

Southern Gothic Fiction and New Naturalism:
Toward a Reading of New Naturalism

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DEDICATION

To Alana. Were it not for your encouragement, I would have never finished this degree.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the intersections of American naturalism and the Southern Gothic by seeking to demonstrate how William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* revise key elements of fin-de-siècle naturalist fiction in a manner that enables them to create a new naturalism that they use to shed light upon the tendency of the sociocultural narratives that give meaning to the traditional conception of the Southern community to entrap characters within predetermined identities. Of particular interest to this dissertation are these texts' revisions of the figures of the naturalist narrator and the naturalist protagonist. Moreover, by calling attention to the revision of literary naturalism that occurs in these three novels, I argue further that their engagement with naturalism contributes to current understandings of the Southern Gothic mode and offers new directions in naturalist studies that will lead to a greater understanding of the conventions and techniques of new naturalism. Specifically, I contend that placing emphasis on the Southern Gothic's naturalist features allows readers to gain greater insight concerning questions of what happens to the Southern Gothic protagonist following his realization that he "has been 'divested of the illusion of transcendent significance for either his social or personal existence and so finds himself an 'alien, a stranger,' 'an exile,' in the world that had once been his home'" (Rubin xiii). It pushes beyond this observation by arguing that while the Southern Gothic characters' lives unfold within the parameters of sociocultural narratives and structures that seek to determine their identities in a manner reminiscent of first-wave naturalism, these characters, unlike the unthinking naturalist brute, are conscious of the alienation and determinism that he or she experiences. This consciousness enables them to act as new naturalist characters that resist the deterministic environments that threaten to entrap them by creating narratives of self with which to combat the claims of the prevailing sociocultural narratives in which they have become inscribed and that will determine them should they not resist by conceiving of themselves as existing outside of their influence.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In *Apocalypse South: Judgment, Cataclysm, and Resistance in the Regional Imaginary*, Anthony Dyer Hoefer offers a reading of several works that might be read as belonging to the Southern Gothic tradition but “deliberately (and strategically) avoid[s]” identifying them with the term “Southern Gothic” (14). He does so because he believes that the “idea of the ‘southern Gothic’ has been deployed so frequently and so widely to any work of art tinged with the uncanny that, at least for me, it no longer offers any critical utility” (14). He states further that he intends for *Apocalypse South* to create “a new conceptual language to address many of the same literary phenomena [associated with the Southern Gothic] and a means by which they can be locating [sic] within the context of cultural practices and beliefs rather than the conventions of a particular genre” (14). Hoefer is correct in that the overuse of “Southern Gothic” as a descriptor of literature and film has caused it to become, in many instances, a vaguely-defined catch-all term for works that focus on the South or Southerners and that seek to create an ominous mood tinged with dread, one of the hallmarks of the Gothic tradition; however, to claim that this has divested it of “critical utility” is an overstatement. Nevertheless, such a response is understandable given that the too-frequent application of “Southern Gothic” is largely a result of its use in the context of popular culture and not in the context of literary studies. Thus, Hoefer’s desire to discuss the Southern Gothic in terms of “cultural practices and beliefs rather than the conventions of a particular genre” appears to be a move in the right direction where studies of this phenomenon in Southern literature are concerned.

While Hoefer’s strategy allows him to remove his readings of the texts that he analyzes in *Apocalypse South* from any restrictions that might be imposed by the generic conventions of the Southern Gothic, it disregards the fact that the conventions that he seeks to avoid emanate from

and respond to the cultural practices and beliefs on which he focuses. As a result, his avoidance of “Southern Gothic” allows him to shift focus away from the problems that he believes stem from the excessive, and perhaps wrongful, application of this term but only at the expense of avoiding a larger issue that has posed difficulties to assessments of the mode from the publication of Ellen Glasgow’s “Heroes and Monsters” to the present, the failure to consider thoroughly its engagement with and revision of American literary naturalism.

To address this issue, this dissertation explores the intersections of American naturalism and the Southern Gothic by seeking to demonstrate how William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, and Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* revise key elements of fin-de-siècle naturalist fiction in a manner that enables them to create a new naturalism that they use to shed light upon the tendency of the sociocultural narratives that give meaning to the traditional conception of the Southern community to entrap characters within predetermined identities. Of particular interest to this dissertation are these texts’ revisions of the figures of the naturalist narrator and the naturalist protagonist. Moreover, by calling attention to the revision of literary naturalism that occurs in these three novels, I argue further that their engagement with naturalism contributes to current understandings of the Southern Gothic mode and offers new directions in naturalist studies that will lead to a greater understanding of the conventions and techniques of new naturalism. Specifically, I contend that placing emphasis on the Southern Gothic’s naturalist features allows readers to gain greater insight concerning questions of what happens to the Southern Gothic protagonist following his realization that he “has been ‘divested of the illusion of transcendent significance for either his social or personal existence and so finds himself an ‘alien, a stranger,’ ‘an exile,’ in the world that had once been his home” (Rubin xiii). It pushes beyond this

observation by arguing that while the Southern Gothic characters' lives unfold within the parameters of sociocultural narratives and structures that seek to determine their identities in a manner reminiscent of first-wave naturalism, these characters, unlike the unthinking naturalist brute, are conscious of the alienation and determinism that he or she experiences. This consciousness enables them to resist the deterministic environments that threaten to entrap them by creating narratives of self with which to combat the claims of the prevailing sociocultural narratives in which they have become inscribed and that will determine them should they not resist by conceiving of themselves as existing outside of their influence.

By acting in this manner, the characters examined in this dissertation reflect Mary E. Papke's statement concerning the request that naturalist fiction makes of its readers:

For all its seeming pessimism, passivity, and self-destructiveness in the face of cultural crisis, naturalism depends on the romantic hope that we will not simply settle for the spectacles of suffering or supreme indifference it presents with such visceral intensity. Naturalism thus asks us to refuse the hand dealt to us by our histories—if not to call for a new deck, since there isn't any other, then to reimagine the rules of the game and the order of play. (xi)

I argue that principal characters of the texts that I examine possess a level of self-awareness that enables one to read this request as extending to them. In this light, each of their struggles to resist the sense of entrapment and the determinism that exudes from their environments is nothing if not an effort to "refuse the hand dealt to them by [their] histories." Certainly, these characters' attempts at such a refusal, whether successful or not, marks a significant step toward freedom as opposed to the hard determinist perspective that many readers associate with American literary

naturalism and requires a word of explanation on the conception of determinism that is at work in these characters' lives.

According to Eric Carl Link, the subject of determinism is at once a “major theme in naturalistic fiction . . .” and an aspect of naturalism that causes many readers to view it as an inconsistent, faulty mode (103). He argues that naturalism’s faultiness tends to arise from the fact that many naturalist narratives fail “to embody a strict determinism” by “seeming to allow characters free will and for holding their characters morally responsible for their actions” (103). This critique of literary naturalism is justified if one believes that to be called naturalist, a work of fiction must embrace a view of the world as being completely determined, in which, to quote William James, “[t]he whole is in each and every part, and welds it with the rest into an absolute unity, an iron block, in which there can be no equivocation or shadow of turning” (James 151). However, Link maintains that given the intellectual context from which first-wave American literary naturalism emerged, such a critique does not accurately represent the mode’s engagement with determinism. He writes,

[P]hilosophical and scientific naturalism in the nineteenth century opened the door for deterministic interpretations of nature, human nature and experience. As the universe came to be understood as operating through force, law, and causal relationships, so too did humankind seem to be subject to these transcendent natural laws. Such a recognition readily pushed scientists, philosophers, and authors to a deterministic interpretation of the world and experience. . . . Still, for American literary naturalists in the late nineteenth century determinism was not a *statement*, but a *question*. Norris, Crane, and London did not so much create narratives that monologically incorporated a deterministic worldview as they

created narratives that dialogically interacted with deterministic ideologies. They used their fiction not to preach determinism, but to engage in a struggle with determinism. (104)

Link goes on to say that this struggle “was often defined by the conflict between philosophical naturalism and traditional religious belief,” namely in the forms of scientific determinism and providential determinism. Therefore, American naturalists had to “create narratives with some degree of philosophical and aesthetic complexity” in order to “successfully juxtapose or reconcile these different deterministic orientations in their fiction . . .” (108). The need for such narratives often led these authors to explore and utilize a range of positions on determinism rather than depict the world only in terms of hard determinism.

Interestingly, Link points out that even in the case of a writer committed to a hard determinist position such as the French novelist Emile Zola, whose *roman experimental* was the pioneering form in the creation of literary naturalism, the possibility of free human action is maintained. He argues that Zola’s fiction is grounded in the belief that “in a determined system every effect can be traced back to a cause that necessitated it, and insofar as man is able to manipulate causes in order to generate effects, so man is able to ‘act’ in some fashion” (113). This conception of the possibility to act in a determined world distinguishes hard determinism from fatalism, which maintains that “effects may be the result not of a recognizable system of causes, but of the directing ‘stick of destiny’ (. . .), upon which man has no power to act” (113). Similarly, he cites Theodore Dreiser, who is often considered the American naturalist most committed to hard determinism, as believing that even in a rigidly determined world, acts aimed at resisting the forces that would determine life can and do occur:

For plainly nature is dual. There are the exact facts of the mechanical laws of the universe, knowledge of which may be acquired via mathematics, chemistry, physics and those allied interpretations of fact which they permit But in addition to these facts, there is something,—an impulse and a power to betray them—which manifests itself in all forms of organized intelligence and which works apparently to undo or delay that which exact fact would achieve. (608-609).

That Dreiser presents this resistance, in naturalist fashion, as a cause-and-effect response to an “impulse” that occurs “in all forms of organized intelligence” indicates that he believes that the effort to “undo or delay” the inescapable facts of reality is as natural as the forces that give rise to these facts and determine life. It is this impulse that stirs the human being to “struggle against deterministic forces with the determination of hardened veterans” that naturalist fiction desires to effect in its attempt to exhort readers to “refuse the hand dealt to us by our histories” (Link 119, Papke xi).

The coexistence of freedom and determinism in the world portrayed in naturalist fiction may cause some to question whether one can rightly call a work naturalist that permits its characters to exercise free will. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that although determinism is an important element of American naturalism, so too are the prospect of freedom in characters and readers as well as the impulse toward acts of resistance, regardless of their success or failure. For it is most often when a naturalist text portrays in horrifying details the defeat of a character that struggles to overcome determinism but is crushed in the process that the reader is shocked into seeing the reality that he or she, like this unfortunate character, inhabits a naturalist world. But because naturalism maintains the hope amidst despair that humans can

respond to the impulse to resist determinism and have the ability to “manipulate causes in order to generate effects,” its attempts to shock might be read as calls for its readers to realize the facts of their world and to take actions that preserve and promote freedom regardless of the powerful forces, whether natural or sociocultural, against which they must struggle in order “reimagine the rules of the game and the order of play” (xi).

Although such a reimagining of one’s environment has been a persistent feature of fiction that utilizes American literary naturalism from the work of the first-wave naturalists to the present, this is especially so in the texts that I examine in this dissertation because of their protagonists’ awareness that they are inscribed within narratives that will determine, and even end, their lives if they are allowed to reach their logical conclusions. These characters come to realize that the environments that they inhabit are narratological creations and that to resist their power requires the creation of a different narrative, one that will allow them to remove themselves from the parameters that the prevailing narrative establishes. At first glance, it might seem that this form of resistance should not prove difficult to the characters that I consider in detail. For example, Darl Bundren of *As I Lay Dying* and Hazel Motes of *Wise Blood* are grown men whose experience as war veterans should provide them with sufficient knowledge of the world and themselves to resist easily the narratives by which they are inscribed in their Southern homes. However, this does not prove to be so in either case precisely because of the depth at which the narratives that were instilled into them as children have become rooted. It is the abiding presence of such deeply internalized identities that stem from these characters’ senses of home that make them excellent Southern Gothic characters. For the Southern home, like other sociocultural structures, is a construct that is rendered meaningful by the continuation of a narrative in which those within it can believe and find personal significance. Therefore, when

such narratives, or, rather, a character's ability to accept such a narrative and the identity that it ascribes to him or her, fail, the stage is set for the alienation from home and thus, in a real sense, one's self, that Rubin cites as the principal trait of a Southern Gothic character.

Certainly, the failure of a narrative in which a character had once found "transcendent significance" is vital to his or her being a Southern Gothic character, but this event marks only the beginning of the challenges that he or she will face. It is important to note that in each of the texts examined in this dissertation, a character's realization of the failure of such a narrative is not a corporate experience, meaning that the loss that it entails is a private matter. Because of this, regardless of the falsity of the narrative that this experience reveals to the character, the narrative remains intact for other characters and continues to give meaning both to them and the broader community. Consequently, the affected character becomes isolated from those around him, and this isolation leads him or her to form an alternate narrative that is capable of investing him or herself with the meaning that he or she has lost. The stakes of this attempt to discover new meaning are pushed high by the fact that the narratives that Southern Gothic characters create run contrary to the narratives that prevail in their settings and, thus, contrary to what Ellen Glasgow calls "the pattern" of Southern life (358). If Southern life is understood as following a pattern, then the isolation of the Southern Gothic character becomes more pronounced by virtue of his lack of conformity. Should he persist in his alternate narrative, he, like a naturalist character who is overcome by deterministic forces, will be faced with the brutal reality that only two choices exist for the character that would resist the narratives that give shape to the pattern of Southern life, willful submission via replication of the dominant ideology or self-annihilation. Viewed in this light, Southern Gothic fiction puts forth an image of Southern life that encourages its readers to view the region's sociocultural structures as generating environments that shock

readers into the realization that the pattern of Southern life, and in some cases, such as with the theological dimension of *Wise Blood*, their own lives, must be reimagined.

The critical history of the Southern Gothic indicates that the mode's efforts to reimagine the South by combatting the mythical conception of Southern life, history, and culture that informed much of the region's literature from the mid-nineteenth century to the early work of the Fugitive Agrarians was met with resistance. In fact, when Ellen Glasgow coined the term "Southern Gothic" in her 1935 address to the Ladies of Princeton Library (this address was later published in the *Saturday Review of Literature* under the title "Heroes and Monsters"), she intended it as a negative critique of recent fiction that offered a portrayal of the South that strove to be realistic in nature and that featured "aimless violence," a tendency to show more concern for "decay" than progress, and a focus on creating an atmosphere of unrelenting "despair" (357). Glasgow's critique is based on the premise that authors of the "Southern Gothic school" are no more than literary profiteers who seek to take advantage of a recent demand for "lurid" fiction among genteel readers, but her concerns about the possible effect of such fiction shows that despite her sometimes dismissive tone, she sees the Southern Gothic as a mode with troubling implications for Southern culture.

According to Glasgow, the problem with Southern Gothic fiction and other modernist modes is her belief that they operate "under the delusion that we are running away from the past" and that the attempt to evade the past is "useless" because "[w]herever we go, we still carry life, and that root of life which is the past in our tribal memories, in our nerves, in our arteries" (358). This statement is grounded in the assumption that reality is comprised of life in the present and the memory of the past that gives meaning to the present, and she goes on to argue that any attempt to evade or resist the influence of the past requires one "to deny or distort" reality (358).

Her belief that the Southern Gothic intends to evade the past, and is an inaccurate representation of reality, leads her to conclude that rather than offer a realistic portrayal of life in the region, it merely continues the romantic tradition of Southern literature, only its romanticism runs in a different direction. The link that connects the romantic and gothic traditions of Southern literature as Glasgow sees them is their emphasis on depicting life in ways that exceed the bounds of reality. On the one hand, earlier works of Southern romanticism present the South, its past, and its customs in such an idealistic light that they deny reality. On the other hand, Southern Gothic fiction, in “st[ealing] the proud stilts of the romantics,” lowers the purview of the region’s fiction to such a base level that it can only see the most undesirable qualities of the South. Therefore, Glasgow argues that authors of the Southern Gothic school create in their works a distorted image of the South as a region that is the epitome of lurid excess and that should be considered, aesthetically speaking, an example of “pseudo realism” (360).

Glasgow spends the final paragraphs of “Heroes and Monsters” delineating the threat that Southern Gothic fiction poses to Southern culture and making clear her purposes for writing a critique of the mode. Central to her purposes is her claim that she does not intend to demand that the writer of Southern Gothic fiction “change his material” but rather wants to encourage him “to deal as honestly with living tissues as he now deals with decay, to remind himself that the colors of putrescence have no greater value for our age, or for any age, than have—let us say, to be very daring—the cardinal virtues” (360). Her decision to conclude by pointing to the value of the cardinal virtues may appear to be a playful gesture because of their contrast to decay and putrescence as well as the tone she uses in this sentence; however, given the serious tenor of the essay as a whole, such a reading of this statement seems unwarranted. Rather, the reference to these virtues suggests that her critique arises from a concern that the violence and the morbidity

of the Southern Gothic stands opposed to the values that she believes contribute most to the continuance of a virtuous society. She expresses this concern with greater clarity when she writes, “Few things are more certain than this:—the literature that crawls too long in the mire will lose at last the power of standing erect. On the farther side of deterioration lies the death of a culture” (359). In this statement, which offers her most damning critique of the Southern Gothic, Glasgow indicates that the popularity of a fictional mode that features decay and aimless violence may be a precursor of the demise not only of Southern culture but also of humanity. Thus, although she insists that “the last position [she] would assume is that of the lone defender of the human species in modern fiction” (359), by writing this essay, she appears to have embraced willingly the task of preventing the literature and culture of the South from being dragged toward primitivism at the hands of the authors of the “Southern Gothic school” (360).

To understand better what is at stake in “Heroes and Monsters” requires one to consider what Glasgow believed the Southern Gothic school of fiction writers was dragging Southern culture and literature away from. An answer lies in her response to what she calls “the inflamed rabble of impulses in the contemporary Southern novel . . .” (358). She writes,

[O]ne asks immediately: What is left of the pattern? Has Southern life—or is it only Southern fiction—become one vast, disordered sensibility? Is there no Southern horizon beyond Joyce? Where is that “immoderate past” celebrated in Mr. Allen Tate’s loyal “Ode to the Confederate Dead”? Has “the salt of their blood: oozed away in a flicker of iridescent scum on the marshes? Does defeat always appear nobler than victory? Or is the whole tedious mass production of degeneracy in our fiction—the current literary gospel of futility and despair—merely a single symptom of the neuroses inflicted on its slave by the conquering

dynamo? (358)

While this passage does not provide an explicit answer, it suggests that the version of Southern culture that Glasgow seeks to defend is grounded in a traditional view of the region and its history. Her first question implies a belief in a pattern, a basic structure that underlies “Southern life,” imparts it with order, and marks it as Southern. The subsequent description of Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead” as “loyal” to and celebratory of the Southern past indicates that Glasgow considers literary works that she reads as espousing a traditional Southern perspective especially valuable in preserving the region’s culture. It is precisely this kind of cultural preservation through fiction that she believes the Southern Gothic is resisting by putting forth what she sees as a false conception of the reality of Southern life.

Glasgow’s desire to protect Southern literature and culture from the rise of the Southern Gothic exemplifies Michael Kreyling’s description of Southern literature as a highly institutionalized and artificial cultural form. This view of Glasgow stems from the fact that in “Heroes in Monsters,” she acts not only as a “defender of the human species in modern fiction” but also as a defender of the Southern tradition (359). Her comments concerning the existence of a pattern of Southern life indicates that she is likely one who believes that Southern literature, in Kreyling’s words, “is not invented by our discussions of it but is rather revealed by a constant southern identity” (ix). Kreyling contends that this belief rose to prominence through the work product of the authors, poets, and critics associated with the Agrarian movement in Southern literature. That “Heroes and Monsters” criticizes Southern Gothic fiction from a perspective that aligns with the Agrarians’ conception of the South and its literature is supported by Ellen M. Caldwell’s claim that Glasgow’s later work reflects a “bond with the Southern Agrarians . . .” and “reassert[s] the traditional values of history and myth as her bulwarks against the chaos of

the modern world” (203). According to Kreyling, such values were at the heart of the Agrarians’ conception of Southern identity as an unalterable quality that was an innate feature of Southern life. If this idea is extended to “Heroes and Monsters,” then one might argue that this view of Southern identity is what Glasgow has in mind when she speaks of the pattern of Southern life that the authors of Southern Gothic fiction seemed poised to dismantle. Her Agrarian leanings also come through when she describes the mode as “merely a single symptom of the neuroses inflicted on its slave by the conquering dynamo” (358), thus arguing that the Southern Gothic is no more than a literary submission to the forces of modernity that threaten to overwhelm traditional Southern life. However, when one approaches the Southern Gothic from the standpoint of later authors and critics, Glasgow’s critique appears misguided precisely because she mistakes the sense of despair that pervades the mode as stemming from the mode’s submission to modernity rather than its struggle to resist the deterministic power of the Southern mythos from which this despair emanates and that she urges its authors to defend.

In later criticism on the Southern Gothic, critics and authors rejected Glasgow’s claims and began to treat the violence and despair that she deplored not only as hallmarks of the mode but also as capturing something of the essence of the Southern experience. For example, in his 1971 afterword to Carson McCuller’s *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, Tennessee Williams states that the Southern Gothic is expressive of “something in the blood and culture” of the American South and arises from “a sense, an intuition, of an underlying dreadfulness in modern experience” (131). This sense of dread, he writes, “is not a reaction to anything sensible or visible even, strictly, materially, *knowable*. But rather it’s a kind of spiritual intuition of something almost too incredible and shocking to talk about, which underlies the whole so-called thing” (133). He argues that Southern Gothic fiction is an art form that resulted from the social,

political, and cultural angst that accompanied the gradual encroachment of modernity upon traditional forms of Southern life. By discussing Southern Gothic literature in terms of its historical context, Williams establishes a rather generic starting point from which subsequent readers could begin to theorize about the principal elements of the mode. Because of this, one may conclude that despite Williams's insightful analysis, his assessment is hindered by a level of vagueness that seems to suggest that Southern Gothic fiction could just as easily be defined as Southern modernism. While this conclusion is partially correct in that the mode is usually categorized under this broader term, such a broad definition creates the potential for readers to disregard the Southern Gothic's contributions to both Southern literature and modernist fiction writing. Therefore, Williams's assessment may lead readers to ask a question to which criticism on the Southern Gothic must respond: What is the regionally specific source from which the pervasive sense of dread in Southern Gothic fiction emanates?

Fourteen years later, Louis Rubin suggests such a source. Like Williams, he maintains that the Southern Gothic is best understood as a response to modernity. He demonstrates this by stating that both Southern Gothic fiction and the sense of dread it seeks to encapsulate arise from an acute awareness of the "psychic, and the spiritual dislocation of modern man" (xii). However, unlike Williams, Rubin places these aspects of the mode within a more specific context in his discussion of the common features of the Southern Gothic protagonist. He contends that typically this character is faced with a personal crisis that is brought on by the fact that he "has been 'divested' of the illusion of a transcendent significance for either his social or personal existence and so finds himself an 'alien, a stranger,' 'an exile,' in the world that had once been his home" (xiii). Here, Rubin calls attention to an aspect of Southern Gothic fiction that seems to flesh out what Williams means when he writes that the mode speaks of a dreadful reality that "underlies

the whole so-called thing.” This underlying reality is the character’s realization of the tenuous nature, or even the dissipation, of the identity that she derived from the social and cultural structures that invested her sense of home and existential meaning with “transcendent significance.” By identifying this realization as the central feature of Southern Gothic fiction, Rubin offers an explanation of the source of dread that several critics have identified as an essential quality of the mode that exceeds those put forth by his predecessors.

However, while Rubin’s assessment of the dread that overwhelms the Southern Gothic character provides a thorough understanding of this essential feature, it does not explain how such characters’ realization of and experience of the dread that is inspired by their sociocultural environments affects their behavior in the wake of this discovery. In her “Female Gothic Fiction, Grotesque Realities, and *Bastard Out of Carolina*: Dorothy Allison Revises the Southern Gothic” (2010), Peggy Dunn Bailey provides an overview of the Southern Gothic that identifies several tendencies that its characters display as they respond to such dread. She writes, “Southern Gothic literature is characterized by obsessive preoccupations—with blood, family, and inheritance; racial, gender, and/or class identities; the Christian religion (typically, in its most ‘fundamentalist’ forms); and home—and a compulsion to talk (or write) about these preoccupations” (Bailey). Since Bailey’s interest lies primarily in understanding Allison’s use of the Southern Gothic tradition as a means of creating in her work a distinctly Female Gothic, she does not focus on the importance of the Southern Gothic character’s compulsion to talk about his or her preoccupation with the subjects that she addresses. Nevertheless, by calling attention to such compulsions, she identifies a rarely-discussed element of Southern Gothic fiction that has the potential to broaden critical conceptions of the mode. Specifically, understanding the Southern Gothic character’s compulsion toward forms of authorship demands that readers

consider what such narratives reveal about the aesthetic grounding of the mode.

In the texts examined in this dissertation, this compulsion arises from characters' desire to escape the power of the sociocultural narratives that shape their environments and that threaten to determine their lives by confining them within these narratives in which they have become inscribed. Although the fact that these characters inhabit deterministic environments that indicate a connection between the Southern Gothic and American literary naturalism, their compulsion to respond to and resist the dread that emanates from the deterministic power of prevailing sociocultural narratives illustrates that the Southern Gothic presses beyond the models of naturalism that appear in the fiction of first-wave naturalist authors, such as Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser. The characters in these texts who attempt to escape the influence of deterministic narratives do so by first showing an awareness of their identity as determined characters that distinguishes them from characters that are subject to deterministic forces in first-wave naturalism. That is, the determined Southern Gothic character represents a transformation of the naturalist character from one who is "not represented as being conscious of what they are doing or capable of any self-analysis of their motivations . . ." into one that is "almost obsessively preoccupied with self-conscious analysis . . ." (French 125). The compulsion to "talk (or write) about [his or her] preoccupations" that Bailey identifies is a result of the self-conscious analysis that the characters examined in this dissertation exhibit. However, to say that these characters merely talk about their preoccupations with the dread that stems from the deterministic narratives in which they have been inscribed would be to disregard a second revision of the naturalist character that they signal, the attempt of these determined characters to appropriate the role of a narrator-figure, like the conventional naturalist narrator, who exists outside of the influence of the determinants that affect their lives.

These characters' attempts to act as narrators marks a significant revision not only of the figure of the naturalist narrator but also the conception of modern society that is central to American literary naturalism. In *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*, June Howard maintains that naturalist fiction presents society as being divided into two spheres of existence, which she calls the realm of freedom and the realm of forces. This bifurcation leads to the establishment of a basic relationship between the figures that inhabit each realm: Those in the realm of freedom act as observers who look upon those characters who are subject to deterministic forces and ascribe meaning to their actions and to the events that befall them. Because of their observatory nature, conventional works of naturalism utilize a third-person, omniscient narrator who exists outside of the realm of forces in which such a text's principal characters function. According to Howard, the inclusion of such a narrator in a work of naturalist fiction "affirms the existence of a perspective that is detached, unconditioned, objective—a perspective that corresponds to the epistemological premises and aesthetic program of naturalism and the claim to convey 'facts' . . ." about the environment that the text explores (126). The control that emanates from this figure lies in a key premise of first-wave naturalism's reformist agenda, namely that "an adequate understanding can envision and may be able to effect changes that will make society better, more rationally organized, more humane" (126). However, the fact that those Southern Gothic characters who attempt to act as narrators are inscribed within the narratives that have given rise to the realm of forces as it appears in the sociocultural environments that they inhabit complicates the model of naturalism that Howard describes in that they are focused on self-preservation rather than social reform. In fact, I argue that the narratives that these characters create in order to resist the narratives within which they become entrapped are not simply manifestations of their preoccupations with deterministic elements of their

environments but, rather, the means by which they attempt to forge and protect selves that exist outside of the narratives that threaten to subsume them.

Because the alternative narratives with which these characters resist the power of the deterministic narratives that prevail in their environments are used by them to create for themselves identities that will place them outside of the structures by which they are entrapped, they might be read as anticipating, and in some ways going beyond, the theory of the self as a narrative-based entity that Daniel Dennett discusses in his 1991 book *Consciousness Explained*. On the function of the self, Dennett writes,

Each normal individual of this species makes a *self*. Out of its brain it spins a web of words and deeds, and like the other creatures, it doesn't have to know what it's doing; it just does it. The web protects it, just like the snail's shell, and provides it a livelihood, just like the spider's web, and advances its prospects for sex, just like the bowerbird's bower. Unlike a spider, an individual human doesn't just *exude* its web; more like a beaver, it works hard to gather the materials out of which it builds its protective fortress. Like a bowerbird, it appropriates many found objects which happen to delight it—or its mate—including many that have been designed for other purposes. (416)

Here, Dennett asserts that each human possesses the capacity to create a self and that the purpose of the self is biological in nature, meaning that the individual uses it to facilitate his or her capacity to survive and prosper within its environment. As he points out, the self is, in many ways, similar to other biologically purposeful creations found in animal life, but despite these similarities, it differs radically from spider webs and bird nests in one important way. While

these structures are made of physical material, the self is comprised of words, which the individual uses to build meaningful and purposeful narratives. Because of this, the self may be described as fundamentally narratological and discursive.

According to Dennett, these aspects of the self result from the fact that humans can talk, but the ability to communicate through spoken language does not necessarily require one to fashion narratives or to participate in the process of discourse. So, what about human life makes it necessary for the individual to perform these tasks? He maintains that the self's narratological and discursive nature results from our being "almost constantly engaged in presenting ourselves to others, and to ourselves . . ." (417). In this sense, one might also state that the self is representational in that we are also frequently "*representing* ourselves—in language and gesture, external and internal" (417). For Dennett, this tendency for self-representation is not only an aspect of the self but also a fundamental behavior that distinguishes the self as a protective entity from those created by other species. Moreover, this behavior is a direct response to one's environment. He writes, "Our human environment contains not just food and shelter, enemies to fight or flee, and conspecifics with whom to mate, but words, words, words. These words are potent elements in our environment that we readily incorporate, ingesting and extruding them, weaving them like spiderwebs into self-protective strings of *narrative* . . ." (417). Ultimately, our words become the means by which we forge environmentally specific identities, and it is important to note that these identities are typically created "in response to perceived challenges real or imaginary" that stem from our environment (417).

By reading the texts included in this dissertation in light of Dennett's theory of the self, I argue that they make the case for reading the Southern Gothic mode as giving rise to a variation on the themes and structures of American naturalism that is driven by the thoughts and

purposeful actions of self-conscious characters as opposed to the stereotypical unthinking brute of first-wave naturalism. I contend further that they utilize such characters in a manner that anticipates and contributes to the understanding of the self as a narrative-based entity through its portrayal of characters who are forced by a loss of personal significance to create selves within the context of sociocultural environments that breed such determinism, and, thus, entrapment, that they might be considered Gothic structures in themselves. This approach builds upon current understandings of the Southern Gothic by explaining what becomes of the Southern Gothic characters after events transpire that render such a character an “‘alien, a stranger,’ ‘an exile,’ in the world that had once been his home” (Rubin xiii). My dissertation seeks to accomplish this by demonstrating that Southern Gothic characters’ preoccupations with the narratives and structures that shape their senses of home and identity stems from their realization that these entities are in fact determinants that have the power to entrap them in lives that they would rather not live and that must be resisted by creating and acting in light of alternative narratives of self. In this regard, it sees the Southern Gothic as a mode that offers an enhanced version of Dreiser’s conception of humans as responding to a natural impulse “to undo or delay that which [the determinants that affect them] would achieve” (609). Nevertheless, how such resistance is carried out, the determinants that characters resist, and what they achieve through their resistance varies widely in the texts that I examine.

To demonstrate the breadth of these texts’ revision of conventional naturalist elements, I will dedicate a chapter to each that examines its utilization of a revised naturalism and considers how it contributes to the portrayal of their characters’ creation of narratives that combat the determinants that threaten to overwhelm them in their settings. The first chapter considers how *As I Lay Dying*’s use of multiple first-person narrators allows three of its characters, Dewey Dell,

Anse, and Darl Bundren, to act as naturalist narrators to achieve specific ends in regard to their relationship with the grounding ideology of the rural Southern community that they inhabit. It presents Darl as attempting to discover a sense of personal significance by assuming the role of a conventional, detached narrator that exposes the determinism inherent in the life of his family following his discovery of his mother's adulterous affair but ultimately failing to remain in this role and falling victim to the very determinants that he desires to escape. In contrast, it argues that Dewey Dell and Anse create deterministic narratives of self in which they seek to gain sympathy despite their violations of the community's mores by presenting their transgressions as being caused by forces beyond their control. In addition to revising the figure of the naturalist narrator, the fact that Darl descends into madness and is committed to a mental asylum while Dewey Dell and Anse have the potential to become reintegrated into the community offers an excellent example of the Southern Gothic's insistence that two choices exist for characters who resist the social determinism that they face, replication of the prevailing ideology or self-annihilation.

The second chapter examines *Wise Blood*'s portrayal of Hazel Motes as a Southern Gothic character whose life unfolds in the wake of the rigidly determinist theology preached by his grandfather that leads him to live in manner that will allow him to evade the divine judgment of Christ for the sins that he committed as a child. When it becomes clear that he cannot carry out such an evasion by living a sinless life, Hazel attempts to resist the claims of this theology by inventing not only an alternative narrative of self but also his own church, the Church Without Christ, of which he is the only communicant. In this sense, he follows a pattern similar to that of the characters in *As I Lay Dying*; however, I argue that *Wise Blood* is distinguished by the fact that its treatment of the revised naturalist narrator and naturalism itself, as well as its Southern

Gothic elements, serves only to lay the groundwork for its transformation of Hazel into a grotesque character who is forced into a meeting with grace by the determinants with which he grapples as well as his inability to believe in the alternative theology in which he grounds his narrative of self. Thus, *Wise Blood* revises the secular naturalist mode so as to use it as a vehicle that ultimately leads Hazel to submit to the will of God and accept his grace. Furthermore, because Hazel arrives at this point by blinding himself, an act that might be read as a form of self-annihilation, *Wise Blood* emerges as revising the symbolic function of such acts in Southern Gothic fiction.

The third chapter focuses on *Blood Meridian*'s portrayal of its protagonist, the kid, as one that is literally born as a Southern Gothic character and that leaves home in order to escape the brutalizing effects of his stereotypically naturalist environment in quest of freedom in the unsettled American Southwest in the mid-nineteenth century. It argues that although the kid begins as a conventional naturalist character, whom the narrator initially presents as an unthinking brute, his experiences lead him to develop a level of self-awareness that indicates that he has become a revised naturalist character. It is this aspect of his character that ultimately leads him to realize that the animosity that exists between him and the text's antagonist, Judge Holden, stems from Holden's attempt to bind him within a naturalist narrative of cosmic proportions that ultimately demands, in Southern Gothic fashion, that the kid either submit to the dictates of this narrative or die. But like *Wise Blood*, *Blood Meridian* revises this element of the Southern Gothic by presenting the kid's death at the hands of Holden in such a way that it might be read as the zenith of his resistance of the judge's narrative. Regardless of his inarticulateness, the kid's verbal resistance of Holden's narrative allows him to stay outside of its determinism and forces Holden, like Darl Bundren, to enter the world that he creates with this narrative in order to quash

the resistant kid. This demonstrates that far from being a reflection of the deterministic truth of reality, his narrative is but a construct, substantiated by nothing more than his words and his willingness to do violence to those who would oppose him, thus dealing a fatal blow to the rigid determinism that informs his own narrative of self and opens the possibility for autonomy in the world of the text.

In this dissertation, my intention is to contribute to the recent trend of expanding the purview of naturalist studies in American literature not by simply identifying new texts that might be read as naturalist works but, rather, by presenting these specific texts as indicating a new direction in the utilization of naturalism in modernist and contemporary fiction. Several critics, such as Donald Pizer, Paul Civello, and Eric Carl Link, have called attention to the fact that beyond the end of the naturalist movement, there still exists much “fiction which, like that of the naturalists of the 1890s, desires to render the circumstances of American life which severely condition and determine the fate of most Americans” (391). However, their work, while highlighting new authors and texts to claim within the naturalist tradition, often does not explain how these works’ engagements with later fictional modes and aesthetic concepts bring naturalism up to date. I offer this dissertation as a means of suggesting some ideas as to what such an update, or reboot, even, of naturalism might entail. Finally, I have chosen to focus this examination of the evolution of naturalism on the Southern Gothic because its openness to the blending of genres as well as its modernist and postmodernist tendencies prevents readers from simply applying familiar readings of naturalist fiction and encourage them instead to test new waters and see firsthand a glimpse of what such an evolved literary naturalism looks like.

II. THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC AND THE FAILED NATURALIST NARRATOR IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *AS I LAY DYING*

In "A Tale of Two Novels," Donald M. Kartiganer argues that if readers of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* would shift their focus away from the characters of Addie and Darl Bundren, they would find that this experimental modernist text is more conventional than it might initially appear to be. He writes,

The plot, built on a traditional quest motif, would scarcely change . . . but our entire perspective would. The novel would become, even with its interior monologues, fairly conventional in the realist-naturalist tradition of poor people in the South contending with natural, social, and economic forces, trying to accommodate a mother's wish even as they also hope to gain some small urban pleasures . . . (149)

While his contention that the quest motif is the text's most important structural element regardless of which characters one chooses to analyze seems valid, his statement concerning the "realist-naturalist" tradition appears problematic when considered in light of standard critical understandings of this tradition. Since *As I Lay Dying* is told entirely through first-person monologues spoken by fifteen different characters, any form of naturalism that it implements cannot be considered conventional. In fact, some might argue that the absence of a third-person narrator that is exterior to the determinism that affects the Bundren family characters precludes reading naturalism as having any bearing on this text. That is, the presence of first-person narrators causes it to diverge widely from what many critics have long considered the clearest distinction between naturalist and realist fiction, and later modernist fiction—the striking

absence of self-consciousness that conventional naturalist characters exhibit. Nevertheless, while Kartiganer's assertions about *As I Lay Dying*'s engagement with the realist-naturalist do not coincide with common understandings of this tradition wherein naturalism is concerned, one should not discount their significance within the broader scope of Faulkner studies. Although it does not appear that Kartiganer desires to break new ground in "A Tale of Two Novels," this article suggests the possibility of reconsidering the place of naturalism in this text. By calling attention to the naturalist elements of *As I Lay Dying*, he asks his readers to consider seriously an approach to Faulkner's work that several critics since the mid-twentieth century have deemed invalid.

According to M. Thomas Inge, the waning of interest in naturalist readings of Faulkner that took place between the years of 1940 and 1950 occurred neither because critics had settled all issues concerning the question of naturalism in Faulkner's fiction nor because such readings became less relevant in light of contemporary critical developments. Rather, he argues that critics ceased to maintain that Faulkner utilized the naturalist mode in any meaningful way because they concluded that this approach to his fiction is simply incorrect: "It was with *Sanctuary* that Faulkner became identified with the school of Naturalism—through the comments of such critics as Henry Seidel Canby and Alan Reynolds Thompson—a mistaken notion that it would take another decade of writing and finally some overt statements of the author, especially the Nobel Prize Address, to eradicate" (xiii). While this claim is representative of a common position on the subject, the reasoning behind it appears less convincing in Inge's preface than his speedy dismissal of early naturalist readings of Faulkner's work suggests. Outside of citing the apparent mistakenness of such readings, Inge does not explain why its proponents read Faulkner's fiction wrongly, and he does not explain the reason for the abrupt

cessation of this line of criticism. He does, however, make a statement from which one might infer an explanation of his reasoning. Read against his account of Faulkner's early novels, Inge's preface indicates that he, and perhaps previous scholars, discounts naturalist readings of these texts because they detract from what he considers their most valuable feature: their emphasis on the "development of experimental techniques" that have become associated with modernist fiction writing (xiii). This statement suggests that the loss of interest in Faulkner's early engagement with naturalism stems from a tendency among critics to undervalue the influence of American literary naturalism on modernist fiction rather than from the fact that his fiction does not lend itself to naturalist readings. However, this dismissal is not simply the effect of a reluctance to draw formal connections between naturalist and modernist fiction. Instead, it is a result of the prevalent belief introduced by Malcolm Cowley that naturalism sacrifices any psychological depth that its characters might possess in its efforts to demonstrate the power of their environments to determine their lives, even to the point of death. But while this belief may be validated by a number of modernist novels, I argue that such is not the case with *As I Lay Dying*.

This chapter contends that *As I Lay Dying*'s portrayal of the Bundren family and the community that they inhabit suggests that both act as powerful determinants in the lives of those within them and therefore indicate an engagement with American literary naturalism that has yet to be sufficiently examined. However, as I mentioned earlier, the text's use of multiple first-person narrators necessarily complicates this engagement, but rather than view this narrational method as evidence that naturalism cannot provide a window into *As I Lay Dying*, I argue that in addition to being the text's most modernist element, it is also the strongest evidence of the text's attempt to revise first-wave naturalism in order to show the complexity and determinism that is

inherent in its treatment of the Southern family and community.

Central to this revision is *As I Lay Dying*'s portrayal of the Bundrens as distinctly Southern Gothic characters. This chapter will work from Louis Rubin's definition of the Southern Gothic character as one that "has been 'divested' of the illusion of a transcendent significance for either his social or personal existence and so finds himself an "alien, a stranger,' 'an exile,' in the world that had once been his home" by an experience that, in naturalist fashion, is often beyond his or her control (xiii). Several characters in *As I Lay Dying* might be read in light of this definition, and this is especially the case with Addie, who I intend to address in future work. Here, however, I focus primarily on Dewey Dell, Anse, and Darl Bundren. I argue that these characters experience events that result in either the direct loss or the potential loss of their sense of personal significance within the sociocultural structures in which they function. Following this loss of significance, each takes advantage of his or her opportunity to narrate his or her account of events in order to create a narrative of self that is grounded in naturalism in one of two ways. On the one hand, Dewey Dell's and Anse's violation of the community's mores that govern their social identities lead them to use the sections in which they narrate to portray themselves as victims of forces that are beyond their control after the manner of determined characters in first-wave naturalism. On the other hand, Darl responds to the loss of significance that he experiences when he learns of his mother's concealed adulterous affair by attempting to detach himself from his family and appropriating in his narration a role that is strikingly similar to that of a conventional naturalist narrator that is removed from the deterministic realm of forces, which in Darl's narrative consists of his family. However, despite his efforts to detach himself, Darl's identity as a Southern Gothic character proves too powerful for him to overcome. As a result, he violates his assumed identity as a naturalist narrator by entering the realm of

forces to thwart the desires of his family but becomes bound in this realm by doing so and represents *As I Lay Dying*'s most significant revision of first-wave naturalism, the fall of the naturalist narrator.

While the narrator in first-wave naturalism provides a buffer between the two spheres of existence that naturalist fiction portrays, the realm of freedom and the realm of forces, no stable barrier between these realms exists in *As I Lay Dying*. This instability, which stems from the possibility that a naturalist narrator can fail and become subsumed by determinism, is a central feature of the revised naturalism that the text puts forth. By emphasizing the fall of the naturalist narrator, *As I Lay Dying* calls attention to an often overlooked problem that troubles naturalist fiction even as it implements the mode in creating what may be described as a Southern Gothic portrayal of family and community: for a work of naturalist fiction to succeed in accomplishing its sociopolitical objectives, the boundary between the realm of forces and the realm of freedom must be permeable. However, in emphasizing Darl's fall, *As I Lay Dying* goes beyond the conventions of first-wave naturalism to consider the possibility that such permeability can thwart the project of naturalism, a possibility that, according to June Howard, "threatens the very gesture of control . . ." over the realm of forces that the naturalist mode "implies" (126). Approached in this light, *As I Lay Dying*, whether intentionally or not, explores the effects that stem from the fact that the boundary between the realms of forces and freedom must be violated in the act of naturalist narration. Therefore, rather than conclude that it exposes naturalism as an inferior mode, or that it does not utilize the naturalist mode at all, I argue that it engages naturalism through the problems inherent in first-wave naturalist narration so as to reimagine the aesthetic boundaries of naturalism. Its revision of the naturalist narrator through its implantation of an experimental, modernist method of narration demonstrates how naturalist elements can

play a central role in a work of high modernist fiction, thus offering an example of how a revision of first-wave naturalism points toward the emergence of a new naturalism. Furthermore, *As I Lay Dying*'s depiction of the Southern family and community as sociocultural structures that are capable of entrapping characters within deterministic social narratives indicates that such new naturalism is central to its participation in the creation of the Southern Gothic.

That Gothic elements are prominent in *As I Lay Dying* is undeniable. These include conventions of traditional Gothic fictions, such as haunted characters and the incessant return of the past to bear negatively upon the present, as well as those that are more reflective of the grotesque, such as Addie's rotting, mutilated corpse, her devolution ("My mother is a fish"), and the disgust that the Bundrens' journey to bury her generates (Faulkner 84). However, these elements per se do not qualify the text as a work of Southern Gothic fiction. "Southern Gothic literature," Peggy Dunn Bailey states, "is characterized by obsessive preoccupations—with blood, family, and inheritance; racial, gender, and/or class identities; the Christian religion (typically, in its most 'fundamentalist' forms); and home—and a compulsion to talk (or write about these preoccupations" (271). Certainly, its sociocultural setting and its characters' preoccupations with some of these elements reveal that *As I Lay Dying* is a thoroughly Southern Gothic text. Its Southern Gothicism is amplified by the fact that several of its characters reflect Rubin's description of the Southern Gothic character as one who has experienced a trauma that divests him or her of the "transcendent significance" that he or she once derived from the sociocultural structures that informed his or her senses of home and self (xiii). These identities are defined by the ideologies that inform the community and family within which the Bundrens and their neighbors are inscribed as well as the beliefs and practices that these structures inspire.

The social practices that shape the Southern community portrayed in *As I Lay Dying*

derive from the modern version of what W. J. Cash identifies as the foundational tenets of the legend of the Old South, the centrality of the plantation, or family farm, the idealization of the pure Southern woman, and the establishment of the family patriarch as an unquestioned authority within the home. Although the manorial estates, ladies in farthingales, and the aristocratic Cavalier of this legend are not directly represented in the impoverished, Depression-era Mississippi that *As I Dying* portrays, the regional mythos, in which they are central figures, exerts a powerful influence over the characters that inhabit this setting. However, perhaps more important than the text's engagement with the Southern mythos is its characters' participation in an underlying practice that makes the social application of such a mythology possible: the tendency among Southerners to create fictions to justify their negative behaviors and deflect the criticisms of their detractors. For example, Cash argues that two major figures in the Southern mythos, the Southern gentleman and the Cavalier, were modeled after characters in the fiction of Walter Scott and became so influential that "Scott was bodily taken over by the South and incorporated into the Southern people's vision of themselves" (65). The fictive nature of the Southerner's self-image speaks to a radical break from reality, but Scott Romine contends that such a break makes sense because the Southern community was grounded in manners, which he identifies in this case as acts of "avoidance, deferral, and evasion" (3), rather than a shared view of reality. He subsequently defines a community as "a social group that, lacking a commonly held view of reality, coheres by means of norms, codes, and manners that produce a simulated, or at least symbolically constituted, social reality" (3).

By arguing that the Southern community is the product of manners rather than a shared view of reality, Romine highlights the fact that the region's predominant social ideology was the product of human invention. In doing so, he puts forth a conception of the Southern community

that aligns with Michael Kreyling's assertion that the region's culture was a matter of artifice and not of "ontology" as many early curators of Southern culture maintained (26). The prevalence of this ontological conception of the South led many Southerners to believe that their social and cultural institutions originated from an essential Southern-ness that preceded them. As a result, many contended that the Southern community as a whole was axiomatic and could not be viewed as the "product of history" (26) or ideological struggles and conflict. Contrary to this belief, Romine states that the creation and perpetuation of the manners-based Southern community was, in essence, an exercise in avoiding ideological struggles and social unrest by "deferring conflict on an everyday basis" (1). In this sense, it was indeed a product of specific historical conditions, and, to a great extent, the community itself was a fiction, a fantasy even, that was created in response to the historical conditions that Southerners confronted from the mid-nineteenth century through much of the twentieth century. Although the Southern community may have been grounded in fiction, this fictional entity was the means through which Southerners were able to create a shared conception of reality that allowed them to become a "social group that apprehends reality 'as one'" (1). Romine argues that this sense of oneness greatly affected the Southern mind and facilitated the South's arrival at a state of "mechanical solidarity" in which "the individual consciousness is almost indistinct from the collective consciousness . . . [and] the individual has no sphere of action that is peculiarly his own" (3). In similar terms, Cash maintains that this state of communal affairs caused the South to move toward what he calls the "savage ideal," or the "ideal whereunder dissent and variety are completely repressed and men become, in all their attitudes, professions, and actions, virtual replicas of one another" (91). It is against this sociocultural background that *As I Lay Dying* uses the Southern Gothic mode to explore the nature of the Southern community.

Given its setting in a rural community in Depression-era Mississippi, the female characters in *As I Lay Dying* would be expected to discover transcendent significance in the social mythology associated with the cult of true Southern womanhood. According to Cash, the praise of Southern womanhood arose in response to the northern journals' depiction of all Southern men as "Turks wallowing in lechery" because of accusations of their sexual abuse of female slaves (86). Concerning the response to such portrayals of the South, Cash writes,

[T]he only really satisfactory escape here, as in so many other instances, would be fiction. On the one hand, the convention must be set up that the thing simply did not exist, and enforced under penalty of being shot; and on the other, the woman must be compensated, the revolting suspicion in the male that he might be slipping into bestiality got rid of, by glorifying her; the Yankee must be answered by proclaiming from the housetops that Southern virtue, so far from being inferior, was superior, not alone to the North's but to any on earth, and adducing Southern Womanhood in proof. (86)

This belief, he states, led to the presence in the South of "downright gyneolatry" as the Southern woman, "the lily-pure maid of Astolat and the hunting goddess of the Boeotian hill," became for the region the "mystic symbol of its nationality in the face of the foe" (86).

While the virtual worship of the pure Southern woman elevated her to near iconic status, the centrality of the plantation, and thus, the home, in the South resulted in a state of isolation that intensified her prominent position within the minds of her male family members. Cash argues that because of this isolation, "family ties acquired a strength and validity unknown in more closely settled communities; and, above all, there grew up an unusually intense affection

and respect for the women of the family—for the wife and mother upon whose activities the comfort and well-being of everybody greatly depended . . .” (85). This dependence upon the women within the home suggests that the cult of true Southern womanhood shares similarities with the cult of domesticity that defined gender roles in the North; however, the centrality of the plantation, of which the home was a vital part, engendered two significant distinctions. One, according to Janet Coryell, because in the South “work and business remained centered around farms and plantations . . . , Southern women laid less of a claim to a separate sphere of authority” than did women in the North (90). Two, the lack of separation between the public sphere of work and the domestic sphere of the Southern home grounded the home in unusually strong patriarchal values that “required that the authority of husband, father, and slave master not be challenged” (91). The combination of this unquestioned patriarchal authority and the mythic adoration of the Southern woman led Southern men to claim as one of their principal duties “the avowed protection of and the self-serving devotion to white women” (Railey 93). Therefore, the female characters in *As I Lay Dying* could achieve transcendent significance because they are shielded from the turbulence of the world outside of their farms by their husbands or fathers. However, the patriarchal values at work in the Bundren home fail to instill in the Bundren women a transcendent identity, and this failure opens the possibility of reading these characters as distinctly Southern Gothic figures.

This is especially so in the case of Dewey Dell Bundren and her concealed pregnancy. If one approaches *As I Lay Dying* in terms of the failure of the Bundren home to enact the patriarchal values at the heart of the Southern mythos, then Dewey Dell, an unwed, sixteen-year-old girl in pursuit of an abortifacient drug emerges as a stark contrast to the idealistic concept of the pure Southern woman. While this aspect of her character may strike some as obvious, the

reasoning behind her insistence that she “could not help” but have sex with Lefe, one of the men who came to help on the Bundren farm, is less clear. One might explain this avowal as an attempt to deflect the sense of guilt that stems from her being overcome by sexual desire to the point that she violates the social mores regarding the behavior of women. But, if her self-proclaimed lack of agency is considered within the social context of her situation as she describes it, her pregnancy and the patriarchal values of her community appear in a different light.

In Dewey Dell’s first monologue, she tells the story of her first sexual encounter. After stating that the “first time” occurred when she and Lefe “picked on down the row,” her narrative takes an unexplained turn away from the event that it seeks to recount (26):

Pa dassent sweat because he will catch his death from the sickness so everybody comes to help us. And Jewell dont care about anything he is not kin to us in caring, not care-kin. And Cash like sawing the long hot sad yellow days up into planks and nailing them to something. And pa thinks because neighbors will always treat one another that way because he has always been too busy letting neighbors do for him to find out. And I did not think that Darl would . . . (26-27)

Dewey Dell breaks the chronology of her monologue to offer an account of each of her male family members’ attitudes toward her behavior and their primary concerns in life. To begin, she refers to Anse Bundren’s imaginary illness that he believes to stem from a heat stroke he suffered earlier in his life. From her statement that he “dassent sweat because he will catch his death . . .,” one may infer the extent of Anse’s inactivity on his farm. Since the major work on the farm occurs during the spring and summer, it is likely that Anse’s sickness would prevent him from

tending and harvesting the crops on which his family's well-being depends. As a result, "everybody comes to help [them]." She then states that two of her older brothers, Cash and Jewel, either do not care or are too busy with their own affairs to know about her sexual activity. She then returns her attention to her father and points out that he, who should be the guardian of her purity, has no knowledge of her relationship with Lame because his inactivity has separated him from the working of the farm. Therefore, he knows nothing of the behavior of those who "help" him. As she says, Anse "has always been too busy letting neighbors do for him to find out" about her affairs and what actually transpires on the farm.

That this passage is spoken in reference to her affair with Lame is suggested when she states, "And I did not think that Darl would . . ." (27). Although she does not complete the verb phrase in this sentence before moving on to her next thought, the context of the passage suggests that in place of the missing word, one might read "care." Read in this manner, Dewey Dell's statement demonstrates that other than Darl, none of her male family members shows any concern for how she spends her time. Furthermore, if they are unconcerned with her behavior, then they cannot act as the protectors of her virtue. This passage, which occurs prior to her description of herself as devoid of agency in the matter of her sexual activity and pregnancy, indicates that while Dewey Dell is conscious of her transgression, she is also conscious of the fact that this transgression was the result of her supposed protectors' failure to perform their patriarchal duties. Moreover, the ordering of her narrative suggests that in her mind, the Bundren men's failure to protect her from the hazards of the world outside of their farm precedes her transgression, thus diminishing the fact that the direct cause of her violation was her surrender to desire.

Subsequently, Dewey Dell offers an account of her relationship with Lame in which she

builds upon her self-proclaimed lack of agency by presenting their sexual encounters as a matter of fate:

We picked on down the row, the woods getting closer and closer and the secret shade, picking on into the secret shade with my sack and Lafe's sack.

Because I said will I or wont I when the sack was half full because I said if the sack is full when we get to the woods it wont be me. I said if it dont mean for me to do it the sack will not be full and I will turn up the next row but if the sack is full, I cannot help. It will be that I had to do it all the time and I cannot help it.

And we picked on toward the secret shade and our eyes would drown together touching on his hands and my hands and I didn't say anything. I said 'What are you doing?' and he said 'I am picking into your sack.' And so it was full when we came to the end of the row and I could not help it.

And so it was because I could not help it. (27)

Here, Dewey Dell stresses her belief that her actions are determined by fate or a cosmic will and are not of her own volition. She supports this assertion by repeating variations of "I cannot help it" four times and by stating that if her sack was full when she reached the woods, where she and Lafe would be out of sight of any others working in the field, she would be divested of any say in the matter and be bound to have sex with him. Here, as in a later monologue in which she states that her pregnancy has caused her to feel like "a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth" (64), she insists that she has lost any semblance of an internal locus of control and has become subject to the forces that caused her overwhelming sexual desire and led to her pregnancy. Thus, although it was her choice to act on her desire that causes her violation of the community's mores, she

attempts to presents her male family member's failure to carry out their roles as her protectors as the reason for the loss of her virginity and, therefore, her identity as a pure woman. But regardless of whether she accepts or projects the blame for her failings, she has set in motion a series of events that entraps her in a plot of decline to which she believes herself to be bound by fate and biology. In this sense, she is similar to a determined character of first-wave naturalism; however, to read her as such a character does injustice to her complexity and to the strain of naturalism that is at work in *As I Lay Dying*.

Several critics maintain that one of the most noticeable distinctions between works of naturalism and works of realism, and later modernism, is the virtual absence of self-consciousness that naturalist characters exhibit. Warren French's description of characters in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* versus those in Henry James's *Roderick Hudson* exemplifies this position: "[T]he former are not represented as being conscious of what they are doing or capable of any self-analysis of their motivations; whereas the latter are almost obsessively preoccupied with self-conscious analysis . . ." (125). Dewey Dell's account of her affair with Lefe demonstrates that contrary to her determinist narrative of self, she is highly self-conscious and is aware that her sexual behavior has violated the community's expectation of women. Therefore, the narrative that she puts forth in her monologue demonstrates not only that she is dishonest but also that she is a distinctly Southern Gothic character, for the fact of her pregnancy divests her of any transcendent significance that she might be able to derive from her participation in pure Southern womanhood unless she can terminate it. Moreover, her preoccupation with her transgression leads her to use her monologues to project a specific self-image both to herself and to the reader, who in the sections that Dewey Dell narrates becomes *her* reader. Consequently, she represents the first clear example of *As I Lay Dying*'s revision of the naturalist narrator by

assuming the role of a naturalist character that is subject to determinism and also becomes the creator of a naturalist narrative.

As I've noted before, according to June Howard, works of naturalist fiction present characters as functioning in two separate spheres: the realm of freedom and the realm of forces. She argues further that each of the figures that converge at the text during the act of reading—the narrator, characters, and the reader—can be identified as existing in one of these realms—the narrator and reader belong in the realm of freedom while the determined naturalist character belongs in the realm of forces. Such separation of these realms is necessary to naturalism's desire to understand and control determinism as it is represented by the brutish character that is mandated by deterministic forces that arise from his or her environment. Howard maintains that this is so because “although the menacing and vulnerable Other [in this case, the determined brute] is incapable of acting as a self-conscious, purposeful agent, he can only be observed and analyzed by such an agent” (104). In other words, without the separation of realms and a narrator/observer that remains firmly in the realm of freedom, the control that exudes from this figure would not exist and neither would the possibility of naturalist narration and the reformist hope amidst despair that naturalism offers to its readers. Therefore, in first-wave naturalism, the narrator, and occasionally a character, such as Robert Ames in *Sister Carrie*, stands in sharp contrast to the determined characters that he or she observes. Interestingly, although Howard states that the reader, also, is a free agent, she contends that what the reader does is distinguished from the narrator because he or she does not, and, indeed, cannot, participate in the acts of observation and analysis. Rather, the reader is a voyeur that looks on the characters that the narrator relates and analyzes. This idea leads Howard to conclude that while readers of naturalist fiction, through the narrator, “explore determinism, [they] are never submerged in it and

[themselves] become the brute” (104). However, in the naturalist narrative that Dewey Dell communicates, this luxury is not extended to the reader.

The absence of a buffer between the reader and the realm of forces in Dewey Dell’s narrative raises a question: How does someone who is often unable to articulate grammatically complete sentences create a narrative that defies and consequently transforms a foundational element of literary naturalism? The answer is actually quite simple. By creating a naturalistic self-narrative and communicating it directly to the reader, Dewey Dell acts as a “self-conscious and purposeful agent.” In so doing, she represents a radical departure from the consciousness-deficient characters typical of first-wave naturalist fiction, but she nonetheless remains a distinctly naturalist character. As her consistent presentation of herself as having become subject to forces beyond her control indicates, she is located in the realm of forces and possesses a keen awareness of this fact. (Regardless of whether one rejects her self-identification as a determined character, if her pregnancy is revealed, she will be determined by the loss of personal and social significance that she will experience as a fact rather than as a potentiality, which it is at this point). However, her ability to create a self-narrative through which she articulates her awareness of the determinants she faces demonstrates that unlike a determined character in first-wave naturalism, she possesses a clear degree of self-consciousness as well as the agency to impose her will to the extent that her narrative of self can convince others to accept the self-image that she projects. Moreover, the purposefulness of her actions throughout the novel, for example, persuading Anse to continue the journey to bury Addie, lying about her reason for making the trip to Jefferson, persistently seeking an abortion, participating in the detection and arrest of Darl for arson, thus removing the lone family member with knowledge of her pregnancy, demonstrates that while her words situate her in the realm of forces, her actions place her in the

realm of freedom.

In light of Howard's assessment of the reader's place in the rhetorical strategy of naturalism, Dewey Dell's belonging in both realms renders her a horrifying figure in that her ultimate decline, her final realization that she is indeed entrapped in an identity imposed upon her because of her significance as a Southern female, departs from first-wave naturalism in a way that places at hazard the reader's presumed identity as a free subject. This happens because "[t]he tale of decline at once risks and rescues the reader, for it figures the fascinating, repellent possibility of a privileged character being swallowed up by brutality; yet the very fatality of the procedure always suggests that the character somehow inevitably belonged to the realm of forces and not the realm of freedom" (Howard 151). However, in the decline of Dewey Dell, who bears the marks of a privileged subject within first-wave naturalism, self-awareness and the capacity for purposeful action, the reader will experience risk with no promise of rescue, for Dewey Dell's fall represents not only the fall of a naturalistic character but also that of the naturalistic narrator, the one figure capable of preventing the reader from becoming submerged in the realm of forces. Of course, one must point out that the submersion of the reader occurs in terms of the rhetorical strategy of naturalism, which is deconstructed by the text's revision of the naturalist narrator, rather than in a real sense. Nevertheless, this effect of *As I Lay Dying*'s creation of new naturalism engages the reader in a manner far different from first-wave naturalism by refusing his or her assumption of the passive role of a voyeur.

Read in this manner, Dewey Dell represents a significant transformation of the naturalist narrator. While her character is an anomaly in terms of first-wave naturalism, the same cannot be said of the naturalist narrator when it appears in other portions of *As I Lay Dying*. To consider the text's further experimentation with this figure, I will now shift my focus to two additional

narrators, Anse and Darl.

In the opening sentence of Anse's first monologue, he says, "Durn that road" (35). That these are the first words that he speaks in the text as a narrator reveals that the road occupies the primary place in his mind even as his wife lies on her deathbed. While hatred for something as mundane as a road may seem unwarranted, Anse explains that his animosity stems from a deeply held belief that the road has contributed greatly to his being a "luckless man" (18). He describes it in the following manner: "A-laying there, right up to my door, where every bad luck that comes and goes is bound to find it. I told Addie it want no luck living on a road when it come by here, and she said, for the world like a woman, 'Get up and move, then.' But I told her it want no luck in it . . ." (35). This passage suggests that Anse believes that his successes and failures are dependent upon luck and that he operates in light of an external locus of control. Yet given his description of the road's power over him and his family, he seems to conclude that his luck is not merely luck, a matter of chance, but, rather, is the result of entities, such as the road and the government that built it, that are outside of his sphere of influence and, indeed, that function contrary to, and in disregard of, his interests. His view of the road's negative effect on his life is epitomized by his statement that its presence has exacerbated his unluckiness because "every bad luck that comes and goes is bound to find [his home]" (35). His use of "bound," which could have two meanings in this context, creates the possibility for a naturalistic reading of his remarks on the road. By saying that bad luck is "bound" to find his home, one might conclude that this word should be read as meaning "very likely." However, one might also read it as denoting Anse's belief that bad luck is "determined" to find him while passing on the road. Regardless of which definition one chooses to apply to this sentence, one thing is clear—Anse sees the road as an entity that he cannot control and that negatively affects his and his family's lives. Thus, his

discussion of the road invests his monologue with a naturalistic bent.

As with Dewey Dell, Anse's consciousness of the power of external entities and his inscription of this power into a narrative suggests the presence of a strain of naturalism that imbues its characters with a level of self-awareness and efficacy that many earlier works in the mode deny them. Without some level of efficacy, no matter how limited, characters such as Anse and Dewey Dell could not construct meaningful and purposeful narratives of self. But, there is a marked difference between the scopes of their narratives. On the one hand, Dewey Dell seeks in her narrative to establish herself as a victim of circumstances because her male family members' failure to preserve her maidenhood gave rise to a situation in which she is helpless against violating the sexual mores of the community. Because of this, one might contend that her narrative, as well as her actions, stems from a desire to preserve an identity that signifies within the communal structure in which she functions. On the other hand, Anse's narrative casts the entire family as victims in a vast drama in which modernity perpetually encroaches upon their lives by way of the road. In this sense, his narrative is concerned with not only self-preservation but also the preservation of the way of life that maintains the communal structure itself. And at the heart of this way of life is a profound degree of rural insularity. Approaching Anse's character with this desire to preserve the family's state of insularity in mind allows one to begin to understand more completely his animosity toward the road. Moreover, considering him in this light reveals the extent to which the presence of the road distinguishes *As I Lay Dying* as a work that explores what Rubin identifies as the foundational concern of the Southern Gothic mode—the rise of issues that engender a loss of existential significance that causes a character to feel as though he is a “stranger” . . . in the world that had once been his home” (xiii).

But, how does this sense of loss and strangeness come to enter the world of the text?

According to Anse, it has everything to do with the road. Specifically, his disdain for the road may be described as stemming from his awareness that the road allows those who are outside of his sphere of influence to affect the lives of his children in ways that would not have been possible prior to its construction. However, the mere presence of the road does not seem to concern Anse so much as the effects that it has on what he perceives as the divine order of life and on the minds of the individuals who live near it. He states that these effects derive from the road's having "switched the land around longways . . ." (36), meaning that it made it more feasible for individuals to conceive of the land as expanding far beyond the boundaries of one's own property. Additionally, it made it possible for them to realize this conceptualization of the land by witnessing travelers from distant places that pass on the road and perhaps by traveling themselves. This "switching around" of the land from a vertical to a horizontal model in the mind of the individual leads Anse to believe that the road defies the intentions that God has for terrestrial life. He says, "[T]he Lord put roads for travelling: why He laid them down flat on the earth. When he aims for something to be always a-moving, He makes it long ways, like a road or a horse or a wagon, but when he makes it up-and-down ways, like a tree or a man" (36). He further states that God "never aimed for folks to live on a road . . ." because the presence of a road beside of a house would cause those in it to stay "restless and wanting to go somewhere else when he aimed for them to stay put like a tree or a stand of corn" (36). In this sense, the essential strangeness that affects Anse's home results from the encroachment of a modern entity, the public road, onto his domain that upsets the sense of authority that he was granted and that he claims as a family patriarch within the prevailing social ideology.

While the road is at the heart of Anse's first monologue, the road itself is not the source of his animosity but, rather, the road as it exists in a specific ideological context. One may best

account for the negative feelings that Anse expresses in this monologue and his sense of lacking control over his home by considering both the road and the Bundren farm within the social context of the Southern mythos. Read in this light, Anse's concern with the power of the road derives from its ability to affect his family's minds in ways that pertain directly to the domestic ideology that governs their community. Because the road has "switched around the land" in a manner that has resulted in its becoming horizontal rather than vertical, it has challenged, and perhaps greatly weakened, the foundational idea that the plantation, or the family farm, is a "self-contained and largely self-sufficient little world of its own" (Cash 32), for this shift from a vertical to a horizontal conception of the land has eradicated the idea of fixedness that arose from the belief that individuals were ordained by God to remain within the narrow spatial boundaries of their home. Since the road goes through the farm and continues to stretch across the region without regard to fixed property boundaries, it causes the mind to conceive of the land in terms of an open horizon rather than the closed unit of the farm.

One may consider Anse's discussion of the decrease in the self-sufficiency of his farm as partially deriving from the shift from a closed to an open conception of the land. This is especially so in the case of the injury that his eldest son, Cash, suffered during a construction accident. Anse's statements concerning Cash's injury are particularly revealing of his understanding of the effects of the road on his family and their departure from the ideologies that stem from the Southern mythos. He points out that in addition to the taxes that he is compelled to pay for its maintenance, the road is "making him pay for Cash having to get them carpenter notions when if it hadn't been no road come there, he wouldn't have got them; falling off churches and lifting no hand in six months and me and Addie slaving and a-slaving, when there's plenty of sawing on this place he could do if he's got to saw" (36). That Anse calls attention to

Cash's "carpenter notions" as being a result of the road's presence is significant in that these "notions" cause Cash to resist two key features of the prevailing social ideology. On the one hand, by working as a carpenter, he defies the belief that the farm is an insular world unto itself in which the family members are supposed to stay. He does so by the simple act of discovering the possibility of using his skills as a carpenter to earn a living outside of these familiar confines. On the other hand, the mere fact that he attempts to make carpentry his profession causes him to deviate from the tendency among Southern males to enact the "savage ideal" by demonstrating a desire to work as something other than a farmer. Through this choice, Cash appears to resist becoming a "replica" of his father and his male neighbors where his profession is concerned (Cash 91).

Similar to Darl's queerness, Cash's desire to practice carpentry in itself does not pose a problem to Anse or to the social structure of the farm and community, but when it is combined with what appears to be his intentions to earn a living as a carpenter outside of the confines of the family farm, this desire becomes problematic. Anse points this out when he claims that "there's plenty of sawing on this place if he's got to saw" (36). His emphasis on "this place" suggests that Anse espouses the belief that his farm is the place where his family belongs and where they should expend their energies as laborers. Moreover, by stressing the connection between the family and the farm, he presents himself as one who has worked to ensure that his children act upon the belief that they are bound to the land that they inhabit. In doing so, one might say that he seeks to create a narrative in which he is not only the Bundren patriarch but a Southern patriarch with good intentions for his family whose authority has been usurped by the forces of modernity in the form of the road. This aspect of his monologue is most apparent when he states that "if it hadn't been no road come there, [Cash] wouldn't have got [his 'carpenter

notions’]” (36). But, because the road did come to the Bundren farm, Cash was influenced by the reconceptualization of the land and the home and chose to pursue a career away from the farm. According to Anse, this choice, which he believes was directly caused by the road, led to the injury that caused him and Addie to have to handle the work of the farm without their eldest son for six months. Thus, at the heart of his narrative is a series of causal relationships that testify to the fact that while he may be the family patriarch, he primarily views himself as a “luckless man” (18), one who believes that his sociocultural authority has been undone by forces that are beyond his control.

In this monologue, then, Anse portrays himself as the victim of the road and the desires, actions, and thoughts that it inspired in the minds of his oldest sons. However, if one considers the continual remarks that his children and his neighbors make concerning his laziness, then his self-portrayal appears in a different light. Read against the prevailing social ideology of the Southern community, Anse’s monologue emerges as an attempt to account for, and even explain away, the fact that he has been derelict in his duties as the patriarch. And the image of Anse that Darl, Jewel, and Dewey Dell create in their monologues suggests that this dereliction is not a recent phenomenon. For example, in an early monologue, Darl makes the following observation of Anse: “There is no sweat stain on his shirt. I have never seen a sweat stain on his shirt. He was sick once from working in the sun when he was twenty-two years old, and he tells people that if he ever sweats, he will die. I suppose he believes it” (17). By noting the earliness of this occurrence, Darl indicates that Anse has avoided performing demanding physical labor for virtually his entire adult life. Also, this statement, like Anse’s first monologue, shows that over the years, he has developed a tendency to create and believe narratives that justify his violation of the accepted behavior for one in his position. This aspect of his character explains why Dewey

Dell points out that “he has always been too busy letting neighbors do for him to find out . . .” about her sexual activity, her pregnancy, or anything else that takes place on the farm (26). That this dependence on his neighbors is a fact of life for the Bundrens is further demonstrated when Jewel, in his only monologue, says, “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 country coming to stare at [Addie] . . .” (15). Here, Jewel states what he sees as a basic problem on the Bundren farm—the constant presence of outsiders who have violated the privacy of the family and his dying mother. Anse’s continual dependence upon his neighbors to help manage his affairs and work his farm places him at the center of this problem. Although he sees himself as a naturalistic figure, a victim of circumstances that derive from forces that he cannot control, his children portray him as one who has a history of shirking his duties as patriarch and seeking to justify himself through dubious narratives that play on the sympathies of those who are willing to help him.

This aspect of Anse’s character along with Dewey Dell’s creation of her narrative of self raises a question: Why do these characters present themselves through naturalistic self-narratives in which they seek to justify their violations of the social mores of their community by blaming these violations on the power of forces that are beyond their control? An answer may be formulated by considering their creation of these narratives in light of Daniel Dennett’s conception of the essential relationship between narratives and the human self, namely his contention that the self is created “in response to perceived challenges real or imaginary” that stem from our environment (417). For both Anse and Dewey Dell, their environment is the sociocultural realm of their rural Southern community, and the challenges that they face are the problems that result from their violation of the behavioral norms that are associated with their

environmentally specific identities. Considered in this light, the narratives that they construct in order to explain and justify their violation of social mores are the result of their efforts to survive and prosper within their community by salvaging the meaning that derives from the social and gender roles that they enact. Their willful violation of the community's mores would likely cause them to be shunned by their neighbors and to be left to function outside of the social structure that has invested their lives with significance. Because of this, one might read the naturalistic narratives through which Anse and Dewey Dell present their situations and themselves as being created in response to the existential crisis that may arise from their violable behaviors. Should the truth of their actions emerge, they will, as Rubin writes, become ““exile[s]”” in “the world that had once been [their] home” (xiii). While Anse appears to see himself as an exile in his narrative, his exclusion would likely be complete if he embraced the fact of his laziness openly before his neighbors. To avoid such crises, Anse and Dewey Dell present their violations through a naturalistic lens whereby they can portray themselves as having been divested of the ability to exert their wills by outside forces. Therefore, in their minds, as in their narratives, they cannot be held accountable for their wrongdoing.

Moreover, the act of creating such narratives emerges as a phenomenon that derives from the social structure to which the Southern Gothic mode responds. Such a willful divestment of one's self-image as a being with free will is made desirable only when one functions within, and depends upon in some way, a structure in which violation of the rules or expectations will result not only in social but also possibly economic expulsion. In this light, Anse and Dewey Dell's naturalistic self-narratives seem a fitting response for those characters that realize the potential crises that their violations may cause and their desire to forge a means of maintaining their identity within the structure that they have violated. If the Southern community is portrayed by

Southern Gothic fiction as a social structure that entraps its inhabitants, then Anse and Dewey Dell appear to use their naturalist narratives to remain subject to this entrapment rather than have to face life outside of this environment.

To gain a better understanding of what is at stake in the naturalistic self-narratives that Dewey Dell and Anse create, one may approach the potential results of their violations in terms of their community's expectations of them as a Southern woman and a patriarch. If Dewey Dell's pregnancy becomes known to the community, her identity as a pure Southern woman will deconstruct because of the loss of her virginity and her being an unwed mother. Along these lines, Candace Waid writes,

Still pregnant at the novel's close, Dewey Dell will inevitably be seen as the source and cause of the Bundrens' lost honor. With Addie dead, Cash lame, Darl in the state asylum, and Anse married to a woman who, if not of easy virtue, is certainly easily married, the Bundrens are falling fast and the exposure of Dewey Dell's pregnancy will be a final and fatal blow to whatever respectability the family has left. (89)

Therefore, by creating a narrative in which she represents herself as lacking the agency necessary to prevent her sexual encounters with Lame Merdle from occurring, she seeks to shield herself from personal guilt and negative judgments of her character that may later arise. This is especially the case when she persistently states that she "could not help" the chain of events that led to her violable behavior. In pursuing this argument, she intends to clear herself of responsibility in this matter and casts herself as being at the mercy of fate. While she does not go so far as to imply that Lame Merdle forced her to have sex with him, she invests her narrative with a strong naturalistic

strain that emphasizes the role of fate and abrogates her responsibility in order to maintain her identity as a pure woman, if only in her own mind. Thus, at the heart of her naturalistic self-narrative is the hope of preserving the appearance of the purity that will allow her to retain her identity within the communal structure as a marriageable woman.

As in Dewey Dell's narrative, Anse represents himself as one whose lack of agency has resulted in events that have divested him of his essential identity within the social structure of the community and family. Whereas her violation of the community's sexual mores causes her to lose her identity as a pure woman, Anse's laziness causes him to lose the unquestioned authority that he believes he should rightfully possess as the patriarch of the Bundren family. According to Jason Todd, Anse's laziness diminishes his authority by allowing Addie to resist his authority and establish within their home an "inversion of power" through which she undermines the "masculine authority" that is central to both the Southern home and Southern society in *As I Lay Dying* (49). While this inversion of power, as well as his children's low opinion of him, may lie at the heart of the diminishment of Anse's identity as a patriarchal figure, his open admission of these facts would ruin him in the eyes of the community. One who admitted to such failures would be viewed as unable to fulfill the patriarchal duties of ruling over his farm as well as protecting and providing for the women in his home. Given Anse's dependence upon his neighbors to aid in the working of his farm, one may assume that his failures were known throughout the community. Nevertheless, their continual presence on the Bundren farm should not be read as indicating their complete understanding of the reasons for Anse's struggles.

Anse's initial monologue may be seen, then, as an attempt to maintain his sense of dignity as a Southern patriarch by creating a narrative in which he represents himself as one whose patriarchal authority has been usurped and overwhelmed by the encroachment of

modernity onto his farm. Through his emphasis on portraying the road as inspiring Cash's "carpentry notions" and facilitating Darl's removal from the farm by the draft, Anse appeals to his audience's sympathy. This is especially so in regard to those with an understanding of Southern social practices. For example, he prefaces his discussion of Darl's entry into the military with the following statement: "It aint that I am afraid of work; I always is fed me and mine and kept a roof above us . . ." (36). Here, he cites his ability to perform the basic tasks of a patriarch, and he goes on to say that his main concern in the case of Darl is that the government used "the law" to "short-hand" him, to deprive him of the manpower needed to run his farm. Thus, he presents his situation in a way that suggests that his problems do not result from a desire to shirk his duties but rather the reality that the government and the road have demonstrated their ability to penetrate his isolated home and have disregarded his authority with impunity. This line of argument indicates that his most pressing concern likely stems from the fact that he no longer enjoys the privileges of the social arrangement of the traditional Southern farm on which the father's "individual will would stand as imperial law" (Cash 32). By placing the blame for his loss of authority upon the government and the road, Anse encourages his audience to believe that his failures as a patriarch were caused by entities that he cannot control and that lay outside of his power. The irremovable presence of these facts of life in the Bundrens' community suggests that this same loss of authority, which ultimately entails the failure of the patriarch, the foundation of Southern social power, could befall anyone whose life comes into contact with them. Read in this manner, Anse's naturalistic self-narrative emerges as seeking to present his current situation as a powerless Southern patriarch not as the result of his personal failings, and thus his violation of the social codes that govern his life, but as the inevitable effects of the emergence of modern sociopolitical structures in the rural South.

Because Anse seeks to present the road and the government as entities that are capable of negatively affecting the lives of all with whom they come into contact, he achieves in his narrative an effect that is similar to Dewey Dell's drawing of the reader into the realm of forces through her self-narrative. In his case, this effect works toward a different end. Before discussing how Anse's role as naturalist narrator diverges from that of Dewey Dell, it is important to call attention to a feature that their narratives share in common and what they seek to accomplish by utilizing a naturalistic perspective. In terms of Dennett's conception of narrative and the self, Anse and Dewey Dell construct narratives out of the materials of both their consciousness and their environment that will enable them to continue to function and perhaps prosper within this environment. Since their environment is a community that is based upon the foundational elements of the Southern mythos, namely patriarchal rule and feminine purity, the only means by which they may thrive in this setting is through adherence to the social code. Because they have violated this code, both find themselves in precarious situations. If the truth of their actions should be revealed to their neighbors, then, as Waid points out, any vestige of respectability that remains for them individually and for their family as a whole would dissipate. This fact does not appear to be lost on either Anse or Dewey Dell, and one might go so far as to consider it the exigent impulse for their self-narratives.

For example, both Anse and Dewey Dell use their narratives to represent themselves as characters that, in naturalist terms, are situated in the realm of forces. However, their participation in the text as narrators precludes arranging them in only one of the two realms that Howard cites as the structural binary that lies at the heart of fiction written in the naturalist mode. Because of their dual roles as naturalistic characters and narrators, as well as their consciousness of these roles, Anse and Dewey Dell, unlike the stereotype of a naturalist character that lacks the

depth created by a well-developed interior life, display a striking level of psychological complexity despite their intellectual simplicity. At the same time, like a conventional naturalist character, they are primarily the products of their environment. While their ability to create narratives aimed at evoking sympathy indicates that they can act as free agents, the purpose that they use these narratives to work toward demonstrates that their primary concern is preserving selves, or identities, that signify within the communal structure that derives from the Southern mythos. Moreover, that they carry out their attempts at self-preservation by communicating these naturalistic self-narratives speaks toward a significant feature of both Anse and Dewey Dell's experiences within the sociocultural setting of the text. They are motivated not simply by a desire for self-justification but for justification in the eyes of those to whom they might communicate their narratives. Thus, at the heart of their acts of narration is a need to forge a connection with another who is capable of hearing their narratives and sympathizing with them over their conceptions of the situations that they face. In this regard, both characters use their self-narratives to establish a kind of communal bond with the reader that derives from the sympathy that they seek to evoke as they narrate.

Read in light of Howard's description of the reader of naturalist fiction as a voyeur, these narratives place the reader in a complex position. In them, he or she is not afforded the luxury of experiencing characters in the realm of forces at a second remove, as is typically the case in naturalist fiction. Rather, Anse and Dewey Dell, in their capacity as narrators, imaginatively expose the reader to the realm of forces not only by representing themselves as characters within this realm but also by acting as the only narrational voice in their self-narratives. Thus, they assume the role that would be filled by the typical naturalist narrator whose acts of observation "contain and frame the events of the stories" that they communicate to the reader (Howard 150).

Because Anse and Dewey Dell function as characters and observer/narrators, their narratives do not allow the possibility of understanding them through the mediation of a third-person narrator. If this feature of these narratives is considered alongside their narrators' desires to form bonds of sympathy between themselves and the reader, they may be read as achieving a troubling effect. By limiting the reader's perspective on the situations that they narrate, Anse and Dewey Dell seem to desire to entrap him or her in the passive role of the voyeur. Whereas conventional works of naturalism do not place the reader's sense of being a free agent at risk, the self-narratives of Anse and Dewey Dell do because they are not communicated by a narrator who can rescue the reader from the immersion into the realm of forces that they facilitate. The absence of a detached naturalist narrator realizes what Howard calls the "repellent possibility of a privileged character being swallowed up by brutality . . ." (151), and in this case, it is both the narrating characters and the reader who face this possibility. This absence also precludes the reader's ability to draw the conclusion that the "character somehow inevitably belonged to the realm of forces and not the realm of freedom" because the "very fatality" of the character's situation and the sense of entrapment that it creates is extended to the reader (151).

The strain of naturalism employed in these self-narratives allows *As I Lay Dying* to instill dread in the mind of the reader by transforming the text itself into a kind of gothic structure that simulates the mode's conception of the Southern community's tendency toward entrapping individuals in static, prescribed identities. Like a character in a work of Southern Gothic fiction whose life is unsettled by his realization of the failure or the falsity of the concepts and structures inherent to Southern culture that had imbued him with a sense of home and existential meaning, the reader of the narratives of Anse and Dewey Dell experiences a similar unsettling. Because the reader of naturalism exists in what Howard calls a state of spectatorial paralysis, she is

rendered unable to extract her imagination from the realm of forces that the text allows her to access. This access comes, then, at a great price in *As I Lay Dying*. Anse and Dewey Dell suggest that the reader become aware of the ease with which a self-conscious, purposeful agent can fall victim to circumstances that ultimately ensnare her in the realm of forces; and both are relentlessly self-centered, uninterested in facilitating the removal of the reader once they invite her into this realm. That is, they are interested solely in constructing self-preserving narratives that will assist them in their efforts to maintain their places within the Southern community despite their violable behaviors. Whereas the conventional naturalist narrator is a reliable guide who exposes the reader to the realm of forces and extracts them from it with their sense of being a free agent intact, Anse and Dewey Dell prove to be the epitome of unreliability by using their roles as narrators to work toward solipsistic ends.

Although Anse and Dewey Dell function in the text as deviant naturalist narrators, their monologues should not be read as representative of the figure of the naturalist narrator as it appears throughout the text. This is especially the case with Darl, who appears in many of his monologues to function in a manner similar to that of a conventional naturalist narrator. However, despite the differences between these characters' utilization of their positions as narrators, a significant feature connects them: They respond to their sense of the loss of identity that is central in works of Southern Gothic fiction by embracing different aspects of a naturalist perspective. Whereas Anse and Dewey Dell do this by appealing to the reader's sympathy by casting themselves as the victims of circumstances and forces that are beyond their control, Darl exhibits his embracing of naturalism by acting at times in a manner similar to a narrator in a work of fin-de-siècle naturalist fiction. Initially, this difference between Darl and the other naturalistic narrators in *As I Lay Dying* appears in his expansive vocabulary, the moderateness of

his tone, and his penchant for philosophizing. Over the course of the text, however, his naturalistic tendencies grow more pronounced as the reader becomes increasingly aware of his purposeful detachment from both the community and the Bundren family. By detaching himself from those around him, Darl, like a conventional naturalist narrator, assumes the role of an outside figure that observes and narrates the actions of the characters within the text that are subject to deterministic forces that arise from their social environment. In doing this, Darl strives toward detaching himself from his own sense of personal identity, and this detachment arises from the fact that this identity is grounded in the interconnected social structures of community and family.

In this sense, Darl's efforts to act as a naturalist narrator have a distinctly Southern Gothic flare. Because his behavior occurs in a fictional setting that is shaped by the Southern Gothic mode, his detachment, like Dewey Dell's and Anse's attempts at garnering sympathy, is a reaction to the failure of the ideologies upon which these social entities, the community and the family, rest. This is especially the case in regard to such ideologies and the ability of those characters that embody them to invest other characters in the text with a sense of identity as well as a sense of home. It is this sense of home that serves as the ground from which a Southern Gothic character's personal identity emerges. And in the case of Darl, both his home and his identity derive from one character, his mother, Addie Bundren.

The remainder of this chapter will ask the reader to consider Darl not merely as a madman with a penchant for clairvoyance but instead as a Southern Gothic character that seeks to find a means by which he can establish a sense of identity after having become aware of the deceitful behavior and sexual transgression of his mother. The significance of Addie's failures to this understanding of Darl is twofold. One, approaching his detachment as being caused by his

intuitive knowledge of her adulterous affair and Jewel's illegitimacy reveals his loss of identity as being closely linked to a belief in the Southern mythos, especially in terms of the central role of the mother and the concept of the pure Southern woman. Two, the connection between his detachment and his apparent hatred of deceit that Addie fostered in him presents his monologues as pointing toward the hollowness of the social mythology that informs and conditions the lives of those that live under their influence. In this sense, his monologues simultaneously reveal the failures and hypocrisies of his parents and siblings and show him as using the role of narrator to overcome the loss of identity caused by the collapse of the social structures from which his former sense of self derived.

In order to assume the role of naturalist narrator, Darl detaches himself from his family and his home by acting as an outside observer who is virtually an inactive participant in the life of the family, which is comprised of working on their farm. He takes on this role by using his monologues to distinguish himself from his parents, Jewel, and Dewey Dell by showing them to be deceitful individuals whose choices are shaped by their selfish desires and to present himself as a free agent who exists mentally outside of the strictures of home and community despite living within both. Specifically, he presents the Bundrens' selfishness as stemming from an innate desire, or need even, to maintain their prescribed identities within the family and the community despite their violation of the mores that derive from these structures. His response to the sense of loss that he experiences upon the collapse of his conception of self and home leads him to imagine himself as occupying an intellectual space that is outside of the family and community. Yet, the power that these entities hold over those in the text suggests that regardless of his efforts to detach from them, such a removal of oneself from this social realm while remaining physically within it is virtually impossible.

Prior to his arrest and subsequent commitment to the state insane asylum, Darl's monologues work toward a different purpose than those of his siblings, his parents, and his neighbors. For example, where Dewey Dell and Anse use their monologues to diminish the severity of their transgressions of the community's mores by presenting themselves as victims of circumstances, Darl tends to use his to report what he has learned by observing the actions of the Bundrens and their neighbors as well as to narrate the events that the text portrays as transpiring in the present. Also, unlike several narrators in the text, Darl does not assume a conversational tone in his monologues. Thus, he does not appear to address the reader on a personal level, choosing instead to narrate the action of the text as it unfolds from a removed perspective. By doing so, he, like a naturalist narrator, reports what he sees unfolding to the reader, and he does so in a manner that suggests what he observes does not affect him personally. This aspect of his character indicates that in some way he views himself as an outsider who does not fit within the social structures of the family and the community. In this regard, he takes on the role of a conventional naturalist narrator who does not inhabit the same realm as those that he observes and who seeks not only to relate to the reader an account of the actions of those that he watches but also to ascribe significance to the events that befall the observed characters. This is particularly the case when Darl offers in his monologues analysis of the behavior of his family members and neighbors that allows the reader to arrive at a more complete understanding of the motives that underlay their attitudes and actions.

Darl's assumption of the role of naturalist narrator is most clearly exhibited by his tendency to narrate the actions of the characters that he observes from a detached perspective that features an eye for detail and mimetic depiction that is reminiscent of fin-de-siècle naturalist fiction. This method of narration is first displayed in his description of the path that he and Jewel

walk on in his first monologue. He states, “The path runs straight as a plum line, worn smooth by feet and baked brick-hard by July, between the green rows of laidby cotton, to the cottonhouse in the center of the field, where it turns and circles the cottonhouse at four soft right angles and goes on across the field again, worn so by feet in fading precision” (Faulkner 3). He also exhibits this fidelity to physical detail when he describes their walking across the field on the path. He states,

When we reach [the cottonhouse] I turn and follow the path which circles the house. Jewel, fifteen feet behind me, looking straight ahead, steps in a single stride through the window. Still staring straight ahead, his pale eyes like wood set into his wooden face, he crosses the floor in four strides with the rigid gravity of a cigar store Indian dressed in patched overalls and endued with life from the hips down, and steps in a single stride through the opposite window and into the path again just as I come around the corner. In single file and five feet apart and Jewel now in front, we go on up the path toward the foot of the bluff. (4)

The most striking feature of this passage is Darl’s persistent attention to the distance between Jewel and himself. By marking this distance with precise measurements as well as counting the number of strides that Jewel takes when walking, Darl goes beyond simply relating to the reader what he, a character in this scene, sees and describes the objects of his vision in terms similar to a fact-based observation of external phenomenon, a hallmark of naturalist narration. Read in this light, this passage demonstrates that even in the opening pages of the text Darl has already embraced a detached, naturalistic perspective. Significantly, Darl’s perspective is not only a matter of the fact-based observation and mimetic depiction of the external world but also one of emphasizing and perhaps maintaining distance himself and Jewel.

At first glance, the distance between Darl and Jewel in this passage appears to be a matter of footsteps and linear feet; however, it takes on an metaphorical dimension when it is read against Darl's description of Jewel as an animate "cigar store indian." By calling attention to Jewel's wooden features and stating that he is "endued from life from the hips down," Darl invites the reader to consider Jewel as being essentially different from himself. Through his attention to detail and his acute awareness of himself and his surroundings, Darl emerges as a character that is inherently cerebral. His description of Jewel that compares him to a wooden statue with animate legs suggests that he, unlike Darl, is at least semi-corporeal in nature. At the same time, one might go so far as to say that he believes Jewel to be unthinking, like a block of wood. This is implied by his emphasis on Jewel's persistent stare, stating that he is "looking straight ahead" as he crosses the field and is later "[s]till staring straight ahead" as he walks through the cottonhouse. In contrast, Darl, through his narration, demonstrates his ability to conduct a panoramic observation of his surroundings, report what he observes, and comment upon its significance, even rendering contents of his vision in metaphorical terms, as he walks. Specifically, in this scene, Darl appears to interpret Jewel's tendency to maintain a singular focus on what is immediately in front of him as evidence of an inability to consider himself and his actions within a scope broader than his narrow field of vision.

Darl later elaborates upon this understanding of Jewel's character as he meditates upon the process of falling asleep in a "strange room" (80). He states,

In a strange room you must empty yourself for sleep. And before you are emptied for sleep, what are you. And when you are emptied for sleep, you are not. And when you are filled with sleep, you never were. I dont know what I am. I dont know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is, because he does not know that he does not

know whether he is or not. He cannot empty himself for sleep because he is not what he is and he is what he is not. (80)

In this passage, Darl calls attention to Jewel's simplemindedness by stating that he does not have to empty his mind before falling asleep. He believes that Jewel does not have to do this because his seeming incapacity for self-reflection allows him to persist in a mental state in which he is unaware that "he is not what he is and he is what he is not." Because of this belief, one might argue that in this scene Darl emerges as a purely naturalistic narrator. In highlighting Jewel's lack of self-reflection, he demonstrates that like a narrator in a conventional work of naturalist fiction, he is primarily "concerned with observed behavior and with explanations of that behavior in terms of heredity and environment" (Cowley 417). In the case of Jewel, the reason that he "does not know whether he is or not" is that, unlike Darl, the environment in which he lives has not required him to question his sense of identity. In this sense, Darl's assumption of the role of a naturalist narrator stems from his acquisition of knowledge that causes him to feel as though he stands outside of the family and is therefore no longer subject to the social forces that influence their actions. This aspect of his character is further enhanced by his use of his narrational voice to perform the most essential task of the naturalist narrator, that of observing a character that functions within an environment that is capable of conditioning his mind and explaining his behavior within this context. But at the heart of his adoption of this role is the fact that although Darl views himself as being outside of the family and the forces that influence them, he, too, may be thought of as one that is greatly affected by his environment. Thus, although he believes that Jewel's apparent simplicity causes him to persist in a state of unrealized misidentification, his own acute self-awareness and intuition have led to what seems to be the ultimate demise of his identity as Darl Bundren. It is this divestment of personal identity that leads him to state, "I don't

know what I am. I don't know if I am."

That Darl views himself as having somehow lost his sense of identity allows one to view him in a light similar to that in which Dewey Dell and Anse present themselves in their monologues. This similarity indicates that like his father and sister, Darl may be read as a distinctly Southern Gothic character because events have transpired that have rendered it difficult, or even impossible, for him to continue to align himself with the social structures and ideologies in which his personal identity was grounded. But unlike Dewey Dell and Anse, who seek to preserve their roles within the family and community, Darl chooses instead to forge a new identity outside of them. To accomplish this, he presents himself as being mentally separated from his parents and siblings in his early monologues even as he lives in the same house as them. This sense of separation enables him to conceive of himself as standing outside of the ebb and flow of the family's lives and acting as a detached observer rather than continuing to be an active participant on the farm. By assuming this role, he is able to use his monologues to establish himself as a link between the reader and the world of the text through his reports of what he sees, intuitively, and deduces through his observations. In doing so, he acts in a manner similar to a conventional naturalist narrator, for unlike Dewey Dell and Anse, who implement naturalist themes in their monologues to garner sympathy, Darl appears most interested in revealing the selfish and deceitful behavior that mark the lives of his parents, Dewey Dell, and Jewel as well as to call attention to such behavior as deriving from the social environment in which they function.

In addition to its observational nature, literary naturalism exhibits a deep fascination with the material aspects of the environments that it explores. While Darl's participation as a naturalist narrator in *As I Lay Dying* focuses on his observation of his family's and neighbors'

actions and his assessment of the motivations for their behavior, he also exhibits a strong interest in the presence and significance of a non-human entity that assumes a central place in his mind, and, therefore, his monologues: Jewel's horse. The first reference to Jewel's horse occurs in an early monologue in which Darl recounts a conversation that he, Vernon Tull, and Anse had before he left with Jewel to haul a load of lumber for Vernon. When Anse asks Darl if he knows Jewel's whereabouts, he tells him that he is "[d]own to the barn . . . Harnessing the team" (11). Subsequently, he offers a vivid description of Jewel's actions in the barn, where he is in the act of stealing hay to feed his horse. He states, "Clinging to the hay-rack he lowers his head and peers out across the stall tops through the doorway. The path is empty; from here he cannot even hear Cash sawing. He reaches up and drags down hay in hurried armsful and crams it into the rack. / 'Eat,' he says, 'Get the goddamn stuff out of site while you got a chance . . .'" (13). To say that Jewel is simply feeding his horse in this scene overlooks the degree of surreptitiousness that he exhibits while raking hay into the rack. That he "lowers his head and peers out across the stall tops and through the doorway" to ensure that "the path is empty" indicates that he is hiding his actions from Anse and his siblings. But despite the fact that Darl's monologue expresses that Jewel is stealing from the family, two facts remain unclear: The passage suggests neither how Darl can relate Jewel's actions with such detail without being able to see him in this moment nor why he chooses to narrate this occurrence in his monologue.

One explanation for this choice may be arrived at by considering this scene in light of the story of Jewel's horse's appearance on the Bundren farm, which Darl tells in his tenth monologue. In addition to suggesting a correlation between the horse and Darl's detachment from the family, this monologue also highlights an important tendency in his narrational style. Namely, at key moments in the text, Darl's observation of the present inspires him to

contemplate the significance of events that occurred in the past. Typically, the substance of this contemplation appears to depart from his current context in a manner that is not readily explainable, but as one reads further, he or she discovers that these reflections upon the past highlight events that have played a role in shaping his present character.

An example of this tendency can be found in his tenth monologue. This monologue details the moment at which the Bundrens and Vernon arrive at the crossing near the Tull farm and find that the river has flooded and poses danger to any who would try to ford it in a wagon. That crossing the river could prove disastrous is indicated in the preceding monologue, in which Vernon states that he refused to lend the Bundrens his mule to aid in their crossing. Darl's tenth monologue seems to begin immediately after Vernon's refusal because of his description of Jewel as he "sits the horse, glaring at Vernon . . ." (128). Beginning the monologue with Jewel's silent challenge of Vernon over the issue of the mule allows Darl the opportunity to explore the tension that is present in this pivotal moment in the novel. If the Bundrens are unable to cross the river at this point, it would likely mean that they would be unable to bury Addie in Jefferson and have to bring their journey to an abrupt end. However, he does not appear interested in either the tension or the significance of this moment and chooses to shift his focus away from the present altogether and relate the story of how Jewel came to acquire his horse.

Darl begins this story by recalling that in "the summer when [Jewel] was fifteen, he took a spell of sleeping" during which he slept so much that he "stumble[ed] along like a drunk man" as he did his chores and even fell asleep while working (129, 139). He highlights the severity of Jewel's sleeping by pointing out that "he would go to sleep at the supper table and as soon as supper was finished he would go to bed . . ." (129). His inability to stay awake led Addie to conclude that he was ill, but because she could not convince Anse that Jewel needed medical

attention, her only means of helping him was to have Dewey Dell and Vardaman secretly do his chores so that he could rest. Darl states that Addie went as far as “doing them herself when [Anse] wasn’t there” and also “fix[ed] him special things to eat and hid them for him” (130). His observation of her surreptitious treatment of Jewel leads Darl to draw a troubling conclusion about his mother because her deception of Anse contradicts one of the foundational teachings that she had imparted to her children. Concerning this, Darl states, “And that may have been when I first found it out, that Addie Bundren should be hiding anything she did, who had tried so hard to teach us that deceit was such that in a world where it was, nothing else could be very bad or very important . . .” (130). At this point, Darl was unaware that Addie was hiding anything from Anse other than her treatment of Jewel, but his continued observation of her during this time led him to contemplate the significance of not only her current deceitful behavior but also the hypocrisy that it indicated. Nevertheless, that he came to realize that there was a hidden meaning that caused her to value Jewel to the point of becoming the embodiment of deceit is indicated when Darl states, “[A]t times when I went in to go to bed she would be sitting in the dark by Jewel where he was asleep. And I knew that she was hating herself for that deceit and hating Jewel because she had to love him so that she had to act the deceit” (130-31). It is only after the family learns the reason for Jewel’s recent sleeping spell that he is able to intuit what he believes to be the impetus for Addie’s deceit.

After five months, Jewel’s sleeping spell ended. With the exception of Cash, who remained oddly silent about the issue, none of the Bundrens discovered the reason for Jewel’s bout of fatigue until the morning that he arrived on the farm riding a horse that he had acquired by clearing land at night for Lon Quick (133). The seriousness of Jewel’s acquisition of the horse is indicated by Cash’s behavior upon learning of his recent activities. Darl describes him as often

“watching Jewel with a queer look, like having found out where Jewel went and what he was doing had given him something to really think about at last” (133). In this sentence, one of the most interesting occurrences in *As I Lay Dying* takes place: The word “queer” is used to describe the behavior of someone other than Darl. That Darl uses this word in this context suggests that one might view it in the text as a term that is expressive of the attitude that arises from a character’s acquisition of troubling knowledge through the observation of other characters’ actions that somehow violate the norms of their social setting. In this sense, one’s being queer in *As I Lay Dying* may be understood as part of the observational act that is a foundational part of the naturalistic perspective that comes to mark Darl’s role as a narrator. But with Cash, this queerness never reaches the level of expression or, in terms of naturalism, narrational analysis of characters as it does in Darl’s monologues. Thus, rather than call attention to the truth of Jewel’s recent activities, and perhaps his own queer perspective, Cash remains silent about his knowledge of this matter. As a result, Jewel’s arrival on the horse causes a scene that may be best described as an eruption of spontaneous and varied emotions. Anse responds with anger, demanding that Jewel tell how he acquired the horse. Upon learning that he had exchanged labor for it, Anse castigates him by pointing out that he had stolen from the family, “taken [his] work from [his] flesh and blood . . .” to achieve a selfish end (136). Vardaman is excited by the horse and repeatedly asks to take a ride. Cash is the calmest of the characters that speak in the scene, and he attempts to assuage Anse’s anger by stating that since Jewel worked at night rather than during the day to earn the horse, it had not “cost anybody anything except Jewel” (135). Jewel responds to Anse with the promise that his horse “wont never eat a mouthful . . .” of feed intended for the Bundrens’ animals. In fact, he claims that he would “kill him . . .” before giving him any of Anse’s hay (136).

In this passage, Jewel's defiant response, which is similar to his attitude toward Vernon at the flooded river, offers an example of how Darl's observation of the present moment inspires his reflection upon a past event that seems unrelated to his current context. However, in this case, his reflection ultimately invests the present with layers of meaning that call the reader's attention to the complex nature of the problems that foment beneath the surface of the Bundrens' lives. If one views Darl's narrational style as using examples from the family's past to shed light upon their present and recent actions, then both Jewel and Addie emerge here as examples of hypocritical characters whose actions belie the beliefs that they appear to espouse. In the case of Jewel, Darl's narration of his response to Anse allows the reader to look back to the early scene in the barn in which he is depicted in the act of feeding horse with his father's hay. This marks a violation of his claim to maintain a sense of independence that is so fierce that he would kill his horse before depending upon Anse to provide for it. Moreover, if one approaches Jewel's actions in the manner suggested by Charles Palliser, one might argue that it is not individual acts of hypocrisy and deceit that Darl is concerned with in his monologues but rather behavior that suggests that his parents and siblings are habitual deceivers. According to Palliser, the seemingly clairvoyant visions that Darl appears to narrate in scenes such as this one are most likely "forecasts of the behavior of other members of his family and are simply based on his knowledge of their past behavior" (134). Considered in light of his role as naturalist narrator, this knowledge would derive from his frequent observation of their actions prior to the moments that he narrates in the text. Thus, in terms of Southern Gothic aesthetics, Darl may see the persistent deceit and hypocrisy practiced by his family as deconstructing the ideological framework that had invested him with a sense of personal and communal identity. But, to argue that this effect on Darl's psyche is expressed in its totality in the figures of Jewel and his horse would be an

understatement. To address this aspect of his character in a more thorough fashion, I will shift the focus away from Jewel and place it upon Addie's unusual reaction to his arrival on the horse.

The reactions that Darl describes each of the Bundrens as having when they see Jewel on his horse are fitting given the context in which they occur and are consistent with their typical behaviors. However, the same cannot be said of the emotional outburst that this moment causes in Addie. According to Darl, following Cash's attempts to reason with Anse, Addie tells Jewel to "come right to the house and go to bed," but he replies, "I aint got time. I got to get me a saddle and bridle. Mr. Quick says he—" (135). Darl relates Addie's response to this statement as follows: "'Jewel,' ma said, looking at him. 'I'll give—I'll give—give—' Then she began to cry. She cried hard, not hiding her face, standing there in her faded wrapper, looking at him and him on the horse, looking down at her, his face growing cold and a little sick looking, until she looked away quick and Cash came and touched her" (135). Darl depicts Addie as being shaken by Jewel's acquisition of the horse and his intentions to return to Quick's farm to work out a deal for a saddle and bridle. Although he does not ascribe any significance to her emotional response in his narration of it, this occurrence enables him to identify a likely reason for Addie's special treatment of Jewel. In the final paragraph, he states, "That night I found ma sitting beside the bed where he was sleeping in the dark. She cried hard, maybe because she had to cry so quiet; maybe because she felt the same way about tears she did about deceit, hating herself for doing it, hating him because she had to. And then I knew that I knew. I knew that as plain on that day as I knew about Dewey Dell on that day" (136). Here, Darl explains how he came to realize that Addie's recent deceitful behavior was not just a matter of hiding from Anse Jewel's failure to perform his chores during his sleeping spell. Rather, this simple act of deceit was only part of a much greater deception—Addie's concealment of the fact that Jewel is not Anse's son.

While Darl's realization of this fact marks a significant moment in his life, it is important to note that he communicates it to the reader approximately three years after it occurred. The lateness of his telling of this story may seem an insignificant detail at first glance; however, it is distinguished from most other descriptions of the Bundrens' lives prior to Addie's death because it offers a glimpse of Darl before he detached himself from the family. This is demonstrated through his description of his participation in the work of the farm, a part of his life that is strikingly absent at the time when the present events in the text happen. For example, in the first paragraph of the monologue he states that he first learned of Jewel's sleeping while he was "feed[ing] the mules . . ." (132), and, later, he mentions working with Cash in the fields. In addition to his physical involvement, Darl also points out that he participated in the activities of the family on emotional and mental levels, especially in regard to Addie's deception of Anse during Jewel's sleeping spell. He expresses this when he discusses the moment when he discovered that Jewel was missing from his bed on the morning that he arrived on his horse. Of this morning, he states,

Jewel was not in bed and he didn't join us in the field. That was the first time ma learned anything about what had been going on. She sent Vardaman down to find where Jewel was, and after a while she came down too. It was as though, so long as the deceit ran along quiet and monotonous, all of us let ourselves be deceived, abetting it unawares or maybe through cowardice, since all people are cowards and naturally prefer any kind of treachery because it has a bland outside. (134)

Here, the reader learns that like Addie and his siblings, Darl was a willing participant in this communal act of deceit despite not fully understanding the reason for Addie's betrayal of the principles that she had instilled in her children. Although he states that his participation in this

matter was an act of cowardice, one should be mindful of the fact that this assessment of his behavior comes following his detachment from the family. Regardless of how he interprets his actions in the present, its occurrence indicates that prior to his realization that Jewel is not Anse's son, he was a willing and active participant in the life of his family. Therefore, rather than follow Anse's statement that Darl's experience in the war exacerbated his "queerness," one might better understand the impetus for his detachment by considering this aspect of his character as a result of his discovery of Addie's infidelity.

If Darl's reaction to his intuitive discovery of Addie's participation in an adulterous affair is read as the incident that led to his detachment, then one may consider it, and, by extension, his method of narration, a product of his sociocultural circumstances. This approach to his detachment is warranted when viewed in light of his comparison of the knowledge that he attained at the moment that he became cognizant of Addie's secret and his awareness of Dewey Dell's concealed pregnancy. By linking these occurrences within the broader context of his intuitive powers, Darl indicates that at the heart of his detachment lie the facts that his mother and sister's behavior has placed them in violation of the mores that govern the role of women in Southern society in general and the Southern family in particular. Simply put, their sexual transgressions render them unable to enact the role of the pure Southern woman. While it may be an overstatement to say that Addie and Dewey Dell should be read as functioning within the text as representatives of the pure Southern woman as W. J. Cash describes her, the "mystic symbol of [the South's] nationality in the face of the foe" (86), as a Southern male, Darl would have been raised in a way that led him to view the females within the family, especially the mother, as the central figures inside of the home. Because of the centrality of the mother in the Southern home, Addie may be read not only as the Bundren matriarch but also as the one who instilled in

Darl and his siblings a valuing of honesty and honor that informs their senses of personal and communal identity. That she served this purpose in their lives is made apparent when Darl describes her as “hav[ing] tried to teach [them] that deceit was such that, in a world where it was, nothing else could be very bad or very important . . .” (130). Thus, when he discovers that she had perpetrated a nearly two-decades-old act of deceit against her husband and children, he reacts by detaching himself from the family. For if Darl’s worldview and his identity are based upon his mother’s teaching that where deceit is present “nothing else could be very bad or important . . .” (130), then the presence of such deceit within his family would likely diminish, if not eradicate, its importance in his mind.

While Addie’s deceitful and transgressive behavior contributes greatly to Darl’s detachment, a closer look at her reaction to Jewel’s acquisition of his horse suggests that in this moment she expresses something that may be read as the act that devastated Darl’s sense of identity. Approaching her response in this manner reveals it as shedding light on the extent to which she has not only deceived the family through her infidelity but also rejected them in her attempt to please Jewel. Because of this implicit rejection, her reaction becomes a significant part of the text’s exploration of the Southern family and community. This is especially the case when this scene is read as depicting a moment during which the “savage ideal,” perhaps the foundational social pattern of the Southern community, is willfully undermined.

According to Cash, the savage ideal manifested in the South through the virtual suppression of dissent and gave rise to a society in which “men bec[ame] in all their attitudes, professions, and actions, virtual replicas of one another” (90-91). But in this scene, the central occurrence, Jewel’s arrival with the horse that he acquired by working outside of the family farm unbeknownst to his parents, portrays an instant in which the ideal is transgressed. While the

purchase of the horse does not deviate from the ideal wherein profession is concerned (the acquisition was made possible through agricultural work, the trade of Anse Bundren and his neighbors), it violates it in both action and attitude. The strongest indicator of the extent to which Jewel violates this unspoken ideal is Anse's rebuking him for having deprived the family of his labor. He states, "You went behind my back and bought a horse. You never consulted me; you know how tight it is for us to make by, yet you bought a horse for me to feed. Taken the work from your flesh and blood and bought a horse with it" (136). Anse's criticism of Jewel focuses on two major areas of traditional Southern life, the centrality of patriarchal rule and the farm in the life of the Southern family. That Anse points out that Jewel "went behind [his] back" to buy the horse demonstrates that he views Jewel's actions as an assault on his authority as the Bundren patriarch. By acting against the wishes of his father, Jewel violates the social expectations placed upon him by his family and the community. Because of this violation, he becomes a dissenter from the social norm and thus one that a society grounded in the savage ideal should seek to punish or even exclude in egregious cases. Additionally, Anse states that Jewel's acquisition of the horse marked a willful and cognizant violation of the needs of the family by calling attention to the fact that Jewel knew of the Bundrens' economic hardships but still purchased the horse. Because of this, Jewel's purchase of the horse emerges as an act that is both rebellious and selfish. Further, the selfishness of Jewel's actions is most clearly exhibited in the additional workload and the life of dishonesty that his virtual absence placed upon Addie and his siblings.

That Darl believes that the deception of Anse in the matter of Jewel's actions arose from the family's cowardice suggests that the deceit that lay at the heart of the Bundren family's life was permitted because none had the courage to expose it and suffer the resulting consequences.

Therefore, his exposure of this deceit through narration marks one of the clearest examples of his assuming the role of a naturalist narrator. In his 1947 essay “Not Men: A Natural History of American Literary Naturalism,” Malcolm Cowley highlights the courageousness of fin-de-siècle naturalist authors by stating that their unflinching portrayal of the most negative aspects of American life cause their fiction to be remarkably “true” (431). Moreover, their courage was displayed by the fact that the very act of writing a work of naturalist fiction “forced [them] to stand in opposition to American orthodoxy” (431). Considered in this light, Darl, like a writer of naturalist fiction, displays a striking degree of courage by exposing the deceitfulness present in his family and community and thereby places himself in opposition to these foundational structures of the Southern orthodoxy. Initially, he appears to present himself as an opponent to the regional mythology in which the prevailing conceptions of these structures are grounded. However, if his opposition is read as a response to Addie’s reaction to Jewel and his horse, it may be viewed as arising from his understanding of her actions as showing clear disregard for the savage ideal and thus undermining one of the basic principles of Southern life. Her sympathy for Jewel despite his dissenting behavior leads Darl to look at her in a different light than he had prior to this moment. As he recalls this occurrence in his monologue, he highlights her willing support of Jewel’s selfish actions by calling the reader’s attention to her repetition of the unfinished sentence “I’ll give.” Because Darl is one who has been raised to espouse the values upon which his family and community are founded and who understands the economic hardships that the Bundrens face, he realizes that Addie cannot give anything to Jewel in relation to the horse without acting selfishly against the family. Therefore, her actions demonstrate a willingness to take from her “flesh and blood” in order to help Jewel despite his unacceptable behavior.

Addie's desire to help Jewel without regard for the family's interest takes on an additional level of significance when one considers the extent to which it violates the ideological assumptions upon which the Southern family is grounded. The mere act of purchasing the horse causes Jewel not only to deprive the family by expending his energies on labor done away from the Bundren farm but also to acquire a means of transportation that would allow him to come and go from the farm as he pleases. Thus, by violating the will of the patriarch, he gains the power to escape the social structures that had previously bound him, the family, and the farm.

Furthermore, his defiance of the wishes of his father points to his willingness to place his own desires over the needs of the family. In this sense, his acquisition of the horse allows him to be viewed in terms of Darl's opening description that suggests an inability to see his actions as transpiring in a context that expands beyond the scope of his own vision. Moreover, his actions on the matter of the horse allow one to read him as a dissenter whose pursuit of his own interests in disregard of those of the larger social whole places him outside of the communal model informed by the savage ideal. As Cash points out, a Southerner who dissented from this ideal by word or deed could expect to be quickly "challenge[d] or to be larruped through the streets . . ." by those that adhered to it. But in Jewel's case, such punishment, which Anse's remonstrance seems to lean toward, is thwarted by Addie's emotional response. And it is this response that allows Jewel's violable behavior to go unaddressed.

The absence of communal condemnation of Jewel's actions and his later observation of Addie crying at Jewel's bedside lead Darl to conclude that she has acted egregiously against her family in favor of one dissenting child. By doing so, she displays blatant, and, in terms of the community's ideological framework, misguided, favoritism and therefore defies her role as the matriarchal figure "upon whose activities the comfort and well-being of everybody greatly

depended” (85). Initially, Darl is willing to blame Jewel for Addie’s abnormal behavior because he placed her in a compromising situation in which she felt that she must act deceitfully. However, he realizes that her reaction to Jewel’s horse points toward a more troubling reality. Through the power of his intuition, he understands that her sadness arises from her desire to keep the newly mobile Jewel near her by protecting him from the repercussions of his act of dissent regardless of the detrimental effect their selfish behavior has on the family. Moreover, it enables him to come to the knowledge that Addie’s special treatment of Jewel speaks toward the devastating truth that Jewel is not Anse’s son. Thus, the story of Jewel’s horse is also the story of Addie’s fall as a matriarch and a pure Southern woman. Ultimately, her failure in her ideological roles as the mother of the Southern family, who was responsible for instilling in him the values on which his sense of home and personal meaning are based, appears to coincide with the collapse of Darl’s identity.

The loss of identity that Darl experiences in this moment casts him as a Southern Gothic character in the terms established by Williams and Rubin. Because he arrives at the knowledge that leads to this loss through intuition, Darl exemplifies Williams’s assertion that the sense of dread that Southern Gothic fiction seeks to represent is “a kind of spiritual intuition of something almost too incredible and shocking to talk about, which underlies the whole so-called thing” (133). In light of this statement, Addie’s infidelity and ongoing deceit of Anse and her children are the facts that underlay the façade of the Bundren family’s life. This is especially devastating to Darl because at this point he appears to believe that the family and home that invested him with a sense of personal identity are empty forms that are incapable of imparting meaning to him or to anyone else. His discovery of these facts causes him to arrive at the state of “psychic . . . and spiritual dislocation . . .” that Rubin cites as being central to the Southern Gothic mode (xii).

He comes away from this moment of realization as one who “has been divested of the illusion of a transcendent significance for either his social or personal existence . . .” (xiii). In short, his new knowledge results in his becoming a Southern Gothic character.

Because the divestment of his identity was caused by the actions of his mother, the central figure in the Southern home, Darl “finds himself an ‘alien, a stranger,’ ‘an exile,’ in the world that had once been his home” (xiii). Since his world is almost wholly comprised of the Bundren farm and the surrounding countryside, his sense of loss is especially profound. Darl best describes the effect of this loss on his life in his fifth monologue. After pondering the existential question of whether he “[is] or not” he says, “How often have I lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home” (81). This sentence may be read as Darl’s reflection on his experience in World War I, which likely marked the only extended period of time that he was away from the farm. Because he makes this statement shortly after his discussion of emptying oneself before falling asleep, its context suggests that Darl may have spent many nights during his time in Europe thinking of home and desiring to return to the people and the place that had shaped his life. In a manner similar to his description of himself participating in the deception of Anse during Jewel’s sleeping spell, this sentence indicates that prior to his discover of Addie’s infidelity and Jewel’s illegitimacy, Darl felt a powerful connection to his home and family. Thus, the failure of these social structures in his mind has a devastating effect on his life.

The nature of this effect may be better understood by considering it in light of Dennett’s theory of the lapsed self. He writes, “[S]elves are not independently existing soul-pearls, but artifacts, subject to sudden shifts in status. The only ‘momentum’ that accrues to the trajectory of a self . . . is the stability imparted to it by the web of beliefs that constitute it, and when those beliefs lapse, it lapses, either permanently or temporarily” (423). The beliefs that had comprised

Darl's self before he became aware of Addie's transgression were grounded in his being certain that she embodied matriarchal purity. In Darl's case this belief lapses permanently because this view of womanhood demands that females remain sexually pure whether through chastity or through marriage. According to this idea, any sexual transgression necessarily prevents one from maintaining her status as a pure woman. That Darl espouses this view of women is a major factor in his becoming a Southern Gothic character. In his perspective, Addie's transgression precludes his resting in the security of the seemingly "transcendent" identity that emanated from his former conceptions of his family and home. Yet, his loss of identity does not encompass the entirety of the problem that arose from the events that transpired following Jewel's arrival on his horse.

While Jewel's horse sparked the incident that led to the collapse of Darl's identity, it plays a significant role in Darl's life by serving as a symbolic representation of a second aspect of his being a Southern Gothic character: his sense of being bound precisely within the structures of family and community. The presence of the horse in Jewel's life extends to him the opportunity to leave the farm when he desires to do so; however, Darl, in stark contrast, is virtually bound to the farm. Outside of the trip to bury Addie, Darl leaves the farm in the text only one time. This departure occurs when he and Jewel make a delivery for Vernon on the evening that Addie dies. During his narration of this trip, Darl indicates that he is well aware of the degree of freedom that the horse extends to Jewel when he states, "He has been to town this week: the back of his neck is trimmed close, with a white line between hair and sunburn like a joint of white bone" (39). That his observance of the fact that Jewel has recently gone into town calls attention to a significant occurrence is implied by the fact that no other character is said to have made such a trip. Additionally, the fact of Jewel's mobility may be understood as inspiring the animosity that Darl often displays in private conversations with him. For example, during the

delivery, he speaks in a harsh manner to Jewel when he asks him, “Do you know she is going to die, Jewel?” (39). In addition to this question, he calls Jewel’s attention to the reality of Addie’s impending death twice more in this monologue. At first glance, his insistence on raising this subject seems to occur without a clear exigency; however, after the reader learns of the reason for Darl’s ill feelings toward Jewel, the reason for these statements comes into greater focus. On the one hand, they may be read as Darl’s attempt to hurt Jewel emotionally because he knows of his deep attachment to and affection for Addie. On the other hand, his awareness of the fact that Jewel is not Anse’s son allows one to understand his words as implying that Addie’s death will divest Jewel of the privileges that she has granted him out of favoritism toward him. Moreover, Darl may believe that his knowledge of Jewel’s illegitimacy gives him the potential to cause Jewel to experience his own crisis of identity should he reveal this knowledge to Anse.

Read in this manner, Darl is presented as attempting to antagonize Jewel out of what may be a desire for revenge over Addie’s preference for him or over the mobility that Jewel acquired, and that Addie condoned, by acting against the interests of the family. Considered in tandem with his efforts at naturalistic detachment, this aspect of his character speaks to a level of complexity that seems absent from the majority of the other characters in the text. While his detachment enables him to act in a manner similar to that of a naturalist narrator, the emotions that he feels because of his loss of identity cause him to maintain a connection, albeit a negative one, to the people and structures from which he wants to disconnect. Because of this, he appears to be more similar to a naturalist character that is bound to the realm of forces than to a naturalist narrator that acts in the realm of freedom outside of the influence of the forces that he analyzes. Therefore, perhaps the best way to understand Darl’s detachment is by identifying it as a detachment that is somehow thwarted. At first glance, it seems to be thwarted by his persistent

emotional connection to his family members; however, a closer look at his inability to detach fully reveals the presence of a problem that prevents his separation from family and community regardless of his emotional state.

The possibility of reading Darl as a naturalist narrator arises from his demonstration of a clear degree of detachment from his family through his tendency to observe and analyze his social environment and the characters that inhabit it. At the heart of his observation-based narration is his effort to present his family members and neighbors as acting selfishly, even deceitfully, in order to conceal their transgressions of the local mores, which are grounded in key features of the Southern mythos. Their acts of concealment are aimed at preserving their outward adherence to the narratives that stem from this ideological framework and invest their lives with personal and communal meaning. By presenting these characters in this manner, Darl, like a naturalist narrator, portrays them as leading lives that are conditioned by external factors. In this case, these conditioning factors emanate from the social structures of family and community as understood within the parameters of this regional ideology. That these structures exert a powerful influence on characters within the text is demonstrated by their performance of actions that result from their awareness of the fact that violation of the mores in which they are grounded will divest them of the social capital that allows them to function within the family and the community. Thus, these Southern Gothic characters narrate and act out of a fear of losing their identities to the extent that they become ““exile[s]”” in “the world that had once been their home” (Rubin xiii).

Since Darl already exists in a state of exile, he appears to have achieved full detachment from both his family and community; however, the text does not suggest that he has fully arrived at this state despite his efforts to do so. This is most clearly demonstrated through the view of

Darl that his neighbors and family hold. According to the majority of those who know Darl, his detachment causes him to be “queer,” or peculiar, when judged against the typical expectations of men in the community. These characters understand his queerness as deriving from his manner of looking at people and things. Because of this, this aspect of his character becomes a vital part of his naturalistic narration. However, unlike a conventional naturalist narrator, Darl’s unique perspective does not situate him outside of the ideological framework of the community. Thus, he is missing what is perhaps the foundational characteristic of such a narrator, the ability to stand outside of the influence of the forces, natural or social, that he sees as shaping the lives of those around him. While he does act as a naturalist narrator in many of his monologues, the social parameters of the Southern community preclude the existence of a critical space from which he may enact this role in a consequential manner. Furthermore, if this space is not present in *As I Lay Dying*, then effectual naturalist narration is likely impossible.

That naturalistic narration may be impossible in the text poses a significant problem for Darl. Because the social ideology that prevails in the community, despite being grounded in a fictionalized conception of Southern society and history, is so deeply inscribed upon the lives of those that inhabit it, they must either ascribe to it or keep their criticisms silent if they wish to function within it. Moreover, should a character transgress the boundaries that are established by the social narratives that derive from this ideology, then rather than remaining a guiding narrative for his or her life, such a narrative may become the means by which he or she is excluded, or even extracted, from the community. This aspect of the community, as it pertains to Darl, is highlighted in Vernon’s remark that Cora is “right when she says all [Darl] needs is a wife to straighten him out” (71). Although he goes on to treat this statement with jest by saying that “if nothing but being married will help a man, he’s durn nigh hopeless,” he concludes that

Cora's assertion is supported by his belief that "the reason the Lord had to create women is because man don't know his own good when he sees it" (71). If one views Darl in light of these statements, it appears that despite his queerness, he may be assimilated into the narrative fabric of the community and the Southern way of life by taking a wife.

Because Darl demonstrates no means of earning a living outside of agricultural work, his entrance into marriage would cause him to enact the savage ideal by replicating the lives of the male characters in the community. Such a result would be devastating for one who has seen through the grounding narratives of the Southern community and believes them to be empty forms that are incapable of offering one a sense of personal meaning. Nevertheless, Vernon maintains that marriage would prove beneficial to Darl because it would offer him a means of salvation from his mind. That he views marriage in this light is suggested when he states, "[T]he Lord aimed for [a man] to do and not to spend too much time thinking, because his brain it's like a piece of machinery: it won't stand a whole lot of racking. It's best when it all runs along the same, doing the day's work and not no one part used no more than needful" (71). Here, Vernon presents work as a divinely ordained means of maintaining a balance between the body and the mind. Given the context of this passage, his conception of work appears closely related to the central acts of a male within his community, marrying and assuming the responsibility of running a farm to provide for his family. Should Darl engage in these acts, the amount of work needed to run a profitable farm would alleviate him of the burden of excessive philosophizing that Vernon presents as the source of his queerness. But a more troubling possibility lies beneath his contemplation of work and marriage: Because these aspects of life, which are linked to the social narrative of marriage, involve the balancing of mind and body, Vernon may be understood as implying that without the grounding effect of marriage, Darl may be driven to madness. And

in the world of the text, madness appears to derive from excessive thought, which is the defining quality of Darl's character. Thus, one might read Darl's ultimate fall into madness as finding its roots in the fact that, as Vernon puts it, "he just thinks by himself too much" (71).

If Darl is thought of in terms of the binary of marriage-madness, then he may be viewed as a character whose dissenting behavior, which derives from his queerness, must be dealt with in the manner established by the ideological structure of the community. Because his behavior is viewed by those around him in light of this binary, the options that his family and neighbors have in dealing with him are limited. These include either urging him to ascribe to the prevailing social norm by marrying and becoming a patriarchal figure or having him incarcerated should he cause harm to the person or property of anyone within the community. Regardless of which of these narratives Darl becomes inscribed within, the threat that he poses to the social continuity of the community and the Bundren family will be eradicated. Should he get married, rather than remain the "queer," detached naturalist narrator that calls attention to the hypocrisy of the grounding ideological structures of family and community, he would willingly consent to them and repeat them in his own life, thus aligning himself with the savage ideal. Should he be incarcerated, he would be forced to surrender his will to that of the community in the form of institutionalization. While his incarceration cannot be read as his participation in the savage ideal, it does allow for this social ideal to remain intact, at least outwardly, within the family and the community for at the heart of this preservation is the eradication of dissent through the forced silencing or extraction of the dissenter. Reading Darl in terms of this social binary suggests that although he has an intuitive ability to see the emptiness of the ideologies that fostered his sense of identity, the social structures that arise from these ideologies appear to deny him a means of eluding their power to circumscribe his life with the narratives they propagate.

By approaching Darl in this manner, his assumption of the role of naturalist narrator appears in a different light from what his monologues suggest. In his monologues, he establishes himself as standing outside of the lives of his family and neighbors and observing them as various events befall them. Like a naturalist narrator, he often reports his findings to the reader in a manner that allows him to express the conclusions that he has reached after contemplating the significance of these events. This is especially the case when he recounts the story of Jewel's acquisition of his horse and his discovery of Addie's infidelity. But, while he acts as a detached narrator who reports this story to the reader outside of the time in which it took place, he does not always follow this narrational method. For example, in the case of his concern over the deceitful behavior of Jewel and Dewey Dell, he tends to disregard his role as a detached narrator. By doing so he departs from the naturalistic practice of portraying these characters as victims of the social structures that condition their lives and instead confronts them about deeply personal matters, such as Jewel's illegitimacy and Dewey Dell's pregnancy. Thus, despite his efforts to detach from his social context, Darl seems unable to overcome the negative feelings that arise from his knowledge of the failure of his mother and his family to carry out their social roles in a way that would promote the sense of "transcendent significance" that he had previously derived from the Bundren home.

This aspect of his character comes to light in his fourth monologue as he recounts a conversation between him and Dewey Dell shortly before Addie's death. He states,

I said to Dewey Dell: 'You want her to die so you can get to town: is that it?' She wouldn't say what we both knew. 'The reason you will not say it is, when you say it, even to yourself, you will know it is true: is that it? But you know it is true now. I can almost tell you the day when you knew it is true. Why won't you say

it, even to yourself?’ She will not say it. She just keeps on saying Are you going to tell pa? Are you going to kill him? ‘You cannot believe it is true because you cannot believe that Dewey Dell, Dewey Dell Bundren could have such bad luck: is that it?’ (40)

That Darl chooses to report this conversation in one of his monologues is telling of the emotional connection that he maintains despite his desire to detach himself from his family. Also, it highlights the complexity of his identity as a narrator in two ways. One, by stating his belief that Dewey Dell wants Addie to die so she can acquire abortion-inducing drugs in Jefferson, Darl reveals the extent to which her identity is dependent upon her outward alignment with the community’s expectation that young women must remain chaste. Moreover, her willingness to terminate her pregnancy without medical assistance and her hope for her mother’s death show how powerful is her desire to conceal her transgressive behavior and align herself with the community’s mores. Presenting Dewey Dell in this manner encourages the reader to consider her as one that is trapped within the realm of forces and whose actions and desires indicate her desire to remain within the social structures that confine her. This portrayal of her character establishes Darl as fulfilling a central task of the naturalist narrator, that of observing and analyzing those characters who function in the realm of forces. Two, the menacing tone of his statement indicates that far from being a detached observer who is removed from the realm of forces, Darl enjoys the emotional distress that he can cause Dewey Dell by making her aware of his knowledge of her concealed pregnancy. Because of this, he violates the position that a naturalist narrator is supposed to occupy in a text in that his treatment of Dewey Dell reveals that he has not separated his emotions from the realm of forces. Therefore, he does not demonstrate the level of detachment that is expected of such a narrator. This aspect of his character raises an important

question in regard to naturalist narration in *As I Lay Dying*: Can a narrator that is not emotionally detached from the realm of forces perform the vital task of maintaining distance between the reader and characters that inhabit this realm?

One may begin to answer this question by taking advantage of the text's use of multiple perspectives and considering his statement to Dewey Dell in light of her account of their conversation. In her first monologue, she states, "I knew he knew because if he had said with the words I would not have believed that he had been there and saw us. But he said he did know 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?'" (27). Here, Dewey Dell points out that in addition to having knowledge of her pregnancy, Darl also "had been there and saw [her and Lavee]" having sex. Her questions concerning the likely courses of action that stem from her awareness of Darl's knowledge of her situation show that she assumes that he will act in accordance with his role as her elder brother within the prevailing domestic ideology. This is made apparent when she asks if he intends to tell Anse of her sexual activity or kill Lavee for taking her virginity. Considered in this context, his response of "Why?" may be read in two different ways. On the one hand, it may be read as an example of his efforts to detach himself from the affairs of his family members. For him to tell Anse or kill Lavee would require him to act within the bounds of the social ideologies from which he seeks to separate himself. On the other hand, it may be read as a question that arises from his belief that these ideologies have failed and that acting in accordance with them would be futile. Read in this manner, Darl may be understood as saying "Why?" because Dewey Dell's sexual activity and pregnancy only signify within the context of the idea of the pure Southern woman. Given Addie's transgression of this ideal and her exposure of the weakness of the figure of the patriarch, Darl may see these grounding social concepts as devoid of all meaning. Therefore, he

asks why as if to say, “What difference would his telling Anse or killing Lavee make in the grand scheme of life in the family and community in light of its collapsed ideological structure?”

If Darl is read as believing that responding to Dewey Dell’s pregnancy in a manner prescribed by the ideological system that prevails in the community is a futile task, his identity as a naturalist narrator is cast in an uncertain light. For example, his observation-based portrayal of this system following his realization of Addie’s transgression suggests that one may approach him as a naturalist narrator that functions as what Charles Child Walcutt calls the “scientist reformer” (24). This figure appears within a work of naturalist fiction as one that demonstrates to the reader through detached narration that “the state of man needs to be improved, and that human conditions are determined by the operation of material causes which can be traced, recorded, and understood, and, finally controlled” (24). While Darl shows in several of his monologues an ability to trace, record, and understand the “operation of material causes” that have determined the conditions of life within the Bundren family, his ability to control these causes is not made apparent over the course of the text. His inability to effect change in his environment is portrayed through his tendency to antagonize Dewey Dell and Jewel, and even Addie, instead of forging a constructive response to the loss that he feels because of the failure of the ideological structures that previously informed his sense of identity.

The fact that he is unable to put forth such a response is telling within the context of these three characters’ failures to meet the expectations placed upon them by the family and community. This is especially the case given the text’s participation in the Southern Gothic mode. By making Dewey Dell aware of his knowledge of her sexual activity and pregnancy, calling Jewel’s attention to the possibility of his illegitimacy, and separating Addie from Jewel in her dying hour, Darl does little more than respond to the characters that he views as direct or

symbolic participants in the collapse of his ideologically grounded self with acts of calculated passive aggression. That he behaves in this manner throughout the text indicates that the emotional pain that these characters' actions have caused him to feel has led him to retaliate by returning pain for pain rather than by devising a means of ameliorating the conditions that lead to their undesirable actions. Because of this, rather than act as a model of the conventional naturalist narrator as the "scientist reformer," Darl's emotional connection to his family overwhelms his desire for detachment and causes him to remain circumscribed within the conditions that he loathes. In this sense, Darl, like Anse and Dewey Dell, displays a degree of freedom by acting as a narrator, but in terms of literary naturalism, his emotions bind him within the realm of forces. As a result, his behavior indicates that he more closely resembles a naturalist character that is perpetually subject to the causes that determine his conditions than a naturalist narrator that exposes such causes and works to control them with the power of the detached intellect that marks one who inhabits the realm of freedom.

Approaching Darl in this light requires an explanation of how the text allows the reader to view him as a character that is detached from his social context and therefore appears to act as a naturalist narrator in spite of the evidence that suggests that he remains attached to his family. Perhaps the clearest way by which the text develops this aspect of his character is its portrayal of him in the first several monologues as a reliable narrator. The reader is made aware of his reliability early on because the text presents the opportunity for her to compare Darl's narration of the conversation that led to his and Jewel's departure from the farm on the evening that Addie died to that offered by Cora in her second monologue.

At the heart of Cora's assessment of the Bundren children is her belief that Darl is different from his siblings because "he was the only one of them that had his mother's nature,

had any natural affection” (21). She exemplifies this belief by contrasting her conception of him with her low opinion of Jewel, and this opinion derives from her understanding of Jewel and Darl’s inability to be present at the moment of Addie’s death. She states,

Not that Jewel, the one she labored so to bear and coddled and petted so and him flinging into tantrums or sulking spells, inventing devilment to devil her until I would have frailed him time and time. Not him to come and tell her goodbye. Not him to miss a chance to make that extra three dollars at the price of his mother’s goodbye kiss. A Bundren through and through, loving nobody, caring for nothing except how to get something for the least amount of work. (21-22)

Following this statement, Cora indicates that her knowledge of the conversation that led to Darl and Jewel’s departure to acquire the three dollars in question is based upon hearsay, namely what she was told by her husband who was a part of this conversation. She says, “Mr. Tull says Darl asked them to wait. He said Darl almost begged them on his knees not to force him to leave her in her condition. But nothing would do but Anse and Jewel must make that three dollars” (22). Here, Cora substantiates her belief by appealing to the word of Vernon, who appears to be respected by all in the community. Because of the level of respect enjoyed by her husband, Cora’s account of this conversation would appear highly credible were it not preceded by a contrasting version of this occurrence in Darl’s second monologue.

Darl begins this monologue by describing Vernon as having just arrived at the Bundrens’ home after having prepared a wagonload of lumber for the boys to take on delivery. He asks Darl if he is ready to make the trip, and after replying that he is prepared, Darl asks Vernon to wait until Anse has had the opportunity to decide whether he wants his sons to stay home because of

Addie's worsening condition. When Anse hesitates in making this decision, Darl reminds him that making the trip "means three dollars . . ." (17). He underscores the significance of earning this money when after Anse states that Addie wants the entire family to bury her in Jefferson immediately after she dies, he says that they will "need that three dollars then, sure . . ." (17). By reporting these two statements in his monologue, Darl presents himself as the Bundren who was most concerned about earning the money by hauling Vernon's lumber. Because of this, Cora's insistence that Jewel was more worried about three dollars than saying goodbye to his dying mother is proven false. In fact, Darl indicates in his monologue that Jewel is the one that is most upset by Anse, Vernon, and his speaking of Addie's impending death as a foregone conclusion. Considered in this light, Cora emerges as espousing incorrect assumptions about both Jewel and Darl and as being unreliable. The significance of her unreliability comes into greater focus when one notes that of the first four narrators to speak in the text, she and Darl are distinguished from the others, Jewel and Dewey Dell, by their command of language, which suggests a higher level of education. This distinction allows one to view Cora as coinciding with Cheryl Lester's description of Darl as one who possesses qualities that make his perspective "superior" to other characters in the community (38). Furthermore, both appear to be more closely aligned with "the middle-class readers to whom [Faulkner's] writing appeals" than with the remaining members of the Bundren family (38). In terms of naturalism, this alignment with the reader suggests that Cora and Darl are characters whose "superior" perspectives appear to place them outside of the realm of forces. It is this aspect of their roles as narrators that causes their contradicting monologues to become a subject of importance in the early stages of the text and beyond.

Because Cora and Darl control five of the first seven monologues, the opening section of *As I Lay Dying* is dominated by their voices. Therefore, their contradictory monologues may be

read as showing each as working to establish narratives that will encourage the reader to view other characters and events that transpire in the text in the manner that he or she prefers. However, rather than persuade the reader to accept her perspective, Cora's misrepresentation of Darl and Jewel, unbeknownst to her, causes her monologue to stand in stark contrast to Darl's. As a result, their disagreement places them in opposition to one another and extends to the reader an opportunity to judge their reliability based on the truthfulness of their narratives. From a naturalistic perspective, Darl emerges as the more reliable narrator for two reasons. First, because of the gender divisions that prevail in the community, Cora is prevented from having as great an access to the male-dominated public sphere and therefore cannot observe as many characters as freely as Darl can. Thus, she must depend upon her husband to tell her about events that happen outside of their home and outside of the limited sphere of feminine work. This reality is demonstrated by the fact that she refers to what "Mr Tull says" four times as she relates her account of the conversation that preceded Darl and Jewel's departure from the Bundren farm. Second, her misrepresentation of Darl and Jewel suggests that she has a biased point of view that she desires to impose upon the events that transpire in the text, as well as upon the reader, regardless of its factual accuracy. This indicates that her unreliability is likely a result of self-motivated dishonesty. Moreover, her insistence that her false narrative is based upon Vernon's account of the conversation points out that either he, like Cora, cannot be trusted as a narrator or that she is willing to use his good name as a means of supporting her empty claims. Regardless of which of these possibilities is the case, Cora's second monologue reveals her as an unreliable narrator. Consequently, Darl appears to be the narrator that is most capable of offering the reader a reliable representation of the realm of forces as it appears in his community. In this sense, the opening sections of the text present him in a manner that supports reading him as enacting the

role of naturalist narrator.

Having arrived at an understanding of how the text establishes Darl as a reliable narrator, one must then consider the aesthetic significance of its portrayal of him as one who falls into madness in its final sections. Central to this aspect of *As I Lay Dying* is its utilization of the Southern Gothic and naturalist modes in its exploration of the inner workings of the Southern family and community. Beginning with its naturalistic elements, the presentation of Darl as a reliable narrator that stands outside of the social structures that inspire selfish, even dishonest, behavior among his parents, siblings, and neighbors enables the reader to place a remarkable degree of confidence in his assessment of his surroundings. As Lester points out, this allows one to read Darl as a character that possesses a “double consciousness from which he looks critically at himself, his family, country folk, modernity, and the Jim Crow South” (43). This double consciousness is central to his ability to act as a naturalist narrator that both offers readers a glimpse into the realm of forces and acts as a buffer between them and the deterministic structures that prevail in this realm. Unlike Dewey Dell or Anse, whose identities as self-conscious narrators that are immersed in the realm of forces put the reader’s freedom at hazard, Darl’s double consciousness allows the reader to “explore determinism . . .” without the threat of being “submerged in it and himself becom[ing] the brute” (Howard 104).

Considered in this manner, Darl appears to extend to the reader a degree of narrational safety that is otherwise absent from the text. This safety emanates from its presentation of him as one with whom the reader may initially feel a sense of commonality. Along these lines, Lester writes, “On the basis of presumptively broader horizons and greater familiarity with modernity, shared perhaps with Darl yet certainly with Faulkner, the reader is cast from the outset as superior and opposed to the cramped and benighted horizons of characters who inhabit an

outmoded and disappearing world” (38). She goes on to say that “demonstrating the limited horizons of each character seems to be a principal aim and achievement of the novel’s stark shifts from one to another of its more than fifteen points of view” (38). Because Darl is established as having essentially an outsider’s view of his family and community, he seems unbound by limited horizons. In fact, Dewey Dell’s description of him as having eyes “filled with distance beyond the land” suggests as much (Faulkner 27). Therefore, he emerges as a superior character and is one that enables the middle class reader to rest secure in their own feelings of superiority amidst the “outmoded and disappearing,” and perhaps even alien, world that the text depicts. In this sense, one might argue that prior to his psychic break, he successfully performs the role of a naturalist narrator.

While Darl may be read as acting in the manner of a conventional naturalist narrator, it is important to note that the modal complexity of *As I Lay Dying* requires that the reader view him as functioning within both naturalistic and Southern Gothic frameworks. This dual modality allows one to view Darl as a willfully detached naturalistic narrator that inhabits the realm of freedom and as a Southern Gothic character that has experienced a profound loss of identity because of the failure of his family as an ideological structure. The sense of loss that shapes his perception and informs his decision-making causes Darl to become entrapped on emotional and psychological levels within the social structures that prevail in his community despite the degree of freedom that he exercises as a narrator. Thus, he, like Dewey Dell and Anse, is a kind of hybrid naturalist narrator in that he functions within both the realm of freedom and the realm of forces. Although he can detach himself from the realm of forces to the extent that he can observe and comment upon those who are immersed in it, he cannot eradicate the negative emotional connection that has been fostered by his realization of the family’s failures and the dissipation of

his sense of identity that their failures caused. Ultimately, it is this hybridity that enables *As I Lay Dying* to utilize the naturalist mode as a means of allowing the reader, through Darl, to experience the feelings of dread, loss, and entrapment that Southern Gothic fiction present as endemic in the Southern community.

To understand how Darl contributes to the text's ability to extend this experience to the reader, one may begin by focusing on a basic difference that distinguishes his character from that of a conventional naturalist narrator. In works of naturalist fiction, the narrator's primary task is comprised of observing characters within their environments with an emphasis on discovering how the forces that emanate from their environments shape their actions, decisions, and fates. Subsequently, the narrator presents this information to the reader in the form of a narrative that presents the observed characters and their experiences in terms of the forces that influence, or even determine, the course of their lives. As the term naturalism implies, the narrational method implemented in naturalist fiction derives from the observational methodologies of the natural sciences. Therefore, naturalistic narration strives for objectivity in its portrayal of characters and settings. Central to this objectivity is the separation of the narrator and the observed characters into different spheres of existence, the realm of forces and the realm of freedom. In order to maintain this degree of separation, the narrator must remain outside of the sphere occupied by the characters and should not attempt to alter the trajectory of events that transpire before his or her gaze regardless of any desire to do so. Should the narrator encroach upon this sphere of action, it would compromise his integrity as an objective narrator and place his freedom, and by extension, that of the reader, in jeopardy by exposing himself to the forces that shape life in the realm in which the characters function.

Approached in these terms, the difference between Darl and a conventional naturalist

narrator lies in his failure to carry out the primary tasks expected of such a narrator. This failure arises from his inability to detach himself from the realm of forces as represented by his family. More specifically, his inability to achieve full detachment is caused by the persistent, negative emotional connection that he feels toward those of his family that have contributed to the deceit that has thwarted the ability of the family to function on an ideological level as a structure that is capable of investing him with a stable sense of identity. But, his failure to act in the same manner as a conventional naturalist narrator is not confined to his inability to rid himself of this emotional connection. While it does prevent him from arriving at the state of detachment necessary to achieving an objective vantage, he further compromises, if not surrenders, his ability to act as a naturalist narrator by setting fire to Gillespie's barn in order to end the family's trip to Jefferson by destroying Addie's corpse, thus eliminating their need to bury her. By acting in this manner, Darl violates the role of the naturalist narrator not only because he attempts to change the course of events that he observes but also because he enters the realm of forces in a way that causes him to risk his freedom by violating the law of the community. And in doing so, he places the reader's security at hazard by creating the potential for the narrator in whom they have placed their trust to become bound by the power of the family and the community. In this sense, Darl's violation causes him to become one whose narration is at once unintentionally ironic and horrifying to those who read it, for in his failure to carry out the tasks of a naturalist narrator in their entirety, he exposes the troubling nature of the forces that emanate from the social environment of the text in the form of the Bundren family and the community but fails to protect the reader from these same forces by choosing to immerse himself, and thus the reader, in the realm in which they reign supreme.

Although Darl's burning of Gillespie's barn sparks his transformation into a naturalist

character, it is important to note that prior to this occurrence the text suggests that his inability to enact the role of naturalist narrator precedes this crime. Shortly before he sets fire to the barn, Darl has a conversation with his youngest brother, Vardaman, as they stand beside Addie's coffin that reveals him as having lost touch with reality. Vardaman relates this conversation as follows:

‘Hear?’ Darl says. ‘Put your ear close.’

‘What is she saying, Darl?’ I say. ‘Who is she talking to?’

‘She’s talking to God,’ Darl says. ‘She is calling on Him to help her.’

‘What does she want him to do’ I say.

‘She wants Him to hide her away from the sight of man,’ Darl says.

‘Why does she wants to hide her away from the sight of man, Darl?’

‘So she can lay down her life,’ Darl says. (214-215)

That Darl has lost touch with reality is made apparent when he implies that he possesses the ability to comprehend the sounds made by Addie's decomposing corpse in the same manner as he would a spoken language. His sincere belief in such a farfetched claim indicates that his potential to act as a naturalist narrator, a role grounded in scientific observation and detachment from one's environment, is eradicated by what appears to be his unsoundness of mind. The questions that this conversation raise concerning his mental status could be explained by citing the fact that Darl is speaking to a child who has a limited understanding of death and no concept of its effects on the body; however, such a reading does not seem warranted given the circumstances under which this conversation occurs. This is because Darl is the one who initiates the conversation and then directs Vardaman to listen to the sounds emitting from the coffin.

Subsequently, he states that he understands the meaning of these sounds not as a response to a child's questions but as a statement of what he believes to be a fact. That Vardaman confesses to the reader that he personally is unable to "tell what she is saying" reveals that of the two characters portrayed in this scene, he has the greatest degree of mental stability. While this admission could be read as indicating that Vardaman may believe Darl's claim that he can understand what Addie is "saying" despite the fact that he himself cannot, it seems more appropriate to read Vardaman's monologue as suggesting that Darl has at least temporarily lost his sanity. One might argue that in this mental state, which has been caused by the grotesque nature of the Bundrens' journey, Darl metaphorically hears Addie's rotting corpse express a desire for self-eradication. Ironically, in attempting to fulfill this desire by burning Gillespie's barn, Darl performs an action that will prove to be the means by which his own self will be eradicated from the world of the text. This, in turn, points to a significant problem in terms of the text's utilization of the naturalist mode: If Darl, who has acted as a naturalist narrator prior to this moment, falls into madness, there remains no character in the text that is capable of preventing the reader from becoming "submerged" in the realm of forces (Howard 104).

That Darl sets fire to Gillespie's barn following his apparent fall into madness suggests that the commission of this crime was inspired by his altered mental state. In terms of naturalism, these occurrences combine to compromise the reader's identity as a free subject shielded from the realm of forces to such an extent that her freedom is virtually eradicated within the context of the novel. For in attempting to destroy Addie's corpse by burning Gillespie's barn, Darl places his literal freedom at risk by violating the law. Prior to this moment, Darl has acted as a reliable narrator and has been the narrator most capable of allowing the reader to experience the social setting of the text without becoming circumscribed by the communal structures that shape the

identities and influence the actions of the characters that inhabit it. In this sense, he appears to fulfill the role required of a naturalist narrator, but by placing his freedom at hazard, he fails to act as a buffer between the reader and the forces that he exposes through his narration. Moreover, his setting fire to the barn suggests that unlike a conventional naturalist narrator, Darl fails to understand the mechanics of the ideological framework that organizes life in the community. Thus, he does not apprehend the fact that his violation of this framework will cause him to become subject to its punitive aspects, which are aimed at ensuring the protection and perpetuation of the community's grounding ideologies. From a naturalistic standpoint, the problems that arise from Darl's failures to understand the ideological realities of his situation would likely not affect a conventional naturalist narrator, for such a narrator would demonstrate a full comprehension of the ideological forces that act upon the characters whose stories he tells in that his narrational method is grounded in detached observation. Ultimately, Darl's immersion in the community and his emotional connection to his family prevent him from achieving full detachment and causes him to underestimate the problems that could arise by attempting to alter the course of action in the text by acting in the realm of forces.

Certainly, these features of Darl's character cast him as a failed naturalist narrator; however, if his failure is read as shedding light upon the inner workings of his social environment, it allows for a more thorough assessment of the text's treatment of naturalist narration. This is especially the case when his failure is read alongside Howard's discussion of the problems that face spectatorial characters that enter the realm of forces in naturalist fiction. This approach allows one to understand the text's employment of the naturalist narrator as an integral part of its portrayal of the Southern community as a gothic structure that entraps its inhabitants and offers them no means of escape. Because of this, the likelihood that the

characters within it can achieve the distance needed to establish a vantage point from which the community may be critiqued so as to affect change is limited, if not nonexistent.

At first glance, the figures in naturalist fiction that function outside of the realm of force may be read as possessing a degree of freedom that could allow them to be agents of such criticism. However, Howard argues that this is not necessarily so: “The exemption from determinism . . . itself becomes a disturbing confinement: the barrier that separates the privileged spectator from the helpless actor, the free from the unfree, seems to imprison both. And when the spectator does become involved in events, his privilege seems alarmingly precarious” (126). She states further that “if we follow determinist ideas to their logical conclusion, readers and critics may reasonably ask how anyone can get outside of the fabric of causality” (126). In the case of *Darl*, such questioning is especially relevant. His inability to evade the negative emotional connection to his family that stems from his loss of identity, which, in turn, may be read as leading him to set fire to Gillespie’s barn, suggests that despite his efforts to detach from his environment, he is unable to escape causality. Because he is subject to causality regardless of his level of detachment, *Darl* embodies an affirmative response to three significant questions that Howard poses in regard to the problem of causality and what she perceives as the inability to escape this defining feature of the naturalist mode:

Are the possibilities for self-awareness not themselves contingent—surely *all* the characters of naturalism and indeed we ourselves must be vulnerable to impersonal forces? From some broader perspective might our own understanding not seem partial and conditional, even as simple and selfish as that of the brute? And more immediately, especially in the world of these novels, might we not be brutalized at any moment by some disaster? (126)

Darl's failure to comprehend the potential chain of events that setting fire to the barn could put in motion and the manner in which the community would likely view his actions reveals him as an otherwise privileged character whose "partial and conditional understanding of his circumstances leads to his fall into a state of madness. Thus, he might be read not only as having been brutalized by his actions but also as having acted in a manner that appears to be as "simple and selfish" as the self-centeredness that he criticizes in Anse, Dewey Dell, and Jewel. However, the motivation behind his attempt to destroy Addie's corpse does not seem "simple and selfish" when considered in light of the reformist aspect of naturalist fiction.

By acting as a detached narrator, Darl seeks to gain control over his environment and thus tries to carry out what is perhaps the central task of the sociopolitical project of literary naturalism. Howard argues that such a "gesture of control affirms the existence of a perspective that is detached, unconditioned, objective—a perspective that corresponds to the epistemological premises and aesthetic program of naturalism and the claim to convey 'facts' . . ." concerning the particular environment that a text portrays (126). Furthermore, "It affirms the possibility that an adequate understanding can envision and may be able to effect changes that will make society better, more rationally organized, more humane" (126). One might argue that in setting fire to the barn, Darl was not merely attempting to end the Bundrens' journey prematurely but was rather trying to thwart the continuation of the pattern of deceit that their arrival in Jefferson would likely allow. Thus, by acting in the realm of forces, he may be understood as making an effort to change his social environment, especially at the level of the family. Yet in doing so, he fails to consider his actions as occurring within a world governed by causality and therefore does not appear to understand their potential to bring about undesired consequences. This view of Darl raises an important question in regard to his appropriation of the role of naturalist narrator: "If

our understanding is incomplete, may we not even now be making the choices that will lead to catastrophe?" (126).

If the reader is considered in matter of choices that lead to catastrophe in *As I Lay Dying*, then one might argue that Darl is not alone in underestimating, or simply disregarding, the dire consequences that may result from his entrance into the realm of forces. Because he acts in a manner similar to a conventional naturalist narrator, the reader is likely to place a degree of confidence in Darl that she is unlikely to place in other characters that narrate in the text. In this sense, the text may be understood as presenting him in a manner that conditions, or even determines, the reader's perception of him and his actions, for the confidence that the reader places in Darl may lead her to fail to consider the risk at which his actions in the realm of forces puts her sense of freedom while engaged with the text in light of its portrayal of the Southern community. Thus, in keeping with his role as a naturalist narrator, Darl's attempt to destroy Addie's corpse might be read as a noble act because it arises from his desire to "hide [his mother] away from the sight of man . . ." (215). It further appears to be the only means of undermining the family's use of her death as an occasion to fulfill their selfish desires and to maintain a semblance of respectability within the community despite their transgressions of its mores.

Such a reading calls attention to the possibility of understanding Darl's actions as evidence of his potential to resist the power of the family, one of the most influential social structures in the text, but it fails to understand the implications of his willful entrance into the realm of forces in the form of the community. Because of this, it overlooks the fact that his actions occur in a context in which his resistance represents a violation of the ideology that prevails in the community, for his act of resistance may be read as comprising an assault on the

three central ideological features of the Southern community, the family farm, the figure of the mother, and patriarchal rule. This causes his actions to be understood by those in the community, and even his family, as an act of transgression that is so egregious that it leads to his being declared insane and committed to the state asylum in Jackson. Viewed in light of the savage ideal, Darl's actions cause him to become one who represents so great a threat to the Southern way of life that rather than be merely "challenge[d] or . . . larruped through the streets . . ." by his neighbors, he must be extracted from the community (Cash 90). More significantly, by having Darl arrested and committed, the community demonstrates its power to divest him of his freedom, thus compelling him to be bound by the forces that he sought to evade and from which he had protected the reader.

If Darl is read in this manner, he, like Dewey Dell and Anse, emerges as an unreliable naturalist narrator; however, the stakes of his failure are significantly higher. Because Dewey Dell and Anse create naturalist narratives of self as a means of casting themselves as victims of circumstances and forces beyond their control, they are primarily interested in being understood by the reader as naturalistic characters that function in the realm of forces. In contrast, from the novel's first pages, Darl emphasizes the distance that exists between himself and his family, thus implying that he is removed from the forces that shape their actions and decisions. In this sense, Darl may be read as desiring to be seen as a detached narrator rather as a character in the realm of forces that happens to narrate. Unlike Dewey Dell and Anse, he does not appear to seek sympathy. Instead, he views himself as existing outside of the realm in which his family and neighbors function despite living in this same realm, and he seems to want the reader to view him in this manner. Because of this, his fall into madness, his surrender to the realm of forces, and his incarceration take on an especially tragic aspect, for throughout his monologues, Darl

does not conceive of himself as a naturalist character that is subject to forces that are beyond his control. Thus, at the heart of his fall, which unfolds in a manner similar to a conventional naturalist plot of decline, is the text's portraying the horror inherent not only in witnessing a seemingly rational character's descent into madness but also of the transformation of a naturalist narrator into a naturalist character. It is through this transformation, and its use of the naturalist mode, that the text is able to connect the reader with this figure in such a manner that the fall of the naturalist narrator becomes that of the reader. In this manner, *As I Lay Dying* removes the buffer between the reader and the realm of forces as represented by the community and Bundren family so as to allow her to experience this realm and the despair that the Southern Gothic seeks to encapsulate without the mediation of the naturalist narrator.

The treatment of the naturalist narrator in *As I Lay Dying* raises the question of whether it is possible for a character to escape the power of or to effect change within the social structures of family and community in works of Southern Gothic fiction. In the case of three characters who act in this role, Dewey Dell, Anse, and Darl, each is circumscribed by one of the social narratives that emanate from these structures at the conclusion of the text. Thus, their enactment of the role of naturalist narrator diminishes it to the point of eradication as well as the possibility of using it to effect changes that would ameliorate the negative effects that these pervasive social structures have on those within the text. Central to this problem is the fact that none of these characters facilitates a means of mediating the reader's experience of the realm of forces. On the one hand, Dewey Dell and Anse are interested in the reader only insofar as he or she can extend to them sympathy as they seek to preserve, or reclaim, their identities within the community despite their transgressive behaviors. On the other hand, Darl's exposure of his family's failures to enact their ideologically determined social roles suggests that he desires to use naturalistic

narration to demonstrate the need to bring about a “more rationally organized” model of the Southern community (Howard 126). However, his inability to detach himself from his social environment and his violation of the law within the realm of forces causes him to abandon the reader and any hopes of effecting change within the community in a manner consistent with the ideological project of literary naturalism. Through each of these characters, the text communicates the reality that there is no means of escape for those that inhabit the closed world it portrays. The only options available to them are self-annihilation, as in the case of Darl, or the perpetual replication of the ideological entrapment that pervades their lives.

By concluding with Anse’s introduction of his new wife, “Mrs Bundren” (Faulkner 261), the novel indicates that the Bundrens’ lives have come full circle, for this marriage reestablishes Anse’s role as patriarch, and the questionable character of his new wife suggests that she may hold the knowledge that will prove to be Dewey Dell’s salvation. Given the options available to the Bundrens as Southern Gothic characters, the adult characters that remain with the family at the novel’s end have chosen, in their own ways, to replicate the prevailing ideology.

Furthermore, Darl’s extraction from the family and the community at the end of *As I Lay Dying* leads one to believe that life, and the power of the social structures that determine it, will resume its normal course, for he is the only character who appears willing to challenge these structures. Nevertheless, the text’s deconstruction of the naturalist narrator suggests that hope is not lost. Because this technique exposes the reader to the horrors of realm of forces that in first-wave naturalism are mediated by the narrator, *As I Lay Dying* asks him or her to take on the tasks of observing and analyzing the characters and thus enact a role far different from that of earlier readers of naturalism. By placing the reader in this role, the text demands that he or she realize the corruptness of this model of the Southern family, and the community they inhabit, and

attempt to reimagine the structures that led to this state of affairs.

III. NATURALISM AND THE SOUTHERN GROTESQUE IN FLANNERY

O'CONNOR'S *WISE BLOOD*

In “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” Flannery O’Connor argues that over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Southern authors have worked predominately in two traditions of American fiction writing, those of the “dark and divisive romance-novel” and the “comic-grotesque” (46). In addition to participating in these traditions, she states that in the twentieth century, much Southern fiction had been influenced by the “lessons that all writers have learned from the naturalists . . .” (46). If one approaches modern Southern fiction in light of this statement, then he or she might expect to find that it tends to explore philosophies of determinism, implement an observational, journalistic writing style, and emphasize characters and scenarios that point toward the often futile nature of human experience. Should this prove to be the case, then it would follow that its writers represent a direct continuation of the project of the fin-de-siècle American literary naturalists, such as Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser. However, O’Connor’s fiction and that of Southern authors of the modernist and contemporary periods do not represent a clear continuum of the naturalist tradition. Even when their work utilizes elements that might be considered naturalist, this engagement with naturalism appears strikingly different from that of the aforementioned writers of first-wave American naturalism. In the case of non-Southern fiction written after the end of the naturalist movement that engages with naturalism in non-conventional ways, several critics have chosen not to explore the transformations of the aesthetic. Some maintain that the disappearance of the socioeconomic conditions and intellectual trends that gave rise to first-wave naturalism makes it impossible for one to consider fiction written during the modernist and contemporary periods naturalist in the same way as fin-de-siècle literary naturalism. Nevertheless, O’Connor’s statement concerning the “lessons of the

naturalists” indicates that there is indeed a strain of naturalism at work in much Southern fiction, including her own, and that to disregard its presence will prevent one from obtaining a full understanding of its place in these works of fiction as well as the evolution, or even reinvention, of American literary naturalism that has taken place over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

While O’Connor’s statement calls attention to the influence of naturalism on Southern fiction, it is important to note that she does not encourage her readers to identify her work as being primarily naturalist or naturalist at all. Rather, she presents naturalism as a viable mode for Southern authors but sees it as inferior to her preferred mode, the grotesque. She argues that the distinction between the author of naturalism and the author of the grotesque lies in his or her conception of life, especially where mystery and the supernatural are concerned. She contends that if an author believes that “the ills and mysteries of life will eventually fall before the scientific advances of men,” then his or her work will tend toward naturalism (41). Of such an author, she writes,

[I]f he believes that actions are predetermined by psychic make-up or the economic situation or some other determinable factor, then he will be concerned above all with an accurate reproduction of the things that most immediately concern man, with the natural forces that he feels controls his destiny. Such a writer may produce a great tragic naturalism, for by his responsibility to the things he sees, he may transcend the limitations of his narrow vision. (41)

In contrast, she maintains that for authors, such as herself, who are more “interested in what we don’t understand than in what we do” (42), naturalism’s focus on the immediate facts of material reality will prevent it from being their primary mode of fiction writing. Instead, she believes that

they will be more likely to utilize the grotesque. Concerning the author of grotesque fiction, she writes,

If the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious, if he looks upon us as beings existing in a created order to whose laws we freely respond, then what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself. His kind of fiction will always be pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery (42)

She states that this is “because for this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not begin except for at a depth where adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted” (42). In this sense, she sees the grotesque as picking up the story at the place where naturalism, like the “various determinations” in the character’s life, “ha[s] been exhausted.” It is this that leads her to draw her greatest distinction between grotesque and naturalist authors—the grotesque author “will be interested in possibility rather than in probability” whereas the naturalist author will be interested in the probabilities that stem from the working of the deterministic forces that he believes shape life. Therefore, rather than focus his or her concern on the effect of these forces on characters, the grotesque author “will be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves—whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not” (42).

Because grotesque fiction seeks to tell stories in which meaning lies outside of common understandings of motivation, psychology, and external determining factors, all of which are integral to the materialist conception of life that informs naturalist fiction, it cannot be considered a derivative of the naturalist mode. In fact, its focus on evil, grace, and faith indicates

that it is more accurate to state that grotesque fiction is primarily more concerned with the supernatural rather than the natural. However, O'Connor argues that this does not permit the grotesque to relinquish its grasp upon life in the material world, for "[f]iction begins where human knowledge begins—with the senses—and every fiction writer is bound by this fundamental aspect of his medium" (42). From this statement, one may deduce that drawing near the "limits of mystery," wherein lies the meaning that grotesque fiction seeks to convey, requires an author to create a realistic portrayal of the world his or her characters inhabit that the reader may engage with through his or her senses. Thus, while the objective of the grotesque is to arrive at a deeper understanding of the relationship between the individual and the supernatural, it can only accomplish this by grounding its stories and its characters in natural settings and then working toward its concern with mystery.

However, in the context of Southern fiction writing, this blending of grotesque and the natural has the potential to breed controversy. For example, in the 1935 essay "Heroes and Monsters," Ellen Glasgow harshly criticizes the emergent school of fiction most notably advanced by William Faulkner that she labels the "Southern Gothic" for what she sees as its failed attempt to combine the grotesque with realism. She contends that central to this failure is Southern Gothic authors' presentation of lurid violence, macabre imagery, grotesque characters, and a pervasive sense of despair as offering a realistic portrayal of Southern life. If one understands Glasgow's comments concerning realism as aligning with a Howellsian conception of literary realism as an artistic means of progressing American democracy by focusing on the "smiling aspects of life," then her critique will appear well-founded. But, if her essay is read alongside O'Connor's remarks on the place of naturalism in Southern fiction, then her excoriation of the Southern Gothic will strike one as emanating from a mistaken view of the kind

of realism that such fiction implements. Therefore, one might argue that rather than understand her objection as a reaction to its misuse of realism, it should be viewed as her misidentification of the Southern Gothic's grounding in naturalism as a failed or, to use her words, "pseudo," realism. Considered in this light, "Heroes and Monsters" initiates a tradition of disregarding the Southern Gothic's utilization of literary naturalism and the role that it played in contributing to the mode's participation in the reexamination of individual and communal conceptions of identity that took place in much Southern fiction during the modernist and contemporary periods.

An approach that seeks to reassess this trend in criticism on fiction commonly associated with the Southern Gothic tradition must begin by attempting to identify the relationship between the Southern Gothic and literary naturalism. It must explain how works in this modernist mode utilize naturalism in order to create a particular representation of the individual Southerner and the Southern community and to make meaning within this context. In what follows, this line of critique will be applied to O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood* (1953). However, from the outset, one must note the fact that O'Connor did not think of her works as participating in the Southern Gothic tradition. Rather, she preferred to identify them as belonging to the grotesque tradition because of their focus on supernatural concerns, namely convincing her audience of the need of all humans for redemption through Christ. Nevertheless, her intentions and desired labeling of her works does not eliminate the fact that *Wise Blood* implements elements of the naturalist and Southern Gothic aesthetics, namely characters and contexts, to discover and convey the spiritual knowledge that she believed is concealed by the material world and must be revealed through grotesque fiction rather than the aforementioned modes.

Although *Wise Blood* is typically read as a work of grotesque fiction, its resonance with naturalism and the Southern Gothic traditions creates the possibility of reading it as engaging

with these modes in order to lay the groundwork for its presentation of Hazel Motes as a grotesque protagonist who is “forced out to meet evil and grace and who act[s] on a trust beyond [himself] . . .” when he blinds himself in the penultimate chapter (O’Connor “Some” 42). That he, and indeed any grotesque protagonist, must be forced by something outside of him or herself into his or her encounters with evil and grace indicates that the process by which this is achieved may well reflect “the lessons that all writers have learned from the naturalists” (46). This is especially the case in *Wise Blood* with its emphasis on characters whose lives unfold within deterministic sociocultural narratives that prevail in the South that it portrays. To demonstrate how the text forces Hazel into his encounter with grace, this chapter will present him as a Southern Gothic character that from his youth is entrapped by a theological narrative that overshadows his existence and threatens to divest him of his freedom. In a manner similar to Faulkner’s Darl Bundren, Hazel attempts to resist the narrative that threatens his freedom and identity by creating an alternative narrative that counters its claims. He becomes the founding preacher of a new church, the “Church Without Christ” (O’Connor WB 103), a church that is grounded in the blasphemous assertions that Hazel makes to protect himself from the judgment of Jesus that is the center of the narrative that prevails in his community. By doing so, he emerges as creating and preserving a narrative-based identity that aligns with Daniel Dennett’s theory of the self and so becomes a kind of naturalist narrator in the context of the deterministic sociocultural setting that he inhabits. However, in keeping with the pattern of Southern Gothic fiction established in *As I Lay Dying*, his efforts ultimately undermine his intentions and put him in a situation in which he is placed at the mercy of that which he had hoped to escape, Jesus. This reading reveals *Wise Blood* as utilizing both the Southern Gothic and naturalism to establish and then deconstruct the self-trust that Hazel builds through his alternative theological narrative in

order to “force” him, through his own actions, to transform into a grotesque protagonist through his encounters with evil and grace.

Prior to the moment when Hazel Motes blinds himself with a bucket of liquefied lime, the narrator describes him as existing in an agitated state in which he seems prepared to elude the threats of an unseen assailant at any moment. Even in the opening description of him on the train ride to Taulkinham, Tennessee, he appears paranoid, and although the source of his paranoia is unexplained at this point, it is clear that it is sufficiently strong to make him consider harming himself if he deems such actions necessary. This is aptly demonstrated when the narrator states, “Hazel Motes sat at a forward angle on the green plush train seat, looking one minute at the window as if he might want to jump out of it, and the next down the aisle at the other end of the car” (3). In addition to portraying him as paranoid, this description of his constant agitation and his readiness to be on the run indicates that Hazel is also a groundless character, one who lacks a sense of stability or rootedness in his sense of self or his surroundings. This is further revealed when he is shown as being unable to engage with others on the train in small talk or to make requests for service without causing disruptions. For example, when Mrs. Hitchcock, a fellow passenger, attempts to converse with him, he does not respond and continues to shift his gaze rapidly about the train. Similarly, when he engages the porter in a conversation that should have consisted of a brief request for him to make up his berth for the night, he begins to harass him by repeatedly stating that he is from Eastrod, Tennessee, and then scoffing at him when the porter says that he is from Chicago. His insistence on telling the porter the name of his hometown derives from his belief that “[h]e knew him to be a Parrum nigger from Eastrod” (6). While the narrator does not confirm whether this knowledge is accurate, and the porter twice states that he hails from Chicago, it functions on two levels in this scene. First, it marks an attempt by Hazel to

establish a connection with someone who he believes is also from Eastrod, if only to tell him that neither of them could return there even “if they wanted to” (12). Second, his belief that the porter is living under a false identity calls attention to the possibility that one can create for him or herself a new identity by simply altering the facts of his or her biography so as to control the self-image that he or she presents to others.

Each of these readings of Hazel’s exchange with the porter lays the groundwork for *Wise Blood*’s subsequent presentation of him as a Southern Gothic character that attempts to escape from the influence of a theological narrative of entrapment that he believes determines his identity by divesting him of his sense of freedom. The first of these readings stems from his awareness that his hometown of Eastrod has virtually dissolved, which is the reason why he says that no one can return there. This is demonstrated when he reflects on Eastrod as it existed prior to his departure for the war: “[T]here must have been twenty-five people in Eastrod then, three Motes. Now there were no more Motes, no more Ashfields, no more Blasengames, Feys, Jacksons . . . or Parrums—even niggers wouldn’t have it. Turning in the road, he saw the store boarded and the barn leaning and the small house half carted away, the porch gone and no floor in the hall” (14-15). Although the narrator does not explain what caused the departure of all these families from the town, the reason why none of the Motes family remains in Eastrod is that all of them have died with the exception of Hazel, including his “two younger brothers” (14). The sense of homelessness that arises from the absence of his family is intensified when the narrator recounts Hazel’s visit to his childhood home the night after he arrived in Tennessee from the war. She states,

The house was as dark as the night and open to it and though he saw that the fence around it had partly fallen and that weeds were growing through the porch floor,

he didn't realize all at once that it was only a shell, that there was nothing here but the skeleton of a house. He twisted an envelope and struck a match to it and went through all the empty rooms, upstairs and down. When the envelope burnt out, he lit another one and went through them all again. That night he slept on the floor in the kitchen, and a board fell on his head out of the roof and cut his face. (19-20)

Thus, not only has Eastrod dissolved, the Motes home has dissolved as well. Because of the dissolution of his home and family, Hazel aligns with Louis Rubin's description of a Southern Gothic character. According to Rubin, the defining characteristic of the Southern Gothic character is a "spiritual dislocation . . ." that results from his "hav[ing] been divested of a transcendent significance for either his social or personal existence . . ." (xiii). Following this divestment, he "finds himself an 'alien, a stranger,' 'an exile,' in the world that had once been his home" (xiii). The fact that Hazel has become an alien not only "in the world that had once been his home" but also in the house in which he was raised is demonstrated in an ironic manner by the board that "f[alls] on his head out of the roof and cut[s] his face" (O'Connor WB 20). This scene and his earlier statement to the porter that no one can go back to Eastrod reveal that Hazel has lost any sense of "transcendent significance for either his social or personal existence . . ." and has become through this experience a thoroughly Southern Gothic character (Rubin xiii).

The gothic nature of Hazel's alienation from his home is further indicated by the fact that although Eastrod itself has passed from existence during the time he spent in the military, the memory of it continues to haunt his mind and determine his view of reality. The narrator demonstrates this when after Hazel's initial altercation with the porter, she states, "Eastrod filled his head and then went out beyond and filled the space that stretched from the train across the empty darkening fields" (6). Although Hazel is right to say that no one can return to Eastrod, at

least to the form in which it had previously existed, this does not prevent the indelible mark that his hometown left upon his consciousness. That this memory is so powerful that it fills his mind and the landscape that he sees indicates that while he speaks truly when he tells Mrs. Hitchcock that he is not going home, it is equally true to say that he never leaves home because Eastrod has become the cognitive matrix through which he perceives the world. The fact that Eastrod is so firmly planted in Hazel's mind makes a unique contribution to his identity as a Southern Gothic character in that he can potentially derive a sense of transcendent significance by living in the past, but this significance does not translate to the South that he returns to following the war. As a result, he is a doubly alienated character, for Eastrod exists only in his mind, and his inability to escape from this mental world of the past prevents him from thriving in the modern city of Taulkinham.

Hazel's inability to escape the lingering effects of Eastrod becomes the first of two ironies that come to define him as both a Southern Gothic and a naturalist character. While the dissolution and subsequent memory of his childhood home prevent him from maintaining or achieving transcendent significance for his social existence, his personal existence is overwhelmed by a "spiritual dislocation" that is a product of his experience with the theological narrative that prevailed in Eastrod during his childhood and would function in his life as a deterministic narrative of entrapment (Rubin xiii). The substance of this narrative is presented in the narrator's account of the preaching of Hazel's grandfather:

Every fourth Sunday he had driven into Eastrod as if he were just in time to save them all from Hell, and he was shouting before he had the car door open. People gathered around his Ford because he seemed to dare them to. He would climb up on the nose of it and preach from there and sometimes he would climb up onto the

top of it and shout down at them. They were like stones! he would shout. But Jesus had died to redeem them! Jesus was so soul-hungry that he had died, one death for all, but He would have died every soul's death for one! Did they understand that for each stone soul, He would have died ten million deaths, had His arms and legs stretched on the cross and nailed ten million times for one of them? (15-16)

To demonstrate further the nature of the "soul-hungry" Jesus, he calls the audience's attention to the young Hazel and says,

Did they know that even for that boy there, for that mean sinful unthinking boy standing there . . . , Jesus would die ten million deaths before he would let him lose his soul? He would chase him over the waters of sin! Did they doubt Jesus could walk on the waters of sin? That boy had been redeemed and Jesus wasn't going to leave him ever. Jesus would never let him forget he was redeemed. What did the sinner think there was to be gained? Jesus would have him in the end. (16)

Throughout this sample of Hazel's grandfather's preaching, he reflects what W. J. Cash calls the Southerner's desire for "a faith as simple and emotional as himself," one that had the power "to draw men together in hordes, to terrify them with Apocalyptic rhetoric, to cast them into the pit, rescue them, and at last bring them shouting into the fold of Grace" (56). While such preaching is intended to frighten the audience into seeing the gravity of sin and the need for redemption, thus terrifying them into "coming to Jesus," it has the opposite effect on Hazel: he "did not need to hear [this sermon]" because his grandfather's theology had already taken hold of his mind and his life through its harsh determinism (O'Connor WB 16). That is, "[t]here was already a deep

black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin” (16). Rather than lead Hazel to submit his life, his will, to Jesus, his grandfather’s preaching caused him to attempt to live a life of sinless perfection so as to avoid having to encounter this Jesus who “would chase him over the waters of sin” and “would have him in the end!” Therefore, Hazel becomes a doubly determined character—he is determined to find a way of living that will allow him to avoid the inevitable confrontation with Jesus that is the predetermined end that his grandfather presents as awaiting all sinners.

The conception of Jesus that comes to haunt Hazel’s mind further reveals the extent to which the deterministic theology that prevailed in Eastrod reflects Cash’s description of the Southern Christianity that arose prior to the Civil War. He writes, “The God demanded [by the Southerner] was an anthropomorphic God—the Jehovah of the Old Testament: a God who might be seen, a God who *had* been seen. A passionate, whimsical tyrant, to be trembled before, but whose favor was the sweeter for that” (56). In Hazel’s case, the fear that he felt because of his belief in this conception of God led him to reject the bidding of Jesus when he appears to him. Concerning this experience, the narrator states, “[H]e saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown” (16). His refusal to respond to Jesus’ beckoning is ironical because it occurs after he had arrived at the knowledge that “he was going to be a preacher” and therefore one of Jesus’ “representatives” (O’Connor WB 16 & Cash 56). This irony stems from the fact that he views Jesus as a malevolent figure, a dispenser of eternal judgment rather than one who extends grace and redemption to humankind. So, instead of responding to Jesus’ bidding by following him and surrendering to his will, he resolves to stay

“in Eastrod with his two eyes open, and his hands always handing the familiar thing, his feet on the known track, and his tongue not too loose” (16). Because this determination is focused on ensuring that he will be grounded in familiarity, it emerges as his attempt to avoid the uncertainty that is promised if he should choose to follow Jesus “into the dark where he was not sure of his footing” Considered in this manner, his decision to remain in the familiar setting of Eastrod is one that is inspired by his conviction that “the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin” as well as his “strong confidence in his power to resist evil” (16, 17), especially in a place where he could be sure of his moral footing. Again, his refusal to follow the ragged Jesus in his mind marks another instance in which he seeks to resist the theological determinism that bears upon his life by once more asserting himself as a self-determining individual rather than a naturalist character who is determined by an outside force.

More than reveal Hazel as devising a means by which he can avoid sin and Jesus, his reasons for wanting to stay in Eastrod are evidence of his attempt to respond to the threat posed by the narrative conveyed through his grandfather’s preaching by creating an alternative narrative that he can enact so as to protect himself from committing sin and becoming subject to Jesus’ judgment. That his grandfather’s sermon closes with the haunting sentence “What did the sinner think there was to be gained? Jesus would have him in the end” invests it with a clear determinism because his theology is grounded in the belief that all humans have a sinful nature. As a result, they are bound to sin and cannot avoid a confrontation with Jesus during which they must come to terms with their sinfulness. Viewed from a naturalist perspective, Hazel’s belief that he can escape judgment by acting in light of a narrative that is the product of his intellect and will emerges not only as a means of resisting a prevailing narrative by which he feels entrapped but also as a means of exercising his free will in a manner that will protect his identity

as an autonomous being. Because of this, his alternative narrative represents his attempt to construct, to use Daniel Dennett's terms, a "protective fortress" of words that will shield his self from the adverse effects of the religious narrative into which he has been inscribed. That he has been inscribed into this deterministic narrative is pointedly demonstrated when his grandfather uses him to exemplify the claims that he makes while preaching: "That boy had been redeemed and Jesus wasn't going to leave him ever. Jesus would never let him forget he was redeemed" (16). In this context, Jesus becomes a threat to Hazel's freedom as well as his soul. Therefore, his narrative becomes not only the basis of the identity that he creates "in response to perceived challenges real or imaginary" that emanate from his environment but also the means by which he intends to avoid being subsumed by determinism (Dennett 417). However, regardless of the benefits that he may derive from this narrative, it leads to another form of contradictory double alienation by leading him to subscribe to, and potentially replicate, his grandfather's theology through his intention to become a preacher and simultaneously resist it by refusing to submit his will to that of Jesus. Consequently, Hazel emerges as a Southern Gothic character for which the only available behavior in response to the sociocultural narrative that determines him is the replication of this narrative of self-annihilation.

In terms of naturalism, the mentality required to create this narrative reveals Hazel as acting in a manner similar to a scientist reformer of first-wave naturalist fiction in that he crafts his narrative according to a belief that "human conditions are determined by the operation of material causes which can be traced, recorded, and understood, and, finally controlled" (Walcott 24). However, the fact that he inhabits a world that is informed by the theological assumptions of O'Connor's conception of the grotesque distinguishes him from a purely naturalistic version of the scientific reformer, for he believes that the conditions of his community and of his life are

supernatural rather than material in nature. Nevertheless, his creation of an alternative religious narrative indicates that he believes that his condition might “be improved” by his asserting his understanding of it in a manner that will allow him to control his life to the extent that he can avoid Jesus and thus determinism. In this sense, one might go so far as to say that by attempting to resist the deterministic religious narrative that his grandfather preaches, and which he takes for truth, Hazel makes an effort to preserve his sense of freedom by conceiving of a way of living that will enable him to remain outside of this narrative. By trying to forge such a resistance, he emerges as one whose life unfolds within a deterministic sociocultural framework yet who strives to protect himself from falling victim to the narrative in which this framework is grounded. As such, he reflects the tendency of Southern Gothic protagonists to act as revised naturalist characters that realize the potential for their environments to entrap them, thus rendering them thoroughly naturalist characters, and who struggle to maintain their freedom, especially where it concerns their ability to be self-determining individuals.

That Hazel believes that he is self-determining rather than determined by anything outside of him is indicated in the narrator’s description of his time in World War II: “When he was eighteen and the army called him, he saw the war as a trick to lead him into temptation, and he would have shot his foot except that he trusted himself to get back in a few months, uncorrupted. He had a strong confidence in his power to resist evil; it was something that he had inherited, like his face, from his grandfather. He thought that if the government wasn’t through with him in four months, he would leave anyway” (17). However, this did not prove to be the case. Instead, “[h]e was gone four years; he didn’t get back, even for a visit” (17). The fact that he was drafted by the government and made to stay abroad for four years rather than four months again proves that Hazel is subject to forces beyond his control, regardless of his belief that he is a

free, self-determining individual. Nevertheless, in this instance, as with his earlier decision to avoid Jesus, he fails to see the deterministic nature of his experience in the war by inserting it into a narrative that supports the self-image of himself that he maintains and desires to protect. He accomplishes this by viewing the war as part of a grand spiritual narrative in which it is not an event of national or historical import but a “trick” specifically aimed at “lead[ing] him into temptation.” Whether he sees this as a ploy of Satan or as a means by which he will be tempted into sin and therefore confrontation with Jesus is unclear, but what is clear is that he fails to see it as an instance in which his will has been superseded by that of the government. This is demonstrated when he exercises free will in his decision not to render himself unfit for service by “sho[oting] his foot” and chooses instead to go to war, yet even this choice is part of the narrative that informs his understanding of his circumstances, for central to his participation in the trick that he believes the war to be is the fact that “he trusted himself to get back in a few months uncorrupted” because of his “strong confidence in his power to resist evil . . .,” which is the most persistent feature of his conception of himself as a self-determining being.

The level of self-trust that Hazel demonstrates here functions on two levels in terms of the text’s engagement with naturalism in this sequence. One, because it blinds him to the fact that his life has been shaped by forces outside of his control, his grandfather’s preaching, and the World War II draft, it casts him as a naturalist character who is unaware that he functions in the realm of forces, regardless of the façade of freedom that he creates for himself and attempts to preserve with his narratives. However, this is not to say that his lack of awareness should lead one to read him as being similar to conventional naturalist characters that are not “conscious of what they are doing or capable of any self-analysis of their motivations . . .” (French 125). Rather, his tendency to protect his sense of self with narratives that respond to events and

structures with the power to determine him demonstrates the extent to which he represents a revision of the naturalist protagonist. Two, because his self-trust and the narratives that support it are defining features of his character, at this point in the text, he does not align with O'Connor's description of grotesque characters as those that "act on a trust beyond themselves . . .," for every decision that he has been determined to make is influenced by the self-trust that he draws from his protective narratives of self.

In light of this, it may seem warranted for one to read Hazel as a kind of naturalist character as opposed to a grotesque character, but such a reading will not hold given the trajectory that his life follows in the remainder of *Wise Blood*. Nevertheless, the fact that his naturalist characteristics outweigh his grotesque characteristics at this point remains relevant and demands explanation in order for one to understand how O'Connor's utilization of the grotesque works in his case. O'Connor states that before characters in grotesque fiction can "act on a trust beyond themselves . . .," they must be "forced out to meet evil and grace" ("Some" 42). That she describes such characters as being "forced out" indicates that the naturalist elements of the text's portrayal of Hazel do not compete against its utilization of the grotesque but rather set the stage for his eventual meetings with "evil and grace." In fact, one might argue that its characterization of him is an example of a work of grotesque fiction making use of one of "the lessons that all writers have learned from the naturalists . . ." (46) by presenting him as creating a level of self-trust that is so strong that it prevents him from realizing the deterministic elements in his life that will ultimately, in naturalist fashion, force him to relinquish his façade of freedom and confront the realities of evil and grace.

That the naturalist elements of Hazel's character counter the sense of freedom that he derives from his creation of a theological alternative raises a question: What constitutes freedom

in the world of *Wise Blood*? The significance of this question is highlighted by the fact that O'Connor's note to the second edition of the text cites Hazel's freedom as a central concern. She writes,

That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence. For them Hazel Motes' integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to. Does one's integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that it usually does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel . . . can only be asked to deepen. (WB np)

In regard to Hazel's freedom, this passage calls attention to two important points. The first concerns his inability to "get rid of" the image of Jesus as "the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind." At the heart of this inability is the fact that *Wise Blood* presents Hazel as a "Christ-haunted" character brought up among Southern Protestant fundamentalists whom Ralph C. Wood describes as "h[olding] fast to twin realities often abandoned by Christians and secularists alike: an unembarrassed supernaturalism on the one hand, and a deep veneration of Holy Scripture on the other" (34). He argues that it is these facts of traditional Southern life that led O'Connor to say that "while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted" (Aspects 44), a state of being that she says stems from the Southerner's fear that "he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God" (45). Because she sees this fear as taking the form of a ghost, Wood argues that this image of Jesus "cannot be banished" from the Southern mind (38).

The second point concerns the nature of freedom in the context of Hazel's being a Christ-haunted Southerner. On the subject of freedom in O'Connor's fiction, Thomas F. Haddox writes,

I tentatively conclude that O'Connor highlights an inherent tension between mimesis and freedom, and that in affirming freedom at crucial moments, she complicates Aristotle's judgment in the *Poetics* that "the use of impossible probabilities is preferable to that of unpersuasive possibilities." It is always 'possible' to act freely, especially if one understands that one's truest freedom lies in accepting God's gift of grace. But is it probable that one will do so—especially if one has been shaped by a formerly Protestant and now liberal culture that tends to view will as untrammelled? O'Connor thinks, with much justification, that such probabilities are "unpersuasive," though not "impossible." When she warns her readers not to misread the violence in ["A Good Man is Hard to Find"], she might well be exhorting, "don't worry about being persuaded. Be free instead, for only in openness to grace does proper freedom exist." (36)

If the freedom that Hazel seeks to secure with his early theological alternative and his invention of the Church Without Christ following his return from the war is considered in light of this passage, then it appears that this freedom is no freedom at all. In fact, one might go so far as to say that his early rejection of the bidding of Jesus to follow him has the effect of transforming his attempts to create narratives that he believes will preserve his freedom into deterministic narratives of entrapment that, should he persist in them, will prevent him attaining the freedom that comes from an "openness to grace." His movement from his early plan to become a preacher and live a life void of sin to his conclusion during the war that he has no soul, that the "misery he had was a longing for home . . ." and "had nothing to do with Jesus" to his preaching the Church

Without Christ indicates that he intended to persist in these narratives in order to protect himself from divine judgment (18). However, one might sympathize with him because the implications of the theological narrative that he struggles to escape are so powerful, so inevitable that if he remains inscribed in it, he will lose his freedom in the secular sense and his identity as a self-determining being. Should this prove to be the case, he will reflect perfectly the tendency of Southern Gothic fiction to divest its characters of identity, and in naturalist terms, he will become a determined character whose freedom is subsumed by forces that are outside of his control. But the kind of determinism that is at work in his life remains up for debate in the text, and the way one identifies it will depend upon whether he or she believes the narrative that determines Hazel's life is a fiction or an inescapable and irreducible fact woven into the fabric of creation.

Regardless of the conclusion that one reaches concerning this issue, it is clear that at no point during *Wise Blood* does Hazel underestimate the implications of redemption. Even when he appears to be the most resistant to the claims of Christianity, the nature of his resistance and the narrator's presentation of his thoughts suggests that he is at least partially unconvinced by his own preaching and is thus unable to use his alternative theology to achieve his goal of self-determination, which in naturalist terms, is tantamount to freedom. One example of this occurs when he becomes perplexed by Sabbath Lily Hawks' confession that she is a bastard despite her father's claim to be a preacher who blinded himself with lime "to justify his belief that Jesus Christ had redeemed him" (108). In order to show her father, Asa Hawks, that "he was in earnest when he said he preached The Church Without Christ," Hazel decides to "seduce" Sabbath and allow the preacher's "ruined" daughter to be evidence of the sincerity of his belief that he has saved himself "[w]ithout repenting" (106 & 108). However, upon learning that she is a bastard,

Hazel's plan is overwhelmed by conflicting thoughts over whether a bastard could be admitted into the Church Without Christ. As they drive into the countryside beyond Taulkinham, Sabbath gives an account of her birth and explains how she received her name. Hazel shows no interest in her until she says of her parents, "Him and her wasn't married . . . and that makes me a bastard, but I can't help it. It was what he done to me and not what I done to myself" (116). This statement leaves Hazel dumbfounded because he "couldn't see how a preacher who had blinded himself for Jesus could have a bastard" (116). She assures him that this is the case by saying that she is a "real bastard . . .," then exclaiming, "[A]nd do you know what? A bastard shall not enter the kingdom of heaven!" (116). The fact that Sabbath is a bastard should make her a fitting candidate for the Church Without Christ and give Hazel the opportunity to use his alternative theology to show one who is the epitome of a determined character that the narrative that has labeled her as damned from her birth is not binding. However, this fact actually serves to turn the tables on Hazel's plan to ruin Sabbath by demonstrating, at least by Sabbath's logic, that she is already ruined.

More than derail Hazel's intentions for her, Sabbath's account of her birth and bastardy takes on a greater significance where Hazel's theological alternative and the text's engagement with naturalism are concerned. Central to this is the fact that in this scene she takes control of the story and narrates her own alternative to the theological narrative that she views as dictating her damnation. Rather than respond to Hazel's half-formulated statements of disbelief at her being a bastard, Sabbath tells him another story that stems from this issue, that of her exchange of letters with Mary Brittle, an advice columnist in a local paper who "tells you what to do when you don't know" (117). In her first letter, she writes: "'Dear Mary, I am a bastard and a bastard shall not enter the kingdom of heaven as we all know, but I have this personality that makes boys follow

me. Do you think I should neck or not? I shall not enter the kingdom of heaven anyway so I don't see what difference it makes'" (117). In response, Brittle tells her, "'Dear Sabbath, Light necking is acceptable, but I think that your real problem is one of adjustment to the modern world. Perhaps you ought to re-examine your religious values to see if they meet your needs in Life. A religious experience can be a beautiful addition to living if you put it in the proper perspective and do not let it warf you. Read some books on Ethical Culture'" (117). According to Mary Frances Hopkins, this correspondence, especially Brittle's reply, should be read as "constitut[ing] a strong authorial commentary on the value systems [the writers] speak" (207). She goes on to say that "[o]ne need not know O'Connor's religious convictions to recognize her ridicule of the 'salvation' found in [the] kind of popular psychology" that Brittle offers (207). Certainly, Hopkins is correct to highlight the narrator's satirical treatment of Mary Brittle's advice, but she fails to call attention to a separate concern that arises from her response to Sabbath's letter.

Although Brittle and Sabbath speak of this situation in terms of the religious context that Sabbath establishes, it is clear that Brittle is incapable of understanding the nature of this context, namely Sabbath's conception of herself as one for whom the fact of damnation precedes her birth. In the mind of an individual who espouses this belief, the opportunity to "re-examine [her] religious values" does not exist because these "values" emanate from scriptures that she has been taught to view as communicating truths that are eternally binding. Therefore, she cannot conceive of herself as having the power to alter the invariable precepts that pronounce her damnation in a manner that renders them better able to "meet [her] needs in Life." The problem that hinders communication between Sabbath and Mary Brittle is the fact that neither comprehends the terms in which the other understands herself and the world she inhabits. In the

case of Brittle, one who espouses her modern perspective will likely be unable to realize that for Sabbath, who is circumscribed by an unbending, hard determinist theology, religion is not a matter of having a “religious experience” nor is such an experience merely an “addition to living.” Rather, Sabbath understands the world, humanity, and indeed all experience as being religiously determined in nature. This conception of existence arises from the fact that she sees the theological narrative that circumscribes her as circumscribing all things and inscribing upon them preexistent identities, some of which, as in the case of being a bastard, may not be altered by any means, human or divine. In this way of thinking, religion does not “warf,” or warp, a person but rather identifies him or her in rigid terms that point out exactly where he or she stands in regard to salvation or damnation. However, to conclude that Sabbath’s correspondence with Brittle, and her recounting of this correspondence to Hazel, serves only to reveal her as one who has embraced her place within the prevailing theological narrative overlooks the importance of her assumption of control of her conversation with Hazel and what it reveals about the latent beliefs concerning this deterministic narrative that he conceals with the rhetoric of the Church Without Christ.

While Hazel believes that he is in control of Sabbath, and thus maintains his identity as the author of a naturalist narrative, the narrator demonstrates that this is not the case when after learning that she is a bastard, he becomes unaware of his actions and “driv[es] his car toward the ditch while he stared at her, saying ‘How could you be . . .’” (116), unable to utter the word “bastard.” At first glance, this loss of control seems unimportant, but when it is read in light of Hazel’s statement that “Nobody with a good car needs to be justified” (109), it takes on greater significance. This claim, while farfetched, is integral to his argument that he has saved himself “[w]ithout repenting” (109), for as Wood points out, his “broken-down Essex is indeed his deity:

he sleeps in it, preaches from it, and relies on it to escape from all obligations that are not of his own choosing” (15-16). But while the Essex may be read as Hazel’s deity, because it is a machine, he is able to exert control over it. More specifically, it is literally the vehicle that allows him to fulfill his desires. That he conceives of it in this manner is demonstrated when he says, “That car’ll get me anywhere I want to go” (O’Connor *WB* 125). Thus, unlike God, as long as it is functional, the Essex must respond to Hazel’s will. However, the conversation with Sabbath shows that his control is not perfect, and it also shows the extent to which his alternative theology and the façade of self-determination that he creates with it begin to deconstruct when any assumption upon which it rests proves untrue.

In this instance, Sabbath’s identity as a bastard works against two assumptions that fuel Hazel’s preaching of the Church Without Christ and his conception of himself as existing outside of the power of the deterministic forces that threaten his freedom. One, because Asa Hawks has a bastard child, he cannot be considered an unsullied man of God against whom he may target his rhetoric so as to demonstrate the sincerity of his beliefs. Two, despite purporting to embrace sin, he is conflicted over whether a bastard may enter his church. While his perplexity over these issues might be read as stemming from their unexpected revelation, it seems more likely that it arises from his inability to conceive of a religious model in the construction of his alternative theology that is different from the theology that he seeks to reject. This indicates that although he intends to escape the prevailing theological narrative, as preached by his grandfather and Asa Hawks, who argues that “you can’t run away from Jesus” because “Jesus is a fact” (47), by creating an alternative narrative, one that will ensure his freedom in the face of this spiritual determinism, he cannot easily imagine the same kind of freedom being extended to others. This results from his inability to embrace those whom he has previously been taught to view as

sinner in his new theology because he cannot see beyond the determining effect that he believes that their sins have on their identities. Therefore, despite the mobility that his automobile gives to him and his willingness to preach blasphemy and nihilism to those he encounters, he cannot escape the lingering effects of the theological narrative that shaped his worldview as a child and teenager. In fact, this narrative pervades his mind to the point that it causes him to reconsider the freedom that his alternative narrative promises to the point that it takes on features of the rejected narrative and thus threatens to become a narrative of entrapment in its own right. This is most clearly demonstrated when immediately after telling Sabbath that “[t]here’s no such thing as a bastard in the Church Without Christ . . .,” “[h]e looked at her irritably, for something in his mind was already contradicting him and saying that a bastard couldn’t, that there was only one truth—that Jesus was a liar—and that her case was hopeless” (120). Subsequently, the narrator indicates that Hazel becomes more settled on this subject: “The thing in his mind said that the truth didn’t contradict itself and that a bastard couldn’t be saved in the Church Without Christ” (120). Although he determines internally that this issue is “not important” and says that “[t]here wouldn’t be any sense to the word, bastard, in the Church Without Christ,” Hazel never goes so far as to state that a bastard could be accepted into his church (120, 121), regardless of the fact that the absence of this claim contradicts his foundational assertion that humans are free from the stain of sin and have no need of redemption.

This contradiction marks a glaring inconsistency in Hazel’s theology, but it is important to realize that the reason why he fails to see it as a problem is the fact that he does not actually purport to use this theology to create an actual church, which is made evident by his lack of serious interest in gaining a membership. In fact, one might even say that although he preaches vigorously to the public and at times to the few characters with whom he becomes acquainted,

his preaching tends to harass those who hear it rather than scandalize them by “exciting vigorous affirmation or equally vigorous negation” in the manner that his grandfather’s preaching scandalized him (Wood 160). Thus, regardless of his proclamations of the Church Without Christ and the “new kind of Jesus . . . that can’t waste his blood redeeming people with it because he’s all man and ain’t got any God in him” (O’Connor WB 119), the preaching through which he articulates his theological alternative is not aimed at provoking a religious response from others. Rather, it is an offensive manifestation of his extreme solipsism that is intended to preserve his sense of self from the opinions of others and the theological narrative into which he was inscribed as a child. Therefore, despite his claims to offer in his preaching a means by which others may become free from the determining effects of sin, he is not actually concerned with aiding in the achievement of anyone’s freedom other than his own. This is also demonstrated by his fear that Asa Hawks’ having a bastard proves him to be a hypocritical sinner posing as a minister, for this fear is driven by his knowledge that such a sinner will not be troubled by his willful embrace of sin and his blasphemous claims. Should this prove to be the case, Hazel’s narrative of self would lose its ability to affect the one person that he desires to scandalize with his preaching. Thus, he attempts to shore up the conception of Hawks as a godly man by probing Sabbath to tell him about how her father was “changed . . . into a preacher for Jesus” (118). However, her response is vague and secondary to her attempt to seduce him, a fact that goes unnoticed by Hazel because of his focus on preserving the assumptions that he holds about Hawks. In this sense, he emerges as one who, in Dennett’s terms, has become “almost constantly engaged in presenting [himself] to others, and to [himself] . . .” (417).

That Hazel is particularly interested in proving to Hawks that he is sincere in preaching the Church Without Christ and his rejection of Christian doctrine becomes an integral aspect of

his character and contributes to his creation of a theological alternative to the preaching of his grandfather. This derives from the fact that until the moment he discovers that Hawks is a fraud, he believes that Hawks is indeed a Christian preacher “who had blinded himself for Jesus” (O’Connor *WB* 116), a belief that reveals Hazel as one whose identity as an anti-Christian depends upon having a supposed Christian foil from whom he may distinguish himself. While this serves as his primary means of “*representing [himself]*—in language and gesture . . .” (Dennett 417), some critics have noted that his choice to represent his anti-Christian character through blasphemy undermines his intentions and causes him to lose control of the representation of himself that he seeks to project. For example, in his first proclamation of the Church Without Christ, Hazel states, “I’m going to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn’t the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar” (O’Connor *WB* 101). Concerning this passage, Donald E. Hardy writes,

Haze here denies the miracle work of Christ, the Fall, original innocence, redemption, and judgment. In other words, he claims to believe, by being “a member and preacher to that church where the blind don’t see and the lame don’t walk and what’s dead stays that way,” that he has not been redeemed. Of course, given the pragmatics of negation, Haze shows that he “knows” quite a bit about the suppositions of redemption through what he denies. (82)

Marion Montgomery pushes this point further: “Hazel Motes . . . , in pressing bad manners to the level of blasphemy, discovers that one cannot blaspheme what does not exist, so that his very attempt at impious rejection becomes a proof of the existence of that which he attempted to deny as existing at all . . . that ‘ragged figure’ of Christ in the back of his mind” (131). It is this feature

of Hazel's character that best reveals him as the Christian *malgré lui* that O'Connor describes him as being in her note to the second edition of *Wise Blood*.

That Hazel maintains some level of belief in the necessity of redemption, and thus embraces the theological narrative that he opposes, regardless of his anti-Christian rhetoric is demonstrated in his brief exchange with the young women in the dining car on the train ride to Taulkinham. When the smoke of one of the women's cigarette begins to blow repeatedly in his face, Hazel says to her, "If you've been redeemed . . . , I wouldn't want to be," a statement that causes another of the women to laugh (O'Connor WB 10). The narrator describes his response to this dismissive treatment as follows: "'Do you think I believe in Jesus he said, leaning toward her and speaking almost as if he were breathless. 'Well I wouldn't even if He existed. Even if he was on this train'" (10). The laughing woman replies, "'Who said you had to?' . . . in a poisonous Eastern voice" (10). By posing this question, she shocks Hazel by disregarding the power of the narrative of Christian redemption to scandalize individuals by leaving them no options other than "vigorous affirmation or equally vigorous negation" of its claims (Wood 160). However, this does not remove the power of religion to scandalize from the text but redirects it, a fact that is illustrated when her statement causes Hazel to reverse the aggressive, forward-leaning posture that he used when stating his claims to the women by "dr[awing] back" (O'Connor WB 11). This reaction belies his claim to believe that he has no soul by showing that he is scandalized by the fact that others do not care whether he has been redeemed or even if he believes in Jesus. But the most revealing feature of this exchange is the shock that Hazel experiences when he learns from this woman, who most likely hails from outside of the Christ-haunted South, that no person "has to" believe in Jesus, any claim associated with Christianity, or religion in general. In the manner of the Christian *malgré lui*, he shows an inability to embrace

this idea regardless of the fact that he will later preach a similar concept upon inventing the Church Without Christ.

If Hazel seeks to evade the lingering deterministic effects of the theological narrative that he was inscribed in during his childhood, why does not his creation of an alternative narrative prove capable of severing the mental and emotional ties that bind him to the original narrative, or what causes him to be a Christian *malgré lui*, a Christian in spite of himself? An answer to this question may be found in the narrator's account of Hazel's efforts to convince himself that he does not have a soul during his time in World War II. In keeping with the text's interest in the presentation of and power of theological narratives, Hazel's first consideration of the benefit of disbelieving in the existence of his soul comes when he has the opportunity to share his initial theological alternative, that of living a sinless life and remaining in Eastrod so as to avoid Jesus, with his fellow soldiers. When they invite him to go with them to a brothel, he replies in the following manner:

He took his mother's glasses out of his pocket and put them on. Then he told them he wouldn't go with them for a million dollars and a featherbed to lie on; he said he was from Eastrod, Tennessee, and that he was not going to have his soul damned by the government or any foreign place they . . . but his voice cracked and he didn't finish. He only stared at them, trying to steel his face. His friends told him that nobody was interested in his goddam soul unless it was the priest and he managed to tell them that no priest taking orders from no pope was going to tamper with his soul. (18)

Afterward, "they told him that he didn't have any soul and left for their brothel," leaving Hazel

to contemplate the benefits of being soulless (18). At this point, the narrator reveals a fact about Hazel's desires that sheds much light on the reason he might be considered a Christian *malgré lui*: "All that he wanted was to believe them and get rid of it once and for all, and he saw the opportunity here to get rid of it without corruption, to be converted to nothing instead of evil" (18). Hazel's desire for such a conversion demonstrates that he does not seek to evade a theological narrative whose adherents would determine his identity with its scandalous claims but, rather, the fact that he is "evil" because of his innate sinfulness, for one cannot wish to be converted "to nothing instead of evil" without realizing that he or she is already "evil." Hazel's realization of his sinfulness illustrates that he sees himself in a manner that aligns with O'Connor's conception of a grotesque character as one who exists within a distinctly supernatural context.

To understand Hazel's conception of himself as evil requires one to consider the effect that his initial experience with sin has on his character, especially where it concerns his relation to the vengeful Jesus of his grandfather's preaching. After having twice seen a pornographic show at a local carnival, the ten-year-old Hazel returned home to meet the guilt-inducing gaze of his mother who instantly knew that he had gotten into trouble. Moreover, that she understood the nature of his exploits is demonstrated when she asks him repeatedly, "'What you seen?' . . .'" (59). Subsequently, she punishes him by "hit[ting] him across the legs with [a] stick" and says, "'Jesus died to redeem you' . . ." (59), reminding him of the theological narrative that informed his and his family's life. In response, Hazel says, "'I never ast him' . . ." (59), a statement that shocks his mother to the point that she can only "stand looking at him, shutmouthed . . ." (59). The narrator remarks that in this moment, Hazel "forgot the guilt of the tent for the nameless unplaced guilt that was in him" (59). Here, he is revealed as having committed sins and

displayed a sinful attitude that indicates that he has lost any sense of innocence that he may have had prior to his watching the shows. Therefore, this occurrence may be read as the moment when he realizes that he has become “evil” and desires to be converted into something else. At first, his desires remain within the parameters of the prevailing narrative first with his intention to become a preacher and remain in Eastrod while pursuing a sinless life, but the constant pressure, and indeed the impossibility, of such a life leads him to shift his desire to that of being converted to “nothing instead of evil” (18). These desires present Hazel as representing a significant revision of the Southern Gothic character, for while Rubin points out that a typical Southern Gothic character suffers from the collapse of the structures and figures that had previously invested him or her with “a transcendent significance . . .” (xiii), Hazel’s experience following this occurrence is defined by his attempt to divest himself of such a significance and through his preaching to deny the possibility of such a significance existing. That he uses his alternative theology in this manner reveals him as seeking to embrace the divestment of transcendent significance that the typical Southern Gothic character desires to have restored to him or her.

While this reading of Hazel indicates that he diverges from the typical Southern Gothic character by trying to resist the transcendent significance that Christianity believes all humans have, he is typical insofar as he aligns with the naturalist elements that are present in Southern Gothic characters. More specifically, his attempt to create an alternative reality reveals him as a complex naturalist character in the vein of Darl and Dewey Dell Bundren, one who realizes that he is determined by a prevailing cultural narrative of entrapment and who has the ability to resist this narrative by becoming a narrator himself. That he performs this task by taking on the role of a preacher has led some, such as Susan Srigley, to argue that he does so because acting in this role is “the only thing he can do” given “his limited understanding and experience” (70).

However, if one considers that he sees his preaching as offering him a means of protection from the spiritual reality from which he desires to escape, then it becomes clear that preaching a new narrative represents the only means by which he can negate the theological claims that bear upon his life. Moreover, that his preaching begins after he has attempted to disbelieve in the existence of his soul and his encounter with the young women on the train indicates that his experience is not so limited as Srigley suggests, for in each case, he is confronted by people whose views offer him models of belief that lie far outside the parameters of his grandfather's preaching or Christianity in general. The breadth of his experience is demonstrated most clearly through his ability to incorporate the act of preaching as practiced by his father and, to some degree, Asa Hawks as well as the atheistic or agnostic positions of his army friends and the young women in order to create a narrative that he believes will allow him to resist the determinism of the prevailing theological narrative and thus allow him to preserve, or, at least, to contend for, his freedom. In this sense, his preaching is aimed at "mak[ing] a *self*" that is free from the sense of spiritual entrapment that pervades his life (Dennett 416), and he makes this self by "appropriate[ing] many found objects . . . including many that has been designed for other purposes" (416), such as the act of fundamentalist Protestant preaching. But regardless of Hazel's efforts to create an alternative spiritual reality with this piecemeal theological narrative, he, like a naturalist character, is ultimately unable to command a response from reality or to alter his fate through the exertion of his will.

The clearest and final example of the fact that Hazel cannot force reality to act in accordance with his will occurs when a patrolman stops him on the highway for no reason other than the fact that he "just do[esn't] like [his] face . . ." and later demolishes his Essex by pushing it over an embankment, leaving Hazel without the vehicle that had been his home, pulpit, and

self-professed means of justification (O'Connor *WB* 212). This occurrence brings about a transformation in Hazel's character that casts him as shifting from his previous identity as a naturalist character determined by a theological narrative of entrapment to a grotesque character who becomes a reflection of an author of the grotesque for whom "what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself" (O'Connor "Some" 42). This is demonstrated when the narrator states, "Haze stood for a few minutes, looking over at the scene. His face seemed to reflect the entire distance across the clearing and beyond, the entire distance that extended from his eyes to the blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space. His knees bend under him and he sat down on the edge of the embankment with his feet hanging over" (O'Connor *WB* 211). In this moment, the surface of reality that he had attempted to shape with his theological alternative seems to disappear as it becomes merely part of the "entire distance" that spans from Hazel's "eyes" throughout the infinite reaches of "space." As a result, his vision expands from the narrow perspective that derived from his attempt to compress all of reality into his alternative narrative only for the sake of preserving his sense of freedom and his supposed identity as a self-determining individual. This suggests that far from the solipsism displayed in his attempts to preach the Church Without Christ, he now sees himself as only one speck in the cosmos. The narrator makes this reading possible when she points out that as Hazel gazes into the depths of space, "[h]is knees bend under him and he sat down on the edge of the embankment with his feet hanging over." His bending knees indicate that for the first time in the text Hazel has been humbled, and for the first time, he is depicted as being at rest. The paranoia and impulse to run away from things that contradict his view of himself have disappeared to the point that the patrolman must ask him three times whether he had intended on going any place before his car was destroyed. This

change is further demonstrated when rather than giving the patrolman a sermonizing response, Hazel says, “No,” and returns his gaze to its “concentrat[ion] on space” (212). Then, he returns by foot to his room at Mrs. Flood’s house and blinds himself with liquefied lime.

According to Susan Srigley, Hazel’s decision to blind himself and his subsequent dedication to self-torture as a form of payment for his sins demonstrates that although he has arrived at a sense of “accountability,” he is ultimately unable “to overcome the narrow religious vision of his childhood” (84). She further argues that one of his methods of self-torture, “walking with stones and broken glass in his shoes . . . indicates a return to his mother’s religious ideas” (84). For a reading that is interested in the use of the Southern Gothic in *Wise Blood*, this seems to be an important claim as Srigley’s argument appears to validate a reading of Hazel as a thoroughly Southern Gothic character who comes to replicate the narrative by which he is entrapped. However, what this conclusion overlooks is the fact that Hazel’s filling his shoes with rocks as a child was not his mother’s idea but, rather, his response to the guilt he felt for attending the pornographic show at the carnival. Thus, his attempt to “satisfy” Jesus should not be considered a practice that he had been taught by his family as there is no evidence to support this claim (59). Similarly, while Srigley contends that Hazel’s “actions in the novel, and specifically the progression of his preaching, make it clear that O’Connor knows Hawks to be the only possible paradigm for [him]” (70), one should note that although both use lime as a means of self-blinding, they are distinguished by the fact that Hawks cannot go through with blinding himself but Hazel can and does. A further distinction lies in the circumstances surrounding their attempts. Whereas Hawks’ intention to blind himself in order “to justify his belief that Jesus Christ had redeemed him” was advertised via newspaper and was to be carried out before an assembly of “two hundred people or more . . .” (O’Connor WB 109 & 110), Hazel simply walks

into Mrs. Flood's house with a bucket of lime and water and when asked what he intended to do with these items, he says, "Blind myself" (212). He then performs this task without further explanation and in privacy. Therefore, while Hazel may have followed the model set before him in the form of Hawks, he exceeds this model by keeping his word and actually blinding himself. In doing so, he is transformed from being a Southern Gothic character whose life is shaped by the deterministic theological narrative into which he had been inscribed as a child to a grotesque character whose self-blinding is, to use O'Connor's words, an act that derives from a "trust" that is "beyond [himself]" and that prepares him to have an "experience of mystery itself ("Some" 42).

Furthermore, Hazel's blinding himself distinguishes him from his most committed follower and *Wise Blood*'s most thoroughly naturalist character, Enoch Emery, but where the difference between Hazel and Sabbath and Asa Hawks lies in the latter two characters' choices to live in sin, the difference between Hazel and Enoch stems from Enoch's desire to lose his humanity. Enoch's desire is fulfilled when he attacks the man who plays the role of Gonga, a gorilla that is billed as a "Giant Jungle Monarch and a Great Star," in order to take his gorilla suit and wear it himself (177). That Enoch undresses and buries his clothing prior to putting on the suit indicates that he has, in his mind, not only divested himself of his identity as a human but has effectively killed it and become an actual gorilla. The narrator supports this reading by identifying him as a gorilla twice in the final paragraphs of chapter twelve, rather than with the name Enoch. Moreover, the narrator calls attention to the theological dimension of Enoch's transformation when she states that he is a gorilla "whose god had finally rewarded it" (208-209). This aspect of his transformation distinguishes it from the transformation that Hazel experiences in his self-blinding because Enoch believes that his becoming a gorilla, albeit an

artificial one, represents the fulfillment of his “expectation that the new jesus would do something for him in return for his services” (193). However, Enoch does not offer his services, which occur in the form of his stealing the mummified corpse from the Taulkinham museum to be the “new jesus” in the Church Without Christ in hopes of being delivered from sin or, as in Hazel’s case, from the power of a theological narrative from which he cannot escape (141). Rather, he desires only to be transformed into something other than himself. The narrator states, “[Enoch] was not a boy without ambition: he wanted to become something. He wanted to better his condition until it was the best. He wanted to be THE young man of the future, like the ones in the insurance ads. He wanted, some day, to see a line of people waiting to shake his hand” (193). Should he prove able to achieve this desire, he would cease to be naturalist character whose actions are determined by the “wise blood” that he inherited from his father and that urged him toward actions that tended toward criminality in the manner of a fin-de-siècle naturalist character that is in the process of devolving into an animalistic brute.

The portrayal of Enoch as a thoroughly naturalist character is most clearly demonstrated when the narrator states that while under the influence of his wise blood “the nerve inside him would grow so big that he would be forced to steal a car or rob a bank or jump out of a dark alley onto a woman” (77). She later amplifies its power by describing his blood in deterministic terms: “[Enoch] didn’t want to justify his daddy’s blood, he didn’t want to be always having to do something that something else wanted him to do, that he didn’t know what it was and that was always dangerous” (135). The naturalist grounding of this description is highlighted further when the narrator begins the subsequent paragraph with the sentence “Naturally, his blood was not going to put up with any attitude like this” (135). However, regardless of her presentation of Enoch as a clear and grotesquely naturalist character, the fact that his devolution ends with his

choice to shed his humanity and become false gorilla, rather than succumbing to the conventional naturalist plot of decline to a state of primal brutality sheds, light on the text's treatment of naturalism. The artificiality and purposefulness of Enoch's becoming a brute renders his existence nonsensical in the context of naturalism's focus on brutal characters. If the objective of naturalist fiction is to expose its readers to life in the realm of deterministic forces in order to help them to understand and, subsequently, to control the forces that transform characters into brutes against their wills, then Enoch's willful transformation into a false brute should not be read as achieving this objective. As the scene depicting him as he terrifies a young couple while attempting to make friends with them after putting on the gorilla suit indicates, his new identity renders him neither a human nor an animal but, instead, a freak that exists outside of the categories of existence that are found in naturalist fiction. Because of this, he becomes the character that sheds the most light on the text's engagement with naturalism: his transformation into an artificial brute reveals that *Wise Blood*, whether intentionally or not, presents pure naturalism as an aesthetic that leads to a dead end if followed to its logical conclusion.

By blinding himself, Hazel is revealed as one who can neither find pleasure in a life of self-justified sin, such as Sabbath Lily, nor persist in a life of falsehood, like Hawks, for as he says before killing Solace Layfield, the man hired to imitate him when he refuses to turn the Church Without Christ into a religion-for-profit scheme, "Two things I can't stand . . . a man that ain't true and one that mocks what is" (206). Following the destruction of his car, he realizes that the narrative that he had created and preached nightly so as to avoid the judgment of Jesus is not true: it is a fabrication that does little more than perpetuate his self-imposed spiritual blindness. Thus, as a man who seeks to be true, he could no longer persist in this narrative, but to become true required for him to exercise the freedom to be true that the characters by whom he was

surrounded in Taulkinham had lost through their commitments to the sinful lives in which they had become entrapped. Ultimately, Hazel is distinguished from the characters with whom he comes into contact by his decision to reject his failed narrative of the Church Without Christ and submit his will and his vision to Jesus. Although some might read his blinding himself as an example of self-mutilation that marks his submission to and replication of the theological narrative preached by his grandfather, this reading does not seem warranted in light of the transformative experience that causes Hazel to turn his vision from the earth to the spiritual realm. Because he accepts this experience rather than run from it, he is transformed from a naturalistic character plagued by a “narrow vision” to a grotesque character who ultimately “meet[s] evil . . .” by realizing his sinfulness and comes to “act on a trust beyond [himself] . . . in such a way that he “goes through [the material world] into “an experience of mystery itself” (O’Connor “Some” 42). In regard to the Southern Gothic elements of the text, Hazel’s transformation proves so profound that when presented the option to choose to replicate the theological narrative by which he had been entrapped from childhood or self-annihilation, he willingly chooses the latter. However, in his case, self-annihilation does not come in the form of self-blinding but, rather, his choice to abandon the self that he had created through many years of resisting the one thing capable of delivering him from his state of spiritual entrapment, not the judgment of Christ, but his grace.

IV. REIMAGINING THE NATURALIST PROTAGONIST AND THE EXHAUSTION OF HARD DETERMINISM IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S BLOOD MERIDIAN

While several critics have argued that naturalism plays an important role in McCarthy's fiction, they often disagree on the conclusions that they believe readers should draw from its engagement with the naturalist tradition. This is no different in the specific case of *Blood Meridian*. On the one hand, Barclay Owens argues that *Blood Meridian* pursues the overtly naturalist thesis that "mindless, atavistic violence is the true nature of mankind, a genetic heritage in common with apes and wolves" (4). On the other hand, Eric Carl Link contends that its romantic elements should encourage readers to approach its engagement with naturalism with an eye of caution because associating it too closely with first-wave naturalism could result in a narrow understanding of the text. He maintains that a reading that highlights the naturalist elements of McCarthy's fiction "provides one more lens through which to view his works, and is probably no more or less enlightening than treatments of [him] as a southern novelist, or as a western novelist" (150). He exemplifies this claim by pointing specifically to *Blood Meridian*: "Literary naturalism is not the mystic key to unlock *Blood Meridian* any more than the gothic is the key to unlock *Moby-Dick*" (150). Regardless, he admits that "our perspectives on both texts and authors is [sic] broadened through such examination" (150). However, despite believing that a naturalist reading of *Blood Meridian* can prove valuable, Link calls attention to a problem that he believes will inevitably face such readings given this text's publication in 1985, more than a quarter-century after the end of the naturalist movement in American literature. This problem arises from the facts that naturalism, whether first-wave or new, is informed by post-Darwinian "theories of the relationship of the human to his or her environment . . .," and that these theories have "evolved over the course of the past hundred and fifty years . . ." (153). Therefore, he argues that

“when one talks of the postmodern vision of this relationship, then, in a sense by definition, one is really not talking about literary naturalism—at least as conventionally understood” (153). But in returning to Owens, one finds that this is not necessarily the case, for his reading highlights conventional naturalist elements and assumptions that cannot be dismissed by the fact that *Blood Meridian* was written more than fifty years after the end of the first naturalist movement. These elements include its focus on characters that are reduced to brutishness by their environment and its portrayal of the earth as “constantly remind[ing] readers of the harsh, uncaring nature of the universe” (59), both of which indicate that *Blood Meridian* utilizes features of naturalism that have characterized it from its inception.

Nevertheless, Link is correct to state that works of modernist and contemporary fiction that participate in naturalism do so in unconventional ways. That is, they differ from first-wave naturalism either because of their conception of the relationship between characters and their environments or because of their engagement with aesthetic techniques that post-date the historical moment of first-wave naturalism. An important example of such a deviation from the conventions of first-wave naturalism in *Blood Meridian* is its inclusion of a protagonist, the kid, that is a determined character but that has a capacity for self-reflection that distinguishes him from the stereotypical naturalist brute, such as Frank Norris’s McTeague. James Dorson discusses this aspect of the kid in a recent article in which he examines one of *Blood Meridian*’s most important naturalist elements, Judge Holden’s attempt to impose a hard determinist narrative upon the world of the text in his quest to become “suzerain of the earth” (McCarthy 198). He concludes that despite this narrative’s potential to give Holden seemingly limitless power, it is “not finally substantiated” because of the kid’s ability to resist its claims, a resistance that arises from his capacity for self-reflection. Although one must admit that the text does not

provide unlimited access to the kid's "inner world," those instances in which access to this world is granted, he appears to have a degree of self-consciousness that, in tandem with this identity as a naturalist protagonist suggests a revision of this figure that counters the prevalent, and long-standing, belief about naturalism. According to Malcolm Cowley, naturalist fiction's commitment to portraying environments that determine its characters supersedes its exploration of the "world within" characters to the extent that they are divested of a meaningful sense of agency (435), but this is not the case in *Blood Meridian*.

In fact, the question of agency and the "world within" become its central concerns as the kid and Holden struggle against one another in their attempts to maintain and extend their senses of autonomy by acting in accordance with narratives of self that inform their actions over the course of the text. Again, the limited access to the kid's consciousness and the infrequency of his speech poses a difficulty to such a reading; however, I argue that the text provides sufficient evidence to support reading the kid as acting on knowledge that he derives from reflection on his past experiences, his interaction with Ben Tobin, the ex-priest, and his dreams of Judge Holden in a manner that indicates that this knowledge becomes the foundation for his sense of self and ultimately informs his resistance of Holden's narrative. Although this reading of the kid maintains that *Blood Meridian* uses him to engage with naturalism in an unconventional manner, I contend that its portrayal of him does not diminish the significance of its utilization of elements of first-wave naturalism, nor should it lead readers to qualify unduly its participation in the naturalist tradition. Rather, it asks them to set aside concerns over conventional and unconventional naturalism and attempt to understand how *Blood Meridian* revises familiar character-types and techniques associated with first-wave naturalism in order to work toward creating a new naturalism that appropriates the conventions of first-wave naturalism in a manner

that allows them to contribute to a work that is primarily read in terms of late modernism. This chapter seeks to illuminate *Blood Meridian*'s revision of first-wave naturalism by examining three major features: its presentation of the kid as a Southern Gothic character; its interest in the concept of "optical democracy"; and its reinvention of the figures of the naturalist narrator and protagonist in its portrayal of the struggle between Judge Holden and the kid. Through these, the text creates a world in which the determined, yet self-conscious kid is able to struggle against the determinants that bear upon him in a manner that challenges the assertion that naturalist characters are void of agency and suggests a new perspective on the nature of the hard determinist narrative that is often considered a defining characteristic of naturalist fiction.

Blood Meridian's portrayal of the kid as a determined character in the tradition of first-wave naturalism begins with its opening sentence: "See the child" (McCarthy 3). This sentence functions as an imperative command from the narrator to the reader that establishes the two of them and the kid in the three-part relationship between narrator, character, and reader that is the aesthetic foundation upon which naturalist fiction builds. As June Howard points out, such a relationship is vital to naturalism because its exploration of the lives of determined characters depends upon the perspective from which they are viewed," and this perspective is typically "inscribed within the narrative itself in the form of observant articulate characters who explore and deplore the terrain of cause and effect" (x). At this point in *Blood Meridian*, the narrator fulfills this role and despite directly observing the kid, he occupies a "privileged location . . ." that allows him to "assum[e] a kind of control over forces and events through [his] power to comprehend them" (x). Read in this light, the opening sentence signals that the subsequent description of the child, who is the kid, in the context of his failed Southern home is grounded in the act of naturalist observation that will seek to understand the character that is the observed

object and those features of his or her environment that have brutalized him or her. The naturalist aspect of this scene is further demonstrated by the fact that the narrator's telling the reader to "see" the kid indicates that both he and the reader do not inhabit the same sphere of existence as the kid, which is another important element of first-wave naturalism that this sentence indicates.

The naturalist parameters that the first sentence establishes are enhanced by the description of the kid not only as a brutish character reminiscent of those in first-wave naturalism but also one that experiences an additional form of determinism by virtue of his being the product of a Southern Gothic context. Concerning his physical appearance and his home in Tennessee, the narrator states,

He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire. Outside lie dark turned fields with rags of snow and darker woods beyond that harbor yet a few last wolves. His folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water but in truth his father has been a school master. He lies in drink, he quotes from poets whose names are now lost. The boy crouches by the fire and watches him. (3)

This passage reveals that the kid's failed Southern home, in which his only activities appear to be sitting with his drunken father and attempting to fend for himself, is an environment that has a deterministic effect on his life. In naturalist fashion, this environment has rendered his life to no more than a struggle to survive amidst the brutal conditions into which he was born and, as a child, over which he has no control. However, the apparent rigid determinism that pervades this setting is softened, if ironically, by the narrator's remark concerning the distinction between the kid's "folk" and his father. Because his folk "are known for hewers of wood and drawers of

water,” the fact that his father “has been a schoolmaster” reveals that in the past, his intellect allowed him to escape the life of slavish labor that had been the lot of his predecessors, thus demonstrating that one’s environment can be overcome through the exertion of his or her will. But in the kid’s case, the restrictions that emanate from his failed home make such upward mobility unlikely.

The power of these restrictions to determine the kid is further indicated by the narrator’s remarks concerning the effect that the death of his mother had on his father: “The mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off. The father never speaks her name, the child does not know it . . .” (3). Once again, the narrator calls attention to the kid’s dual identity as a determined naturalist character and a Southern Gothic character. In terms of naturalism, the kid’s birth is a causal force that set in motion a chain of unfortunate events—his mother’s death led to his father’s becoming a non-functional alcoholic, which, in turn, led to the poor living conditions and isolation that define the environment that shapes the kid’s life. According to the narrator, these conditions determine the character of the kid, for at the age of fourteen, “[h]e can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence” (3). That he is raised in the social isolation of rural east Tennessee amplifies these negative characteristics that stem from his failed home. According to W. J. Cash, the rural Southern home of the mid-nineteenth century, the time period in which *Blood Meridian* is set, was so isolated that it “was necessarily the center of everything . . .” for Southern families. Therefore, “family ties acquired a strength and validity unknown in more closely settled communities” (85). However, the isolation that the kid experiences is greatly increased because his mother’s death eliminates the development of strong ties within the home, and this is especially so given Cash’s assertion that the Southern home was centered on the “wife and

mother upon whose activities the comfort and well-being of everybody greatly depended . . .”

(85). Because of her absence and his father’s alcoholism, even the hope of health and comfort is denied the kid.

While the absence of the kid is most clearly seen in his poor appearance, his inability to read and write may be more indicative of the lingering effect of her death and contributes most to his being a naturalist character. John E. Murray contends that in the antebellum South, most children, especially those in rural areas, “learned to read and write from literate adults” (775), and the responsibility for teaching literacy skills was usually placed upon Southern mothers. Although the narrator does not state whether the kid’s mother was literate, Murray contends that because the education of children was a primary responsibility of the mother in Southern families, she “had to have been taught properly; therefore, education of girls became a matter of some importance . . .” (775). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that had the kid’s mother lived, the conditions of his upbringing and his level of education would have also been greatly improved. In fact, one might argue that her presence would have had a determining effect on his character because it likely would have given him a far different life. Had this been the case, he might not have been forced to live in a state in which survival outweighed all other aspects of his life to the extent that by the age of fourteen he has developed the intellect and taste for violence that aligns him with the figure of the naturalist brute.

If the kid is considered in the terms that late-nineteenth-century sociologists, whose work influenced the models of society and of the brute in first-wave naturalism, his brutality might be read as the result of his lack of education. Gina Rossetti maintains that many sociologists during this time espoused Charles Loring Brace’s theory that the brutalism that he thought was rampant among the lower classes and immigrants must be combatted through education, for he believed

that “education purges the primitive of his undesirable qualities” (Rossetti 11). He maintained further that the negative qualities of brutish people were inherited from their forebears and if left unchecked, they would advance to the point that such individuals would lead lives of crime and violence, (a claim that is later exemplified in *Blood Meridian* by the kid’s behavior after leaving Tennessee for New Orleans and, afterward, Texas). Brace concludes that for an educated society to counteract such devolution, it must combat the “biologically determined force that wills individuals toward a natural primitivism” by educating them to share the values that form the ideological basis of the broader community (11). To return to *Blood Meridian*, the fact that the kid grew up in rural east Tennessee suggests that he would likely have been exposed to the primal violence that Cash describes as being ingrained in the culture of the frontier regions of the South (43-44). Moreover, because he has not been affected by the civilizing power of education, he could not be purged of his desire to engage in violent behavior or even the belief that violence is an acceptable part of life. Thus, his natural “taste for mindless violence” becomes an “irresistible force” that became entrenched in his home region through the unchecked indulgence of the “appetites” and “habits” of his predecessors. In this sense, the kid, like a naturalist brute, is led by forces that are outside of his control “toward a natural primitivism.”

This reading of the initial description of the kid and his home demonstrates that from its first sentence, *Blood Meridian* presents the kid as a naturalist character that is shaped by his environment. However, unlike a conventional work of naturalist fiction, this portrayal of him does not seem to guarantee the reader a safe distance from which to observe this brutal character, but it nevertheless accomplishes this in a subtle manner. The narrator creates distance between the reader and the kid by identifying him in animalistic terms as “the creature who would carry [his mother] off.” These terms indicate that the kid exhibits a non-human quality that precludes

him from possessing the degree of freedom enjoyed by a person who functions outside of the realm of forces. However, the narrator does not allow the reader to take comfort in this fact, for in the final sentence of the opening description of the kid, he states, “All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man” (3). At first glance, this sentence seems only to suggest that the kid’s taste for violence is so strong that it will determine the remaining course of his life, but by saying that “[a]ll history is present in that visage,” the narrator extends all that the kid represents, the brutalism, the violence, to all of history and therefore all of humanity. By doing so, he presents the reader with the disturbing possibility that the deterministic violence that has transformed the kid into a brute is an underlying fact of all history and thus affects him or her, though perhaps not to the same extent as the kid. Nevertheless, this expansion of the kid’s historical context serves to incorporate the reader into the deterministic realm that the kid inhabits by deconstructing the sense of exteriority that is extended to the reader in first-wave naturalist fiction. As a result, this passage suggests the existence of a connection between the reader and the kid that is indicative of the “unguessed kinships” that are at the heart of “optical democracy . . .” (247).

While optical democracy has become one of the most discussed concepts in criticism on McCarthy’s fiction, the term itself only appears once in his work, in a description of the Sonora desert in the seventeenth chapter of *Blood Meridian*:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical

democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (247)

In light of this statement, optical democracy might be described as the natural state of life on earth, but it is, at the same time, a mode of perception that sees all material phenomena as they are when divested of the layers of meaning that humans impose upon them through the act of seeing and the subsequent process of interpreting and ordering them according to anthropocentric models of taxonomy and hierarchy. The absence of such organizing structures forces the observer into a state of visual clarity that renders unfamiliar the objects that he or she sees because from this perspective no feature of an object or a landscape appears in a manner that suggests that it is more important than another. Thus, central to optical democracy is a natural resistance to the cognitive tendency toward synecdochical thought that leads to the construction of interpretive frameworks that are based upon a partial understanding of a thing or phenomenon and is presented as encapsulating a complete understanding of the whole. Such perspectives derive from the preference of one thing or feature over another, but in an optically democratic world, “all preference is made whimsical.” This is to say that using a preference-based model to arrange the components of the material world, including humans, is a flawed methodology because it is based upon and supported by no more than the subjective perception of the individual observer. This resistance to anthropocentric perspectives contributes to *Blood Meridian*’s performance of the “naturalistic leveling” of all life forms (Hardwig 41). In exchange, it extends to the reader a new perspective, one which Steven Shaviro calls “a kind of perception before or beyond the human” (151).

While a non-anthropocentric perspective on reality lies at the heart of optical democracy, the entrenchment of anthropocentric thought in the minds of readers requires *Blood Meridian* to

create an aesthetic means of eliminating such systems of thoughts in order to bring them to the new kind of perception needed to see the optical democracy of life. It accomplishes this by working to deconstruct the ideologies in which the anthropocentric viewpoints that the reader brings to the text are grounded. According to David Holloway, *Blood Meridian* does this through “the deconstructive collapsing of binary hierarchies through which traditional western American mythology has tended to articulate itself—savage/civilized, the arbitrary contingent being of indigenous cultures as opposed to the essential rhetorical mission of manifest destiny, nature/culture, the very notion of the frontier line . . .” (*Late* 37). In an earlier article, he describes this process as being carried out specifically through the text’s tendency to identify an “extant order of things” and immediately abolish this order from the world of the text with “an aesthetic act” that deconstructs it (“Another” 98). Like several other critics, he states that optical democracy is “first of all a way of looking at landscape . . .” (153), but his conception of it as a way of seeing that is aesthetically achieved allows one to think of this concept as working not only at the level of landscape but also through narrative techniques used in the text and its portrayal of characters.

This broadened understanding of optical democracy sheds new light on the naturalist grounding of the opening description of the kid and reveals it as deconstructing the typical position of the naturalist reader. Central to this is the unsettling of the preconceived assumptions that may inform the reader’s conception of the kid as a brutish character. But to apprehend fully the means by which the text performs this deconstruction requires one to ask a question that has received little attention to this point: If *Blood Meridian* is primarily concerned with retelling the history of the West, why does it open in the South and utilize a protagonist who is the product of a Southern Gothic context?

The shift from the confining nature of the kid's home to the vast landscape of the unsettled West promises a level of freedom that has evaded him to this point, but beneath the surface of the mythical understanding of the region that extends this promise foments the same deterministic violence that he has experienced in the South. Yet even before he arrives in the West, he, like a Southern Gothic protagonist, has been "divested of all that he has been" (4). However, this divestment of identity does not align with the experiences of earlier Southern Gothic protagonists, such as Darl Bundren or Hazel Motes. According to Louis Rubin, such protagonists share a defining characteristic: Each "has been 'divested' of the illusion of transcendent significance for either his social or personal existence and so finds himself an 'alien, a stranger,' 'an exile,' in the world that had once been his home" (xiii). They are also similar in that following the experience that divests them of this "illusion," they typically embark upon a quest for meaning that places them in opposition to the sociopolitical structures that define life in their settings and whose power they seek to evade or resist. If the kid is considered in this light, he emerges as being distinct from such characters regardless of the fact that he is the product of a Southern Gothic environment. Because of this, he may be read as a reimagined Southern gothic protagonist. For example, the "illusion of transcendent significance" does not exist for him because his failed home and family were incapable of generating and instilling such an illusion. Therefore, unlike Darl Bundren or Hazel Motes, he does not attempt to reclaim a lost identity in the context of his home or even of the South but rather leaves both in hopes of creating a new identity in a new land. The kid's dissimilarity to these characters allows the text to use its Southern Gothic opening to achieve a naturalist end by removing from him any identity that he could have derived from the sociocultural narratives that prevailed in the South. By doing so, it removes him from the deterministic influence of such narratives and enhances its

engagement with naturalism by rendering him an ideological blank slate prior to his entry into the West.

This portrayal of the kid places him in the tradition of young naturalist protagonists, such as Henry Fleming and Carrie Meeber, that leave home in search of a new life and are caught amidst forces that shape them in their new setting regardless of their will. However, his leaving home is not the only factor that contributes to his arrival at the place where he is divested of identity to the point that “[h]is origins are become remote as is his destiny . . .” (4). This occurs through a process that begins when the narrator calls him a “solitary migrant” (4). By calling him a migrant, he precludes viewing the kid as a mere wanderer, for “migrant” signifies that its referent moves from one place to another in search of something, or, as in the case of animals, in response to an impulse stimulated by environmental and biological forces. Because of this, his move from the South to the West represents a purposeful migration rather than a chance occurrence. The purposefulness of his actions is suggested when the narrator describes the unique opportunity that the unsettled West presents to those who enter it to make their mark upon the world: “[N]ot again in all the world’s turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his heart is not another kind of clay” (4-5). Thus, central to the kid’s move to the West is the possibility that in this region he can create for himself an identity through the exertion of his will.

That the kid is able to accomplish this to some extent is demonstrated by the fact that he acquires a new identity by succeeding in nightly street fights with sailors who make port in New Orleans during his stay in the city. However, the fact that he forges a new identity by surrendering to his innate taste for violence shows that his new setting has only increased the power of violence to determine him. The narrator indicates that these fights cause him to sink

deeper into brutishness when he describes him as “com[ing] down at night like some fairybook beast to fight . . .” (4). Nevertheless, his fighting provides him with an opportunity that was unavailable to him in his home in that it allows him to achieve a sense of self-validation. In keeping with the opening description of the kid, this self-validation is cast against the backdrop of a universal brutality that affects all whom he fights. The narrator states, “They fight with fists, with feet, with bottles or knives. All races, all breeds. Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes. Men from lands so far and queer that standing over them where they lie bleeding in the mud he feels mankind itself vindicated” (4). The kid’s belief that his victories over foreign fighters vindicate “mankind” suggests that he views these men as sub-human. He would likely apply to them the terms of the brutal and bestial that the narrator uses in this passage, but his belief is undermined by the fact that these terms apply to all who participate in these fights. Therefore, he fails to achieve the vindication that he imagines because he, like those over whom he asserts his physical dominance, is defined by these terms, thus further entrenching his identity as a brute. Moreover, his inability to recognize this demonstrates that he lacks the self-awareness that would allow him to see that rather than justify a certain view of humankind, his fighting merely equates him with his opponents despite his unwarranted sense of superiority.

While the narrator’s presentation of the kid’s involvement in these fights undermines the identity that he draws from them, it is important to note that this identity is based upon the dominance of a white American over foreigners, many of whom are likely non-white. Because of this, his newly-forged, violence-based identity reflects the belief prevalent among those who sought to make their mark on the unsettled West that human life is ordered according to a racial hierarchy that establishes Caucasians as the dominant race. That this racial ideology underlies his violence reveals a connection that will link his Southern roots to his new life in the West. This is

because the “taste for mindless violence” that was fostered in Tennessee will signify within the context of the racist violence perpetrated by white Americans that became a defining characteristic of post-Mexican-War expansion. Specifically, the racial aspect of his street fighting portrays him as espousing a rudimentary form of the philosophy that informed Manifest Destiny. The narrator further indicates that his participation in this violence has a powerful effect on his sense of personal identity by stating that when the kid leaves New Orleans to enter Texas, he has been “divested of all that he has been . . .” and “[h]is origins are become remote as is his destiny . . .” (4). At this point, the kid’s experiences and his surrender to his taste for violence have detached him from any identity that he previously bore. While such detachment suggests that he has achieved a level of freedom that would have been impossible in his home, it also means that he will be vulnerable to the influences of the competing forces that shape life in the West. His vulnerability becomes apparent as his taste for violence, his new setting, and his brutish nature converge following his arrival in Nacogdoches.

By presenting the kid in this manner, the text draws the reader into its naturalistic framework by inviting him or her to identify him as a naturalist brute and thus encouraging him or her to voyeuristically observe him through the narrator’s account of his experiences. While this reveals *Blood Meridian* as utilizing a technique that is essential to first-wave naturalism, it differs from earlier works in the mode by causing this act of voyeurism to occur under conditions that compromise the reader’s identity as one whose freedom is unaffected by this experience of the realm of forces. Central to this is the fact that the kid’s identity as a brute is a viable sociopolitical currency in the context of western expansion and allows him to blend immediately with the itinerant militiamen who sought to loot and wage war in the territories formerly held by Mexico following the Mexican war. That his brutishness, which would no doubt exclude him

from participation in polite society, makes him a desirable figure complicates the naturalist reader's observation of him as well as his or her ability to control the threat that he poses to his or her sense of social order. That is, observing him in this context of western expansion requires American readers to confront the fact that brutish violence was an accepted part of the United States' settlement of the territory it claimed in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Consequently, this unsettles in their imagination the figure of the noble, trailblazing cowboy and the order-creating lawman that occupy central positions in the mythic national identity that finds its origins in this period. This, in turn, enables the text to create an uneasy connection between the kid and the reader by resisting the tendency of first-wave naturalism to place the reader in a secure location, for in *Blood Meridian*, the narrator cannot expose him or her to the realm of forces without eliminating this security and thus putting his or her sense of freedom at hazard. Because of this, it departs from first-wave naturalism's intention to provide its readers with the comforting thought that the threat that the brute poses to society and humanity might be contained by forcing readers to confront troubling questions concerning the connections between themselves and the brutish kid that are not easily resolved.

By deconstructing the position of exteriority typically granted to the reader in works of naturalist fiction, *Blood Meridian* unsettles the reader so as to enable him to view himself and the world from an unfamiliar perspective. This perspective aligns with optical democracy because it is made possible by the kind of deconstructive aesthetic act that is integral to this concept. In this instance, the arrival at optical democracy results from the text's engagement with naturalism. For example, by telling the reader to "[s]ee the child" and subsequently portraying this child as having been brutalized by his environment, the narrator establishes his observation of him within the basic framework of literary naturalism. Thus, the text is able to incorporate the reader into

this aesthetic framework from the opening sentence by placing him or her in the role of the naturalist reader, a role that exists within the hierarchical ordering of the figures that converge in the act of reading a naturalist text. Because the narrator and reader are assumed to exist outside of the realm of forces and are therefore deemed superior to those within this realm, one may proceed under the idea that the same will hold true in *Blood Meridian*. However, its emphasis on extending to its readers the non-anthropocentric perspective that is necessary to see the optical democracy of reality requires the text to deconstruct this hierarchy. Should it remain a viable perspective, it would likely color the reader's perception of him or herself as well as his or her perception of the characters that inhabit the realm of forces. To eliminate this hierarchy, the text first identifies it as a valid ordering of the figures that converge in the act of reading by establishing a naturalist framework and then almost immediately invalidating it by deconstructing the exterior position that this framework grants to the reader. This allows the text to enact the "naturalistic leveling" that is at the heart of optical democracy by preventing the reader from conceiving of himself as remaining outside of its exploration of life and history in the realm of forces.

It is important to note that this act of deconstruction is not aimed at the reader per se but at the role that the opening pages' utilization of a conventional naturalist framework extends to him or her. If this is considered in light of optical democracy, *Blood Meridian* emerges as being interested in stripping away meaning and identities that lack substance outside of the ideologies from which they derive. While its deconstruction of the naturalist reader accomplishes this, it emerges as working at an even deeper level than the unsettling of the reader's perspective when read in light of the text's most pressing question, whether the individual has the power to shape reality according to his or her will. Since the text manipulates one of the foundational elements

of naturalist fiction in its opening pages so as to determine the reader's perspective by divesting him or her of the façade of freedom and exteriority granted to the naturalist reader, it would appear that it denies the reader and its characters this power. However, the fact that it seeks to answer this question within the context of the American West during the era of Manifest Destiny complicates this apparent denial of agency because the mythical conception of American history maintains that the trailblazers and lawmen of this period did indeed shape reality to their will. But in light of optical democracy, the version of history and the national identity that arose from such myths are problematic because they are constructs that derive from an ideological structure that imposes upon reality a narrative that establishes its adherents at the top of the existential hierarchy that it presents as representing the proper ordering of life forms. It follows that *Blood Meridian* engages with this historiographical tradition in order to deconstruct it and thus demythologize the history of the West.

To understand *Blood Meridian*'s treatment of this subject in light of its setting in the West in the wake of the Mexican War requires one to consider in depth its treatment of Manifest Destiny. During this period, advocates of Manifest Destiny argued that the United States' settlement of the lands that it acquired through the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo would mark the apex of human history. According to Anders Stephanson, this belief arose from the wide acceptance of *translatio imperii*, or "the double notion that civilization was always carried forward by a single dominant power or people and that historical succession was a matter of westward movement" (18). Those who espoused this view maintained that the Anglo-Saxon race was the dominant people and the United States was the power that would guide history to the end of its westward march. This version of history led to the creation of an American national identity marked by a strong messianic strain that caused its adherents to see the United States as

a nation that had been ordained “to show the way for the historically retrograde” by “spread[ing] to full potential under the blessings of the most perfect principles imaginable” (xii), republican government, capitalism, and Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. As a result, many came to believe that in order to carry out this mission, Americans must spread these principles throughout the western territories “by means of regenerative intervention,” or the use of military might to force the inhabitants of the lands to conform to the Anglo-American rule or face extermination.

Blood Meridian engages with Manifest Destiny through its portrayal of the filibusters, a group of itinerant soldiers under the leadership of Captain White. White and his men plan to carry out a private campaign in which they will loot and lay claim to land in Mexico because of their belief that the United States’ government failed to take full advantage of its military victory in the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Prior to embarking upon this mission, a group of filibusters finds the destitute kid camping in the desert near Bexar, Texas, and recognize him as the perpetrator of a vicious assault on a local bartender. One of the men tells him that their leader, Captain White, had learned of this incident and was so impressed by his violent behavior that he wanted him to join his company. He attempts to persuade the kid to accept the captain’s invitation by telling him that the mission will bring great wealth to its participants, saying “Aint a man in the company wont come out a big landowner” (30). While this statement may reflect the motivation of those who volunteer to join the filibusters, it is not indicative of the primary reason that Captain White identifies for waging war in Mexico. In his interview with the kid, he presents the mission as being grounded in the idea of regenerative intervention. Specifically, he sees it as an act aimed at ensuring the spread of American power and the eradication of the barbaric natives that dominate Mexico. He believes that such actions are necessary because the American government did not assume political ownership of Mexico following the war and

decided instead to return control of the defeated nation to “a bunch of barbarians that . . . have no least notion in God’s earth of honor or justice or the meaning of republican government” (33). This statement demonstrates that he considers the current state of political disarray in Mexico to be the result of the Americans’ failure to establish the grounding principles of Manifest Destiny. He argues further that this state of affairs is exacerbated by the Mexican government’s fear of the indigenous population. He describes the Mexicans as a “people so cowardly they’ve paid tribute a hundred years to tribes of naked savages. Given up their livestock. Mines shut down. Whole villages abandoned. While a heathen horde rides over the land looting and killing with total impunity. Not a hand raised against them” (33). Because of this, it is necessary for White and his men to carry out their mission of regenerative intervention in order to establish order in Mexico by expanding American influence and principles.

Although White’s statement to the kid reveals his belief in Manifest Destiny and regenerative intervention, his remarks are cast in an ironic light by the fact that they follow his sergeant’s statement that the mission will be focused primarily on looting the “spoils of war” (30). This irony is deepened when White himself says to the kid, “[W]e will be the ones who will divide the spoils. There will be a section of land for every man in my company. Fine grassland. Some of the finest in the world. A land rich with minerals, in gold and silver I would say beyond the wildest speculation” (34). This statement portrays the filibusters in a way that suggests that they will likely be little more than a Christian horde that, much like the heathen horde that White detests, will “ride over the land looting and killing with total impunity . . .” (33). Similar to the earlier deconstruction of the naturalist reader, here the text presents one of the principal binaries of Manifest Destiny—savagery/enlightenment—in a manner that subtly deconstructs it and in doing so suggests the conflation of the two groups that the binary supposedly divides. This

conflation undermines the validity of White's explanation of the need for further American intervention in Mexico. He says, "What we're dealing with . . . is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there is no god in Mexico. Never will be. We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them" (34). The fact that the filibusters intend to acquire wealth and power by taking advantage of a people ravaged by war renders White's argument hollow and suggests that his company is no more than a group of scavengers. However, he fails to see the irony of his presentation of his mission and persists in his attempts to persuade the kid of the general need for intervention in Mexico and of the specific need for him to join the filibusters' mission.

While the ironic nature of White's comments deconstructs the claims of Manifest Destiny, it is important to note that in addition to this aesthetic act, his statements to the kid also serve to place this scene and the subsequent portrayal of the filibusters' mission in a Southern Gothic framework. The first sign of this occurs when White seeks to establish himself as a patriarchal figure in the kid's eyes when he addresses him as "[s]on" (34). He does so when he notices that the kid appears to have become weary after hearing his lengthy explanation of the rationale for this mission as well as his account of its broader political context. The narrator states, "The captain was watching the kid. The kid looked uneasy. Son, said the captain. We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land. That's right. We are to spearhead the drive. We have the tacit support of Governor Burnett of California" (34). Here, White assumes a paternal tone to encourage the kid to realize that his joining the filibusters will allow him to become a pioneer in this integral moment in world history. Moreover, he uses this tone to

assure the kid of his authority by stating that the mission has received governmental support and is therefore a valid enterprise. He follows the creation of this bond with the previously quoted statement concerning the land that will be parceled to those who participate in the mission. This further enhances his paternal quality by showing him to be one who has the means of providing for those under his care. In Southern Gothic terms, White emerges in this scene as acting as a father figure to the kid. By doing so, he extends to him a sense of stability and paternal provision that he has never experienced and thus makes an initial move toward investing the kid with transcendent significance.

The patriarchal image that White creates in this scene also lends itself to the sergeant's description of him as a messianic figure in his conversation with the kid in the desert. He says, "If I'd not run up on Captain White I dont know where I'd be this day. I was a sorrier sight even than what you are and he come along and raised me up like Lazarus. Set my feet in the path of righteousness. I'd done took to drinkin and whorin till hell wouldnt have me. He seen something in me worth savin and I see it in you" (30). By comparing himself to Lazarus, the man presents White as a messianic figure who saved him not only from a life of sin but a state of spiritual death by bringing him into the company. Because of this, the conception of Manifest Destiny that he espouses and hopes to spread to the kid transcends the political aspects of this ideology and affects him on a deeply personal level by becoming a form of salvation from sin. This religious framework is further extended by White's statements concerning the rich land that the filibusters will receive, which appears in this context as a promised land that is the reward of those who fight the good fight of Manifest Destiny in Mexico. Read in this manner, when the kid joins White's company, he acquires material provisions, such as new clothing, a horse, and saddle, as well as the opportunity to embrace a new identity. Unlike the identity that he derived

from his fights with foreign sailors, this identity has the potential to allow him to achieve a transcendent significance by taking part in Manifest Destiny, a mission that its adherents believed to be essential to God's providential plan. However, as in earlier works that utilize the Southern Gothic, this source of transcendent significance proves incapable of standing up to the ravages of the naturalistic world the characters in *Blood Meridian* inhabit.

This element of the Southern Gothic contributes to *Blood Meridian*'s emphasis on deconstructing hierarchical binaries that serve as the basis of anthropocentric perspectives in order to reveal the optical democracy of reality. In the case of the filibusters, this feature of the text calls into question their fundamental belief that human life is ordered according to a racial hierarchy. The stage is set for the deconstruction of this hierarchy by the belief that since God had ordained Manifest Destiny, he would protect the combatants who took part in it and ensure their victory over the heathens that they would encounter on their journeys into the West. It is this assumption that leads White to undertake the formidable task of traveling to Mexico to wage war against a people so powerful that they have dominated the nation for a century. While most would reconsider taking on such a force with a militia composed of "irregulars," White's belief that Manifest Destiny is divinely ordained prevents him from viewing his mission or his company with a skeptical eye. He implies this when he tells the kid about the exploits of Colonel Doniphan's militia in Mexico: "Did you know that when Colonel Doniphan took Chihuahua City he inflicted over a thousand casualties on the enemy and lost only one man and him all but a suicide? With an army of insipid irregulars that called him Bill, were half naked, and had walked to the battlefield from Missouri?" (34-35). Because this example of a militia similar to his own achieving an unscathed victory occurs following White's initial explanation of the reason his company intends to wage war, it may be read as a means of persuading the kid to join the

filibusters by assuring him that no harm will come to him during the campaign. It is this unwavering belief in their guaranteed safety and victory that inspires the company to carry out their mission and that ultimately leads them to engage in a battle that eradicates them and Manifest Destiny from the world of the text.

Although White's belief that God will ensure the protection of his men is farfetched, the narrator, in keeping with the text's tendency to identify an extant ordering of things prior to deconstructing it, suggests that he may be correct in making this assumption. The narrator demonstrates this when during their journey he calls the filibusters "elect," thus supporting the belief that they had indeed been chosen by God to carry out his will through regenerative intervention (48). However, immediately after applying this term to them, he undermines the gravity of their election by describing their appearance as "shabby and white with dust like a company of armed and mounted millers wandering in dementia . . ." (48). This depiction diminishes the ideological claims that the filibusters represent and encourages the reader to view skeptically the meaning that they derive from them. Furthermore, it allows the reader to recover briefly from the earlier deconstruction of his or her position of exteriority by letting him or her share the narrator's perspective so as to be in on the joke that underlies this description, but this recovery is short-lived. By permitting the reader to stand outside of the text insofar as to let him or her share in the humor of the ironic description of the filibusters, the narrator extends to him or her a moment of exteriority that serves to give him or her a prime vantage point from which to witness the deconstruction of Manifest Destiny and the sense of identity that it has extended to many Americans since the mid-nineteenth century. And with the deconstruction of Manifest Destiny comes the elimination of the belief that the "stuff of creation" can be "shaped according to man's will" (5).

The collapse of Manifest Destiny is portrayed in what has become the most famous scene in *Blood Meridian*, the Comanche attack on the filibusters. Several critics have called attention to this scene's vivid and surrealistic depiction of the violent acts that the Comanche perform, but none has commented on the ironic fact that this is an unnecessary battle that was brought on by White's blind adherence to the tenets of Manifest Destiny. Hours before the Comanche arrive, some of the men note the appearance of "distant clouds of dust that lay across the earth for miles" (51). They eventually realize that these clouds have been caused by a large, oncoming herd of livestock accompanied by what appears to be "a handful of ragged indians . . ." (51). Upon learning this, White immediately brings these riders into the narrative of Manifest Destiny by identifying them as "heathen stockthieves . . .," thus reaffirming the Christian/heathen binary. The narrator presents the filibusters as acting upon their belief that God will ensure their safety by their watching the approaching riders all day long and never attempting to reposition so as to avoid confronting them or to gain a tactical advantage should fighting become necessary. The racial implications of this decision are made clear when White tells the sergeant, "We may see a little sport here before the day is out" (51). White's statement epitomizes the arrogance that stems from his espousal of Manifest Destiny. He has such faith that God will preserve his company and deliver the racially-inferior "indians" into their hands that he believes fighting them will be no more than "sport," diversion from the drudgery of riding across the empty desert. This belief reveals him as possessing a degree of arrogance that leads him to jeopardize the safety of his men and their mission.

If White's behavior is considered in light of the text's emphasis on optical democracy, then it emerges as a vital aspect of the deconstruction of the existential order that derives from Manifest Destiny. While the narrator identifies this order earlier by calling the filibusters "elect,"

here this order is demonstrated through the actions of its characters, namely Captain White's choice to hold his ground in spite of the Comanche's approach on their position. However, the company's faith in the order that underlies this choice is immediately lost when the first of the Comanche riders appear. The narrator demonstrates this by portraying the previously confident men begin "saw[ing] back on their mounts and . . . mill[ing] in confusion" (52). By stating that the filibusters mill in confusion, the narrator returns to his earlier description of them as looking like "millers wandering in dementia," which he used to cast doubt on their supposed divine election. Here, he intensifies this doubt by saying that in this moment, they actually mill in confusion, thus literalizing this simile. By doing so, he indicates that their former sense of purpose and identity have been shattered by a lack of knowledge that stems from the collapse of the ideological narrative that had previously informed their mission and their view of reality. In the wake of this collapse, the filibusters are rendered helpless in what soon becomes a deadly situation. Furthermore, their immediate loss of faith reveals Manifest Destiny as being based upon "whimsical" assumptions that arise from the preferences of a people who aim to force their subjective opinions upon the world.

The narrator demonstrates the significance of this scene to the ideological aspect of *Blood Meridian* by describing the Comanche in language that not only places them within the rhetorical purview of Manifest Destiny but also reveals them as representing a horror that the binaries of this ideology are unable to encapsulate. The failure of these binaries is made most apparent when he says that the Comanche "rid[e] down upon [the filibusters] like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning . . ." (52). At first glance, his statement appears to cast the Comanche in a demonic light, but it actually places them outside of the Christian tradition altogether by saying that the horror they represent exceeds that of hell.

Nevertheless, within the framework of Manifest Destiny, this establishes them as the diametrical opposite of the elect filibusters. As a result, this battle comes to represent a testing ground for the ideology's racial and theological claims. Thus, the carnage that is wreaked upon the filibusters following the Comanche's arrival should not be read as a mere lost battle but rather as a defeat so thorough that the tenets of Manifest Destiny fail and are eliminated from the world of the text. This is demonstrated by the fact that the ensuing battle scene depicts the nearly total annihilation of the filibusters. The narrator portrays the Comanche as

riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives and running about on the ground with a peculiar bandylegged trot like creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore that they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows. (54)

By cataloging these grisly images in this manner, the narrator portrays not only the slaughter that befell Captain White and his company but also the erasure of Manifest Destiny from the text as a valid ordering of reality. Although the kid is one of eight men that survive this attack, it divests him of the identity he acquired by joining the filibusters' mission and demonstrates that his experience in the West has done no more than add another layer to his identity as a character void of transcendent significance. Thus, despite fleeing from his home in Tennessee, he remains

one whose life continues to unfold according to a Southern Gothic paradigm.

Following the defeat of the filibusters, *Blood Meridian* amplifies its naturalist rendering of the kid through its portrayal of him as he emerges from the remnants of the battle into the post-Manifest-Destiny world. His emergence occurs in a deeply ironic manner in that he does not simply leave the scene of the attack and walk into this world but rather is violently born into it. The narrator states, “With darkness one soul rose wondrously from the new slain dead and stole away in the moonlight. The ground where he’d lain was soaked with blood and with urine from the voided bladders of the animals and he went forth stained and stinking like some reeking issue from the incarnate dam of war herself” (55). Here, the kid is portrayed as having been re-born and becomes a dark parody of the salvation and newness of life that Sergeant Trammel said would come to him by joining the filibusters’ mission. This is made apparent by the fact that he “r[ises] wondrously from the new slain dead” in a manner that suggests that he has been figuratively “born again” in the aftermath of the attack. But rather than arriving at a state of salvation that allows him to transcend the turbulence of the material world, he becomes more deeply entrenched in the realm of forces because of this second birth. In fact, the brutalizing experience of this birth and the trauma of the Comanche attack have a negative impact on his life that exceeds that of his biological birth into his failed childhood home. Whereas he could exert his will by running away from home, he cannot run from the fact that the West is not a land of endless possibilities that will respond to his desires. Instead, the place that had seemed to offer unlimited freedom to him becomes a land of bondage, a figurative reality that is literalized when he is arrested and imprisoned in Chihuahua City mere days after emerging from the remains of the filibusters.

During his stay in prison, the kid is reunited with Louis Toadvine, a character with whom

he became violently acquainted while in Nacogdoches. Shortly afterward, Toadvine facilitates his and the kid's release by falsely reporting to Captain John Joel Glanton, the leader of a band of scalphunters hired by the governor of Chihuahua to exterminate indigenous people, that he, the kid, and a third prisoner are experienced "indiankiller[s]" (79). The means by which the kid returns to freedom contributes to the text's presentation of him as a naturalist character in that his release is purely a matter of chance rather than agency on his part. Simply put, had he not been reunited with Toadvine, he would have most likely remained incarcerated. In this sense, his joining the Glanton gang is similar to his joining the filibusters, for in both instances, he is inscribed into narratives that are not of his own devising and his life is made to follow a path determined by other characters.

While such events support a naturalist reading of the kid, it is important to note that the span of time that passes between the defeat of the filibusters and the entrance of the Glanton gang also introduces an aspect of his character that reveals him as being more complex than a conventional naturalist character. For example, in a conversation that he has with another surviving filibuster, "the Georgian," shortly after his arrest (70), the Georgian says, "I guess you seen the captain's head," referring to the detached head of Captain White, which the Mexicans had preserved in a jar and showed to him and the kid upon arresting them (70). After stating that he had seen the head, he tells the Georgian, "Somebody ought to have pickled it a long time ago. By rights they ought to pickle mine. For ever takin up with such a fool" (70). According to Warren French, naturalist characters are not "conscious of what they are doing or capable of any self-analysis of their motivations . . .," but in this instance, the kid, although clearly a naturalist character, appears to be quite capable of analyzing his behavior (125). Although the kid is not depicted in this scene as he reflects upon his motivations while performing an action, it does

provide a moment of self-reflection that demonstrates that he is not an unthinking brute. The fact that he is not unthinking becomes of central importance to the text's engagement with naturalism following its introduction of Judge Holden as a naturalist narrator after the kid becomes part of the Glanton gang.

The entrance of the Glanton gang marks a significant shift in *Blood Meridian's* treatment of the history of the West and its exploration of optical democracy. By eradicating the order imposed upon the region by Manifest Destiny and placing its focus on the gang, the text seems to present their experiences as occurring within a demythologized reality that reflects the naturalistic leveling of optical democracy. Central to this is the fact that although historically-documented, the gang lies well outside of the mythical popular history of the West and therefore gives the text the "advantage" of not having to "confront whatever specific preconceptions and pre-knowledge readers might already have" (Søfting 22). At first glance, this appears to remove from the surface the problem posed to the world and characters by ideological narratives that obscure the optical democracy of nature and enable the text to portray its characters' lives as unfolding in a brutal landscape that rejects the impulse to align reality with anthropocentric perspectives. According to Rick Wallach, such perspectives are rejected by the narrator's tendency to call attention to features of the landscape that function as "deep-time metaphors" (105). Such metaphors include geological formations and artifacts that are "irrupted into the present by a sudden backward lurch of the narrative consciousness of the text" (105). He maintains that these serve to deflate "the human sense of being at the center of the universe" and demonstrate that humans "are short-lived, make less of an impact, [and] therefore matter less than we would like to think that we do" (105-106). One might argue that *Blood Meridian's* use of deep-time metaphors is aimed at revealing the optical democracy that prevails in the land

through which the Glanton gang travels. However, this argument does not hold because many of the deep-time metaphors that appear in *Blood Meridian* would bear no significance beyond their presence as features of the landscape were it not for the fact that they are used by Judge Holden to exemplify the philosophical claims that he makes in his frequent lectures to the gang during their journeys.

Holden's elaboration upon these should not, however, be read as contributing to the text's exploration of optical democracy because he uses them instead to support the deterministic narrative that he communicates in his lectures in order to gain control over those who travel with the gang by seeking to divest them of their sense of autonomy. In this sense, he functions in a manner similar to a naturalist narrator who relates and controls the narrative in conventional works of literary naturalism. However, despite its naturalist features, his narrative diverges from a key feature of fin-de-siècle American naturalism in that it does not seek to impart to its audience the mindset of the "scientist reformer" in an attempt to preserve the values of middle-class society from the threat posed by the brutish characters it depicts (Walcott 24). Rather, he uses it to convince his listeners that they are void of autonomy and are therefore determined entirely by forces that are beyond their control. Therefore, unlike with conventional naturalist narratives, his audience is not allowed to view themselves as free characters that exist outside of the realm of forces, for only he stands outside of this narrative. He presents himself as the only individual who remains outside of the universal realm of forces that he speaks into existence because he intends to use this narrative in his quest to become what he calls "suzerain of the earth" (198). At the heart of this quest is his effort to ensure that he is the only autonomous life form, and he seeks to accomplish this by using his lectures and field research to establish among those who hear him the "commensurability of language and the thing . . ." so as to eliminate the

possibility of “resignification” (Dorson 113). By doing so, James Dorson argues, Holden “stifles . . . the ‘insurrectionary moment’ in which words break from their previous context” and attempts to deny his listeners the opportunity to deconstruct the position of dominance that he creates with his rhetorical prowess (113). Consequently, the power that he holds over all who become bound by his narrative is total because it permits “no contingency, no ambiguity, no resistance, because everything is already accounted for” (113). His narrative is highly reminiscent, then, of those narratives of entrapment that are prevalent in earlier works of American literary naturalism and the Southern Gothic.

Since Holden’s narrative excludes contingency, ambiguity, and the possibility of resistance, it reflects perfectly William James’s definition of determinism. James states that a deterministic philosophy

professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree that the other parts shall be. The future has no ambiguous possibilities hidden in its womb; the part we call the present is compatible with only one totality. Any other future complement than the one fixed from eternity is impossible. The whole is in each and every part, and welds it with the rest into an absolute unity, an iron block, in which there can be no equivocation or shadow of turning. (150-151)

In a rigidly determined world, there exists no possibility of deviating from the predetermined course of existence. Reality is “one unbending unit of fact” in which there are no “ambiguous possibilities” and therefore no room for choice, for in order for there to be the possibility of choice, the laws and forces that govern the world must exhibit some degree of alterability. In the

absence of this, the individual, regardless of his or her desire to alter reality, is merely “one element of a mechanistic universe” that, like the world itself, is determined by forces that preexist him or her and that do not permit deviations from the course of existence that has been “fixed from eternity” (Link *Vast* 19 & James 150). That Holden sees the world in this way is made evident when in his first lecture he seeks to dispel the common assumption among the gang members that the earth was formed in the manner described in the biblical account of creation. To accomplish this, he shows them “copper and native nuggets in whose organic lobations he purported to read news of the earth’s origins . . .” (McCarthy 116). Contrary to the beliefs of his audience, he argues that the earth was formed over “eons out of the ancient chaos, an argument that demonstrates not only his espousal of scientific naturalism but also his willingness to teach the gang members in a manner reminiscent of a naturalist scientist reformer.

According to Charles Child Walcutt, the scientist reformer is a character that urges other characters as well as the reader of a work of naturalist fiction to realize that “the state of man needs to be improved, and that human conditions are determined by the operation of material causes which can be traced, recorded, and understood, and, finally controlled” (24). Throughout the section of *Blood Meridian* focused on the gang’s journey through northern Mexico and the American Southwest, Holden proves himself to be capable of acting in this role through his lectures as well as his frequent observations of natural phenomena and artifacts that he discovers. However, the attitude that he displays toward his audience indicates that if he is to be thought of as a scientist reformer, his version of reform does not aim to improve the state of humankind in any conventional sense. The narrator demonstrates this in his description of Holden’s response to those that sought to understand his lecture on the ore samples: “The squatters in their rags nodded among themselves and were soon reckoning him correct, this man of learning, in all his

speculations, and the judge encouraged until they were proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools” (116). That he finds humor in their attempt to engage with the ideas of one who is deemed a “man of learning” after working to confound their religious understanding of the earth’s formation reveals that Holden cares nothing for edifying his fellow gang members. Rather, he aims to unsettle the assumptions about the world and themselves in which their identities have been grounded over the course of their lives. This aspect of his character leads David Evans to claim that he “uses language not to communicate but to confound” (422), but such a reading of Holden verges on dismissing the fact that while his lectures do indeed aim to confound his listeners, he uses such confounding as a rhetorical technique aimed at preparing his audience to receive the larger claims that he later makes.

The foundational claim that Holden seeks to communicate is his radical proclamation that “[w]ar is god” (249). Underlying this claim is his attempt to encourage his listeners to understand that the deterministic narrative that he creates in his lectures is not merely representative of his opinions but conveys a metaphysical truth that is ingrained in the very fabric of reality. To this end, he presents war as a cosmic force that preceded the emergence of humans. He states, “It makes no difference what men think of war . . . War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always there. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That was the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way” (248). Holden’s explanation precludes understanding war as a human creation and establishes it a constant and unalterable fact of life on earth. To demonstrate this, he compares it to stone, thus casting it as an elemental feature of existence that is unresponsive to the desires and opinions of humankind. These remarks indicate that he believes war is a permanent part of life that transcends the human mind and will and places war in a distinctly naturalist context that

seems to demote the place of humans in reality. However, he reveals that this is not entirely the case when he plays to the gang's anthropocentric sense of superiority when he says that although war is the "ultimate trade . . .," it could only be realized as such following the emergence of the human, "its ultimate practitioner." Considered in this light, humankind's superiority over other life forms derives from the fact that only it has the intellectual capacity to understand the metaphysical nature of war and therefore the ability to submit to it by engaging in violent conflict.

Holden brings this universal claim to the level of the individual when he states that each of his listeners has taken up the trade of war by joining the Glanton gang. By doing so, he seeks to show them that regardless of their opinions of his claims, they have acted in a manner that indicates their submission to war without any prompting. Such an argument allows him to reinforce his argument that war is woven into the fabric of terrestrial life and is therefore inevitable. However, when David Brown rejects this line of thought by saying that it represents no more than Holden's "notion" of reality, he returns his lecture to the universal level by presenting the human's interest in games as evidence of the fact that he or she was born for the purpose of engaging in war. This enjoyment of games does not derive solely from an interest in playing for the sake of sport. Instead, Holden argues that "the worth or merit of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of that which is put at hazard" (249). Because the participants in a game must put something of themselves at stake for it to have meaning, he states that "all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all" (249). Here, he indicates that the stakes of the game do not merely make it more interesting but in fact subsume the worth and the identity of the participants. Consequently, Holden presents the game that achieves the condition of war as one that results in the death of the

loser. He states, “This enhancement of the game to its ultimate state admits no argument concerning the notion of fate. The selection of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is a dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency or significance either one” (249). This conception of games and war epitomizes the naturalist aspect of Holden’s narrative because it presents human life as being a matter of chance that is determined by an unseen force with the “agency” to decide which participant, or combatant, will live and which will die. He elaborates upon this force by saying that games with life-or-death stakes represent the “testing of one’s will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select” (249). His belief that this selection is made by a will that is exterior to and unanswerable to the participants leads him to conclude that “[w]ar is god,” a conclusion that reveals the thoroughly naturalist tenor of the narrative he communicates in his lectures (249).

After Holden reaches this conclusion, Irving, a fellow gang member, counters his argument that the death of the loser in a game with life-or-death stakes is the result of a purposeful decision made by the unnamed “larger will” that governs life. He contends, “Might does not make right The man that wins in some combat is not vindicated morally” (250). Holden responds by rejecting the concept of morality: “Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn” (250). He argues further that morality is hindered by the fact that a “moral view cannot be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test” (250). In this sense, he appears to agree with Irving’s claim and even goes so far as to say that a “man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views” (250). However, he states that the fact that the participants engaged in the duel “gives evidence of a new and broader view” of the duel itself and the

significance of its outcome (250): “The willingness of the principals to forgo further argument as the triviality which it in fact is and to petition directly the chambers of the historical absolute clearly indicates of how little moment are the opinions and of what great moment the divergences thereof. For the argument is indeed trivial, but not so the separate wills thereby made manifest” (250). Holden believes argument is “trivial” because an individual’s “knowledge remains imperfect and however much he comes to value his judgments ultimately he must submit them to a higher court” (250). In this court, “[d]ecisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all questions of right” precisely because the “larger will [that] binds [the participants] . . .” does not respond to their morally grounded claims. Rather, the decision of who shall live and who shall die in such a duel is based upon the evolutionary idea that the strong will prevail over the weak, for it is based upon “[h]istorical law” rather than “[m]oral law” (250). Thus, while the participants can make manifest their wills, they cannot affect the decision that will be made in their case through argumentation because they lack the agency required to affect the outcome they desire. In this sense, they are fully bound to and determined by the “larger will” that is enacted through war.

Following his explanation of his position on morality, Holden makes a move that is unprecedented when he invites ex-priest Ben Tobin to respond to his remarks on war and morality. The fact that he addresses Tobin as the “priest” rather than by his name or as the “expriest” indicates that he views him as the representative of a different conception of the divine and thus as an advocate of traditional morality (250). Because of this, his choice to shift his focus away from the other gang members to Tobin suggests that he does this in an attempt to push the debate toward the “condition of war” in order to allow the larger will to choose between these rival understandings of God. However, this cannot happen because Tobin refuses to

respond. Because of this, Holden is able to inscribe him into his narrative in a manner that suggests that his claim that war is god is the correct view of God, at least where Tobin and he are concerned. Of course, at this point in the text, the reader knows that Tobin does not espouse this position because of his earlier statement to the kid that “God speaks in the least of creatures” (124). The fact that the narrator capitalizes “God” in this instance but does not when Holden states that war is “god” demonstrates that they hold radically different views, but his silence prevents this difference from being made manifest in this scene. This difference is further concealed as Holden uses Tobin’s silence as evidence in favor of his claim. He states, “The priest does not say, said the judge. Nihil dicit. But the priest has said. For the priest has put by the robes of his craft and taken up the tools of that higher calling which all men honor. The priest also would be no god server but a god himself” (250). Although Tobin subsequently refuses the title of priest by stating that he “was never a priest but only a novitiate,” Holden does not accept the implications of this statement and chooses instead to view his intention to become a priest as marking him as a “m[a]n of god” (250). In his estimation, Tobin’s departure from the priesthood in order to take on the life of the warrior reveals him as the ultimate witness to the claim that war is the superior god and is the force that determines all life on earth.

Tobin’s refusal to respond shows that he realizes that this view of his character will be proven true should he engage in this debate when he tells Holden, “I’ll not secondsay you in your notions Dont ask it” (251). By referring to his claims as his “notions,” Tobin seeks to cast doubt upon the view of reality that Holden has conveyed in this lecture and the following debate, but the fact that he will not accept his offer to speak his mind demonstrates that he possesses a degree of self-awareness that compromises his ability to resist Holden’s narrative. He does this because he understands that his choices in life, namely leaving his training for the priesthood and

joining the gang, have placed him in a position in which any response that he makes will support Holden's claims. Thus, his response would indeed "secondsay" the judge. Tobin is incapable, then, of stepping outside of the bounds of Holden's deterministic narrative despite his espousal of an opposing claim about the divine. The fact that he has been circumscribed by this narrative is demonstrated further when in response to his refusal to "secondsay" him, Holden says, "Ah, Priest . . . What could I ask of you that you've not already given?" (251). The section break that follows this question indicates that Holden has won this debate and has silenced the critics of his view of war, god, and morality, and this is especially so given that the one gang member capable of dispelling his argument with an opposing claim concerning God has been revealed as a living testament to the truthfulness of this view.

In the above discussion of Holden's lectures, I have presented him as using these to inscribe the members of the Glanton gang in a deterministic narrative. At this point, it is necessary to address an important question that this presentation of these lectures raises: What is Holden's objective in creating this narrative and using it in this manner? This question is connected to the earlier statement on his acting as an unconventional scientist reformer because these aspects of his character contribute to the naturalist agenda that he seeks to carry out through his lectures and field studies.

The clearest answer to this question appears when Holden explains to Toadvine his reason for preserving the birds that he kills as well as the sketches that he makes of natural phenomena and artifacts that he discovers while exploring the areas through which the gang travels. Central to these practices is his desire to become "suzerain of the earth" (198). Several critics have discussed this desire in their efforts to understand better Holden's identity, but none has addressed the effect that Toadvine's dismissive treatment of his expression of this desire has

on Holden and what it reveals about his character. While this scene does not mark the first time that Holden's actions are questioned by a gang member, Toadvine's abrasive tone distinguishes his inquiry from Webster's earlier lighthearted questions concerning his sketches. Whereas Webster asks what he "aim[s] to do with those notes and sketches . . ." and compliments their verisimilitude (140), Toadvine assumes a less amiable tone and "ask[s] him what [is] his purpose in all this" (198). Initially, Holden does not offer an explanation but merely looks at Toadvine, who, in response to this silence "sp[its] into the fire," an action that is a sign of disrespect throughout the text (198). After finishing his notes, Holden explains his purpose:

Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent.

He looked about at the dark forest in which they were bivouacked. He nodded toward the specimens he'd collected. These anonymous creatures, he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock is out of man's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth (198).

He subsequently defines "suzerain" as a "keeper or overlord," and Toadvine maintains his abrasive tone by asking, "Why not say keeper then?" (198). Holden replies, "Because he is a special kind of keeper. A suzerain rules even when there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgments" (198). Toadvine once again responds by spitting. As if goaded by Toadvine's dismissive response to his statements, Holden exemplifies the task of the suzerain and explains the importance of cataloging the components of the surrounding landscape by

identifying it as a claim over which he holds suzerainty: “The judge placed his hands on the ground. He looked at his inquisitor. This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation” (199). The significance of this passage is twofold. One, the facts that this statement is unsolicited and the narrator calls Toadvine Holden’s “inquisitor” demonstrate that his dismissive treatment of the judge’s claims have given him control of this conversation and places Holden on the defensive for the first time in the text. Two, Toadvine forces him to state explicitly that his objective is to eliminate all life forms that do not align with or submit to his “dispensation.”

The fact that this conversation arises spontaneously from Toadvine’s observation of Holden prevents the judge from gaining the rhetorical advantage that he uses to masterful effects in his lectures, which despite their “extemporary” nature function more as set pieces the contents of which he is able to recall with ease. As a result, the reader is given a glimpse into his motivations that is absent in the more formal lectures and allows him or her to weigh them against the idea of optical democracy. His insistence upon forcing the world to bear the image of his dispensation, or order, reveals the philosophy that he conveys in his lectures as diverging from optical democracy because this order, like that of Manifest Destiny, is based upon a hierarchy. Unlike Manifest Destiny, this order does not posit a specific group as the dominant people but rather places one individual, Holden, at the head of all terrestrial life. Because of this, his suzerainty would give him dominion over both humankind and nature alike. Ironically, the impetus for his desire to achieve such power is his fear that all life forms, regardless of size, have the power to “enslave man” (199), yet the liberation of humankind from this ever-present threat is not the goal of Holden’s unconventional enactment of the role of scientist reformer. Rather, it

is his own liberation, and his alone, that he seeks to ensure. He expresses as much when he says that “each last entity [must be] routed out and made to stand naked before . . .” the one who will take on the role of suzerain of the earth. That this statement is preceded by his comment about the power of minute organisms obscures the fact that if “each last entity [must be] routed out,” then humans must be routed out as well as “[a]ny smallest thing beneath yon rock . . .” (199). Simply put, all animate objects must be “made to stand naked before . . .” Judge Holden and thus be made known in terms of his philosophy.

Approaching Holden in this manner allows his disdain for autonomous life in any form to come into greater focus. Nevertheless, his explanation fails to convince Toadvine that such immense power could be obtained by any individual. He expresses this when he tells him that “[n]o man can acquaint himself with everything on this earth . . .” (199). He follows this logic when he says in response to Holden’s subsequent claim that his actions serve as a means of “taking charge of the world . . .” so as to “effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate” that he does not see what this “has to do with catchin birds” (199). By persistently rejecting Holden’s statements, Toadvine finally extracts from him an explanation for his killing and stuffing of birds that he can accept and that, for the reader, reveals the essence of his philosophy: “The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I’d have them all in zoos” (199). Toadvine gives a final jab by stating that this “would be a hell of a zoo,” for such a zoo, no doubt, would have to encompass the entire earth (199). In doing so, he unintentionally illuminates the fact that Holden’s lectures, observations, sketches, and destruction of natural beings and artifacts arise from his desire to bring all of existence into the figurative zoo of a narrative of entrapment that eliminates the possibility of autonomy in all beings other than him.

While Holden is able to impose the order of his dispensation upon nature by killing,

sketching, and preserving specimens, he cannot utilize these methods in his attempt to divest the members of the Glanton gang of their autonomy. He cannot achieve suzerainty through these means because the freedom of humans to refute his arguments and promote other systems of thought poses a constant threat to his ability to control those in his claim. Moreover, this threat is difficult to curtail. The simplest means by which he could control these individuals would be through physical violence; however, should he attempt to impose his will upon them in this manner, his violence would be returned upon him by the other gang members to the point of death and thus eliminate his ability to “dictate the course of his fate.” Also, a physical approach that would necessarily involve killing those in his claim would undermine his suzerainty because a suzerain can only exist where there are individuals over whom he can rule. Therefore, rather than pursue his objectives among the gang through violence, he uses his knowledge of science and history as well as his rhetorical prowess to circumscribe them within the deterministic narrative that he communicates through his lectures.

Central to Holden’s lectures is his effort to make his claims appear not merely as one ideological perspective among a multitude of others but rather as conveying unrivaled, universal truth. As his comments concerning Toadvine demonstrate, his power depends more upon his ability to make others view him and themselves in a certain manner than the truthfulness of his claims. Therefore, his lectures emerge as being an artifice that he uses to entrap the gang within the claim over which he exercises suzerainty. The significance of this comes into greater focus when this aspect of his character is considered in terms of Daniel Dennett’s discussion of the connection between the need for humans to create narratives in order to protect and perpetuate their sense of identity. According to Dennett, the creation of narratives of self in humans is similar to other “constructions” that animals use “for extending their territorial boundaries . . .”

(415). He states that “[e]ach normal [human] makes a *self*. Out of its brain it spins a web of words and deeds . . .” (416). More than providing the individual with a self, or identity, this narrative “protects it . . . and provides it a livelihood . . . and advances its prospects for sex . . .” (416). Dennett exemplifies this by comparing narratives of self to other natural phenomena: “Unlike a spider, an individual human doesn’t just *exude* its web; more like a beaver, it works hard to gather the materials out of which it builds its fortress. Like a bowerbird, it appropriates many found objects which happen to delight it . . . including many that have been designed by others for other purposes” (416). He again uses natural comparisons to show the importance of the narrative-based self to the continued existence of the human when he states, “Stripped of it, an individual . . . is as complete as a bird without its feathers, a turtle without its shell” (416). If Holden’s collection of natural objects and artifacts that align with his vision of the world and his destruction of those that contradict it are considered in this light, then this persistent feature of his character emerges as the primary means by which he creates the narrative that protects and perpetuates his sense of self. Furthermore, the fact that this narrative is a vital part of his quest for suzerainty demonstrates that it is literally aimed at “extending [his] territorial boundaries.” However, it is only when one attempts to understand how this narrative of self pertains to Holden’s relationship with the kid that it reflects what Dennett identifies as the ultimate objective of such narratives, namely “concocting and controlling the story we tell others—and ourselves—about who we are” (418).

By controlling the story that one tells others about him or herself, he or she seeks “to encourage them to (try to) posit a unified agent whose words they are, about whom they are: in short, to posit a center of *narrative gravity*” (418). Dennett argues that the presence of a center of narrative gravity makes the individual human self a “remarkably robust and almost tangible

attractor of properties, the ‘owner of record’ of whatever items and features are lying about unclaimed” (418). In Holden’s case, the members of the Glanton gang and the landscapes through which they travel are the unclaimed “items and features” that become drawn into his narrative of self and thus comprise the claim over which he exercises suzerainty. However, he is unable to gain total control over this claim because the kid, despite his participation in the gang’s activities and hearing Holden’s lectures, remains outside of the gravitational field of his deterministic narrative. It is this feature of the kid’s character that leads to the growing antagonism between the judge and him that becomes the central focus of the text.

The most striking feature of the kid’s character is, in fact, his seemingly inexplicable ability to resist Holden’s narrative in a way that distinguishes him from the other members of the gang. Steven Frye and Harold Bloom contend that this ability leads the kid to act in a heroic manner regardless of the fact that his heroism does not prevent him from dying at the judge’s hand. According to Frye, the kid’s resistance emerges from what Holden identifies as the “flawed place in the fabric of his heart” (McCarthy 299 & Frye 199). He goes on to say that because of this flaw, the kid “reserved in [his] soul some corner of clemency for the heathen” during his time with the gang (299). Frye reads Holden’s statements as pointing to the fact that the kid has the ability to hear the voice of God that Tobin speaks of shortly after he joins the gang. Although he does not pursue this idea in his reading, one could argue that this view of the kid reveals him as being aware of a narrative of being that is different from that of the judge, one that comes from a divine source. However, this reading does not hold with his character given his response to Tobin that he “aint heard no voice” (124). Moreover, one might go so far as to argue that Holden’s remarks indicate that he also misidentifies the reason for the kid’s refusal of his narrative.

Central to the kid's resistance is the fact that among the Glanton gang he, like Holden, is a character whose origins are unknown. Therefore, Holden cannot use the experiences that occurred in his life prior to his becoming part of the gang to bind him with his narrative as he does Tobin. Moreover, because Holden acts as a naturalist narrator in his quest to achieve suzerainty, the kid's persistent exteriority to his narrative threatens to deconstruct his ability to use it to impose his will and thus his dispensation upon all terrestrial life. While several critics, such as Dorson and Rick Wallach, have noted the threat that the kid poses to this narrative, none has considered the significance of this in light of the text's engagement with naturalism, namely with the figure of the naturalist narrator.

Despite his brutish qualities, the kid is the only member of the gang, and, in fact, the only character in *Blood Meridian*, that is identified as a "free agent" (McCarthy 224). In naturalist terms, this means that the kid's power stems from the fact that he is a free character who functions outside of Holden's deterministic narrative. At first glance, this does not seem to present a complication to the naturalist grounding of this narrative because free characters do exist in works of conventional naturalist fiction, such as Robert Ames in *Sister Carrie*. However, in such works, these characters support and reinscribe the message communicated by the narrator, and this the kid does not do. The significance of his rejection of Holden's message becomes clearer when it is considered in light of the ideological assumption that underlies such narratives in conventional naturalism. These works tend to operate from the belief that exposing readers to life in the realm of forces can help them understand the brutish characters in this realm and the forces that determine them. This understanding, in turn, will enable them to control the threat that such brutes pose to middle-class society and thus allow them to reaffirm their sense of themselves as free agents unaffected by determinism. Because the kid does not ascribe to this

ideology and because he resists rather than affirms the narrative that Holden communicates, he cannot be read as acting in a manner similar to a free character in first-wave naturalism. Rather, he emerges as a kind of character that is perhaps unprecedented in literary naturalism—he is a free character who rejects the naturalist narrator because he possesses knowledge that discredits him to the extent that he cannot believe the narrative that he or she communicates. Simply put, the kid is able to resist Holden’s narrative not because he hears the voice of God but because he knows from past experience that the judge is a liar who uses his rhetorical ability to achieve dishonest ends.

To better understand how the kid’s knowledge of Holden’s dishonesty contributes to his resistance, one might consider this aspect of his character in light of Tobin’s account of how the gang came to acquire the services of the judge and the kid’s encounter with him shortly after arriving in Nacogdoches. Doing so reveals that those members of the Glanton gang that precede the arrival of the kid and Toadvine view Holden with a sense of awe that stems from the fact that he saved them from certain death, a fact that causes them to view themselves as being indebted to him and makes them tolerant of his narrative. According to Tobin, prior to the day when “the judge found [the gang],” they had lost over half of their original company while fighting with the Apache, had been “[h]oled up nine days in a cave,” and had run out of gunpowder (124-125). He says, “Mortally whipped, on the run. Every man jack of us knew that in that godforsook land somewhere was a draw or a culdesac or perhaps just a pile of rocks and there we’d be driven to a stand with those empty guns” (125). The following day, they encountered the judge sitting on the only rock visible in the desert: “And there he set. No horse. Just him and his legs crossed, smilin as we rode up. Like he’d been expectin us” (125). By describing this moment in this manner, Tobin envelops the judge with an aura of mystery that imbues him with a semi-divine quality,

and this portrayal of him contributes to the mystification of his character that reaches its highest point when the narrator later describes him as one for whom there is no “system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go” (309). Subsequently, Tobin tells the story of Holden making gunpowder out of volcanic soil and urine, then luring the Apache to their deaths at the hands of the newly armed gang. Although he points out that he disagrees with Holden by stating that he is “of two minds” concerning him, his story indicates that because he and the other men who shared in this experience owe their lives to Holden’s wit, they are somehow in thrall to him. This ultimately prevents them from fully rejecting him despite believing, at least in Tobin’s case, that he is likely diabolical. This is demonstrated when he begins his story by saying, “The judge. Give the devil his due” (125).

While Tobin’s story indicates that the gang owes their lives to Holden, it also shows that he has sought to circumscribe them with his narrative from his earliest experience with them. He says,

In all this time the judge had spoke hardly a word. So at dawn we were on the edge of a vast malpais and his honor takes up a position on some lava rocks there and he commences to give us an address. It was like a sermon but it was no such sermon as any man of us had ever heard before. Beyond the malpais was a volcanic peak . . . and he pointed to that stark and solitary mountain and delivered himself of an oration to what end I know not, then or now, and he concluded with the tellin us that our mother the earth as he said was round like an egg and contained all good things within her. Then he turned led the horse he had been ridin across that terrain of black and glassy slag . . . and us behind him like the disciples of a new faith. (129-130)

Here, Tobin describes Holden as delivering an address that might be read as a dark parody of the Sermon on the Mount. Like this sermon, Holden's address leads to the establishment of "a new faith" among those who hear it, and this allusion is intensified by the fact that he describes the gang members not only as following the judge afterward but also as being "disciples." Thus, Tobin's story harkens back to the narrator's portrayal of the kid's second birth in the wake of the filibusters' defeat. Both scenes contain biblical undertones that treat instrumental moments and concepts in Christianity in a most ironic manner, but a significant difference exists between them. Specifically, the kid emerges from his second birth divested of any sense of identity that he had acquired through his participation in Manifest Destiny while Holden's salvation of the gang lead these men to become his adherents and see him as their deliverer. Furthermore, his claim that the earth "contained all good things within her" is borne out by his discovery of the items needed to secure the gang's salvation and establishes him among the gang as one who speaks truthfully; however, the same cannot be said of him in the scene that depicts the kid's first encounter with him.

Although several critics have called attention to the kid's encounter with Holden in Nacogdoches in order to highlight his mysterious, possibly supernatural, qualities, it is important to note that this initial depiction of the judge is the only time that he reveals himself as a liar by fabricating an egregiously false narrative that likely costs a man his life and then admitting to having done so. This occurs when he disrupts a tent revival meeting for the sole purpose of discrediting the man conducting the service, Reverend Green. He does this by announcing to the audience that Green is an "illiterate" fraud who is "wanted by the law" in multiple states and is known to have committed acts of child molestation and bestiality (7). In response, Green proves that Holden is lying by "reading feverishly from his opened Bible" and later exclaims, "This is

him This is him. The devil. Here he stands” (7). Because his identification of Holden as the devil is preceded by his reading from the Bible, his statement occurs in a distinctly biblical context. Therefore, one might argue that in calling him the devil, Green has in mind the passage of scripture in which Jesus calls the devil “a liar, and the father of it” (John 8:44). While Green’s claim is overstated in that Holden is neither the originator of lies nor the literal devil, it sheds light on the nature of Holden’s use of narrative at an early stage in the text by raising the possibility that he attempts to establish his authority over others with a narrative that consists of nothing but lies. The fact that Holden’s narrative is the primary means by which he attempts to subjugate all terrestrial life suggests that he is a kind of father of lies in that he is the originator of the false world that he speaks into existence through his lectures. Green’s assessment of his character is substantiated in a barroom scene that occurs shortly after the revival erupts in chaos and some in attendance form a “posse . . . to pursue [him]” (8). Here, Holden is asked to give an account of how he acquired his knowledge of Green’s crimes, and he tells the questioner, “I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him” (8). While those in the barroom find much humor in this fact, it nonetheless proves that Holden has purposefully levied false accusations against Green and set in motion a deadly chain of events. Because the kid witnesses both Holden’s performance in the revival tent and his admission to the falsity of his claims, he becomes the only member of the gang with firsthand knowledge that the judge is a liar who uses his narratives to gain power by promoting chaos.

If this knowledge of the judge is coupled with his capacity for self-critical thought, then the kid may be read as entering into his engagement with the gang with a skeptical eye toward those who would seek to inscribe him in the narratives that frame their worldviews. This is so because his uneasy acceptance of White’s narrative nearly caused his death and landed him in a

foreign prison. Moreover, recalling the opening scene's depiction of his childhood home indicates that the defeat of the filibusters and the collapse of the identity that their ideology promised to impart to him is not his only experience with failed narratives. Thus, rather than view his resistance to Holden as stemming from a mystical source, one should instead consider it the result of his observation of and increasing experience with the world. He resists Holden's narrative, one, because he has come to realize that such narratives have the power to divest those who are circumscribed by them of their freedom and possibly their lives and, two, because his experiences outside of the gang have proven the judge to be a liar and therefore unworthy of his trust. Consequently, he realizes that his acceptance of Holden's narrative will result in his being manipulated in a way that will ultimately bind him to the judge's will and the identity that he ascribes to him. To avoid this, he, like Tobin following the lecture on war, chooses to remain virtually silent and avoids engaging with Holden on any subject that he addresses during his time with the gang. In naturalist terms, this reveals him as bearing a similarity to a scientist reformer because he understands that life is determined by forces "which can be traced, recorded, understood, and, finally controlled" (Walcott 24). In the case of his experience with the gang, the force that determines life is Holden's narrative, and the means by which the kid is able to control its effects is by remaining silent so as to prevent the judge from gaining an opportunity to inscribe him in his narrative by using his words against him. Because of this, his silence serves as a means by which he is able to maintain his sense of self and autonomy by "controlling the story [he] tell[s] others—and [himself]—about who [he is]" (Dennett 418). In this sense, his efforts to stand outside of Holden's narrative present him as acting in light of his own unspoken narrative, and this narrative places him in direct opposition to the judge's dispensation.

If the kid is read as representing a narrative that conflicts with the one that Holden

communicates in his lectures, then one must ask this: What is the claim that he represents and why does Holden find it so offensive? The answer, in keeping with the kid's quietness, can be expressed with one word—autonomy. Unlike the members of the gang who preceded his arrival, the kid does not owe his life to the judge, for he was not among those whom he saved from the Apache. Unlike Toadvine, who yields to Holden by selling him his hat in the desert for an exorbitant price, the kid refuses to sell his pistol and ammunition, and thus his life, when the judge offers him “five hundred dollars,” which is ten times more than its original price, and, interestingly, the price that Glanton says a man's life is worth in Texas (285, 83). These examples indicate that the kid does not feel indebted to Holden and is not willing to do business with him regardless of how he may benefit from it. He realizes that any connection with the judge will put his autonomy at hazard, and this fact is not lost upon Holden. As a result, the kid emerges as the prime example of one of the “anonymous creatures” that Holden says “may seem little or nothing in the world” but that has the power to “devour” others (198). That he goes on in this statement to remark that “[o]nly nature can enslave man” allows one to view the kid's attempt to maintain his autonomy as a natural position. Therefore, Holden's narrative emerges as an artificial construction despite his efforts to present it as representing metaphysical truth. The artificiality of this narrative in addition to the kid's knowledge of Holden's using it in the past to achieve dishonest and brutal ends indicates that his claims can only bind those who are unable to access any world outside of the one that he speaks into being.

Approached in this manner, the kid emerges as a character that not only exists outside of Holden's narrative but also represents the fact that there is indeed an outside to the closed world that he creates with this narrative. Because of this, Holden must act in a manner that acknowledges the artificiality of his narrative by seeking to divest the kid of his autonomy with

means that lie outside of the parameters of his ideology. For example, following the demise of the Glanton gang, Tobin encourages the kid to kill the horses that Holden has claimed ownership of so that they can evade him. As they hide from him, the judge attempts for the first time to weave a narrative of entrapment specifically for the kid by seeking to convince him to surrender to his will on legal grounds. The narrator states, “He called out points of jurisprudence, he cited cases. He expounded upon those laws pertaining to property rights in beasts mansuete and he quoted from cases of attainder insofar as he reckoned them germane to the corruption of blood in the prior and felonious owners now dead among the bones. Then he spoke of other things” (293). By placing the killing of the horses in a legal context, Holden argues that the kid has not necessarily acted against his dispensation but rather has violated the law of the land. Moreover, because he cites “cases of attainder” in order to contend for his lawful claim to the horses, he encourages the kid to see that more important than killing these animals, he has violated his rights. As a result, in Holden’s eyes, the kid has become a criminal. While it is possible, and perhaps likely, that the “other things” that Holden says here relate to his philosophical narrative rather than the legal one that he initiates in this scene, it is important to note that neither line of argument proves effective. The kid demonstrates this when he tells Tobin that he “aint listenin” to Holden and refuses his advice to “stop [his] ears” so as to avoid hearing the judge’s claims by telling him to stop his own ears (293). By acting in this manner, he reveals the extent to which he has been made impervious to Holden’s narrative by his knowledge of the fact that it is grounded in falsehood.

Central to Holden’s attempt to bind the kid with the power of the law is the reality that the kid views his words as no more than empty rhetoric and sees them as having no authority. Therefore, Holden is placed in a position that leads him to compromise the exteriority to this

narrative that he derives from his being a naturalist narrator because it requires him to enter into the realm of forces in order to ensure that the threat the kid poses to his suzerainty will be eliminated. That he is willing to do this is initially demonstrated by his legal argument concerning the killing of the horses. His willingness is further indicated when he once more uses the law to bind the kid literally when he tells the San Diego police, who have him in custody, that he had “conspired” with the Yuma by orchestrating the attack on the gang and then encourages them to “hang” him for his crimes (306). As a result, Holden is able to show the kid that despite his exteriority to his narrative, he still can exert power over him. However, since his power in this case derives from a claim made before legal authorities, it possesses a degree of irony that is absent from his assertion of his will during the gang’s travels in the desert. That is, the kid’s exteriority forces him to withdraw his claim against him from the “higher court” of war and instead bring it before the lower courts of society. Although he does succeed in getting the death penalty levied against the kid, his will is not enacted as the kid is released from jail under his own recognizance a mere two days after Holden testified against him. That one who was deemed a “crazy” murderer worthy of death was set free so easily proves that the kid’s argument that Holden’s story about him was nothing but “[l]ies, by god lies” prevails in this instance (306 & 307). This demonstrates that while Holden’s narrative may hold sway in the closed world of the Glanton gang and in the desert in which he can destroy life and artifacts according to his will, his claims are not binding in society at large, which, like the kid, lies outside of his “dispensation” (199). Moreover, his inability to divest the kid of autonomy by resorting to the law reveals that despite its aura of universality, Holden’s narrative and his power have a limit. Significantly, they reach their limit when the actions and responses of those to whom he speaks indicate that they believe he is lying.

While this view of Holden is true, it nevertheless poses a danger to those who come into contact with him, and this is especially the case with the kid. Because the kid views him as dishonest, he fails to understand the high stakes of his continued resistance of Holden's claim to suzerainty. One might better understand this aspect of his character by returning to his relationship with Tobin. That Tobin understands the power of Holden's words and realizes that he is using them to gain control over the kid in the wake of the gang's demise is demonstrated when he follows the advice he had given to the kid by "cup[ping] his hands over his ears . . ." and asking him, "Do you think he speaks of me?" (293). Because the kid does not respond to his question or stop his ears, he emerges as refusing to acknowledge the fact that Holden's words can affect him because he does not believe them to be true. Here, his identity as a free agent is made apparent not only in his resistance of Holden's narrative but also in his rejection of Tobin's advice. This rejection harkens back to an earlier scene in which he ignores Tobin's warning to avoid Holden and instead helps him slaughter a horse to provide the gang with meat. In this instance, "no one rose" in response to Holden's call, and Tobin tells the kid to "[p]lay him no mind . . ." and avoid making unnecessary contact with him (219), but he takes this advice as an insult to his sense of manhood and goes "into the darkness" to the judge. The fact that he displays blatant ignorance in this moment is indicated when before going to Holden he asks Tobin, "You think I'm afraid of him?" (219). Again, his reaction may be read as stemming from his prior knowledge of Holden, but here, it indicates that this knowledge, while accurate, causes him to disregard the power that Holden wields as well as the threat that he poses to his life.

The kid, then, fails to comprehend the gravity of his situation because he refuses to believe anything that Holden says and thus disregards the fact that should he continue to oppose him, he will likely be killed. His failure to do so arises from his inability to conceive of the

possibility that a narrative does not have to emanate from an honest source or be factually true for it to be binding upon those that come under its influence, or, in Dennett's terms, enter its gravitational field. Such is the case with Holden's narrative, for if its purpose is to convince others to see him and themselves in the manner that it prescribes, its veracity is not as important as its ability to affect the lives of those to whom it is applied. Because the kid does not accept this, he seems to believe that one might escape the power of a false narrative, if he or she can somehow resist its adherents' attempts to inscribe him or her within its parameters. But since the characters in *Blood Meridian* function according to a Southern Gothic paradigm, the kid's attempt to resist Holden's narrative by remaining silent must prove futile. In Southern Gothic fiction, resistance to the narratives that order life in the closed worlds it depicts results in the eradication of those who resist them and the reaffirmation of the ideologies that they convey. However, *Blood Meridian*'s argument that beneath the layers of meaning that such narratives impose upon the world is the truth that all life forms exist in a state of optical democracy indicates that resistance is not as futile as it may appear. Moreover, the text's emphasis on deconstructing hierarchical narratives indicates that Holden's will eventually meet a similar end, but the kid's failure to see that particular narrative as an immediate threat to his well-being prevents him from taking actions that could serve to eliminate it as a valid ordering of reality. In this sense, his exteriority to this narrative and the freedom that it extends to him renders him unable to perform the ultimate act of resistance by killing Holden.

In naturalist terms, this inability stems from the kid's belief that as a free character, he is not determined by any outside force. Therefore, he does not see the need to elevate his resistance of Holden to the level of physical violence. This is demonstrated when he ignores Tobin's pleas for him to shoot the judge following the Yuma's attack on the gang. The fact that immediately

before this moment the kid had shot and killed three Yuma warriors demonstrates that his decision to spare Holden is not a result of his unwillingness to kill other humans. However, in this case, and later when he shoots the boy Elrod, he kills only because he believes that he may be killed if he does not exert lethal force. It is this attitude toward killing humans that leads Holden to state that the reason why the kid does not kill him despite having multiple opportunities to do so is that he does not have “the heart of a common assassin” (299). It is important to note that he neither states nor implies that the kid is incapable of killing but points out instead that he does not have it within him to act in the manner of an assassin. For him to do so would require him to identify Holden as one who has power over him and to act out of a desire to eliminate this power so as to provide himself with greater autonomy; however, because the kid views him as a liar, he does not take seriously his claims, regardless of the fact that they indicate Holden’s intention to divest him of his autonomy. Ironically, it is the kid’s sense of unfettered autonomy that blinds him to the truth of the words that Tobin speaks to him when he first takes aim at the judge: “Do it for the love of God. Do it or I swear your life is forfeit” (285). Here, Tobin urges him to see that regardless of the fact that he is a “free agent,” he can only preserve his autonomy and ensure his freedom by acknowledging Holden’s power and assassinating him (224).

By encouraging the kid to act against Holden in this manner, Tobin pushes the antagonism that exists between them to the “condition of war” by raising the stakes of their rivalry to the point of life or death (249). Because of this, he may be read as contributing to an aesthetic act that has the potential to eradicate Holden’s narrative from the world of the text and thus to reveal the optical democracy of reality that it conceals. Therefore, the kid’s decision not to kill the judge takes on a greater significance than may appear at first glance in that it marks his

refusal to take his resistance to the point of eliminating Holden and thus his narrative from existence. His decision calls further attention to the irony that results from the freedom that he derives from his outside knowledge of Holden, namely, it divests him of the ability to assess his situation and understand that Tobin is correct in saying that if he does not kill the judge, his “life will be forfeit.” Simply put, if he allows him to live, he cannot eliminate the potential for Holden to inscribe him into his narrative regardless of whether he accepts or rejects its claims. Thus, in this instance, he is revealed as one who possesses knowledge but lacks the wisdom to understand when to act upon it and when to discard it in favor of a better idea. He disregards Tobin’s plea and acts upon the incorrect assumption that he and Holden, despite their differences, can live peacefully in the same world, an assumption that Tobin rejects. Considered in this manner, the kid may be read as an embodiment of McCarthy’s famous quotation in his 1992 interview with the *New York Times*: “There is no such thing as life without bloodshed . . . I think that the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous” (Woodward).

While the kid does not spare Holden’s life because he believes that this will improve the species, his choice also indicates that he does not feel that killing him will improve, or even affect, his life. This reveals the extent to which he views himself as a free agent who exists outside of Holden’s narrative and his influence. His decision not to kill Holden indicates that he does not believe that “[t]here is no such thing as life without bloodshed . . .” and thinks instead that it is possible for him to choose to remain outside of the violent ideology that has come to define life for the members of the gang. However, Tobin’s statement that this choice will cause

him to forfeit his life urges him to see that the exteriority that he enjoys is a figment of his imagination, that the knowledge that he gained of Holden's workings prior to becoming a gang member has blinded him to the consistency with which the judge inscribes people and things into his narrative and eliminates from existence those that do not, or, in the kid's case, will not, fit into it. Since Tobin has been inscribed in this narrative, he realizes that without killing Holden, neither he nor the kid will escape his power. In this sense, he becomes the opposite of the kid in regard to McCarthy's statement, for he realizes that as long as the judge exists, the possibility for life does not. Furthermore, he sees that the kid's decision not to shoot is tantamount to him surrendering his freedom to the judge, whether the kid understands this or not. Thus, Tobin's view of his and the kid's situation is one that aligns with Frye's argument that McCarthy's remark concerning the relationship between life and bloodshed "implies realism rather than defeatism . . ." and "arguably preserv[es] the possibility of right-minded human action in the world" (Poetics 109).

Read in this manner, Tobin's plea for the kid to kill Holden is a plea for "right-minded" action in that it derives from a deep understanding of the world that the judge has created through his narrative. His understanding distinguishes him from the kid on the issue of Holden's power. He realizes the truth that "the world always comes to us significantly shaped by human projects" and "is already scored through with the enterprises and intentions of others . . ." (Eagleton 312). Therefore, he understands that Holden's power lies in his ability to dictate the terms of existence within his sphere of influence, and these terms, in turn, bind him and the kid. While this seems to support those readings that maintain that Holden's narrative precludes resistance, this is not the case. Rather, the fact that the world of the text is "scored through" with the "intentions" that he seeks to enact with his narrative "lends some rough-and-ready

coherence” to this world, and this, according to Terry Eagleton, “endow[s] things with a sense of necessity” by causing reality to be “relatively calculable and coherent” (312). Because of this, it is possible for characters to act purposively within these terms. In the case of Tobin and the kid, their actions have the potential to become purposive precisely because they act in resistance to Holden’s narrative. At the heart of this potential is the fact that their resistance stems from the fact that Tobin pushes the confrontation to the “condition of war,” rendering it a moment in which they might act so as to secure their freedom. However, in this case, freedom is not “a matter of being free *from* something . . . but of being free to realize [one’s] goals in practice” (Eagleton 312). As a result, in light of the text’s naturalist grounding and its focus on deconstructing hierarchical narratives, freedom is not a matter of “imposing order on chaos, but of transforming one kind of order into another” (312).

In the world of *Blood Meridian*, such a transformation would most likely involve killing Holden because his continued existence thwarts the possibility of autonomous, purposive action. Thus, the kid’s choice to spare his life is the opposite of right-minded action and reveals him as acting in a vacuous manner, for his decision is the result of his inability to consider the consequences of his actions and to understand the significance of this moment. His vacuousness stems from the fact that while he believes that bloodshed is necessary when it is used to preserve his life in potentially deadly situations, he cannot comprehend the threat that Holden poses to life because it occurs on a plane that transcends immediate, physical existence. His lack of comprehension indicates that despite Tobin’s attempts to enlighten him and his own capacity for self-reflection, the kid, like a naturalist brute, remains bound to the material realm of forces because he cannot conceive of life in terms that are broader than mere survival. More specifically, his inability to escape his brutishness lies in the fact that he appears to have no

capacity to read those features of reality that render it “relatively calculable and coherent” to anticipate the future (312). According to Dennett, this is one of the most notable distinctions between humans and “beasts” (*Freedom* 5). He writes, “Brains are for anticipating the future, so that timely steps can be taken in better directions, but even the smartest of beasts have very limited time horizons, and little if any ability to imagine alternative worlds” (5). Humans, on the other hand, have a “capacity for long-distance knowledge [that] gives us powers that dwarf the powers of all the rest of life on the planet” precisely because we are “able to anticipate danger from the distant future . . . and devise schemes for doing something about it” (4). Considered in these terms, regardless of the fact that he is identified as a “free agent,” the kid is one who has been unalterably shaped by his life-long struggle to survive from moment to moment on the most basic level. Because his life has been so focused on the present, he has not developed the ability to anticipate future dangers to his safety and freedom and respond to these accordingly. Therefore, one might go so far as to say that he cannot comprehend what Tobin means when he states that if he does not kill Holden his “life will be forfeit” (McCarthy 285).

The kid’s silent resistance is of no avail because he is ultimately unable to put forth his own claims in the form of a narrative that is capable of identifying the threat that Holden poses, justifying his assassination, and imposing new order upon the world in place of the violence that Holden promotes in order to extend the bounds of his suzerainty. As a result, the kid cannot work to shape the present in a way that would allow him to press life toward a preconceived future state. The possibility of such a state is central to Tobin’s plea for him to kill Holden, for he realizes that he has become entrapped within the world that Holden creates through his narrative and desires for this binding power to be eliminated from the world. Because the kid cannot conceive of the world or himself in this manner, he is revealed as still bearing the brutish

intellect that characterized him in the opening description of him in his failed home in Tennessee. However, at this point, his brutishness is of a more severe nature than in the early stages of the novel because his numerous experiences and the educating influence of Tobin have given him ample opportunity to reflect upon life in a way that could allow him to transcend the ignorance that marked his childhood. In this sense, the kid's life appears to bear out the narrator's early description of him as one for whom "the child [is] the father of the man" (3) in that he does not develop a capacity to understand life on a metaphysical level. As a result, he is unable to see that one does not have to be killed in order to forfeit his or her life. Thus, despite posing a threat to Holden's narrative with his exteriority, he surrenders this advantage by refusing to step into the judge's world and eliminate him as well as the narrative that he imposes upon everything that he encounters.

One might argue that the kid's choice to spare Holden's life indicates that he is ultimately unable to shape the "stuff of creation" to his will and is therefore but another kind of clay. And this view of him seems to be warranted given the narrator's account of the dreams that he has while sedated during a surgery to remove a bullet following his release from the San Diego jail. Several critics have called attention to the narrator's description of these dreams because they include the text's only discussion of Holden's origins. However, the fact that he points out that speculation on the judge's origin will prove fruitless suggests that one should instead focus on what the kid's dreams reveal about his own character, especially given the change in his demeanor that becomes prevalent in the final chapters. Such a shift in focus is warranted by the narrator's statement that for the only time in the novel, and in his life, the kid is given the ability to read, thus defying one of his most distinguishing characteristics. He states,

In the white and empty room [Holden] stood . . . and he peered down with his

small and lashless pig's eyes wherein this child just sixteen years on earth could read whole bodies of decisions not accountable to the courts of men and he saw his own name which nowhere else could he have ciphered out at all logged into the records as a thing already accomplished, a traveler known in jurisdictions existing only in the claims of certain pensioners or on old dated maps. (310)

Here, the moment of literacy that is extended to the kid serves only to divest him of the freedom that he had previously enjoyed by enabling him to read his "name" among the "bodies of decisions . . ." that appear before him in the books of the room he and Holden occupy in his dream. This knowledge reveals to him the devastating fact that his life has been "logged into the records as a thing already accomplished." Because his dream presents him as having already lost his freedom, in terms of naturalism, he should be read as having become subject to the determinism that prevails in the realm of forces. More specifically, the narrator's identification of him as "a traveler known in jurisdictions existing only in the claims of certain pensioners or on old dated maps" suggests that his actions have led to his being inscribed in Holden's narrative. In *Blood Meridian*, the only individual who lays claim to any jurisdiction is Holden in his capacity as would-be suzerain of the earth. Thus, in this passage, he should be read as the "pensioner" to whom the kid is known. Furthermore, that the decisions in which the kid reads his name are "not accountable to the courts of men" aligns with the fact that while the San Diego police have no reason to hold him, he is nevertheless still bound by the terms of Holden's narrative. By making his failed attempt on Holden's life, the kid places himself in direct opposition to the judge and by doing so enters into the "higher court" that is based upon the "[h]istorical law" that "[w]ar is god" (250, 249). And in this court, Holden is the presiding judge who determines the fate of all who would act autonomously in the realm over which he rules.

Although the kid's realization of the threat that Holden poses to his life and freedom allows one to read him as shifting from being a free character to one that is bound in and by the realm of forces, the fact that he arrives at this awareness in the form of a dream deviates from the conventions of first-wave naturalism. Rather than portraying this as a transformation that is revealed through the effects of the material forces that are at work in the kid's life, the narrator presents it as unfolding entirely within the kid's subconscious mind. One may better understand the nature of the strain of naturalism present in this scene by reading it as dovetailing with the text's engagement with the Southern Gothic. According to Tennessee Williams, a Southern Gothic character's response to such knowledge "is not a reaction to anything sensible or visible even, strictly materially, *knowable*. But rather it's a kind of spiritual intuition of something almost too incredible and shocking to talk about, which underlies the whole so-called thing" (133). While the kid's dream is not a perfect example of the Southern Gothic in that it does not unfold in the context of the South, this scene clearly utilizes the Southern Gothic technique of revealing the dreadful truth that underlies the façade that a character has wrongly accepted as reality through a moment of intuitive clarity rather than through logical thought. Moreover, his dream indicates that despite his having left the South, the kid brings the Southern Gothic with him as his inheritance, thus illuminating the interrelatedness of *Blood Meridian*'s utilization of the Southern Gothic and naturalism. Read in this manner, his dream forces him to confront the materially unknowable fact that his choice to spare Holden has caused him to become inscribed in the narrative from which Holden's suzerainty derives. His realization of this is demonstrated by his attempt to discover a weapon with which to assassinate the dream image of the judge that haunts his mind, but this search proves futile. In addition to revealing the power that Holden now has over him, the dream also shows the kid the truth of Tobin's plea. Because of this double

revelation, the narrator, for the first time, presents the kid in an ironic light by portraying him as taking action only when he is removed from Holden's physical presence and unable to do violence to him. That the time for action has passed him by is the clearest indicator that his life has indeed been "accomplished," or determined, regardless of the fact that he is still alive.

The kid's reaction to his first dream of Holden shows that he at least subconsciously sees himself as having become subject to the power of his narrative. However, in the kid's second dream, Holden appears in a manner that suggests that while he and his narrative are powerful forces in the world of the text, they are not irresistible. He is depicted overseeing the work of a "coldforger" making counterfeit coins from "cold slag" in hopes of rendering "this residual specie current in the markets where men barter" (310). The narrator subsequently identifies a direct relationship between Holden and the counterfeiter when he says, "Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end" (310). While they are presented as contributing to the creation of the night that "does not end," it is important to note that neither Holden nor the counterfeiter can succeed in imposing the darkness of this night on the world without perpetrating continual acts of deception on their fellow humans. Herein lays the possibility for resistance that the kid's second dream suggests. Since their tasks require passing things that are false for truth, whether a coin or a narrative, the endless night wherein Holden is judge is in reality quite tenuous, for in both cases, dawn will break when the falsity of their work is exposed, namely when they are confronted by a rival claim that is grounded in reality. Therefore, while the second dream does not eliminate that first dream's revelation that the kid has become inscribed in Holden's narrative by choosing not to kill him, it shows that the possibility exists for him to expose the fact that this narrative is not representative of metaphysical truth but rather Holden's relentless desire for total power. Thus, for him to resist the judge's narrative in this manner would be tantamount to a

determined brute rising in opposition against an external naturalist narrator in such a way that the narrator can only retain control of the world that he or she creates through his narrative by entering this world and exposing him or herself to the hazards that it poses to his or her sense of freedom and exteriority.

The final scene of *Blood Meridian* depicts the kid making such a last stand against Holden's narrative when the judge attempts to engage him in conversation during a chance encounter at a saloon in Griffin, Texas, nineteen years after the demise of the Glanton gang. In this scene, Holden encourages him to see this meeting as indicating that he has submitted to the metaphysical order that derives from his narrative when he says, "I recognized you when I first saw you and yet you were a disappointment to me. Then and now. Even so at the last I find you here with me" (328). However, here, and throughout their conversation, the kid rejects all of his statements with negative responses. In this instance, he tells him, "I aint with you" and, subsequently, "I never come here huntin you" (328). He asserts these brief sentences to deny Holden the opportunity to present him as being driven by an external force to seek him out after years of separation. He pursues this strategy further by stating that he has come to the saloon for no reason other than "to have a good time" (328). Holden disagrees with this assertion, saying that people "do not have to have a reason [for their actions]. But order is not set aside because of their indifference" (328). He then asks, "If it is so that they themselves have no reason and yet are indeed here must they not be here by reason of some other? And if this is so can you guess who that other might be?" (328). The kid says, "No. Can you?" (325). Holden then argues that their encounter is a matter of fate by presenting it in terms that are similar to his earlier discourse on war, only in this case, he refers to war as "the dance" (329). Concerning the dance, he says, "The participants will be apprised of their roles at the proper time. For now it is enough that they

have arrived. As the dance is the thing with which we are concerned and contains complete within itself its own arrangement and history and finale there is no necessity that the dancers contain these things within themselves as well” (329). He further states that their meeting should be viewed as a ritual that will involve “the letting of blood” and that must result in the death of one of its participants (329). Afterward, he claims that death is “an agency,” or a means by which a cosmic judgment is rendered in such a ritual, and this leads the kid, who refuses to look at him while he explains his views, to verbally dismiss his claim by saying, “I dont like craziness” (330).

By telling Holden that he believes that his argument is crazy, the kid deals a direct blow to the validity of the narrative that supports Holden’s claim to suzerainty and thus casts doubt upon this central feature of his identity. Nevertheless, Holden persists in attempting to present their meeting as having a greater significance than the kid is willing to admit. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that their past experiences have been erased over the course of time, thus making the present moment the only one that bears relevance. At the heart of this claim is his assertion that “[m]en’s memories are uncertain and the past that was differs little from the past that was not” (330). If the kid were to accept this, then he would have no alternative to submitting to Holden’s narrative, for doing so would require him to reject his outside knowledge that Holden is a liar who uses his rhetorical skills to deceive and create chaos that is aimed at imposing his will upon others. Instead of accepting this line of thought, he dismisses the significance of their meeting by saying, “I’ve been everywhere . . . This is just one more place” (332). This statement undermines Holden’s claim that their meeting is part of a fated, cosmic plan by presenting it as no more than one event among many others that he has experienced. Rather than accept that the kid will not embrace his claims and submit to his narrative, Holden

counters by saying that unless he has “[p]osted witnesses” in these places, he cannot speak with any accuracy on their “continuing existence . . .” (331). This is yet another attempt by Holden to encourage the kid to see that his resistance to his narrative has failed. However, the kid sees through this tactic and says that to act in such a manner is “crazy” (331). Afterward, Holden argues for the legitimacy of his question concerning witnesses by asking, “Where is yesterday? Where is Glanton and Brown and where is the priest? . . . Where is Shelby, whom you left to the mercies of Elias in the desert, and where is Tate whom you abandoned in the mountains? . . . And where is the fiddler and where the dance?” (331). Rather than formulate an answer to these questions aimed at revealing the incompleteness of his knowledge, the kid simultaneously demonstrates his awareness of Holden’s *modus operandi* and refuses to engage with him in the manner he desires by saying, “I guess you can tell me” (331).

This statement marks the transformation of the kid into a naturalist character that not only realizes that he has become subjected to a deterministic narrative of entrapment but also is aware of the artificiality of this narrative. By permitting Holden to answer these questions rather than doing so himself, he implies that there is actually no place for his thoughts or voice in this conversation, the terms of which are dictated entirely by the judge. Thus, as was the case in Holden’s inscription of Tobin into his narrative, there is no answer that will not further entrap him in the web that Holden is weaving with his words. The only means of resisting this narrative that are at his disposal in this instance is to avoid engaging with it by seriously considering Holden’s claims and by highlighting its craziness when the opportunity arises. By doing so, he rejects the narrative that binds him, and, more significantly, he refuses to acknowledge the identity, or the self, that Holden derives from and protects with this narrative. Considered in this light, he emerges as having internalized the knowledge conveyed to him in his dreams and acting

in a manner that puts it to use in a way that demonstrates that while his life may be “forfeit” because of his earlier actions, this does not mean that he must surrender to Holden’s will. As a result, he is able to acquire a degree of power in this scene that no other character demonstrates in the novel. Central to this is the fact that he does not accept the assertion that underlies all of Holden’s claims, that Holden possesses suzerainty over all life forms that enter his sphere of influence. Therefore, the kid’s actions in this scene raise a question that pushes *Blood Meridian*’s treatment of the naturalist narrator into territory that Dennett’s assessment of the narrative-based self does not explore: What happens when the narrative that informs one’s identity and protects him or her from outside threats is rejected by another?

If this question is answered in terms of literary naturalism, then this scene emerges as an instance of a determined character turning a naturalist narrative against a narrator who believes that he exists outside of the realm of forces. This marks a radical reinvention of the figure of determined character to affect change within a naturalist text by allowing the kid to shift the balance of power in a manner that ultimately determines the actions of Holden as naturalist narrator. Before continuing with this reading, one must note that the course of events that arises from the conversation between Holden and the kid should not be read as the intention of the kid. To do so would require ascribing a level of intentionality that the text does not warrant. However, what it does warrant is approaching the kid as having become aware of himself as one whose life unfolds in the “terrain of cause and effect” that is central to naturalist fiction (Howard x). At the heart of this reinvention of the determined character is the fact that the kid arrives at the realization that he is determined through his first dream of Holden. In this sense, his dream serves a purpose similar to his first encounter with him in Nacogdoches in that both instances impart him with knowledge of Holden outside of the context of the gang. It is this outside

knowledge that allows him to maintain a critical perspective on Holden and ultimately, through his dream, to gain a perspective that enables him to see himself as being bound in the “terrain of cause and effect,” for his choice to confront Holden with Tobin but not to kill him has the effect of placing him in a conflict that will ultimately end with his death.

While the first dream reveals to the kid that he is a determined character, the second dream reaffirms his knowledge that Holden is a liar whose claims, like counterfeit coins, are unsubstantiated. Because of this, Holden’s narrative does not reflect undeniable metaphysical truth but is instead an artificial creation that he must persuade others to accept by convincing them of its authenticity. Thus, as in the case of a conventional naturalist narrator, the power that he derives from this narrative is based upon creating for himself a “privileged location” in relation to other characters (x). This location is his claim to the role of suzerain, and again, like a naturalist narrator, he uses it to “assum[e] a kind of control over forces and events through [his] power to comprehend them” (x). However, his comprehension of events and forces is informed by a narrative that derives from a counterfeit, or falsified, image of reality, which, in turn, leads to the creation of a false identity that he passes off as authentic. Therefore, as with the naturalist narrator, Holden’s identity is a matter of narratological positioning. He comprehends the world of *Blood Meridian* in terms of the narrative that he uses to support and protect his sense of self, and because this narrative implements a rigid deterministic perspective, he is able to cast all events and individuals as fitting within the cosmic plan by which war forces the “unity of existence” (McCarthy 249), but a striking inconsistency is present in this narrative. Although he presents himself in a manner that suggests that he is bound by the claims that he makes, his ability to control the contents of this narrative and shape it to his will indicates that he actually stands outside of it and is thus free from the deterministic image of the world it puts forth.

The clearest evidence that Holden stands outside of the war-driven world that he delineates in his narrative is the fact that he does not personally engage in the life-or-death struggles that he maintains are the means by which cosmic order is wrought and maintained. It is this fact that leads the kid to make the only statement during his final encounter with Holden that is a direct critique of his personal character and not the persona of suzerain. When the kid allows Holden to answer his question concerning the location of the fiddler and the dance, he takes the opportunity to elaborate further upon his notions of war, the dance, and himself. He states, "As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior's right, and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dancers false dancers. And yet there will be one there always who is a true dancer and can you guess who that might be?" (331). In response, the kid says, "You aint nothing" (331). Concerning this statement, Harold Bloom writes, "To have known Judge Holden, to have seen him in full operation, and to tell him that he is nothing, is heroic" (262). However, the remarkable thing about this statement is not that the kid has "seen [Holden] in full operation" and still calls him nothing but that he has seen through his operations and realizes that he is indeed nothing because the claims that make him are substantiated by nothing outside of his words, which he uses to achieve deceitful ends. Because Holden's entire being is grounded in deceit, the kid refuses to accept this application of the word "true" to his character. Holden accepts the kid's statement by saying, "You speak truer than you know," and then tells him, "Only that man who has offered himself up entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance" (331). In response, the kid speaks a final sentence with which he dismisses the image of manhood and even humanity that Holden presents as being

attained only through the dance of war: “Even a dumb animal can dance” (331). Whereas his previous sentence reveals the falsity and therefore the emptiness of Holden’s identity as suzerain, this sentence points to the fact that his narrative of cosmic war does not represent a means of transcendence but instead reduces its participants, especially one whose very being is linked to participation in war as Holden sees it, to the level of animals.

Shortly after this conversation, the kid leaves the barroom. After a failed attempt to have sex with a prostitute, he walks outside of the bar to the jakes, where he encounters Holden for the final time. The narrator states, “The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered [the kid] in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him” (333). Although no other details are given as to what occurs in this moment, the reaction of two other men who see the interior of the jakes as well as the fact that Holden is depicted dancing naked in the saloon among a number of drunken people and prostitutes indicates that only he emerged from this altercation. While some have argued that Holden did not kill the kid but rather sexually assaulted him, this reading does not take into consideration the implications of the kid’s resistance to Holden’s narrative in their conversation. Because he exposes the emptiness of Holden’s rhetoric as well as his identity as suzerain, the kid becomes not only an embodiment of resistance to the judge’s claims but also the epitome of an “autonomous” life form that refuses to submit to his “dispensation,” despite knowing himself as having become entrapped by this narrative as a result of his actions (199). Therefore, despite his illiteracy, he is able to resist the words with which Holden “concoct[s] and control[s] the story [he] tell[s] others—and [him]self—about who [he is]” and who they are, to the extent that he renders him unable to control this story through narratological means (Dennett 418). Consequently, the kid transcends his identity as a determined naturalist character and forces

Holden, the creator of the naturalist narrative that binds him, to enter the realm of forces and his own narrative by killing him so as to prevent him from continuing to act in defiance of his dispensation. In doing so, Holden bears out the kid's claim that he is "nothin" by proving that his narrative, far from representing the foundational truth of reality, is a fiction created to promote and protect his sense of self.

This reading of the final conversation between Holden and the kid as well as the kid's death raises an important question: If the kid's dream showed him that his actions had bound him in Holden's narrative, then why did he confront the judge in a manner that he must have known would lead to his death rather than attempt to avoid him in Griffin? I believe that the answer to this question lies in the fact that readers of *Blood Meridian* and its characters realize that death is the most pervasive element in the world it depicts. Therefore, for the kid to believe that he could somehow avoid dying would be naïve. Simply put, death for the kid is inevitable and will, and does, occur at the hand of the judge. Nonetheless, even by Holden's logic, it is possible for him to "effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate" by "setting himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry . . ." of reality (McCarthy 199). While the kid may not find such a thread in reality per se, he does discover a thread in the judge's narrative that when removed will deconstruct the entire apparatus with which he has imposed his will upon those in the text and supported his claim to suzerainty. Thus, should Holden allow him to live, he would permit the continued existence of one who "may seem little or nothing in the world" but actually possesses knowledge with the potential to "devour" him by revealing the falsity of his narrative (198). For if, as Holden claims, "a false book is no book at all," the kid's knowledge threatens to dissolve both his narrative and his identity into the nothingness in which they are grounded (141). Because of this, Holden, the self-proclaimed one "true dancer" in the drama of cosmic

war, is reduced to becoming a common killer lying in wait in an outhouse so as to ambush the one with the power to unravel his fantasy world.

Although *Blood Meridian* closes with the image of Holden dancing in the saloon, the narrator's description of him in this scene and the contents of the epilogue that follows suggest that the victory he claimed in killing the kid is hollow. Three times in the final paragraph, the narrator states, "He says that he will never die" (335). Considered in light of the above reading of the kid's death, this statement takes on two significantly different meanings. If it is read from Holden's perspective, it appears that he has reigned supreme and that his narrative will remain intact, for by repeatedly saying that he will never die, he is presented as having the last word and thus the ability to reinscribe his narrative in the absence of the kid. However, if it is read from the narrator's perspective, the inclusion of the words "he says" indicates that he desires for the reader to see that Holden's claim to be outside of the reach of death is not a statement of fact but rather his desire. This reveals the narrator as casting Holden's final words in an ironic light, and this is because the kid's resistance of his narrative and Holden's murdering the kid have demonstrated that this narrative is false and that the identity derived from it is substantiated by nothing but the words that comprise it.

Because of this, the man that the narrator describes in the epilogue becomes the diametric opposite of Holden. He states, "In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there" (337). The fact that the epilogue opens with the dawning of a new day demonstrates that the endless night in which Holden is judge has come to an end. The nature of the man's work, digging holes for fence posts forges a connection between

him and the earth that literally grounds him in the physical world, a stark contrast to Holden's groundless narrative. Because his digging "strikes the fire out of the rock which God has put there," he marks the reintroduction into the world of the text of the conception of God put forth by Tobin, for in this instance as well as in the scene in which Tobin discusses the voice of God (123-124), "God" is capitalized while it is not when Holden says, "War is god" (248). Moreover, he represents a merging of humans, the land, and the divine in that he "enkindles the stone . . ." by releasing the divinely placed fire in the rock. Thus, despite the mechanistic behavior of the others on the plain where he digs, this man's work allows *Blood Meridian* to end with an image that suggests the potential for restoring the autonomy that has been stripped from the land and humanity by the hierarchical ideologies that rise to prominence over the course of the text.

While autonomous life may be possible in the new day that dawns in the epilogue, this does not erase the fact of the horrors and deaths that preceded the arrival of the man who releases the fire concealed within the rocks that lie beneath the surface of the plain. In fact, without the death of the kid, the actions of the man on the plain cannot be read in the manner suggested above—it is his death that reveals the emptiness of Holden's narrative and creates the possibility for a new narrative to take its place in the world of the text. Because of this, his death emerges as a variation on McCarthy's statement that "[t]here is no such thing as life without bloodshed" (Woodward), for without the bloodshed that resulted from the violence done to the kid by Holden, the potential for autonomous life would not exist in the end of the text. Thus, this reading diverges from Dorson's argument that following the kid's death, "we have a distinct feeling that something has ended: that our hopes and dreams for a fresh start in life, no matter how violent they may have turned out, have already run their course; that possibility itself has been exhausted" (109). The kid's death does not plunge the world into the rigid determinism of

Holden's narrative. However, approaching it in this manner requires one to consider it an aesthetically-grounded event that emerges from the text's utilization of naturalism and the Southern Gothic. Doing so reveals that the text tempers its deterministic elements with its presentation of the kid as functioning in light of a Southern Gothic paradigm and preserves the possibility of autonomy by portraying him in a manner that creates the opportunity for him to overcome Holden's narrative to the point of dissolving it and his identity as suzerain by acting upon the knowledge imparted to him in his dreams. This opportunity marks a significant revision of the pattern of the Southern Gothic, for while the kid's death reflects the fact that resistance to the prevailing narrative of entrapment will result in self-annihilation, in this case, self-annihilation becomes the means by which this narrative and the power that it gives its creator is deconstructed. Thus, rather than end with the reinscription of a narrative of entrapment, *Blood Meridian* concludes in a manner that suggests that despite the horrors of the violent world it depicts, the possibility of autonomous life still exists. However, its revisionary features are not confined to its engagement with the Southern Gothic. In naturalist terms, its portrayal of the final exchange between the kid and Holden indicates that regardless of the power a deterministic narrative may have over life, such narratives will ultimately wear out when those whose lives they determine no longer believe them to be binding.

V. CONCLUSION

The times are changing for naturalist studies. Again. I say again because some would argue that they have been changing for a while now. Certainly, the publication of Donald Pizer's *Twentieth-Century American Naturalism: An Interpretation* (1982) served to increase the number of authors that might be considered naturalists by including writers such as John Dos Passos, Saul Bellow, and John Steinbeck, to name a few, who are more often associated with modernism, thus expanding the aesthetic boundaries of naturalism, at least theoretically. At the same time, this expansion pushed naturalism beyond its peak years, deeper into the twentieth century, to the 1950s. Things changed again shortly after the turn of the twenty-first century. In 2002, Pizer again called readers' attention to yet another wave of possible naturalists, Raymond Carver, Paul Auster, and Don DeLillo. If Pizer's work on twentieth-century naturalism tells us anything, it is that just when American literary naturalism is pronounced dead, new authors appear to breathe life into this ever-moribund mode. And for scholars of naturalism, this is a great thing. However, an unintended consequence of this broadening of naturalism is that the body of scholarship that has grown with it often indicates that the critical conception of American naturalism is, in many cases, still bound to the naturalism of Norris, Crane, London, and Dreiser.

For example, in his article on naturalism in contemporary fiction, Pizer opens his argument by claiming that first-wave naturalism is "dead" but that in the works he examines, there exists "a deep vein of naturalistic assumption that man is not only inseparable from the material, social, and intellectual world in which he lives but is deeply and irrevocably limited in his actions and beliefs by that world" (391). But outside of this shared philosophical perspective, he contends that these texts "can more readily be identified with particular strains of postmodernism in form and technique than with conventional naturalist devices" (391).

Therefore, rather than offer a reading that seeks to discover formal overlap between these later texts and classical naturalism, Pizer chooses instead to focus on presenting their attempts “to render the circumstances of American life which severely condition and determine the fate of most Americans” as being “a powerful thread of continuity between the past and the present . . .” that allows naturalism to maintain a presence in American fiction (391 & 402). In this sense, Pizer appears more interested in discussing the new naturalism as a continuation of the old, even as he insists that classic naturalism is dead.

Similarly, in a recent article on naturalism in the fiction of Cormac McCarthy, Eric Carl Link contends that the ability of naturalism to adapt so as to remain relevant in American literature lies in the fact that it enjoys a dual existence. He writes, “[T]here is a sense in which American literary naturalism is both rooted in a particular historical moment, and a sense in which American literary naturalism is given to a set of preoccupations that persist—albeit in ever changing ways—to this very moment . . .” (154). However, the “features of conventions of the new or contemporary naturalism . . .” that he identifies in McCarthy’s work, with one exception, indicate that virtually no difference exists between his conception of the new naturalism and first-wave naturalism:

Some of these features include the use of primitive, wild, or stripped-down environments and landscapes in which the mannerisms of polite and cultured civilization are brushed aside and the elements of human nature more directly tied to the natural world itself are highlighted, as in *Blood Meridian*. One also finds characters who seem to have a limited inner life, who have difficulty expressing themselves, and who express themselves through interaction with the natural world rather than through inner reflection, as illustrated through numerous

characters in McCarthy's fiction One also finds an emphasis on the animal nature of humankind . . . [,] humankind and the use of animal symbolism and imagery as analogues of the human condition One also finds that there is a tension between the seemingly materialistic view of nature informing the novels, and the mystical shimmer that radiates through McCarthy's natural world in ways reminiscent of Edmund Burke's *sublime* or Rudolf Otto's *numinous*. (154)

While Link is right to say that these elements demonstrate that McCarthy's fiction utilizes several conventions of American literary naturalism, to say that the first four of these distinguish his engagement with naturalism from that of the fin-de-siècle naturalists is inaccurate. And such inaccuracies, as well as Pizer's reluctance to consider how the works of contemporary naturalism that he examines use their engagement with modernist and postmodernist techniques to make new naturalism, are reflective of a problem that currently faces naturalist studies. Specifically, this problem is the virtual absence of criticism that seeks to understand what happened to naturalism during the modernist and contemporary periods in terms of aesthetics rather than philosophy.

At first glance, this problem appears to be confined to the field of naturalist studies; however, I believe that current understandings of the Southern Gothic suggest that this problem is more far-reaching. As with naturalism, scholarly approaches to the Southern Gothic seem to have reached a stopping point, and this is made especially apparent by Hoefer's claim that the "idea of the 'southern Gothic' has been deployed so frequently and so widely to any work of art tinged with the uncanny that, at least for me, it no longer offers any critical utility" (14).

Although Hoefer qualifies this statement by saying that it is a matter of personal opinion, it seems warranted to say that others would agree. However, that this problem, for Hoefer, stems

from the excessively liberal application of “Southern Gothic” suggests that it can be solved by offering a more aesthetically complete conception of the mode. Thus, the overarching objective of this dissertation has been to argue that such a conception of the Southern Gothic can be found by exploring its grounding in the naturalist tradition and that this requires proposing a model of naturalism that remains naturalist in its outlook but that has the flexibility to bend its foundational aesthetic elements so as to blend with the modernist and postmodernist features of the Southern Gothic. If I have succeeded in my pursuit of this objective, I will have demonstrated that a focus on the Southern Gothic’s engagement with naturalism allows one to build upon Williams’, Rubin’s, and Bailey’s assessments of it in a manner that explains not only the Southern Gothic character’s tendency to “talk (or write) . . .” about his or her preoccupations with the determinants that affect his or her life but also how he or she responds to the divestment of “transcendent significance . . .” that is his or her defining characteristic (Bailey & Rubin xiii). Moreover, my focus on presenting Southern Gothic character as a revised naturalist character with self-awareness and the ability to combat the narratives that would determine him or her by creating and acting upon alternative narratives of self will provide an in-road for future studies on new naturalism. I believe that it will serve to encourage future critics to shift their focus away from the mere discovery of conventions of first-wave naturalism in works of modernist and contemporary fiction and toward understanding how such works utilize naturalism in ways that demonstrate a blending of subsequent aesthetic modes and techniques that contribute to the generic hybridization that is at the heart of new naturalism.

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