Scythe’, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, Volume 18, Issue 3 (Spring, 2011): 637.

his fiction that, in certain situations, man must rush (Wash), plunge (Quentin), or rampage (Rider) towards an acceptance, an embrace of mortality, 'saying Yes to death.'

Speaking from the perspective of Milly's midwife, Quentin transmits Sutpen's fatal utterance and the moment of the murder thus:

“‘Well? Damn your black hide: horse or mare?’ [...] she told him and he stood there for a minute and he didn’t move at all, with the riding whip against his leg [...] then he looked at the girl on the pallet again and said, ‘Well, Milly; too bad you’re not a mare too. Then I could have given you a decent stall in the stable’ and turned and went out. Only she could not move even yet, and she didn’t even know that Wash was outside there; she just heard Sutpen say, ‘Stand back, Wash. Don’t you touch me’: and then Wash, his voice soft and hardly loud enough to reach her: ‘I’m going to tech you, Kernel’: and Sutpen again: ‘Stand back, Wash!’ sharp now, and then she heard the whip on Wash’s face but she didn’t know if she heard the scythe or not[.]”

(357)

Never for one moment does Wash believe that Sutpen will betray, disrespect, or harm him. Despite his contradictory feelings and misgivings about Sutpen's conduct with Milly, Wash believes in the majesty and innate virtue of Sutpen. Wash also believes in the dream of a better life, and that the recognition he deserves will, inevitably, be granted him, and he believes that Sutpen feels the same. On the other hand, by viewing Milly as having conditional value, Sutpen could consider the moment of her childbearing as either a final victory or a crushing defeat (the latter possibility, however, is never entertained by Sutpen). Standing motionless before the midwife as she announces his daughter's birth, Sutpen is frozen on the boundary between life and death, just as Wash will be as he stands by the window overlooking Sutpen's corpse hours later. At that moment, Sutpen knows that his design has malfunctioned irreparably. The verbal attack he issues against Milly is justified, from his perspective, because of Wash's coercive actions and his insistence upon enacting this exchange. To Sutpen, it is Wash who has scuppered his chances of finally completing his design by gifting him with an instrument (Milly) who is not fit to fulfil her role in the

design. Milly's failure to provide Sutpen with a son reduces both her and Wash to a state below that of human beings. Uttering these words to Milly, Sutpen essentially revokes the basis upon which his exchange with Wash took place; he returns Milly to Wash despoiled, valueless, and fit only for slaughter.

Accordingly, Wash is given the justification to murder Sutpen because of a fundamental need to prove that he is not valueless or powerless. Instead, Wash must defend himself against tyranny, especially since he suffers as crushing a defeat as Sutpen does. Indeed, as Marcolin notes, 'Wash's veneration for Sutpen, the fine God-like man, is swept away in a moment. With it, Wash's own world is swept away, his own life stops dead in him, a supreme, final, dramatic demonstration of how Wash has renounced his life, living it only vicariously through Sutpen, how his identity depended upon him' (66). Wash is spoken of in inhuman, dishonourable terms by Sutpen; is totally denied the partnership and respect he would have gained from Sutpen's and Milly's union; and is repeatedly whipped after being insulted. This latter action serves as a cruel, ironic counter to Wash's repeated words of comfort to Sutpen following the defeat of the Confederacy and the loss of Sutpen's land: "Well, Kernel, they mought have whupped us but they aint killed us yit, air they?" (349). As Sutpen's conduct implies, Wash is now the disobedient slave, deserving punishment. Wash's act of murder, therefore, stems from a form of self-pity and righteous indignation, in that a man who has insulted, degraded, and humiliated his kith and kin must have his behaviour checked. Threatening to "tech" Sutpen, despite being warned repeatedly and vehemently to "Stand back!", both Wash and Sutpen act in self-defence, metamorphosing into mutual, hostile enemies. As Marcolin observes, Wash 'must act violently, kill Sutpen, in order to regain a viable space for himself' (68). Indeed, considering Faulkner's statements regarding Sutpen's inevitable downfall, Wash is ultimately justified to be the vehicle for his master's destruction because of what he has had to endure. As Rowe notes, 'Faulkner wants us to conclude that Sutpen meets the

sordid end that he himself deserves for the lies he told and the secrets he tried futilely to keep' (450).

Retreating into the cabin and with Milly and his newborn great-grand-daughter asleep close by, Wash projects upon himself the voices of those "in every cabin about the land by nightfall", who say, in mockery and admonition, "*Wash Jones has fixed old Sutpen at last. It taken him twenty years to do it, but he has got a bolt of old Sutpen at last*" (357-358). As acknowledged above, Wash's desire for recognition is not a wholly private affair, nor is it simply a matter of wanting to control or "fix" Sutpen. Wash's desires are not as base or loathsome as they are made out to be in the apparent utterances of every member of the community. Instead, Wash's conduct with Sutpen was only ever a plea towards a patron to finally recognise their loyal, devoted subject. What the voices that Wash hears here suggest is that his conduct with Sutpen and Milly was fundamentally misunderstood by outside observers. Yet, considering that Wash never had a voice and that his story is told in a chapter which provides a biographical account of Sutpen's life and design, this misunderstanding and general uncertainty about Wash's character and motivation is unsurprising. As Callen notes, 'Despite the overt adoration and loyalty which Wash offers Sutpen, there is an ambiguity in his attitude, presented in fine implications throughout the story which suggests that deep within him, there lurks a resentment for Sutpen' (34).

This misunderstanding brings this thesis, once again, to the ideas explored in my chapters about Emily and Rider, namely the question of believing and accepting the perspectives of those like the narrator or the deputy sheriff, who tell tales about people in morally dubious circumstances and who cannot defend or explain their actions after death. Whether one views Wash's actions as justifiable or not is based upon a moral judgement made by Faulkner, the narrators, the reader, or the critic. For example, Quentin reports that, in Compson's opinion, Wash had a "morality [...] that was a good deal like Sutpen's, that told him he was right in the face of all fact and usage and everything else" (358).



Whether Wash was justified in murdering Sutpen is a question that is open to debate and which cannot, by its nature, be definitively, conclusively answered. This chapter makes the case that Wash's conduct, where the Southern code of honour is concerned, is justified, but yet no claim is made that this line of inquiry is final.

Quentin himself makes clear that the reason why Wash murdered Sutpen goes beyond any sense of "justification or explanation or extenuation or excuse" (358). As Quentin frames it, Wash's confession to himself is a moment where his affected adoration of Sutpen finally ceases, and all pretences end. Yet, unlike this chapter, Quentin never suggests that Wash is cognisant of the falsity in Sutpen's conception of himself. Instead, Quentin depicts Wash as being bound by a contradictory, confused sense of honour. Wash's act of murder is thus symptomatic of a lifetime of bitterness, self-loathing, and intense self-consciousness, which Wash has long failed to address but which he now acknowledges without censure: "*Better if his kind and mine too had never drawn the breath of life on this earth. Better that all who remain of us be blasted from the face of it than that another Wash Jones should see his whole life shredded from him and shrivel away like a dried shuck thrown onto the fire*" (362-363). Wash cannot utter these words to anyone because, by murdering Sutpen, he places himself at the edge of human existence and waits, like Rider and Quentin, at the boundary between life and death, speech and silence, where nothing and nobody that was in, or ever constituted, his existence has any inherent value or meaning any longer. As a result, Wash 'says Yes to death', making, in Carothers's words, 'a suicidal charge against the men of Sutpen's own kind' (1992, 51).

Unlike Henry Sutpen, who flees the scene of Charles's murder, Wash cannot or will not run away from the posse. He is cognisant of the severity of his crime and so must face punishment. Though his murder of Sutpen is justifiable under the Southern code of honour (as I have argued), and though he may be able to justify his action to himself, he

cannot do so to the wider aristocratic community. After laying down the scythe and entering the cabin, Quentin states that Wash knew:

“It would not be much after dark when it would happen; that he must have sat there and sensed, felt them gathering with the horses and dogs and guns—the curious and vengeful—men of Sutpen’s own kind, who used to eat at his table with him back when he (Wash) had yet to approach nearer the house than the scuppernong arbor—men who had led the way, shown the other and lesser ones how to fight in battles, who might also possess signed papers from the generals saying that they were among the first and foremost of the brave—who had galloped also in the old days arrogant and proud on the fine horses about the fine plantations—symbol also of admiration and hope, instruments too of despair and grief; these it was whom he was expected to run from[.]”

(361)

Wash is only recognised by these men moments before and in the event of his death. His expectations and dreams of respect and ascendancy up the social ladder of Yoknapatawpha fails completely and are summarily denied him. After murdering Sutpen, Wash comes to despise these men of the older, better order, who expect him to flee the scene of murder. In one sense, Wash, by murdering Sutpen, acts in defiance of these men, rejecting their superiority and supremacy over him. In a heated crime of passion, Wash murders the God-like Sutpen, the man who personifies bravery and supremacy, and then murders, in cold blooded calculation, two innocent victims (Milly and her daughter) whose lives no longer have value because they are directly implicated in the death of the master. Yet, as far as the culture outlined by Nisbett and Cohen is concerned, Wash’s actions are justified and culturally understandable, if not entirely condoned. By murdering Sutpen, Wash sought to protect himself and his kin from harm. Yet, his murder of Milly and the newborn is, as this chapter will shortly explain, a tacit admission from Wash that Sutpen robbed them all of their value and worth – they are no longer fit to live.

As Quentin frames the story in the aftermath of the murder of Thomas Sutpen, Wash begins to experience a general collapse, waiting for death and surrendering himself

to the reality of his own mortality. Before the posse arrives, Wash contends that he is “‘Too old to run far even if he were to run who could never escape them, no matter how much or how far he ran; a man past sixty could not expect to run that far’” (362). Displaying full cognisance of his own condemnation, Wash is placed beyond any form of redemption. He is directly in the line of fire of those men who will arrive shortly to mete out his doom. Nonetheless, Wash does exhibit bravery in his acceptance of death and his willingness to stand directly in the face of it. By invoking the spectre of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, through Wash hearing “‘all the voices, the murmuring of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow beyond the immediate fury’” (362), Quentin is, perhaps, under-valuing Wash here. Rather than being a ‘poor player/that struts and frets his hour upon the stage/and then is heard no more’,<sup>276</sup> awaiting ‘the last ding dong of doom’ (Faulkner, ‘Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature’, 120), Wash can instead be seen as having transformed into a tragic hero in his own right. He rages against these voices that declare “‘*Old Wash Jones come a tumble at last. He thought he had Sutpen, but Sutpen fooled him. He thought he had him, but old Wash Jones got fooled*’” (362). Neither these voices, nor Wash himself, acknowledge the degradation that Milly suffered by being exchanged and used as a bargaining tool between these two men. Instead, these voices snipe and mock Wash for having dared to try and usurp or coerce the noble Sutpen. In doing so, these voices reinstate, for the final time, the deference to class hierarchy that remains a cornerstone of life in the South following the War. To his credit, Wash is correct in saying that he “‘never expected that, Kernel! You know I never!’” (362). Yet, he did expect respect and courtesy from Sutpen, which, given that Wash helped him after the profound loss of Henry and the War more generally, was an expectation commensurate with the image of Sutpen that Wash had in his mind, an image that Sutpen refused to conform to. Wash came to believe that he was the

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<sup>276</sup> William Shakespeare, “Macbeth” (1606), *Complete Works* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994), 1076, V.iii.24-26.

“acknowledged and chosen best” among Sutpen’s clan, especially through Sutpen’s choice of Milly. However, Wash was repeatedly sold a lie; as a result, he struck violently in a moment of heated passion.

With the arrival of Major de Spain and his posse, Wash, at last, acknowledges the feelings of injustice and hardship his life with and beside Sutpen has engendered, to the extent that his own life, along with the lives of Milly and her newborn daughter, ceases to have any value. Wash’s murder of Milly and the newborn, with “the butcher knife that he kept hidden and razor-sharp – the one thing in his sloven life that he was ever known to take pride in or care of” that is used “on both the neckbones” (364), is emphatically not an act of honour. The deaths of Milly and her child are not, as Rodden argues, Wash’s ‘misguided effort to “wash” away the Sutpen filth that has defiled the family’ (30); nor, as Clough argues, is Wash’s act a moment of ‘pained tenderness.’<sup>277</sup> Instead, Wash’s murder of Milly and her newborn is a tacit acknowledgment of the ‘Sutpen filth’, and a way of permanently fixing all three members of the Jones family into that filth. Like Wash himself, Milly and the newborn have no value because they have been sullied and rejected by Sutpen. To Wash, the murder of Milly and her child signals his own acknowledgment of their apparent worthlessness. Just as Sutpen rejected them because they failed to complete his design, Wash is now guilty of the same sentiments. Milly and the child did not grant Wash the respect, recognition, or glory he desired. Facing either his own death or life-long incarceration at the hands of the law, Wash decides to communicate his animus and rage towards Milly and the infant for having dishonoured, embarrassed, and failed him. By doing so, Wash is no more virtuous or innocent than Sutpen. Despite the class disparities between Wash and Sutpen, there can be no differentiating between them in the brutality and violence they inflict upon people, especially Milly and her ‘unnamed infant’ (476).

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<sup>277</sup> Edward Clough, *Building Yoknapatawpha: Reading Space and the Plantation in William Faulkner*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia, April 2014, 195.

Faced with de Spain and his men, who order him to ““come on out”” (363), Wash, now, must be prepared to commit focused violence by rushing at them ““with the scythe above his head, straight into the lanterns and the gun barrels”” (364). Charging at de Spain, Wash is a man with nothing to lose. Having murdered both his sovereign master and his valued female kin, Wash shows the extent that all semblance of class distinction, honour, and decorum ceases to have any meaning at the moment of death. Kuyk writes that ‘Wash [...] chooses to die by having himself killed’ and, indeed, ‘has designed his own death’ (74). De Spain, despite his apparent superiority to Wash and his symbolic value as a conduit for justice, has no value to Wash. His threats for Wash to ““Stop! Stop, or I’ll kill you!”” (364) have no meaning. Disobeying a command from his social “superior” guarantees Wash’s death, bringing his slovenly life to its ignominious end.

## Chapter Five

### **“I knew that living was terrible”: Confronting mortality in *As I Lay Dying***

Addie Bundren, the deceased matriarch of *As I Lay Dying*, is described by Brian Norman as ‘simply and strikingly a dead woman, lying in a box, talking.’<sup>278</sup> Annette Wannamaker provides a more nuanced account: Addie is ‘one of Faulkner’s most maligned characters’ who, during her life, was accused by her community of allowing her children to suffer ‘as a result of her neglect and sin.’<sup>279</sup> The final chapter of this thesis considers Addie’s single spoken chapter at the novel’s centre, a voice which emerges from a chorus of fifteen narrators, including her five children and her husband, Anse. Addie’s chapter stands in sharp contrast to the communal narrator in “A Rose for Emily”, the third-person distanced narrator of “Pantaloons in Black”, and even the first-person affectless voice of Quentin Compson: instead of speaking about life on the threshold of or in anticipation of death, Addie’s voice is heard from an explicitly posthumous location. Having crossed the boundary from life to death, Addie, paradoxically, has the ability literally to offer her own final reply, rather than the silent message that Emily leaves for the community when they discover Homer’s corpse after her funeral. Exploring Addie’s chapter in the final stages of this thesis helps to illuminate the ways in which what the dead say about the living and what the living have to say about the dead intersect in Faulkner’s fiction. Her voice also demonstrates why these various voices accept and ‘say Yes to death’, a claim at the heart of this thesis.

The chapter initially examines Addie’s posthumous speech at the centre of the novel, wherein she indicts her family, her community, and the haunting presence of her

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<sup>278</sup> Brian Norman, *Dead Women Talking: Figures of Injustice in American Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 51. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>279</sup> Annette Wannamaker, “‘Salvation Is Just Words Too’: Addie Bundren and the Language of Motherhood”, in Patrick O’Donnell and Lynda Zwinger (eds.), *Approaches to Teaching Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2011), 113. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

father's words, that 'the reason for living was getting ready to stay dead.'<sup>280</sup> As Donald M. Kartiganer makes clear, 'Addie Bundren is the ostensible "I" of the title, but her father's sentence she is always responding to seeks to expand that dying into the solitary goal of life.'<sup>281</sup> Accordingly, the chapter argues that Addie has always felt that 'living was terrible' (99): as a result, she longs to 'say Yes to death' in order to escape her life of subjugation to her husband and children. Her request for her husband, Anse, 'to take me back to Jefferson when I died' because of her outrage that she 'had been tricked by words older than Anse or love' (100) constitutes her revenge upon him, rejecting her identity as a Bundren. Addie, for one moment, tricks Anse with words by making him fulfil his promise to her. However, Anse fails to comprehend the meaning of Addie's request, as Addie confirms by claiming that 'my revenge would be that he would not know I was taking revenge' (100). In death, Addie finds a voice and a space to issue this judgement and indictment of those around her.

The focus of the chapter then shifts to consider the ways in which her children refuse to or ultimately cannot 'say Yes to death', highlighting this chapter's central concern: renewed, albeit corrupted, life is set against death throughout *As I Lay Dying*. During the burial journey to lay Addie to rest in Jefferson, as she has requested, the Bundrens are 'subjected [...] to the two greatest catastrophes which man can suffer—fire and flood' (*Faulkner in the University*, 87).<sup>282</sup> My argument builds upon Kartiganer's observation that

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<sup>280</sup> William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, edited by Michael Gora (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 98. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>281</sup> Donald M. Kartiganer, "'By It I Would Stand or Fall': Life and Death in *As I Lay Dying*", in Richard C. Moreland (ed.), *A Companion to William Faulkner* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 434. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>282</sup> The novel's title derives from Homer's *Odyssey* (675-725 BCE). Specifically, Carvel Collins asserts that Faulkner was inspired by 'The Eleventh Book of *The Odyssey*', which 'recounts Odysseus' visit to the underworld, where he sees Persephone ruling the dead.' Collins then cites Sir William Marris's early twentieth-century translation: 'I, as I lay dying/Upon the sword, raised my hands to smite (Clytemnestra);/And shamelessly she turned away, and scorned/To draw my eyelids down or close my mouth,/Though I was on the road to Hades' house' ('The pairing of *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*', *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, Volume 18, Issue 3 [Spring, 1975]: 123). Regarding similarities between Odysseus's travels and the Bundrens' journey

‘life and death engage each other’ in the novel: ‘The Bundrens are living as dying, dying as living, each drive engendering, distorting, and depending on the other’ (2007, 435). Though they ultimately survive, all of Addie’s children are forced to endure the catastrophes which arise because of her death and the journey she requires them to make. Addie’s revenge, which involves ‘bringing about the awful things that happen to the children during the journey’, as Rueckert says (53), becomes the central thrust of the novel following her death.

### Addie

Faulkner immediately establishes for the readers of Addie’s speech the extent of her intense hatred of children, including her students during her teaching career and, later in life, her own offspring. Addie opens her speech by shockingly declaring that ‘In the afternoon when school was out and the last one had left with his dirty little snuffling nose, instead of going home I would go down the hill to the spring where I could be quiet and hate them’ (98). From the outset of her speech, Addie casts herself as a woman who will never be a traditional, mothering figure. Erin K. Johns Speese acknowledges this aspect of her character, arguing that Addie’s ‘acts as a teacher reflect an earlier defiance against the social expectation that all women inherently nurture.’<sup>283</sup> Instead, Addie conceives of herself as a figure whose existence and outlook revolve around the concept and practice of hatred, particularly because of the haunting voice of her father, and the demands and expectations of her social environment (as will be discussed in further detail shortly). From her chapter’s opening, Addie’s life appears to be based upon the twin actions of judgement and

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to Jefferson, Lynn Gartrell Levins writes that, ‘Like the Bundrens, Odysseus successfully withstands his trials, and in the course of his triumph over the old epic catastrophes his motivation is no more than the Bundrens’: to get back to Ithaca, to return safely again—home’ (*Faulkner’s Heroic Design: The Yoknapatawpha Novels* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976], 112). For more on the novel’s parallels to Homer’s *Odyssey*, see: Elizabeth M. Kerr, ‘*As I Lay Dying* as Ironic Quest’, *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, Volume 3, Issue 1 (Winter, 1962): 5-19; and Richard P. Adams, *Faulkner: Myth and Motion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

<sup>283</sup> Erin K. Johns Speese, *Gender and the Intersubjective Sublime in Faulkner, Foster, Lawrence, and Woolf* (London: Routledge, 2018), 61. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.



punishment, which together establish the parameters for the direction of her life and the content of her speech.

Once ‘down the hill’ at the end of her teaching day, Addie admits that she ‘could just remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time’ (98). Addie’s entire childhood and upbringing is encapsulated within this utterance; and Addie’s subsequent life has been influenced by her father’s words. As with Quentin Compson, the voice of the father remains ever-present, functioning as a spoken injunction which ensures that Addie’s life is irrevocably stunted, revealing the extent to which the influence of her father’s words have devastated and corrupted her. As Kartiganer writes elsewhere, ‘Addie remains inside the boundary of her father’s Word. Without its signification she would not know how to act or speak.’<sup>284</sup> And, as Norman observes, that Word serves to produce ‘a particular animus toward all that is living, including herself’ (54). Addie’s present existence, experiencing ‘the quiet smelling of damp and rotten leaves and new earth’ (98) reminds her of her father’s words: the banalities and demands of her life and work are what lead her to ‘get ready to stay dead.’

The malice and hostility towards life instilled within Addie because of her father’s words therefore explains the hatred she feels for her students because she sees within them a reflection of herself, ‘each with his and her secret and selfish thought’ (98), as she has hers:

And when I would have to look at them day after day [...] and think that this seemed to be the only way I could get ready to stay dead, I would hate my father for having ever planted me. I would look forward to the times when they faulted, so I could whip them. When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my blood that ran, and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in

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<sup>284</sup> Donald M. Kartiganer, ‘The Farm and the Journey: Ways of Mourning and Meaning in *As I Lay Dying*’, *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 43, Issue 3 (Summer, 1990): 293. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood  
with mine for ever and ever.

(98)

Addie's words, therefore, reveal her cognisance of the fact that her father's words have manifested themselves in every area of her adulthood, particularly here, in her punishment of her students. As Bockting argues, Addie's 'text shows how the hatred for the one on whom she is dependent is acted out in the world, displaced unto the school-children that are dependent on her' (98). Addie wishes to replicate the feeling of utter, violent loathing and contempt she feels for her father with these school-children, taking pleasure in seeing the result of her actions as 'it welted and ridged' upon their flesh. In doing so, she does not wish to repudiate her hatred for her father or her environment, but instead allows this hatred to metastasize.

Shortly after recording this, Addie outlines her marriage to Anse Bundren. During the initial stages of their relationship, Addie emphasises the fact that Anse is not an ideal match for her or, indeed, any woman. His 'hump', for example, makes him appear 'like a tall bird hunched in the cold weather' (98). In her initial interactions with Anse, Addie casts a value judgement against him, criticising and exposing his defects and shortcomings. During their initial conversation, she asks: "If you've got any women folks, why in the world dont they make you get your hair cut? [...] And make you hold your shoulders up?" (98-99). Barbara Ladd argues that 'When Anse comes courting, there is a practical acceptance of necessity on both their parts. Anse needs "womenfolk" presumably to give him children to help with the farm and to ensure his patriarchal legacy; Addie is chiefly interested in the fact that Anse has a farm and a house.'<sup>285</sup> However, Addie's initial interaction with Anse is an exercise in combative language, which she replicates in her daily

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<sup>285</sup> Barbara Ladd, *Resisting History: Gender, Modernity, and Authorship in William Faulkner, Zora Neal Hurston, and Eudora Welty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 17. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

exchanges with people. Indeed, one could argue that her rhetoric against Anse and his 'secret and selfish thought' of marrying Addie here (98) is a replication of her punishment and cruelty towards her students. By speaking to Anse in this manner, Addie is testing to see whether Anse can withstand this verbal 'switch' of negative language and, indeed, if he will accept the position of a victim. Inevitably, therefore, she feels the effects of this combative discourse in all areas of her life, both professionally (in her occupation as a teacher) and personally (in her relations with her husband and, later, her children).

Addie's judgement of Anse proves right. After his marriage proposal, he insists that though he "ain't got no people", he does have "a little property." In addition, "I'm forehanded; I got a good honest name" (99). Through his language, Anse demonstrates his desperation for Addie not to judge him negatively, because he appears to be acutely aware of his own imperfections and failures.<sup>286</sup> He also realises, perhaps, that Addie makes him prove himself through words in order to exploit his desperation and, even, punish him for having intruded upon her life. In response, Addie reveals that though she does "have people in Jefferson [...] They'll be hard to talk to. They're in the cemetery" (99). Though they may be "hard to talk to", Addie's dead people in Jefferson, like her father, have an (absent) presence in her life; their speech, like her father's words, exerts a pressure. Faulkner once suggested that Addie 'had probably married Anse because of pressure from her people, but she probably saw through him that he was no good' (*Faulkner in the University*, 114). Yet, Addie's utterance here inadvertently strips her of the power and control she initially exhibited over Anse. By revealing that her people are dead, she actually creates a sense of equality between herself and Anse, which allows him to lay a total claim

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<sup>286</sup> Darl's initial description of Anse reveals that his father's 'feet are badly splayed, his toes cramped and bent and warped, with no toenail at all on his little toes, from working so hard in the wet in homemade shoes when he was a boy' (8). Darl's description demonstrates that, while Addie experiences physical pain and torment because of her loss of virginity and subsequent repeated childbirths, Anse has also experienced much pain during his life by having his feet practically deformed because of the desperate life that being a poverty-stricken farmer entails.

upon her following their marriage. Whatever her own 'secret and selfish thought' in marrying Anse, she transforms herself into a Bundren, a poor farmer's wife, and when she bears her firstborn son, Cash, she becomes subjugated by her husband and son.

It is after Cash is born that Addie discovers that 'living was terrible' (99). Instead of finding herself in an autonomous position of power, hidden perched on a hill where she could 'be quiet' (98), she is forced into the realisation that her 'aloneness [...] had never been violated until Cash came' (99). Thus, rather than fulfilling the promise of her initial encounters with Anse (signified through her mentioning his "good farm" and "new house" [99]) and using Cash's birth to revise her outlook on life and expel the influence of her father's words over her, Addie allows her father's words to corrupt Cash's birth. As a result, Addie is kept in a form of stasis wherein she continually views life in a totally negative, 'terrible' fashion. This argument contrasts to numerous scholarly readings of this passage which consider Cash's birth as a positive, life-affirming moment for Addie. Speese, for instance, claims that 'Through the violence of sexuality, her first child violates her aloneness. The violence of the word "violation" suggests a negative perspective, but Addie goes onto reveal motherhood as a relief from her loneliness' (63). Similarly, Rueckert argues that 'With Cash, (Addie) discovers love and for the first time experiences the blood union she has been seeking. It is Cash, not Anse, who brings her virgin state to an end because of the intensity of the direct experience of motherhood. [...] For the first time, she experiences real "living"' (52). Bocking, too, suggests that Cash 'was received by (Addie) in an exclusive atmosphere of closeness between mother and child that quickly excluded his father. In his mother's conceptualization of him [...] Cash is the solution to a problem' (137). Contrary to these claims, this present chapter contends that the birth and presence of Cash and each subsequent child emphasises for Addie the fact that life is terrible, an argument aligned with Paul S. Nielsen's claim that 'It is the delivery of Cash [...] that shows her that all that preceded was as nothing compared to that violation. It is

the process of being terribly forced open from within that rends her boundary.<sup>287</sup> Similarly, Jill Bergman writes that ‘Far from finding satisfaction or fulfilment in motherhood, it is precisely motherhood that convinces Addie that living is terrible. Her attempt to escape the drudgery of the school children and to express her sexuality freely brings her flight back to virtually the same life of child-rearing and constrained sexuality.’<sup>288</sup> The argument of this chapter, therefore, also contradicts Marc Hewson’s view that ‘each child becomes Addie writ small, and it is through each that she is reincarnated in the novel.’<sup>289</sup>

By becoming a mother, Addie discovers that ‘words are no good’ because they ‘don’t ever fit what they are trying to say at’ (99). To Addie, motherhood is a word ‘invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn’t care whether there was a word for it or not’ (99). Society’s patriarchal expectations of how women should act as mothers (as later embodied by her neighbour, Cora) becomes an irrelevance to Addie. Addie’s outlook on life, that ‘the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead’, does not alter with the onset of motherhood; Addie’s learned reliance upon pessimism and hatred is not overwritten by marriage, childbirth, or motherhood, but instead continues to be the guiding principle of her lived experiences. In Addie’s view, corporal punishment becomes her substitute for affection, because ‘only through the blows of the switch could my blood and their blood flow as one stream’ (99). The vitriol she once felt towards her students is now re-oriented towards Cash and her approach to raising him. In other words, Addie works within the parameters of her suffering and her negative worldview, rather than against it.

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<sup>287</sup> Paul S. Nielsen, ‘What Does Addie Bundren Mean, and How Does She Mean It?’, *Southern Literary Journal*, Volume 25, Issue 1 (Fall, 1992): 37.

<sup>288</sup> Jill Bergman, “‘this was the answer to it’: Sexuality and Maternity in *As I Lay Dying*”, *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 49, Issue 3 (Summer, 1996): 397. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>289</sup> Marc Hewson, “‘My children were of me alone’: Maternal influence in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*”, *Mississippi Quarterly*, Volume 53, Issue 4 (Fall, 2000): 557.

Although she attempts to transform childbirth and motherhood to fit her own needs and regain the power stripped from her by Anse, Addie's gambit totally fails after she discovers she is pregnant with Darl, her second son: 'At first I would not believe it. Then I believed that I would kill Anse. It was as though he had tricked me, hidden within a word like within a paper screen and struck me in the back through it' (99-100). Addie's rejection of her son began from the moment of his birth – to Addie, Darl is a threatening intruder from 'outside the circle' (99). As a result, Bockting writes, Addie 'does not acknowledge Darl's existence in the active way in which she took possession of [...] Anse' (101-102). Both Darl and his father stand, in Addie's terms, as 'he' who hid 'within a word [...] and struck me in the back through it' (99). As a result, Addie's bond with Darl is immediately and irrevocably severed. In bearing Darl, Addie again withstands the physical pain of childbirth, but by doing so she brings into her life figures whom she 'did not ask for', as she later states (100). Prior to her marriage, Addie lived under the illusion that she had control over her situation and the figures within her life. Now, however, she realises that she has completely lost this power and control. In this way, both her request to be buried in Jefferson, and the subsequent burial journal represent different attempts to reclaim power. Richard Gray writes that 'The journey itself forms the spine of the narrative', and 'is a trial of a kind, a way of testing strength and endurance' (1994, 152). By requiring her husband and children to undertake this journey, Addie hopes to reclaim the power which she lost ever since she 'took Anse' (98).

After giving birth to Darl, Addie reveals that, in 'revenge' for being 'tricked by words older than Anse or love':

I asked Anse to promise to take me back to Jefferson when I died, because I knew that father had been right, even when he couldn't have known he was right any more than I could have known I was wrong.

"Nonsense," Anse said; "you and me aint nigh done chapping yet, with just two."

(100)

By making Anse promise to bury her in Jefferson, Addie powerfully indicts the entire Bundren clan in a manner which has lasting consequences for the children to follow. ‘The revenge of the journey’, Kartiganer says, ‘is that Anse Bundren should not know its reason’: ‘That *is* its reason, and no other one is ever stated by Addie. [...] That Anse Bundren, whose central commitment in life has been to emulate the stationariness of a tree or a stand of corn, should be forced to set forth on an 80-mile detour is the heart of Addie’s vengeance: a quest emptied of any goal other than its secret emptiness’ (2007, 437, italics Kartiganer’s). Addie’s revenge on Anse is precisely this forcing him to act, and it is significant that her father is invoked at this point.<sup>290</sup> Nevertheless, during this exchange, Anse does not truly comprehend the total rejection of life with him and his children that Addie’s utterance implies. Asking to be taken back to Jefferson and buried in her family plot is also Addie’s method of signifying that a life with and among the dead is preferable to the life that Anse has given her. Anse’s confident expectation of further “chapping” hits precisely the wrong note, even though it is the case that the life she leads after giving birth to Cash and Darl consists merely of bringing into existence figures which are forced upon her and later expelled out of her. Despite giving birth to three more children in the years following this exchange, the idea of being buried in Jefferson remains locked within Addie’s consciousness and becomes a fact of her life that she carries with her to her death – it is her way of both undoing her life as a Bundren and, ultimately, accepting and ‘saying Yes to death.’ Addie’s plight shows how the voice of a woman in the rural South does not have any power when the use of her body and her life is dictated to her. To Anse, she is

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<sup>290</sup> Anse, however, has an ulterior motive for travelling to Jefferson to bury Addie: shortly after Addie’s death, he reveals that, finally, “I can get them teeth” (30). As Kartiganer subsequently concedes, ‘All of the Bundrens but Darl, as if following Addie’s lead, transform the burial journey into detour, in the sense that each of them has an ulterior motive in going to Jefferson, as Faulkner patently makes clear. [...] Even Anse has his own reason for going to Jefferson, quite apart from the “reason” of Addie’s that is beyond him’ (2007, 437). See also: Jason S. Todd, ‘A Good Carpenter: Cash Bundren’s Quest for Balance and Authority’, *Southern Literary Journal*, Volume 46, Issue 1 (Fall, 2013): 48-60.

useful only for copulation and childbearing. To that extent, she is forced to live within the parameters of his judgement. Addie's request, therefore, constitutes her revenge upon Anse, her refusal to continue living as Anse has determined she should and her forcing him into action. As Greg Chase acknowledges, the burial journey is Addie's 'response to the submissive, unfulfilling role that Anse has forced her to play, her way of achieving in death the freedom from him that she cannot achieve in life.'<sup>291</sup> Similarly, Speese writes that 'By insisting on her Jefferson burial, Addie exacts her revenge on the community and society that dictated the roles she was supposed to fulfil' (51). It is in this context that Addie would rather be treated as 'a significant shape profoundly without life' (100).

With the mention of Cora Tull within her chapter, the idea that Addie is repeatedly mistreated and scorned by those around her is explicated. Cora is an outsider to Addie, and is defined both by her small-mindedness and her religious zealotry, which she judgementally espouses and asserts in relation to Addie. For instance, Cora dares tell Addie that she 'was not a true mother', and, as Addie complains, would also tell her 'what I owed to my children and to Anse and to God' (100). Despite living within the parameters that those around her have established (from her father, to her husband, and later her sons), Addie's existence continues to provoke intense criticism and harsh judgement from others such as Cora. Cora does not comprehend the dynamics within the Bundren family unit; instead, she insists upon assessing familial relationships and situations which are beyond her insight. On this point, Speese notes, 'Cora connects Evangelical Christianity to constructs of motherhood. The objectifying idealizations of white, middle-class motherhood erase Addie's subjectivity' (55). Throughout the novel, Cora makes explicitly clear that she sees herself as Addie's antithesis – whereas Addie is married to the loathsome

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<sup>291</sup> Greg Chase, 'Acknowledging Addie's Pain: Language, Wittgenstein, and *As I Lay Dying*', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, Volume 63, Issue 2 (June, 2017): 176. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.



Anse Bundren, Cora believes that she has an ideal husband and children and, more importantly, a life supported by an unwavering faith in God. Near the beginning of the novel, Cora speaks of a blissful vision of the afterlife which could also be considered her way of 'saying Yes to death':

I have tried to live right in the sight of God and man, for the honor and comfort of my Christian husband and the love and respect of my Christian children. So that when I lay me down in the consciousness of my duty and reward I will be surrounded by loving faces, carrying the farewell kiss of each of my loved ones into my reward. Not like Addie Bundren, dying alone, hiding her pride and her broken heart.

(15)

By considering Addie in these harsh terms, Cora approaches her neighbour with an entirely unsympathetic mindset. Where Cora speaks lovingly of her own children, Addie cannot, which thereby leads to her being criticised by Cora as 'a lonely woman, lonely with her pride, trying to make folks believe different, hiding the fact that they just suffered her' (14). Despite being positioned by Addie 'outside the circle', Cora attempts to force Addie's life to fit her own standards and expectations, including her praise for Reverend Whitfield, 'a godly man if ever one breathed God's breath', who 'wrestled with (Addie's) spirit, singled her out and strove with the vanity of her mortal heart' (96). Throughout her chapter, Addie reveals the extent to which she herself has been condemned for not abiding by the rules which patriarchal society and Cora sets for her. By juxtaposing her wish to 'live right [...] for the honor and comfort [...] and the love and respect' of her husband and children against Addie's 'lonely' and 'broken heart', Cora implies that Addie is rightly criticised for not engaging in the performance of Southern gender norms as conventionally or successfully as Cora believes herself to, especially where the rearing of her children and the practice of her faith are concerned.

Prior to Cora's appearance, Addie mentions neither God nor religion. Indeed, Addie's viewpoints are irreligious; as Cora remarks, Addie 'has never been pure religious'

(96). To Addie, God is of no consequence to her in her early life, especially prior to her marriage, during her teaching career. As John Pilkington argues, ‘Cora is a religious person; Addie is not. Addie has no use for such words as love, motherhood, sin, and salvation, for she has found out about living not through precepts but through experience.’<sup>292</sup> Addie’s interpretation of that experience, of course, has been shaped by her father. Listening closely to Addie’s chapter, especially when she says ‘that sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved nor feared have for what they never had’ (100), conveys the impression that this is Addie’s attempt to communicate, on a spoken level following her death, that she has rejected the doctrine that Cora espouses and abuses. Whereas Addie’s voice is heard briefly following her death, to the extent that she autonomously reveals the salient events of her life and her outrage against life, her family, and her community, God’s voice is repeatedly invoked, abused, and misused by Cora and Whitfield, figures who claim to champion religious doctrine. For example, when Addie claims that “‘My daily life is an acknowledgment and expiation of my sin’”, Cora responds: “‘There is your sin. And your punishment too. Jewel is your punishment. But where is your salvation? And life is short enough to win eternal grace. And God is a jealous God. It is His to judge and to mete; not yours’” (96-97).<sup>293</sup> In her irreligious, defiant outlook, Addie defends herself against (and turns her ‘switch’ upon) a society which has systematically attempted to mould her into obedience by repeatedly invoking and abusing God’s presence and words, as the account of her affair with Whitfield demonstrates.

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<sup>292</sup> John Pilkington, *The Heart of Yoknapatawpha* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 109.

<sup>293</sup> Cora’s utterance here explicitly references Deuteronomy 6:14-15, ‘Ye shall not go after other gods, of the gods of people which *are* around you; (For the LORD thy God *is* a jealous God among you) lest the anger of the LORD thy God be kindled against thee, and destroy thee from off the face of the earth.’ From *The Bible: Authorized King James Version, with Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). All further references to Biblical scripture are taken from this edition and incorporated into the text.

As Ladd writes, through her infidelity with Whitfield, Addie ‘enters into an affair that is satisfying precisely because it is so transgressive, allowing her to violate social convention, law, *and* the fundamentalist religion that have betrayed her’ (43, italics Ladd’s). Addie describes Whitfield as ‘the instrument ordained by God who created the sin, to sanctify that sin He had created’; she and Whitfield are ‘dressed in sin [...] he the more beautiful since the garment which he had exchanged for sin was sanctified’ (101). Through this affair, Addie aims to prove that scriptural ‘words’, which people like Cora and Whitfield rely on and abuse, are ‘no good’ but, instead, are inherently compromised. She attempts to redefine what sanctity and salvation mean through the affair itself, in order to disrupt conventional outlooks on these topics. Laurel Bollinger has argued that ‘Addie seeks to understand sin, and allowing her habitual actions to anchor sin to the body, she can remove it from the realm of abstraction or even from language.’<sup>294</sup> Conversely, Chuck Palliser writes that Addie ‘describes the liaison with the preacher not as a passionate love affair but instead as an abstract symbolic gesture’: ‘The act of sex for Addie is significant only as an outward symbol of the blasphemous nature of her adultery with a man of God.’<sup>295</sup> Certainly, by engaging in the affair, Addie reduces ‘His’ word to merely a ‘dead word high in the air’ (101) and, thereby, renders Biblical scripture and the words of zealots like Cora into meaningless, empty sound. The end of Addie’s affair with Whitfield is an event which is of little consequence to her, as her simple statement of fact suggests: ‘Then it was over. Over in the sense that he was gone’ (101). Through her affair with Whitfield, Addie has acted in defiance of the violence that is promised her in scripture because of her

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<sup>294</sup> Laurel Bollinger, “‘Are is too many for one woman to foal’: Embodied Cognition in *As I Lay Dying*”, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Volume 57, Issue 4 (Winter, 2015): 441.

<sup>295</sup> Charles Palliser, ‘Predestination and Freedom in *As I Lay Dying*’, *American Literature*, Volume 53, Issue 4 (December 1986): 563. See also Charles Regan Wilson, ‘William Faulkner and the Southern Religious Culture’, in Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (eds.), *Faulkner and Religion* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 21-43.

actions,<sup>296</sup> disregarding any punishment or judgement that may be inflicted upon her for her sin. Indeed, rather than experience punishment, she inadvertently receives a reward, a “Jewel”, her illegitimate son conceived with Whitfield: ‘When I waked to discover it, he was two months gone’ (101). The son born from infidelity is, ironically, Addie’s prized child, as he allows her to ‘lie calm in the slow silence, getting ready to clean my house’ (102). To Addie, Jewel is the living embodiment of relief, functioning as a lasting trace of her subversion and rebellion against the confines of her community. Thus she subsequently refers to Jewel as “my cross and my salvation. He will save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me”, an utterance which leads Cora to accuse her of having ‘spoken sacrilege’ (97), since it is to her son, rather than Christ, that she claims to look for ‘salvation’.

As her speech draws to a close, Addie returns to the words of her father: ‘My father said that the reason for living was getting ready to stay dead. I knew at last what he meant and that he could not have known what he meant himself, because a man cannot know anything about cleaning up the house afterward’ (101-102). Addie takes the misery of her life that she has endured and makes her suffering her own, as a final act of liberation from her father before her death. Kartiganer argues that Addie ‘keeps unpacking her father’s sentence, compelling it to suit the desire of her life, even as she allows it to continue—requires it to continue—as the controlling signifier. Living, she believes, is a matter of getting ready to stay dead a long time, but the meaning of that act of preparation is something no man can understand’ (1990, 293, italics Kartiganer’s).<sup>297</sup> Her father’s voice

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<sup>296</sup> See, for example, Leviticus 20:10: ‘And the man that committeth adultery with *another* man’s wife, *even he* that committeth adultery with his neighbour’s wife, the adulterer shall surely be put to death.’ Or, Deuteronomy 22:22: ‘If a man be found lying with a woman married to a husband, then they shall both of them die, *both* the man that lay with the woman, and the woman: so shalt thou put away evil from Israel.’

<sup>297</sup> Similarly, Carolyn Norman Slaughter writes that ‘If Addie’s experience with her father’s words is an indication of the legitimate function of living words, then the difference in old words that are dead and old words that are living is not in their age nor in their sound or sense, but in their

and words are now as meaningless and ineffectual as Anse, Cora, Whitfield, her children, and God. For all their talk, these figures can no longer threaten Addie. Addie finally refuses to be governed by words which are ‘the gaps in people’s lacks’, as the people around her who seek power through language do. Instead, by claiming that ‘I have cleaned my house’ (which, as Michael Gorra identifies, is an ironic citation of Biblical scripture<sup>298</sup>), Addie has cast her final judgement upon her family and her society in the form of her sole spoken chapter in the novel, ultimately acquiescing in the silence and reality of death. Addie does not exhibit fear towards dying and never being heard again, nor does she fear God’s punishment and judgement. She does not seek ‘the eternal and the everlasting salvation and grace’ (6), which people like Cora fear and desire in equal measure, as seen through the fervent prayers that Addie describes her as saying at the end of her speech (102). Instead, Addie simply points out that Cora’s prayers are useless and ineffectual, ‘because people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words, too’ (102). In her final utterance, Addie sees through Cora’s beliefs and faith, which does not extend further than the superficial, verbal enactment of worship for personal, earthly ends rather than spiritual ascendancy and posthumous salvation. Moreover, in her final utterance before death, Addie implicitly references Whitfield’s hypocrisy, who, by having abandoned Addie, evades the truth of his actions and conceals himself within the sanctuary of God’s ‘infinite wisdom that restrained the tale from her dying lips as she lay surrounded by those who loved and trusted her’ (104).<sup>299</sup> Following her death, Addie judges and condemns Cora and Whitfield, people that are beyond salvation. In this way, Addie denies the absolving power that words are said to have.

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relationship with living doing’ (*‘As I Lay Dying: Demise of Vision’*, *American Literature*, Volume 61, Issue 1 (March, 1989): 23-24. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>298</sup> Gorra compares Addie’s utterance to Isaiah 38:1, ‘In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came unto him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live’ (102, footnote 2).

<sup>299</sup> In this passage, the ‘tale’ Whitfield is referring to is both his affair with Addie and Jewel’s conception, the latter which he refers to as “a living lie” (103).

## Cash

*As I Lay Dying* opens with the sound of Cash's saw as he constructs Addie's coffin. Darl says that he can 'hear Cash's saw' as he mounts 'the path' leading to the Bundren farm (3). As Addie's first-born son, Cash is, appropriately, the first member of the family to actively prepare for her death by building her coffin. By undertaking this labour, Cash also appears cognisant of the symbolic importance of his action. Despite the Bundrens' lower socio-economic status, Cash's project indicates that, as they prepare for Addie's death, they too are as much obligated to uphold familial honour and integrity as the upper-class, aristocratic families in Faulkner's work are, such as the Sartorises or the Compsons.<sup>300</sup> Thus, Roberts characterises the novel as 'the "poor white trash" version of *The Sound and the Fury*' (197).

Further still, it is significant that Cash takes part in a physical endeavour, considering Addie's aforementioned obsession with and insistence upon actions over words. Instead of verbally lamenting Addie's terminal condition and her impending death, Cash, in Bockting's words, 'is a man of deeds' (136), 'intent', Martin J. Jacobi claims, 'on maintaining his position in the realm of action.'<sup>301</sup> By building Addie's coffin, Cash insists upon placing her in as stable and "balanced" a position as possible so that she can face and 'say Yes to death.' As Victoria M. Bryan notes, 'For Cash, building a strong, secure coffin for his mother's body to rest in gives him a constructive way to mourn her, to deal with her approaching death productively' (29). As Darl observes, Cash's actions ensure that 'Addie Bundren could not want [...] a better box to lie in. It will give her confidence and comfort' (4). Though Cash never speaks of or considers Addie's death in these terms, Darl encapsulates the purposes of Cash's endeavours: while Cash's construction of the coffin

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<sup>300</sup> Compare Addie's death with the aftermath of Old Bayard's demise in *Flags in the Dust* (328) and the arrangements the Compsons make following the death of 'Damuddy', their grandmother, in *The Sound and the Fury* (17).

<sup>301</sup> Martin J. Jacobi, "'The Man Who Suffers and the Mind Which Creates': Problems of Poetics in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*", *Southern Literary Journal*, Volume 20, Issue 1 (Fall, 1987): 69.

cannot deny or ‘say No’ to the fact of Addie’s death (in contrast to Hamblin’s argument that ‘writing was (Faulkner’s) way of “saying No to death”’ [4]), his act is intended to ease her transition from life to death.

Indeed, as far as Darl frames the event, constructing the coffin is an entirely unselfish gesture that is not motivated by any factor aside from Cash’s devotion to Addie, which directly contradicts Susan Scott Parrish’s claim that ‘Cash does not show himself to be particularly aggrieved by his mother’s deteriorating health. In some ways, it does not matter to Cash whether she is alive or dead, as long as she is framed by a secure structure.’<sup>302</sup> The care with which Cash undertakes his endeavour does not escape Darl’s attention, who immediately compliments Cash’s expertise and skill, noting that he stands ‘in a litter of chips [...] fitting two of the boards together’ (3). The detritus resulting from constructing the coffin implies that, while Cash’s work may be arduous and time-consuming, these inconveniences are overlooked in his service to Addie. The wooden boards, Darl says, look as ‘yellow as gold, like soft gold’ (3), an image which communicates the depths of Cash’s commitment to his task and the splendour and majesty of his labour that others can perceive. As A. M. Potter notes, ‘What makes this care in building the coffin that much more remarkable is that a coffin is simply a box used to contain a dead body, which will soon be laid in the ground, covered with earth, and allowed to rot. It is not for living man’s use; it is not ever to be long in the sight of man; yet Cash works on it with all the infinite care that he has.’<sup>303</sup> Confronted by the finality of Addie’s death and absence, Cash creates as noble an extension of his devotion to her as he can, performing the role of the dutiful son he has always attempted to be, both for his mother and in the eyes of the community as a whole.

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<sup>302</sup> Susan Scott Parrish, *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 216-217. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>303</sup> A. M. Potter, ‘The Role of “Cash” within the Religious Structure of William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*’, *Theoria*, Volume 65 (October, 1985): 55.

Immediately before Addie's death, she calls out to Cash, who stands outside her window and shows her the boards he uses to prepare the coffin. Darl says that:

He drops the saw and lifts the boards for her to see, watching the window in which the face has not moved. He drags a second plank into position and slants the two of them into their final juxtaposition, gesturing toward the ones yet on the ground, shaping with his empty hand in pantomime the finished box. For a while still she looks down at him from the composite picture, neither with censure nor approbation. Then the face disappears.

(28)

What Cash intends as a further wordless demonstration of his devotion to his mother, updating her on the progress of her coffin, which John T. Matthews describes as 'the most intimate expression of (Cash's) natural reproductive relation with' her<sup>304</sup>, Addie interprets as her moment to die: 'She lies back and turns her head without so much as glancing at Pa. [...] [H]er eyes, the life in them, rushing suddenly upon them; the two flames glare up for a steady instant. Then they go out as though someone had leaned down and blown upon them' (28). With her 'box' nearing completion, Addie refuses to wait for Darl and Jewel to return from work (11) any longer: at this terminal stage in her life, rapidly approaching death, all the usual concerns of life (speech, money, children, avoiding societal and familial reproach) do not matter to her. Instead, Addie chooses to die silently, 'neither with censure nor approbation', saying nothing and leaving no grand, final farewell. At the end of her life, all that is significant to Addie is that her box is nearly complete and that her body will (in theory) be hastened to its burial.

Cash's immediate response to Addie's death is to simply say "She's gone", before remaining silent when faced with Anse's directives that he "do the best (he) can" to complete the coffin (29). Cash does not listen to his father, but instead remains physically still, refusing to approach the bed upon which his mother lies dead. In marked contrast to

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<sup>304</sup> John T. Matthews, 'As I Lay Dying in the Machine Age', *boundary 2*, Volume 19, Issue 1 (Spring, 1992): 75. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.



Darl, Cash cannot say '*she is dead*' (31). Instead, he uses a euphemism, "'She's gone'", to soften the impact of her death, a gesture which reflects the multiple and, often, contradictory behaviours which occur in the event of death. As Kearsley states: 'We live in a culture in which *dead* is a four-letter-word, and four-letter-words are often obscene. People don't die. Instead they get lost [...] they leave [...] or they fall asleep. Our dislike of saying that someone is dead reveals the profoundness of our death denial' (30-31, italics Kearsley's). Cash's actions here contrast to his building of the coffin, during which he worked to ease Addie into a state of non-being, preparing her (and, perhaps, the family as a whole) to accept her death. To Cash, Addie's death signals his failure to ensure that she saw her coffin completed. Faced with his failure, Cash returns to constructing the coffin, and through his silence he both indicts and wishes to redeem himself, letting the saw 'snore again' in an effort to complete his grand design (29). In doing so, Cash contradicts what Christopher Crocker observes as a key characteristic of "the Southern way of death": 'Under no circumstances should mourners attempt to "carry on as usual"' (121). Instead, as Bockting claims, 'Cash has always wanted to do things for his mother and by doing things for her he can deal with her death' (136).

Though Cash does ultimately complete the coffin, his intentions are compromised further by "'them durn women'" (52), who Tull says have 'laid' Addie 'in [her coffin] reversed [...] head to foot so it wouldn't crush her dress. It was her wedding dress and it had a flare-out bottom, and they had laid her head to foot in it so the dress could spread out' (51). Cash is prohibited from intervening and preventing these women from laying Addie in the coffin 'in reverse', suggesting that, even in death, Addie's community asserts itself upon her, compromising Cash's plans and intentions with the coffin (to 'give her', in Darl's terms, 'confidence and comfort' [4]). Cash verbalises his outrage towards these women by saying that "'I made it to balance with her. I made it to her measure and weight'" (52), because he knows what their interference will mean as the Bundrens embark on their

journey to Jefferson – the coffin ‘wont balance’ (56) on the wagon. Addie’s body becomes subject to the dictates of these women, whom she implicitly despised throughout her life, women who now attempt to subsume her into their chorus of voices that rise ‘out of the air’ in song, ‘flowing together and on in the sad comforting tunes’ (53). Cash does not prevent these women from interfering with Addie’s body, but instead merely voices his displeasure at what will become of her corpse in this sacred vessel. For instance, as the Bundrens prepare to depart their farm for Jefferson, Cash warns them that ‘In a couple of days now it’ll be smelling’, and that the coffin ‘aint balanced for no long ride’ (62), warnings which the family do not heed.

As Cash attempts to transport Addie’s coffin across the risen river, the coffin overturns. In the scramble to rescue her body, Jewel’s horse kicks Cash ‘loose from his holt on the saddle’ (89). Despite his continual attempts at pragmatism, Cash’s endeavours ultimately fail to match his intentions. He is the member of the Bundren family who suffers most in physical terms. Following his injury, Cash is described in ways which replicate Addie upon her deathbed, a point identified by Bockting: ‘Lying on the bank of the river, unconscious and with his leg broken, Cash comes to resemble his mother as she “lay dying”’ (139). For instance, Darl says that Cash’s face ‘appears sunken a little, sagging from the bony ridges of eye sockets, nose, gums, as though the wetting had slacked the firmness which had held the skin full; his teeth, set in pale gums, are parted a little as if he had been laughing quietly’ (90). These images recall Addie’s resemblance to ‘a bundle of rotten sticks’ on her deathbed (26): ‘Her face is wasted away so that the bones draw just under the skin in white lines’ (6). Where Cash once stood tall and proud before Addie’s coffin, creating an object that shines as bright and ‘yellow as gold’, a deathly, ‘gray’ pallor now dominates his face. Like Addie, Cash suffers the consequences of being associated with the Bundren clan. Unlike Addie, however, he cannot escape them. Cash is transformed into an example of what becomes of being a Bundren; just as the consequences of being a poor farmer’s

wife were written upon his mother's body through her multiple pregnancies and births, so too are the harsh, treacherous realities of farm life and poverty written upon Cash's body.

When he regains consciousness, Cash cannot speak and, as Darl says, 'it is to vomit he is turning his head' (93). Like Addie, Cash is incapable of expressing himself verbally, and his future as a carpenter and one of the main sources of income for the family is endangered.<sup>305</sup> Cash's voicelessness and vulnerability here recalls Elaine Scarry's argument that 'Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to sounds and cries a human makes before language is learned.'<sup>306</sup> Using Dewey Dell as an interlocutor to inquire about 'his tools' (105), which have floated away in the water (91), Cash replaces Addie as a subject of suffering within the Bundren unit.<sup>307</sup>

The careless treatment of Cash's leg, with cement poured onto it, provides a grotesque contrast to his dutiful, careful construction of the coffin. Where Cash laboured over the coffin, meticulously 'bevelling' it to ensure it would function gloriously for Addie, the treatment of Cash's leg takes place hurriedly and crudely on the side of a dirt road, demonstrating the Bundrens' heedlessness and coarseness of action. Despite Cash's repeated insistence that he can "last it out" without the cement (120), Anse insists they proceed because "we done brought it now" (121). Cash's pleading with the Bundrens here is another example of his ineffectual endeavours: he asks them not to apply the

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<sup>305</sup> Prior to their departure to Jefferson, Vardaman reports that 'Cash is carrying his tool box. Pa looks at him. "I'll stop at Tull's on the way back," Cash says. "Get on that barn roof"' (58).

<sup>306</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>307</sup> Darl describes Dewey Dell as she 'stoops and wipes' Cash's vomit 'with the hem of her dress' (90). Dewey Dell is at the service of Cash, honouring his sacrifice, while remaining locked in the confines of her work. Her function as Cash's interlocutor recalls another point by Scarry: 'Because the person in pain is ordinarily so bereft of the resources of speech, it is not surprising that language for pain should sometimes be brought into being by those who are not themselves in pain but who speak on *behalf* of those who are. Though there are very great impediments to expressing another's sentient distress, so are there also very great reasons why one might want to do so, and thus there come to avenues by which this most radically private experience begins to enter the realm of public discourse' (6, italics Scarry's).

cement to his body because he is aware in advance that the outcome will be disastrous.<sup>308</sup>

Whereas Addie's coffin was built to sanctify and maintain the integrity of her body, the cement on Cash's leg causes a severe infection; as Darl says, 'His leg and foot below looked like they had been boiled' (123). The endeavours of the Bundrens to help Cash prove to be as ineffectual as Cash's desire to help Addie as she lay dying; indeed, their endeavours are physically harmful, painful, and potentially fatal. At this point, Cash is in danger of (possibly) facing his own mortality.

When they finally arrive at the Jefferson cemetery, Cash briefly describes Addie's burial, saying of her empty grave that he and his siblings 'got it filled and covered' (137). There are no words spoken, no reverend present, and no explicit performance of a final farewell enacted here. Instead, through the sparse account he gives of the burial, Cash fulfils what he believes is 'God's blessing': to 'take her outen our hands and get shut of her in some clean way' (134). In other words, he works to sanctify her body once more and to rectify the grotesque direction that his actions have inadvertently taken, by giving Addie as dignified a burial as possible. Here, again, Cash seems to have failed. Douglas J. Davies outlines funerary rites in terms of 'performative utterances', where, for example, 'the traditional statement "we commit his body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust" constitutes', in Davies's terms, 'words against death.'<sup>309</sup> These words, when 'accompanied by an act' such as 'throwing soil on the coffin [...] mark the ritual moment of burial' (7). However, it would be possible to argue that the omission of these rites in *As I Lay Dying* implies that it is precisely through the absence of such words and actions during Addie's burial that Cash (ironically) permits and embraces the irreligiousness of her life and death. As Norman states, 'Faulkner eventually grants Addie dignity by what remains

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<sup>308</sup> This point contrasts to Bocking's interpretation of this moment, that Cash is 'more worried about getting cement on the coffin than about his own comfort' (139).

<sup>309</sup> Douglas J. Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 7. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

curiously unnarrated: her actual burial, the ostensible point of the whole plot' (52). Therefore, Cash inadvertently demonstrates the unimportance of religion and the illusory concept and wholesale absence of God within in Addie's life.<sup>310</sup>

After Darl's arrest at the cemetery and his subsequent incarceration at the Jackson mental asylum, Cash describes Darl as follows: 'A fellow cant get away from a shoddy job. He cant do it' (137). Ironically, however, Cash does not acknowledge that the treatment of his leg is the ultimate 'shoddy job' in the novel. Visiting Doc Peabody, the family physician, Cash asserts that the pain and discomfort he experienced while sitting on the wagon "never bothered me much" (138). Peabody, outraged that Cash was allowed to ride "six days on a wagon without springs, with a broken leg", declares:

"You mean, it never bothered Anse much [...] dont tell me it aint going to bother you to lose sixty-odd inches of skin to get that concrete off. And dont tell me it aint going to bother you to have to limp around on one short leg for the balance of your life, if you can walk at all again. Concrete [...] God Almighty, why didnt Anse carry you to the nearest sawmill and stick your leg in the saw? That would have cured it. Then you all could have stuck his head into the saw and cured a whole family....."

(138)

Alongside Addie's speech, Peabody's utterance is the most direct, damning condemnation of the Bundrens heard in the novel. Through harbouring a putrefying corpse that, according to one social voice in Mottson (Moseley, the chemist, following his encounter

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<sup>310</sup> Cash also involuntarily gives credence to every criticism the exterior social voices give to the Bundrens' journey throughout the novel. Armstid, for example, advises that they "bury her at New Hope" (50); his wife Lula repeatedly calls their conduct "a outrage" (108). Through these utterances, the community demonstrate their awareness of the futility of the Bundrens' enterprise and the degree to which it endangers the decorum which should follow death. The Bundrens' conduct further complicates Wilson's view that 'decorum' pervades Faulkner's descriptions of death and burial (274). Indeed, the burial journey exhibits what André Bleikasten calls a 'guileless scorn of decorum and convention', to the extent that 'none of the Bundrens appear to be conscious of the outrageous nature of their journey' (*Faulkner's As I Lay Dying*, translated by Roger Little [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973], 117. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text).

with Dewey Dell), has become 'like a piece of rotten cheese' (118),<sup>311</sup> they have reduced their social reputation to the point of non-existence. With stunning clarity, Peabody reveals the grotesque nature of what the Bundrens have wrought upon themselves through the burial expedition. Peabody reveals the price Cash must pay for following Anse's word and not intervening throughout the journey, using almost the same language (replete with statistics and figures) that Cash himself did during the thirteen-point manifesto while he bevels the coffin (48). Cash's predicament is worsened by the fact that he can perform no action to prevent having 'to limp around on one short leg' for the rest of his life from occurring. Nor can he describe the moment when he must 'lose sixty-odd inches of skin to get that concrete off', an act which is positioned in the interstices of the novel and functions as a moment which is unspeakable, beyond the limits of language.

Although Addie ordered this journey as her revenge on Anse, part of the novel's ironic pattern is that Anse seems to have done well out of the experience, having procured his new teeth and a new 'duck-shaped' wife (149). However, despite Anse's apparent victory at the end of the novel, the amputation of Cash's leg implies that life will be bleak for the Bundrens in the years following their matriarch's death. Though he does not die, throughout the burial journey to Jefferson, Cash has dangerously skirted the boundary between life and death. After the journey is over, as Rueckert writes, 'he will be crippled the rest of his life and never again be the carpenter he was. Addie—or the funeral trip—has deprived him of the true centrality of his being: the ability to use his great talents as a master craftsman' (56). Or, as Kartiganer sardonically claims, 'Cash will not be repairing Tull's barn or anything else for some time' (2007, 438). Returning home to the Bundren farm, Cash is fated to carry the burdens and consequences of the journey upon and through his body for the remainder of his days.

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<sup>311</sup> Describing Addie's corpse in this manner, Moseley exposes the burial journey for the ridiculous travesty it appears to be to outside observers.

## Dewey Dell

Dewey Dell's opening speech is one of the few within *As I Lay Dying* that is, largely, unconcerned with Addie's death; instead, she focuses upon her own, personal dilemma (her unwanted pregnancy), only mentioning Addie's impending death towards the end of the chapter. Robert Dale Parker explains Dewey Dell's motive for an abortion: 'Dewey Dell cannot believe she is pregnant, and she does not want to be pregnant. [...] In a world where pregnancy [...] is treated as an extraordinary condition, especially for an unmarried woman, Dewey Dell desperately wants to regain what she thinks is ordinariness.'<sup>312</sup> Dewey Dell's existence within the Bundren family is orientated toward the world of work and manual labour that characterises the lives of poor Southern farmers. Her initial utterances abound with references to work: 'The first time me and Lafe picked on down the row. Pa dassent sweat because he will catch his death from the sickness so everybody that comes to help us. [...] And Cash like sawing the long hot sad yellow days up into planks and nailing them into something' (17). The fact that Dewey Dell acknowledges Anse's refusal to undertake physical labour (shirking responsibility for household tasks and forcing them onto his wife and children) suggests that, for her, the purpose of living is not 'getting ready to stay dead', but instead keeping oneself occupied with work in order to stay alive. As in Addie's case, Anse, the patriarch, sets the parameters within which his children's lives are both defined and lived.<sup>313</sup> On this point, Chase observes that 'Dewey Dell does the labor that no one else wants to do, receiving few economic or social gains in return' (2017, 180). Indeed, physical labour so permeates Dewey Dell's life and voice that when she describes how she and Lafe 'picked on down the row' towards 'the secret shade, picking on into the

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<sup>312</sup> Robert Dale Parker, *Faulkner and the Novelistic Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 43.

<sup>313</sup> Indeed, any Bundren who disobeys these conditions is roundly criticised. Jewel, for example, is dismissed by Dewey Dell in her opening chapter thus: 'Jewel dont care about anything he is not kin to us in caring, not care-kin' (17). By doing so, she parrots Anse's admonishments of Jewel, such as when he accuses Jewel of having "no affection or love for (Addie)" (12). As with Addie, any attempt Jewel makes to refute Anse's words and actions are met with hostility.

secret shade with my sack and Lafe's sack', her account of field labour almost imperceptibly becomes a euphemistic substitute for sexual intercourse. Dewey Dell's loss of virginity as she labours around the farm functions as an escape and, indeed, a relief from work, which Dewey Dell twice claims that she 'could not help' engaging in. Nonetheless, her subsequent pregnancy suggests that, for her, childbirth itself will become work, and that work itself is life, and that it will continue to be so even after bearing her child.<sup>314</sup>

Dewey Dell is unable to accurately articulate what sex is, both the concept and her actual engagement in it, as is apparent in the language she uses to talk about her encounter with Lafe. Her inarticulacy exposes Addie's own failure to inform her daughter of sexual matters. Indeed, the fact that Dewey Dell's pregnancy coincides with Addie's death implies that, where mother and daughter are concerned, Addie failed to warn her daughter about the possible consequences. By doing so, Addie has exposed Dewey Dell to a life where women are repeatedly subjugated, violated and, inevitably, abandoned. Dewey Dell's being 'ignorant of reproductive processes', in Bergman's terms (402), keeps her locked within the parameters of her subjugation. Furthermore, as Rueckert argues, Dewey Dell 'repeats Addie's pattern—as woman, as female, the dewey dell to be entered, violated, used. She is entering and beginning the pattern that Addie is just completing. She is Addie, the female victim, all over again' (59).

Dewey Dell has not been guided by Addie about the ways of pregnancy and childbearing, but is instead given "'Ten dollars'" by Lafe to terminate the pregnancy (117). Lafe thereby absolves himself of any involvement with the child and does not appear in

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<sup>314</sup> After Addie's death, Dewey Dell returns to work, cooking, milking the cow, and comforting her adolescent brother, Vardaman. In a tragicomic fashion, she tells the cow: "'What you got in you aint nothing to what I got in me, even if you are a woman too'" (37). Her utterance can be applied to all those she tends to following Addie's death – though Dewey Dell does share their dilemma in trying to process the death of their mother (a poor white farmer's wife), she herself is faced with the fact that she is a poor white pregnant teenager in the early twentieth-century South, with limited options available to her. Like Addie, Dewey Dell is cognisant of her plight but cannot verbalise it to anybody except herself and an inarticulate farm animal, who is ironically among the numerous figures she literally lives to serve.



the novel at any point. Thus, as Jessica Baldanzi and Kyle Schlabach write, ‘To preserve the coherence of the family’s narrative, Dewey Dell attempts to erase the illegitimate child she carries [...] but she knows not only that the child is written into her poor rural narrative, but that it is precisely that poor white narrative that gave Lave justification to leave her.’<sup>315</sup> Musing self-reflectively, Dewey Dell admits that she is alone and isolated, incapable of expressing her desire for an abortion during Peabody’s visit prior to Addie’s death: ‘He could do so much for me if he just would. [...] It’s because I am alone. If I could just feel it it would be different, because I would not be alone’ (35). Thereafter, as Tammy Clewell writes, she ‘attempts to sever her attachment to Addie by acquiring an abortifacient during the funeral journey to terminate her pregnancy.’<sup>316</sup> Dewey Dell desires an abortion, perhaps, because she does not want to be a mother to her child like Addie was to her, since she does not wish to repeat the cycle of trauma and pain her mother experienced. One could also argue that, by seeking an abortion, Dewey Dell does not want to replicate the fact that she will one day die and leave her child unaided and defenceless against mortality, just as her mother has: ‘I heard that my mother is dead. I wish I had time to let her die. I wish I had time to wish I had’ (69). Where her speech was initially marked by her perceptions about life on the farm, it is now inflected with anxiety about her condition. The severity of Dewey Dell’s personal situation eclipses her feelings of grief and mourning for Addie, to the extent that she interprets her pregnancy as a judgement and curse against herself, becoming ‘like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth’ (38). Her pregnancy becomes the centre of her perceptions on life, just as Addie’s pregnancies or ‘violations’ became the undesired centre of hers.

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<sup>315</sup> Jessica Baldanzi and Kyle Schlabach, ‘What Remains?: (De)Composing and (Re)Covering American Identity in *As I Lay Dying* and the Georgia Crematory Scandal’, *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Volume 36, Issue 1 (Spring, 2003): 48.

<sup>316</sup> Tammy Clewell, *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 63. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

Throughout the novel, Dewey Dell is surrounded by men who are openly hostile and threatening towards her. Despite her ability to verbalise her hatred and fear, Dewey Dell is initially incapable of combatting these men through action. A central example of this is Dewey Dell's relationship with Darl, whose knowledge of her pregnancy causes him to function as an invasive presence in her life. Dewey Dell is tormented by the fact that Darl knows about the pregnancy. After discovering that she is pregnant, Dewey Dell says 'I saw Darl and he knew. He said he knew without the words [...] and I said "Are you going to tell pa are you going to kill him?" without the words I said it and he said "Why?" without the words. And that's why I can talk to him with knowing with hating because he knows' (17). Dewey Dell's perception of Darl's torment of her continues during the burial journey, in her description of Darl's eyes: 'They begin at my feet and rise along my body to my face, and then my dress is gone: I sit naked on the seat above the unhurrying mules, above the travail' (69). Dewey Dell's phrasing of this moment is comparable to the way in which Anse's eyes, during his courtship of Addie, were 'driving' at her, 'like two hounds in a strange yard' (98). Both instances are moments of aggressive, unrestrained male sexuality rising rapidly to the surface. In Dewey Dell's case, however, Darl's gaze is especially disturbing because it communicates Darl's implicit disgust with Dewey Dell because of her pregnancy. The fact that Darl's eyes make her feel as though she 'sits naked' on the wagon emphasises her vulnerability and discomfort, which creates a sense of futility in trying to keep her secret concealed. Thus, even on a non-verbal level, Darl makes his sister feel harmed and threatened, functioning as one whose perception of her situation menaces and troubles her.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> In her third chapter, Dewey Dell says that, in a dream, she 'rose and took the knife from the streaming fish still hissing and I killed Darl' (69). This moment, perhaps, replicates Addie's relationship with Anse after they were married. After discovering her pregnancy with Darl, Addie says 'I believed I would kill Anse' (99). Dewey Dell's dream both foreshadows Addie's revelation (in the chronology of the novel's chapters) and also prophesises Dewey Dell's present situation. However, as shall be discussed in Darl's section, the balance of power in their relationship shifts dramatically when Darl is arrested.

When depicting Dewey Dell's two attempts at procuring an abortifacient, Faulkner deliberately frames her in the words of men: Moseley, a druggist, and MacGowan, a druggist's assistant. Both men use speech and language to judge and "fit" her into their concept of femininity. As Heather E. Holcombe astutely highlights, 'in this respect Faulkner acknowledges that the discourse into which Dewey Dell enters in these scenes is one that she does not control. In fact, it is deliberately obfuscatory.'<sup>318</sup> To Moseley, Dewey Dell's performance of femininity is immoral and irresponsible to its core, while, for MacGowan, women are to be used for illicit, sexual congress. Both men fail to understand (and, indeed, have no wish to understand) the complexity of Dewey Dell's situation, discounting her experiences and manipulating her situation to suit their own ends and words.

What is apparent during Moseley's conversation with Dewey Dell is the extent to which he considers her entirely incomprehensible and inarticulate. Repeatedly describing her as 'bumbling' (115), he presents himself as being fully in command of his language and voice, able to define, expose, and combat Dewey Dell's immorality. His disdain for her is evident through the language used to describe her: her eyes, he says, are 'kind of blank'; she has 'a stiff-brimmed straw hat setting on top of her head'; she is 'barefooted'; and, most importantly, she is 'a stranger' who, Moseley believes, has 'a quarter or a dollar at most' (115). Moseley deliberately uses these descriptive techniques to set a precedent for his later condemnation of her, evincing a palpable anti-agrarian, anti-poor bias. As a small business owner in a rapidly industrialising Southern town, he immediately perceives and establishes himself as her superior, judging her as being a figure who will not contribute substantively to his livelihood. In so doing, he validates Dewey Dell's own self-denigration

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<sup>318</sup> Heather E. Holcombe, 'Faulkner on Feminine Hygiene, or, How Margaret Sanger Sold Dewey Dell a Bad Abortion', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 57, Issue 2 (Summer, 2011): 21. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

when she earlier states that ‘We (the Bundrens) are country people, not as good as town people’ (36). Moseley exhibits his biases further when Dewey Dell speaks, responding to his questions with short, unclear utterances. Being asked by Moseley, who mistakes Dewey Dell’s pregnancy for “‘abnormal’” menstruation, “‘Are you regular or not regular enough? [...] You want something to stop it?’”, she replies: “‘It’s already stopped’” (116). By answering in this manner, Dewey Dell fails to articulate herself properly either on the farm or during her encounters with strangers, leaving herself vulnerable to men like Moseley because of her ignorance about the realities of femininity and sexuality such as menstruation, pregnancy, and abortion. However, as Holcombe notes, ‘Dewey Dell cannot ask for what she seeks because, by regulation, it only exists as an unnamed product, and one that deliberately withholds information about its function. What appears as Dewey Dell’s ineptitude is Faulkner’s depiction of the barriers she faces in making her request; it is the euphemized language of contraception that is unintelligible, not she’ (221).

Moseley subsequently uses Dewey Dell’s dilemma as a means of bolstering his own sense of moral superiority by rejecting Dewey Dell’s request for an abortifacient. Grandly calling himself “‘a respectable druggist’”, he bluntly tells her that “‘The Lord gave you what you have, even if He did use the devil to do it; you let Him take it away from you if it’s His will to do so. You go back to Lefe and you and him take that ten dollars and get married with it’” (117). Invoking the church and the Lord, Moseley uses God and the Bible to justify his own prejudices, as with several other narrators like him in *As I Lay Dying*.<sup>319</sup> Moseley presents himself, as Anse also does, as ‘the chosen of the Lord’ (63), who has gained respect and authority in Mottson because of his life-long presence within the church and his ability to successfully raise and rear a family. With this power, Moseley prevents

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<sup>319</sup> For instance, Faulkner juxtaposes Moseley’s invocation of God against the reader’s knowledge of Whitfield’s deceit and hypocrisy. Therefore, both men abuse their patriarchal authority which keeps women like Dewey Dell and Addie silenced and subjugated.

Dewey Dell from going against his ideological beliefs. By doing so, however, he inevitably condemns her for life, forcing her to carry to term a pregnancy that neither she nor Lame wanted. By not cooperating with Dewey Dell, Moseley disregards the hardship that she will experience because of her pregnancy and motherhood, while also exposing the extent of her naivety for openly asking for an abortifacient in a country that outlaws such a request. Moseley both works within and is supported by the parameters of anti-abortion legislation set by the United States government,<sup>320</sup> refusing to allow Dewey Dell to terminate her pregnancy and 'say Yes' to the death of her unwanted, unborn child. Rather than providing Dewey Dell with an escape from her predicament, Moseley advocates her descent into a conventional, patriarchal structure by recommending she purchase a marriage license. Doing so perpetuates the cycle of unhappy marriage and unwanted children that resulted from the union between Addie and Anse. As Arnold Weinstein writes, 'Dewey Dell is being initiated into the same processes that her mother encountered.'<sup>321</sup> Both Moseley and conservative American society conspire against Dewey Dell, creating a situation from which she cannot defend herself. She remains the same girl who 'bumbled' into and then out of Moseley's pharmacy, directly into MacGowan's hands.

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<sup>320</sup> As Katherine Henninger writes, 'Moseley's language reflects the status of abortion regulation in the early twentieth century. By the 1920s, every state had enacted laws against abortion which forbade distribution of birth control and abortion information and established licensed physicians as the only practitioners qualified to determine the medical necessity of preventing or terminating a pregnancy. The first decades of the twentieth century are generally regarded as a period of silencing and containment regarding the discussion of abortion. Moseley's stubborn refusal to discuss abortion as an alternative, and his desire to avoid even the knowledge that another druggist might, resonates with official anti-abortion sentiment and policy' ('"It's a outrage": Pregnancy and Abortion in Faulkner's Fiction of the Thirties', *Faulkner Journal*, Volume 12, Issue 1 [Fall, 1996]: 29-30). One law Henninger specifies is the Comstock Law of 1873, which forbade 'any drug or medicine, or any article whatever, for the prevention of conception, or for causing unlawful abortion' to be sold in the United States. Holcombe, too, acknowledges that Faulkner, while writing about Dewey Dell's experiences, 'is subject to the terms of the Comstock Act' (205). For more on the Comstock Law, see Linda K. Kerber, Jane Sherron De Hart, and Cornelia Hughes Dayton, *Women's America: Refocusing the Past, Seventh Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), from which the text of the Comstock Law has been cited (250).

<sup>321</sup> Arnold Weinstein, *Nobody's Home: Speech, Self, and Place in American Fiction from Hawthorne to DeLillo* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 156.

MacGowan immediately signals his proletariat status by saying, during his shift at the Jefferson pharmacy, that he is at the 'back of the prescription case, pouring up some chocolate' (139). Despite the prejudice he evinces against 'Them country people' because 'Half the time they dont know what they want', MacGowan patently does not have the cure for Dewey Dell's "'female trouble'" (140). Instead, to MacGowan, Dewey Dell is merely an opportunity for sexual congress, who can be coerced and then consumed. Twice saying that 'She looked pretty good' before declaring that 'it was dinner time' (139), MacGowan unconsciously connects Dewey Dell to appetite and a need to consume. In accordance with his speech, Dewey Dell becomes merely a body that is bargained with and, ultimately, utilised sexually. He signals his carnal interest in her by saying that 'she had a good leg against the light' (139) and by offering to cure her: "'You got something in your belly you wish you didn't have [...] the acorn in your belly'" (140). Offering her "'the hair of the dog'" in exchange for her ten dollars (142), MacGowan equates her genuine need for help with a sense of sexual promiscuity and immorality, mirroring Moseley's attitude. Framing Dewey Dell exclusively within the context of sexual congress, MacGowan makes clear that the circumstances which led to her pregnancy, the father of her child, and her personal need to terminate her pregnancy are inconsequential to him. Instead, as Karen Weingarten acknowledges, 'MacGowan actually has no idea how to help and is just playing at being a doctor and a pharmacist', and 'he uses the power of his created position for his own sexual pleasure.'<sup>322</sup>

On at least one level, therefore, MacGowan is fully conscious of Dewey Dell's plight, hence his act of giving her liquid from 'a unlabelled bottle' (142). MacGowan concludes 'the treatment' by, essentially, raping Dewey Dell (143). Regarding MacGowan's "'medicine'", Judith Wilt writes that, 'If this were some other novelist's world, the draught

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<sup>322</sup> Karen Weingarten, *Abortion in the American Imagination: Before Life and Choice, 1880-1940* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 100.

may well have been turpentine and “worked”, stopping the life of fetus and mother alike. But in Faulkner’s violent and gravid world, wet seeds always germinate.<sup>323</sup> Therefore, Dewey Dell is ultimately unable to end her pregnancy, which Anse indirectly ensures when he robs her of her ten dollars for his own physical and personal betterment – a set of dentures (147). Unlike Addie, however, by the novel’s end, Dewey Dell is summarily prevented from ‘saying Yes to death’. Extending Wilt’s logic to its grotesque extreme, one could argue that it would have been in Dewey Dell’s favour had she consumed turpentine, thereby ending her life and the life of the foetus.

Dewey Dell must bear a child that will not only be desperately poor but will be raised by a mother whose desires for its termination were emphatically prohibited. This argument extends Karen R. Sass’s prediction that ‘Dewey Dell is apt to hand on to her own child the damage Addie inflicted on her by her inability to communicate on the level of language.’<sup>324</sup> Dewey Dell’s experiences in the novel at the hands of Lefe and MacGowan show how, for women in the South, life is terrible because any woman can potentially be violated by coercive, manipulative men. My argument in this section aims to refute the misogynistic, simplistic analysis of Dewey Dell by Max Putzel, who writes that ‘Were it not for the jealousy with which she conceals her purpose, the obsessiveness of her determination to root out not only the life within her but any life that gets in her way, it would be easy to pity Dewey Dell. [...] In the end, Dewey Dell gets her just desserts.’<sup>325</sup> Like Addie, Dewey Dell is ultimately forced to suffer physically and to endure sexual violation, unwanted pregnancy, and childbirth – in short, to understand, as Addie herself discovered, that living is terrible.

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<sup>323</sup> Judith Wilt, *Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction: The Armageddon of the Maternal Instinct* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 107.

<sup>324</sup> Karen R. Sass, ‘At a Loss for Words: Addie and Language in *As I Lay Dying*’, *Faulkner Journal*, Volume 6, Issue 2 (Spring, 1991): 19.

<sup>325</sup> Max Putzel, *Genius of Place: William Faulkner’s Triumphant Beginnings* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 209.

## Vardaman

Faulkner introduces the youngest Bundren child, Vardaman, and his obsession with his fish from the perspectives of two adult males: Vardaman's neighbour, Tull, and, later, Anse.<sup>326</sup> Tull calls explicit attention to Vardaman's age and his attempted performance of adult masculinity: he is 'carrying a fish nigh as long as he is', but 'He slings it to the ground and grunts "Hah" and spits over his shoulder like a man' (18). Tull emphasises this point when he continues that Vardaman 'cusses it like a grown man, standing a-straddle of it' (19). Anse echoes Tull, saying that 'Vardaman comes around the house, bloody as a hog to his knees, and that ere fish chopped up with the axe' (23). These repeated references to Vardaman's height and emulation of older, masculine behaviours implies that, to both men, Vardaman is placed upon the boundary between childhood and maturity as he stands 'a-straddling' the fish. Implicit in these utterances is the belief that Addie's death will be a key developmental moment in Vardaman's young life. Indeed, Tull mentions his own mother's death just prior to Vardaman's arrival. Tull's mother, like Addie, was subjected to a hard life of rural poverty: 'I mind my mammy lived to be seventy and more. Worked every day, rain or shine; never a sick day since her last chap was born until one day she kind of looked around her and then she went and [...] laid down on the bed and pulled up the covers and shut her eyes' (18). Having lost his mother, Tull clearly compares himself to Vardaman, seeing a distinct similarity between himself and 'That boy', perhaps even feeling genuine sympathy for him. Seemingly Vardaman's processing the situation of Addie's death through his confident capture of the fish is, to Tull, both adequate and admirable. However, this moment actually serves as a stark contrast to Vardaman's subsequent verbal breakdown and the evidence of his extreme perplexity and confusion when confronting his mother's death. As seen throughout *As I Lay Dying*, rather than

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<sup>326</sup> Interestingly, however, Faulkner never reveals Vardaman's actual age.



accepting Addie's death 'like a grown man' (18), Vardaman cannot adequately verbalise the event of death itself or his feelings towards it because he is still a child. This contradicts Moller's claim about how the bloody realities of farm-life prepared children to accept death:

In America during the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries [...] many families had been regularly immersed in "the blood and guts" of everyday life through regularly slaughtering cows, pigs, and chickens. Additionally, children were raised in a cultural context that included them in death watches and mourning rituals. Thus, as individuals grew into adulthood they did so with exposure to and familiarity with death.

(82)

Instead, as Michael Gillum writes, 'when Addie dies [...] perhaps (Vardaman's) first close contact with human death, he makes the appalling connection: his mother is dead meat, like the fish.'<sup>327</sup> By dying, Addie not only exposes her youngest son to what death is, but also leaves him emotionally and verbally stunted, just as her father did to her. This again suggests an unbroken inheritance of parental damage to children.

At the precise moment of her death, Addie stares at Vardaman; 'the life' in her eyes is extinguished, 'as though someone had leaned down and blown upon them' (28). Looking at Vardaman as she dies, Addie reveals to him, much as her father did to her, the ultimate end of life and the inescapability and finality of death. She does so not in words but through actions, through the performance of physical death itself. In other words, Addie effectively transforms herself into a symbol of death for Vardaman; she has brought him into being, and she is also the figure who reveals to him what death looks like. Vardaman's immediate affective response are all physical manifestations: 'From behind pa's leg Vardaman peers, his mouth full open and all color draining from his face' (29), and then running away from

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<sup>327</sup> Michael Gillum, "Great God, What They Got in That Wagon?": Grotesque Intrusions in *As I Lay Dying*, in Harold Bloom (ed.), *The Grotesque* (New York: InfoBase, 2009), 17. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

the scene, crying, and describing how he has ‘cut up’ the fish ‘into pieces of not-fish now, not-blood on my hands and overalls’ (32). These physical manifestations emphasise Vardaman’s perplexed, deeply disturbed reaction to Addie’s death, while ‘not-fish now, not blood’ registers his attempt to conceptualise what death might be. As Clewell writes, ‘Vardaman experiences his mother’s death as nothing less than a life-threatening event, a shattering of self that threatens to dissolve his own existence’ (60). Because of his age, he is unable to articulate his thoughts about her death. He can only say, for example, that ‘I can cry and then I can vomit the crying’ (32), words which imply a tacit, basic understanding of the situation, but which also signal a definite intellectual and developmental lack. Such a lack both anticipates and validates Addie’s view that words are ‘simply gaps in people’s lacks’, making clear that, while Vardaman registers the profundity of Addie’s death, he is incapable of using words to express his understanding.

Vardaman’s inability to use words to communicate his grief properly results in a single sentence chapter: ‘My mother is a fish’ (49). This passage, one of the most famous and confounding in all of Faulkner’s fiction, summarises the ideas explored about Vardaman in this section. Vardaman is exposed to and sees what death is. Despite having lost his mother, he attempts to deny her death after she is placed in her coffin: ‘It was not my mother. She went away when the other one laid down in her bed and drew the quilt up. She went away’ (39). However, because of his young age, Vardaman does not have the verbal or conceptual framework with which to articulate his reaction properly. Kathryn Olsen’s interpretation of Vardaman’s speech is also fruitful here:

Much of Vardaman’s language, both spoken and thought, can be viewed as a sort of negotiation. He manipulates language in the most overt manner, purging his mother’s death by identifying her with the fish he catches and subsequently dismembers. He does more than simply conflate the two deaths, though. Rather, Vardaman uses negation and annihilation, unraveling the functions of

language in time and space, to spurt the regeneration of his mother as an active force.<sup>328</sup>

With Olsen's argument in mind, we can see that Vardaman redefines what Addie's death and, indeed, what death itself means in order to fit his level of expression and understanding (as Quentin Compson did in order to comprehend and, ultimately, commit suicide, as discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis). Therefore, Vardaman is left to discover and attempt to articulate what death is in relation to Addie but fails to do so; what he produces by saying 'My mother is a fish' is, at the spoken, verbal level, a confused, unintelligible sliver of speech which only he can immediately comprehend. As Sass notes, 'although he is old enough to speak coherently, Vardaman cannot coordinate words, ideas, and actions, and so his speech is garbled, powerless to represent meaning' (15).

The most extreme instance of Vardaman's failure to communicate his depth of feeling for, or even totally understand, Addie's death is when he bores holes into her face after she is sealed in the coffin. Tull describes how 'they found him in his shirt tail, laying asleep on the floor like a felled steer, and the top of the box bored clean full of holes and Cash's new auger broke off in the last one. When they taken off the lid they found that two of them had bored on into her face' (42). Vardaman's act emphasises his anxiety about Addie's death in a manner that is again only immediately comprehensible to himself – his concern that she be provided with breathing holes. This act further signals the childish idea that the dead can still breathe. He attempts to supplement Cash's dutiful creation of the 'box', adopting his eldest brother as a role model, by adding these breathing holes. While Cash makes his preparations, for example, Vardaman asks him "Are you going to nail it shut, Cash? Nail it? *Nail* it?" (39). However, instead of replicating Cash's action of providing Addie with 'confidence and comfort' both during and after her death,

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<sup>328</sup> Kathryn Olsen, 'Raveling Out Like a Looping String: *As I Lay Dying* and Regenerative Language', *Journal of Modern Literature*, Volume 33, Issue 4 (Summer, 2010): 104.

Vardaman's act grotesquely perverts Cash's intentions (just as, ironically, Cash's own intentions malfunctioned). As when he described his mother as a fish, any attempt Vardaman makes to articulate his feelings about Addie's death horribly mutates, showing that not only are words 'no good', but in fact, actions are, too. As Michel Delville acknowledges, 'Vardaman's monologues – which are deeply rooted in an empirical, intuitive observation of concrete objects (like the body of the dead fish) display a rudimentary deictic approach to reality and, ultimately, reflect the immediacy of the child's relationship to not only his environment but also to his own discourse.'<sup>329</sup> Vardaman is exposed to the finality of death after Addie dies. However, his vocabulary and life experience are so extremely limited that, as with Dewey Dell, he cannot fully understand Addie's death. Thus, he is anxious that his mother is going to be nailed into her coffin and then concerned that she will not be able to breathe. Not surprisingly, his language collapses when he tries to speak about her death. At the same time, as revealed by his boring holes into her face, his deeds misfire also.

### Jewel

As Darl intimates several times throughout *As I Lay Dying*, Jewel is Addie's favoured son. Like Addie, Jewel only has one chapter in the novel, and its tone is as angry, venomous, and judgemental as hers. Jewel's anger is immediately palpable because of his profanity, the 'cursing' which Darl describes as being characterised by 'obscene ferocity' (9). Jewel dismisses Addie's coffin as 'that goddamn box' (10), and by doing so, he strips the coffin of the majesty and nobility with which Darl describes it being built. Instead, Jewel renders the coffin as a grotesque object that Cash is building for his own self-centred, single-minded reasons. For Jewel, the project is designed for Cash to be able to say 'See. See what

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<sup>329</sup> Michel Delville, 'Vardaman's Fish and Addie's Jar: Faulkner's Tales of Mourning and Desire', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, Volume 2, Issue 1 (1996): 88.

a good one I am making for you' (10). He decries the sound of 'that goddamn adze' and describes those visiting Addie on her deathbed as 'every bastard in the county coming in to stare at her' (10). While Addie is dying, Jewel chooses to be isolated from the familial fold by refusing to engage in any of the preparations being made for her death. Instead, he escapes 'down there to the barn', where in Darl's terms, he is 'fooling with that horse' (8). In fact, Jewel's speech is characterised by his desire to keep Addie alive, denying her death. He cannot say the word "coffin", faltering when he describes Addie "laying there, watching Cash whittle on that damn....." (12). He also attempts to downplay the severity of Addie's condition, fearing for her loss: "Ma aint that sick [...] Shut up, Darl" (11). Instead, Jewel wishes to be isolated 'on a high hill' with Addie, where 'we can be quiet' (10). In his outrage and fury, he wants to strike out at all those around him.<sup>330</sup> Bryan, therefore, is incorrect in her assertion that 'Jewel is not bothered by Cash making their mother confront her own mortality. He seems to realize that Addie knows she's dying, and he does not seem bothered by having to come to terms with that. Instead, he is upset by the ostentation of Cash's project' (31). Rather, the evidence provided here suggests that he is bothered, a view supported by Slaughter's claim that 'for Jewel, who cannot bear to finish his sentence, the completion of the job would mean: coffin. The sound of the hammer, the deed (doing) of the making of the coffin, is a sound he hates, for he hates the sequel – denies, refuses the spoken or carpented reality' (27).

Displaying anger towards his siblings, Jewel exhibits an identical rhetoric to Addie's which is brimming with outrage and resentment at those around him, casting a harsh

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<sup>330</sup> This includes exposing the perceived insensitivity of the Tulls. During their visit to Addie's deathbed, Tull says, in friendly support of Jewel's assertion that Addie "aint that sick": "She seems more like herself today than she has in a week." Jewel caustically retorts: "You ought to know [...] You been here often enough looking at her. You or your folks" (11). These utterances suggest that Jewel repeatedly proves himself to be Addie's defender and "salvation." However, such utterances also indicate the fundamental difference between Jewel and Addie – whereas Addie could only criticise and condemn Cora in private and after death, Jewel openly and angrily criticises the Tulls, questioning the validity of their concern.

judgement upon their efforts to ease Addie into her death. With every 'lick' of 'sawing and hammering' that Cash performs, with every 'buzzard' that sits 'waiting' by Addie, the fact of her mortality becomes increasingly impossible for Jewel to deny. In Jewel's perception of these events, her death becomes willed and desired by her children and the community at large: "If everyone wasn't burning hell to get her there [...] With Cash all day long right under the window, hammering and sawing at that –" (12). Jewel, in this sense, becomes the novel's embodiment of 'saying No to death', protesting against the community waiting upon and preparing for her to die, and displacing his feelings about his mother into other activities and angry rhetoric. The fury within Jewel's speech emphasises the idea that the family and community within which Addie lived and toiled for many years was responsible for her death; by allowing a man like Anse to beget five children with her and force them to live in abject poverty, they "kilt" her. From Jewel's perspective, these accumulated injustices brought her death into being, and this is exacerbated by the fact that the community refuses to heed Jewel's plea to 'just leave her alone' (10).

Jewel is one of the few narrators in the novel to turn their anger and outrage towards not only those within the family and the community, but also towards God, declaring that:

If it had just been me when Cash fell off of that church and if it had just been me when pa laid sick with that load of wood fell on him, it would not be happening with every bastard in the county coming to stare at her because if there is a God what the hell is He for.

(10)

While Addie described Jewel as her cross and salvation, during her conversation with Cora, he is also, like Cash, ineffectual in preventing her from being set upon by these 'buzzards' (note his conditional, twice-repeated and, arguably, helpless cry of 'If it had just been me'). Like Addie, Jewel rejects and scorns God, exhibiting as strong a desire to punish and condemn his community and siblings as Addie herself once did. To Jewel, it is Addie who

is a figure of worship and veneration, not God: she must be kept sacrosanct, cloistered, and protected from those who come with ‘faces and teeth and all’ (10). Further still, she must be kept alive and, indeed, immortal, protected from the sound of Cash’s ‘goddamn adze’ that brings with it the undeniable reality of death.

When Cash completes the coffin, Jewel exhibits a frenzied desire to load Addie’s body into it: ‘He heaves, lifting one whole side so suddenly that we all spring into the lift to catch and balance it before he hurls it completely over’ (57). Speaking about Jewel here, Darl does not relate Jewel’s behaviour to the fact that buzzards are encircling the coffin: ‘High above the house, against the quick thick sky, they hang in narrowing circles’ (55). Rather, Darl merely alludes to why the buzzards are present, saying that he and his brothers are ‘breathing through our teeth to keep our nostrils closed’ (57). In other words, Addie’s corpse has begun decomposing in the July heat to the extent that the buzzards now crave her flesh. Jewel’s frenzy to load her into the coffin, therefore, is a another act of veneration, an ardent expression of his wish to protect her body from further violation. He treats her body with precisely the ‘modesty’ Darl accuses him of soiling.<sup>331</sup> Jewel’s overall outlook and perception of Addie disavows Anse’s claim that he has never had “‘affection or gentleness for her’” (12). Instead, as Elizabeth Hayes writes, “To Jewel, Addie’s death means the loss of the one person in the world he truly loves. Grief and despair he manifests as violent action, and fulfilling his mother’s dying wish in Jefferson is the only way of mourning.”<sup>332</sup>

Anse’s behaviour towards Jewel throughout the novel raises the question of whether Anse knows that Addie and Whitfield’s liaison resulted in Jewel’s conception and

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<sup>331</sup> ‘For an instant it resists [...] as though within it her pole thin body clings furiously, even though dead, to a sort of modesty, as she would have tried to conceal a soiled garment that she could not prevent her body soiling. Then it breaks free, rising suddenly as though [...] seeing the garment was about to be torn from her, she rushes suddenly after it in a passionate reversal that flouts its own desire and need’ (57).

<sup>332</sup> Elizabeth Hayes, ‘Tension Between Darl and Jewel’, *Southern Literary Journal*, Volume 24, Issue 2 (Spring, 1992): 49. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

birth. Jewel's actions cause him to be treated disdainfully by Anse. For instance, Anse acknowledges that he 'told him not to bring that horse out of respect of his dead ma, because it wouldn't look right, him prancing along on a durn circus animal and her wanting us to be in the wagon with her that sprung from her flesh and blood' (61). If Anse is aware of Jewel's illegitimacy, it is perhaps this that motivates him to swap Jewel's horse for the team of mules towards the novel's end ("you tried to swap my horse?" [111]). What becomes evident in this instance is that, while Addie gives to Jewel, Anse shamelessly takes.<sup>333</sup> Anse is fully aware of the sacrifices he has made, living for "fifteen years" without "a tooth in my head" (111). With Addie's death, however, he no longer allows himself to be victimised, but instead rebuilds himself from the pathetic wreckage of a man he has been throughout his life, supping on the "victuals [...] God's appointed food" that he feels are promised him. As Edwards observes, 'Unlike the other Bundrens, who suffer physical trauma and attrition, Anse experiences a bodily increase' (57). Unlike Jewel, Anse does not fulfil Addie's promise without ensuring that a promise be fulfilled to him in return. He feels justified by Biblical scripture, considering himself 'the chosen of the Lord' (63). What ensues between Jewel and Anse after the swapping of the horse is, then, a clash between the two 'chosen' members of the family – Anse, self-appointed, self-described, and Jewel, Addie's appointed "salvation".

Ultimately, Jewel must remain within a family unit that repeatedly alienates him. Though Jewel does sacrifice himself, leaving "the horse in the barn" (according to Eustace Grimm, 112), he subsequently returns to the family, 'without a word, with his pale rigid eyes in his high sullen face' (121), having briefly absconded. Arguably the cruellest

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<sup>333</sup> Indeed, Jewel is not the only victim of Anse's greed. As discussed on pages 247 of this thesis, Anse also takes Dewey Dell's ten dollars, depriving her of the abortifacient. Instances like these imply that, largely, Anse maintains a palpably exploitative relationship with his children. Where Addie's relationship with Jewel is concerned, Darl recounts that, when Jewel first brought his horse, Anse demanded to know if he had "bought [...] that thing on my word?" from Quick (77). In contrast to Anse's hostility, Darl recalls Addie's reaction thus: "Jewel... I'll give—I'll give—I'll give—" Then she began to cry' (78).



aspect of Jewel remaining within this family is that, while he repeatedly shows himself to be Addie's salvation, Addie is never his. By continuing his association with the Bundrens, Jewel is vulnerable to mistreatment by two of its senior patriarchs, Anse and Darl. By protecting the coffin from immolation in the barn fire started by Darl, Jewel prevents Addie's coffin from being destroyed. Jewel, in Darl's words, seems to 'materialise out of darkness, lean as a horse in his underclothes in the beginning of the glare [...] with on his face an expression of furious unbelief' (126). Where Darl attempts to reduce the coffin to ashes and cinders, Jewel keeps Addie venerated when he willingly exposes his body to 'a thin nimbus of flames' and 'upends the coffin and slides it single-handed from the saw-horses. It looms unbelievably tall, hiding him' (128). Jewel therefore becomes one of the primary figures responsible for Darl's incarceration in the Jackson asylum, as will be discussed in this chapter's final section.

### **Darl**

The opening of *As I Lay Dying* establishes Darl's disconnection from Addie, signalling an apparent absence of any grief or emotion when faced with her death. In this way, Faulkner marks Darl out as different from his siblings. While Cash, for instance, actively prepares for Addie's death by building her coffin, Darl merely watches and comments upon the task. While he passes a positive judgement upon Cash's endeavour, he deliberately avoids verbalising his own feelings about Addie or her death. A key element within Darl's speech throughout the novel is the fact that he repeatedly calls his mother 'Addie' or 'Addie Bundren', and only very rarely calls her 'Ma.' This aspect of Darl's speech is both noticeable and deliberate: as André Bleikasten notes, there is 'Manuscript and typescript evidence (which) shows that in the opening Darl section Faulkner substituted "Addie Bundren" for

“Maw.”<sup>334</sup> Clearly, Faulkner worked from the outset to establish a sense of distance between Darl and Addie. Darl appears to witness and discuss Addie’s death from an outside perspective, admitting during the journey to Jefferson that ‘I cannot love my mother because I have no mother’ (55). Addie’s monologue made clear that, as far as her relationship with Darl is concerned, there is no connection between them at all – their link to one another is, at best, tenuous.<sup>335</sup> This section, therefore, will discuss Darl’s attempt to forge a connection with Addie following her death, especially given the indignity and desecration of her body and her memory during the journey to Jefferson. Darl’s attempts to reconnect with and honour his mother culminate in his attempt to cremate her remains by burning down Gillespie’s barn, an action which Faulkner described as ‘the only thing (Darl’s) mad brain could conceive of to rid the earth of something (Addie’s ‘dead putrefying body’) which should have been under ground days ago’ (*Faulkner in the University*, 110). Darl’s disconnection from Addie also manifests itself in his cruelty towards several of his siblings, as signalled earlier in this chapter through his perceived mistreatment of Dewey Dell. As Doreen Fowler argues, ‘Without a mother to deny Darl is unbounded, fluid; he flows into others, invading their secret selves.’<sup>336</sup> However, as a result of his actions, Darl is ultimately contained and punished by his siblings, condemned for life to the Jackson mental asylum.

While the remainder of the family feverishly prepare for Addie’s death, Darl initiates a journey to complete a ‘three dollar’ job with Jewel, much to Anse’s dismay:

“It means three dollars,” I say. [...]  
                   “But if she dont last until you get back,” (Anse)  
 says. “She will be disappointed.” [...]

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<sup>334</sup> André Bleikasten, *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner’s Novels from The Sound and the Fury to Light in August* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 384. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

<sup>335</sup> See page 222 of this chapter.

<sup>336</sup> Doreen Fowler, ‘Matricide and the Mother’s Revenge: *As I Lay Dying*’ (1991), in Gorra (ed.), *As I Lay Dying*, 324. All further references to this work are incorporated into the text.

“She’s counted on it,” pa says. “She’ll want to start right away. I know her. I promised her I’d keep the team here and ready, and she’s counting on it.”

“We’ll need that three dollars then, sure,” I say.

(11)

Practical matters, such as the family’s dire financial situation, intersect with the present situation unfolding within the Bundren unit: Addie, lying in bed, is dying. Darl’s repeated insistence that the Bundrens will “need that three dollars” is explained by Anse’s emotional claims, such as his assertion that “Wagon or no wagon, she wouldn’t wait. Then she’d be upset, and I wouldn’t upset her for the living world. With that family burying-ground in Jefferson and them of her blood waiting for her there, she’ll be impatient. I promised my word me and the boys would get her there quick as mules would walk it, so she could rest quiet.” (12). In other words, Darl’s assertion of financial considerations is not to be read as a means of further severing his connection to Addie. Instead, Darl initiates the journey to complete the job in the muddled, puzzling belief that doing so would enable the Bundrens to fulfil Addie’s wish to, in Anse’s words, “rest quiet” (12). Darl’s twisted, compromised logic for carrying out the job, which could be misconstrued as his refusal to let a financial opportunity such as this elude him, must be read in the context of his mental disturbance. As Faulkner once stated, ‘Darl was mad’: ‘He did things which it seemed to me he had to do or he insisted on doing. [...] Darl did things which I am sure were for his own mad reasons quite logical’ (*Faulkner in the University*, 263). Following on from Faulkner, Darl’s madness affects his relationship with his family and, as will be discussed in further detail, leads to his burning down Gillespie’s barn while attempting to cremate Addie’s putrefied corpse. This is an act which ultimately leads to his incarceration in Jackson.

While completing the job with Jewel, Darl repeatedly asks him: “Do you know that Addie Bundren is going to die?” (24). Darl perceives the depths of Jewel’s affection for Addie, and makes clear that he is cognisant of Jewel being Addie’s favoured son.

Through departing to complete the job with Jewel, he has separated Addie and Jewel, depriving them of the opportunity for being together before death. Critics have often misinterpreted Darl's intentions for doing so. Gillum, for example, surmises that 'Darl, probably motivated by jealousy, has deliberately spoiled Addie's last moments of life by removing her favourite son, Jewel, from the scene' (20). Hayes, too, claims that 'What is important to Darl is Jewel's response to the death of Addie. Darl has deliberately separated Jewel from Addie at her death, isolating himself with Jewel and imposing himself as narrative intermediary between Jewel and Addie. He has in this way placed himself squarely in opposition to both Jewel's and Addie's wishes, an action guaranteed to exacerbate the tension between the brothers' (55). Instead, given my aforementioned argument that Darl carries out the job to allow Addie to "rest easy" in death, his utterances to Jewel and his insistence that Jewel accompany him suggests that Darl not only wishes to gain Addie's favour, but that he also attempts to communicate to Jewel the inherent futility of Jewel's aforementioned endeavour to keep her protected from death.<sup>337</sup> In other words, despite the family's collective attempts to give Addie "confidence and comfort" before she dies, and their wish to treat her with "affection and gentleness", their efforts cannot change the fact that "Addie Bundren is going to die" (24). Darl's pragmatism and honesty is an attempt, like Jewel's, to venerate his mother and respect her wish for death. However, his actions ultimately work to damn rather than vindicate him, as we shall see.

Where Dewey Dell is concerned, her perception of Darl's intimidation of her is further manifested when he describes her climbing onto the wagon: 'She sets the basket into the wagon and climbs in it, her leg coming long from beneath her tightening dress: that lever which moves the world; one of that caliper which measures the length and breadth of life' (60). To Dewey Dell, Darl's speech and gaze are heavily sexualised, as we

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<sup>337</sup> See pages 254-255 of this chapter.

saw earlier; as he stares at Dewey Dell, she feels as though he is penetrating the protective screen she places around herself. Knowing of Dewey Dell's pregnancy and sensing her emotional dilemma, afflicted by her 'secret and selfish thought' of abortion, Darl gazes at his sister, while Dewey feels herself judged by her sibling and his apparent vindictiveness towards her. From that perspective, Darl becomes, as Kartiganer claims, 'the supreme agent of violation in the novel. He invades the people around him, not for sex but for secrets, that private, interior world' (2007, 439). In that sense, Dewey Dell continues to perceive Darl as her victimizer. However, this interpretation contradicts Faulkner's own view that Dewey Dell 'knows by instinct that if he found out that she was pregnant it wouldn't make a great deal of difference' because 'she knows that Darl is capable of a sympathy, a sensitivity, that won't react in violence to serve an empty and to a woman foolish and silly code (of violence)' (*Faulkner in the University*, 113). Instead, Dewey Dell's increasing 'hatred' (17) for Darl stems from his knowledge of her pregnancy and her inability to prevent or counteract the impact of that knowledge – it is this is what leads him to be a figure of cruelty in her life.

On the road to Jefferson, Anse complains that 'we hadn't no more than passed Tull's lane when Darl began to laugh. Setting back there on the plank seat with Cash, with his dead ma laying in her coffin at his feet, laughing' (61). Given his attempts at reconnecting with Addie, Darl's laughter during the beginning of the journey suggests that he perceives the awful reality of what is about to ensue and what has already taken place. Darl is conscious of his position in a wagon with a family he does not feel any connection to, travelling to bury his mother and eliminate the indignity and desecration of her memory. He is accompanied by a father who seeks a new set of teeth (30) rather than a quick, socially acceptable burial for his recently deceased wife; a pregnant sister who manages to keep her secret safe from her family (with the exception of him); a brother who is the bastard son of the local reverend; and another brother whose carpentry skills have been used to create

the coffin that their mother has been erroneously 'laid in it reversed [...] head to foot so it wouldn't crush her dress' (51), much to his chagrin. The dynamics at play within the Bundren family is, therefore, viewed by Darl as high, jetblack comedy.<sup>338</sup> As Bockting suggests, 'As the journey with the smelling corpse and the vultures circling overhead becomes more and more "ridiculous", Darl's behaviour may seem the only "reasonable" comment on it' (116). Darl's laughter functions as a physical, auditory reaction to the situation as a whole, and the futility of his being able to prevent the situation from escalating further. Darl's laughter is also the first overt indication Faulkner provides that his cruelty towards Jewel and Dewey Dell is rooted in a much more alarming issue that is in need of attention. Bleikasten, offering a possible diagnosis of Darl's condition, argues that he exhibits 'all the classic symptoms of schizophrenia': 'withdrawal from reality, loss of vital contact with others, disembodiment and splitting of the self, obsession with identity, sense of isolation and deadness, armageddonism' (1973, 90). The madness at play within the Bundren family unit is translated and distilled in the non-verbal, mad sound of Darl's laughter, with the two coexisting and reacting with one another. This complements Bleikasten's view that Darl 'is laughing at nothing in particular. And hence at everything.

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<sup>338</sup> I would be remiss not to acknowledge the elements of dark comedy within the novel which, though beyond the scope of this present chapter, does merit brief discussion. Macabre humour abounds in *As I Lay Dying*, from Anse's insistence that he cannot work or 'sweat because he will catch his death from the sickness' (17); to Doc Peabody "'weighing two hundred and twenty-five pounds'" and having to be dragged with rope up 'the top of the ridge and reach the house' to visit Addie, who he describes as being 'dead these ten days' (25-26); to Peabody's outrage and indignation towards Cash's stoicism and passivity at riding "'six days on a wagon without springs, with a broken leg'" (138). The most pertinent example of the novel's humour, for the purposes of this chapter, is in the fact that Addie, by executing her revenge and ensuring that Anse fulfils his 'promise' to her, also inadvertently enables him to immediately get married and to get his coveted new teeth after her burial. One way of interpreting the final sentence of the novel, "'Meet Mrs Bundren", (Anse) says', is that the entire burial journey and, by extension, the novel, is ultimately a grim joke at Addie's expense; she is 'tricked' by Anse's words even after death, and his unveiling of the new Mrs Bundren is the punchline. Many thanks to Keith Carabine for encouraging this emphasis of the dark, twisted humour at the heart of the novel. For more on the novel's comic themes, see: Matthew Little, '*As I Lay Dying* and "Dementia Praecox" Humor', *Studies in American Humour*, Volume 2, Issue 1 (April, 1975): 61-70; and Patricia R. Schroder, 'The Comic World of *As I Lay Dying*' in, Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (editors), *Faulkner and Humor* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 34-46.

At the nothingness of it all. His is pure laughter, boundless, devastating, *tragic* laughter' (1990, 194, italics Bleikasten's).

During a conversation that Darl has with Vardaman after crossing the river and setting up camp for the night at Gillespie's farm, he instructs his youngest sibling to "Put your ear close" to the coffin and hear Addie speak 'in little trickling bursts of secret and murmurous bubbling.' Addie, Darl claims, is "talking to God" because "She wants Him to hide her away from the sight of man [...] So she can lay down her life" (123-124). Saying that she is talking to God and claiming that he can hear what she is saying, masquerading as her interlocutor, Darl attempts to soothe Vardaman's incomprehension of his mother's death. By passing this communication onto Vardaman, one could argue that Darl is attempting to give Addie the dignity in death which she never received in life. In other words, to allow Addie to be concealed 'from the sight of man [...] So she can lay down her life', Darl feels that he must give her the burial she has always wanted. To do so, he must honour her wish to be removed and 'hidden' from the sight of the Bundrens. He attempts to preserve the sanctity within Addie's communication with God, using his vision, insight, and perceptiveness to fashion himself into what Julian Murphet terms as Addie's 'privileged medium and interpreter.'<sup>339</sup> However, unbeknownst to Darl, Vardaman reveals that he 'saw something that Dewey Dell told me not to tell nobody' (125) – Darl setting fire to Gillespie's barn.

Darl's supreme act of vengeance against the way Addie's corpse is being treated is his attempt to destroy her corpse and coffin by burning down Gillespie's barn: 'the whole loft of the barn takes fire at once, as though it had been stuffed with powder' (126). The barn burning functions as Darl's misguided, desperate, and mad attempt to reconnect with Addie: unlike Emily, who denies the death of her father and Homer, Darl sees his attempts

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<sup>339</sup> Julian Murphet, *Faulkner's Media Romance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 197.

to burn Addie's remains as the final way in which he can honour her request to "'rest easy.'" His act, as critics such as Chase argues, is his attempt 'to save his mother from the posthumous indignity that the journey to Jefferson has become' (2017, 183). Indeed, as Bockting claims, Darl's actions 'symbolize his final loyalty to his mother' (116), even if it contradicts her expressed desire to be buried in Jefferson. However, Jewel, by saving the coffin from its immolation, undermines Darl. Bearing the coffin upon his back, Jewel now renders Darl's actions utterly useless. Despite the virtue within his act, Darl also inadvertently brings about his own damnation, which reinforces an idea at the heart of the novel: actions, along with words, are both capable of misfiring and being misinterpreted.

Moments after Addie's burial, Darl is arrested and charged with burning down Gillespie's barn, before ultimately being condemned to live within the walls of the Jackson insane asylum. This moment showcases the complete dissolution of the bond between Darl and the Bundrens. Cash says that, after Addie's grave is 'filled and covered', they 'drove out the gate and turned into the lane where them fellows was waiting, when they come out and come on him and he jerked back' (137). The arrest and symbolic 'burial' of Darl is juxtaposed against the literal burial of Addie, implying that, as far as Darl's attempts at reconnecting with his mother are concerned, both are ultimately separated from the Bundrens, either through choice (Addie) or by force (Darl). In the moment of Darl's arrest, he too becomes a casualty of the misery and suffering that his siblings have endured throughout the journey to Jefferson. Where Darl ultimately suffers is in the fact that the three members of the family with whom he most feels a sense of kinship (Anse, Cash, and Vardaman) all refuse to help him.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Under Mississippi law, 'Any person who wilfully and maliciously sets fire to or burns [...] whether occupied, unoccupied or vacant, any [...] barn, stable, or outhouse that is parcel thereof, [...] shall be guilty of arson in the first degree' and, crucially 'Any person convicted under this section shall be subject to treble damages for any damage caused by such person' (MS Code § 97-1-17 [2017], 'Crimes against property', <https://law.justia.com/codes/mississippi/2017/title-97/chapter-17/in-general/section-97-17-1/> [accessed 5/1/19]). The decision to send Darl to Jackson is therefore explained because of the financial burden of the penalty and the possible legal



During Darl's arrest, Dewey Dell, as Bassett writes, 'is the first to betray Darl to the authorities and even tackle him to help' (1981, 128). Silent throughout much of her life and expected to work on the farm 'without words', Dewey Dell cannot allow her secret to be discovered, and so engages in a futile attempt to prevent Darl from revealing her pregnancy. She refuses to be a victim of Darl's apparent malevolence, such as when he says to her "You had more trouble than you expected, selling those cakes in Mottson" (120), an implicitly taunting, mocking reference to her failure to procure an abortifacient from Moseley. In response, Dewey Dell's hatred for him manifests itself physically during his arrest, hurling herself at him 'like a wild cat' (137). For at least one moment in her life, she does not allow herself to be silent. Instead, she perpetuates what Rueckert calls 'the victim-become-victimiser pattern' within the novel (59). As Bassett acknowledges, 'Dewey Dell's revenge on Darl, in fact, seems an outlet of her general hostility toward the family [...] and toward a male world which has made her an object of contempt'; Bassett concludes, 'If she fulfils the role of woman as betrayer, she does so with as much justification as Faulkner could muster' (1981, 128). Indeed, she will strike and harm Darl, punishing him in retribution for his having tormented her throughout the novel.<sup>341</sup>

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ramifications of Darl's crime on the family, which Cash acknowledges by saying that 'It was either send him to Jackson, or have Gillespie sue us, because he knowed some way that Darl set fire to it' (134). Anse echoes Cash's reasoning, simply saying "I reckon there aint nothing else to do" (134). Helpless, Darl says to Cash: "I thought you would have told me [...] I never thought you wouldn't have" (137). See also: Ted Atkinson, *Faulkner and the Great Depression: Aesthetics, Ideology, and Cultural Politics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006). Atkinson reads Darl's burning of Gillespie's barn as 'an act of familial rebellion prompted by his need to bring about a swift and definitive end to the horrific death march of the Bundren family. At base, Darl's defiance is motivated by the indignity his mother has suffered.' Nonetheless, Atkinson contends that, 'examined within the dominant ideology rooted in capitalism, Darl's act is branded as the ultimate insanity, for it threatens the very foundation of the socioeconomic order: the ownership of private property. Even within the family, Darl is perceived as a threat to this sacred principle' (184-185).

<sup>341</sup> Fowler claims that Dewey Dell and Jewel's involvement in Darl's arrest 'represents matriarchal culture's vehement rejection of Darl. [...] Both Dewey Dell and Jewel are well chosen avatars of maternal fury. Dewey Dell, now that she has been denied her abortion, will become the displaced mother; and Jewel, Addie's illegitimate son, born out of patriarchal law, has proven himself again and again the champion of his mother's body.' Ultimately, Fowler concludes, 'The dual roles played by Jewel and Dewey Dell, simultaneously representing both patriarchal and matriarchal cultures, are not contradictory but rather reinforcing; together, they stress the completeness of Darl's alienation' (326).

When he relates Darl's arrest and impending incarceration, Cash makes a curious statement about his younger brother: 'A fellow cant get away from a shoddy job. He cant do it. I tried to tell him, but he just said "I thought you'd a told me. It's not that I," he said, and then he begun to laugh' (137). In the context of Darl's laughter, which Cash describes as 'bad', Darl's subsequent descent into subjective disconnection and madness implies that, to Cash, Darl was born 'shoddy.' In that sense, Darl was a project, a labour, conceived entirely in error by Addie and Anse Bundren. To Addie, he symbolised an unwanted, foreign body that, like Cash, coalesced within her. Darl's laughter both during and after his arrest signals his comprehension of the situation at hand, along with the ironic reversal of fortune he has wrought upon himself by burning down Gillespie's barn to destroy his mother's putrefying corpse and lay her to rest. Darl's uncontrollable laughter is symptomatic of the fact that, for him, there is no escape from the punishment that Jackson symbolises. Cash says of Darl in the novel's final chapter that 'This world is not his world; this life his life' (149). Cash's comment is a compassionate recognition of Darl's madness, and a tacit acknowledge that his younger brother will be deprived from the pleasures of life, such as 'having a little music played' from the graphophone, which Cash declares 'the nicest thing a fellow can have' (148). Indeed, despite Cash's reassurance, Darl's incarceration will not be 'better so for him' (149). Instead, he is forced to endure punishment for attempting to save his mother from the indignity the journey to bury her has wrought.

In his final chapter, Darl's language and voice is replaced by another, incomprehensible Darl. Speaking of himself in the third-person, he says that 'Darl has gone to Jackson. They put him on the train, laughing, down the long car laughing, the heads turning like the heads of owls when he passed' (146). The laughter he once used to communicate the madness of the burial journey now conspires against him – the power of his insights and observations has been corroded by the literal sound of madness. Darl's

ultimate defeat is having to acknowledge, sitting on the train to Jackson and observing the Bundrens standing near his window, that ‘There is about it that unmistakeable air of definite and imminent departure that trains have, perhaps due to the fact that Dewey Dell and Vardaman on the seat and Cash on a pallet by the wagon bed are eating bananas from a paper bag’ (146). Ostensibly, this is an image of family harmony, from which Darl has been irrevocably excluded. At the same time, Darl now physically embodies every secret and betrayal that has ever transpired between the Bundrens. Like Quentin Compson, he is ‘an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names [...] not a being, an entity’, but ‘a commonwealth’ (*Absalom*, 9). When he departs for Jackson, Darl is on his own burial journey, with no member of the Bundren family by his side to aid him; as Rueckert claims, ‘Darl will go on dying for many more years. [...] He might as well be dead’ (51-6).<sup>342</sup> By the end of *As I Lay Dying*, both Addie Bundren and her son Darl have both completed their respective burial journeys: Addie is finally buried in Jefferson, and Darl’s unravelling sanity leads to his symbolic burial within the confines of the Jackson mental asylum.

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<sup>342</sup> Bockting similarly argues that ‘Setting the barn on fire [...] makes (Darl) share (Addie’s) fate by bringing him a kind of death in the form of “capture and deportation” to the Jackson insane asylum’ (116).

## Conclusion

### Saying Yes to Death in Faulkner's fiction

This thesis has explored representations of mortality in selected works by William Faulkner (1897-1962). Over the course of five interlinked chapters, the thesis has advanced the argument that, even in some of Faulkner's best known, most read and studied works, there are characters who actively proclaim their desire to die, to 'say Yes to death.' By doing so, the thesis has deliberately worked against the well-entrenched "theory of fiction" that Robert W. Hamblin has identified in Faulkner's work, 'that writing was his way of "saying No to death"' (4). Indeed, the thesis has highlighted an important distinction between Faulkner's need as an author to achieve immortality through his writing, and the wish that many of his characters express to die.

The thesis began, in Chapter One on "A Rose for Emily", by examining that story's unnamed narrator and the society which he represents. The chapter showed how the narrator and his community shame Emily after her death, engaging in lurid speculation about her failed relationship with Homer and her subsequent spinsterhood. Ultimately, the chapter concluded with the idea that, by 'saying Yes to death', Emily is allowed to enact her final, posthumous revenge upon the town: concealing Homer's corpse 'in that region above stairs which no one had seen in forty years' (119). By doing so, she ensures that her crime is only discovered after her death, when the edicts of the modern generation no longer affect her. In writing "A Rose for Emily", Faulkner highlights the biases and prejudices which are often within accounts of the recently deceased by the living. In this story, Faulkner urges readers to contemplate and challenge these prejudices and to interrogate the purpose and function they serve.

In Chapter Two, the thesis explored Faulkner's use of third-person distanced voice in "Pantaloon in Black". The chapter explored Rider's subversion of African-American funerary rituals throughout the story, arguing that Rider wishes to remain locked within

his grief, standing poised on the boundary between life and death, before ultimately ‘saying Yes’. Rider’s murder of Birdsong leaves his reasons for death and his outlandish behaviour on the day of Mannie’s burial open to wilful misinterpretation and deliberate misrepresentation. Indeed, it was on this topic that the chapter moved from exploring the third-person distanced narrative voice in the story’s first half to examining the first-person speech of the deputy sheriff who dominates the story’s second half. The chapter argued that, in contrast to much of the scholarship on the story, the deputy’s account of Rider’s death is a summation of every bigoted, racially prejudiced view the white Southern community had towards African-Americans in the early twentieth-century. In both Chapters One and Two, the thesis highlighted the deleterious effect that purposeful misrepresentations have upon the memory of the recently deceased. In “Pantaloon in Black” specifically, Faulkner argues that the sentiments of people like the deputy neutralise the validity of Rider’s grief, especially since the deputy’s sentiments are entrenched in racial hatred.

Chapter Three explored Quentin Compson’s first-person voice in *The Sound and the Fury*, as he, like Rider, stands on the borderline between life and death. The chapter explored the numerous ways in which Quentin’s longing for death is manifested in the novel, including: his insistence upon speaking of himself as a corpse who has already ‘said Yes to death’; his repeated engagement in (self-)destructive acts, especially his (ineffectual) enactment of violence upon numerous people, specifically his younger sister, Caddy; and his fixation upon the innumerable misfortunes of his past, particularly his fraught relations with his father, and his unrequited, incestuous longings for Caddy. The chapter made the case that, taken together, these behaviours, misfortunes, and failures all directly contribute to Quentin’s death. With that in mind, the chapter shifted to its central contribution to the study of *The Sound and the Fury*, which was an exploration of the fact that at no point does Quentin utter the word “suicide”. The reasons the chapter provided for this deliberate

linguistic omission were manifold. For instance, Quentin considers the word “suicide” as loaded with profoundly negative connotations which do not match his ideals and desires, but which are instead influenced by hostile societal opinions to death by one’s own hand. Also, to Quentin, the word “suicide” does not communicate the idea that, by killing himself, he desires to achieve a sense of peace. Finally, like Rider and Emily, Quentin finds a modicum of strength in ‘saying Yes to death’, using his death to enact a measure of defiance.

In Chapter Four, the thesis shifted from Quentin’s individual voice, towards his place in a group of narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* The narrators, including Rosa, Compson, and Shreve, all speak the long-dead Colonel Thomas Sutpen and his plantation into being at the level of the text; they offer a multitude of reasons, explanations, and justifications for why Sutpen deserved to die. As discussed in the first part of the chapter, these reasons include: Sutpen’s status as both a diabolical ‘man-horse-demon’ (4), and a felon; his brutality and cruelty towards poor and non-whites and women; and his active role in the murder of his own mixed-race son, Charles Bon.

From these reasons, the chapter then focussed solely on Wash’s relationship with Sutpen. The chapter argued that, in Quentin’s spoken version of events, Wash justifiably murders Sutpen because he breaks the conditions upon which Wash’s exchange of his grand-daughter Milly with Sutpen takes place. Such a violation on Sutpen’s part causes the designs of both Wash and Sutpen to fail, with each man having nothing left to live for. However, the chapter’s ultimate conclusion was that, by murdering Sutpen, Wash places himself in a double bind. In other words, Wash is forced, under the conditions of the culture of honour in the South, to face punishment by Major de Spain’s posse. Like Rider and Quentin, Wash is inevitably placed on the boundary between life and death and, like these men, he must embrace and ‘say Yes to death’.

The thesis ended, with Chapter Five, by considering Addie Bundren's posthumous voice at the centre of *As I Lay Dying*. The chapter highlighted that Addie's explanation for why 'the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time' (98) rests in the people who occupied her life: her father, her husband, and her children. The chapter argued that Addie's sole chapter in the novel is her final judgement upon these children. With that idea in mind, the chapter then systematically analysed the ways in which during the long, treacherous journey from their farm to her burial site in Jefferson, Mississippi, each one of her children confronted the reality and presence of death. Despite the resilience they display while enduring the pain and difficulty of the journey, the torment which Cash, Dewey Dell, Vardaman, Jewel, and Darl Bundren each experience confirms Addie's belief that 'living is terrible.'

Through its close reading of five key Faulkner texts, ranging from short stories to major fiction, this thesis takes issue with the theory Hamblin outlines, especially the idea that 'Faulkner's heroes [...] say No to death, (and) choose life even when that choice entails a considerable amount of anxiety, guilt, or pain' (21). Instead, the thesis has shown that in the lives of the characters explored are moments where overwhelming, violent division and hostility to one's community (as seen in Emily's relations to 'the next generation, with its more modern ideas' [110], or in Wash's murder of Sutpen); uncontrollable, all-encompassing impulses arising out of extreme grief and bereavement (as embodied by Rider); and, most extremely, an unapologetic desire to die (as exemplified by both Quentin and Addie) explicitly cause death to be the only option for Faulkner's most marginalised characters. Placed in various neglected, dehumanising positions, these characters are afforded a chance to tell their stories, using speech to think through the trauma and suffering they have each endured throughout their lives and continue to experience on the boundary between life and death. By being given a chance to raise their voices at the onset (or in the aftermath) of death, these characters are able to find refuge behind 'the wall of

oblivion' which Faulkner desired to 'leave a scratch' upon (*Faulkner in the University*, 61). Scope for further study has also emerged as a result of the research on representations of mortality conducted herein, particularly in works by Faulkner's fellow Southern writers. Charles W. Chestnutt, Flannery O'Connor, and Cormac McCarthy would all be sensible options for further study under this critical lens. Finally, while the thesis attempted brief comparisons to Faulkner's work after the publication of *Go Down, Moses* in 1942 at various stages, with more space and time, an in-depth discussion of those late works could be undertaken to explore continuities within the present study.



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