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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Brandi Stearns entitled "Race, Women, and the South: Faulkner's Connection to and Separation from the Fugitive-Agrarian Tradition." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Thomas Haddox
Thomas Haddox, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Mary Papke
Mary Papke

Allison Ensor
Allison Ensor

Accepted for the Council:

Anne Mayhew
Vice Chancellor and
Dean of Graduate Studies

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Race, Women, and the South:
Faulkner's Connection to and Separation from the Fugitive-Agrarian Tradition

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother Renee French, who took the time to read to me and teach me to read.

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Abstract

“Race, Women, and the South: Faulkner’s Connection to and Separation from the Fugitive-Agrarians” examines the similarities of circumstance, thought, and literature that existed between William Faulkner and the members of the Fugitive-Agrarian group despite the lack of communication between them. The initial chapter elucidates the biographical similarities between Faulkner and the Nashville group. The information in that chapter was chiefly drawn from biographies, *William Faulkner: His Life and Work* by David Minter, *The Southern Agrarians* by Paul Conkin, and *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History* by Louise Cowan.

The second chapter explains Quentin Compson, a character in Faulkner’s novels *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury* and short story “That Evening Sun,” as Faulkner’s most autobiographical character. Establishing this connection between Faulkner and Quentin is essential to the third chapter, which both slots Faulkner into the Fugitive and Agrarian traditions and distinguishes certain opinions he held from those held by members of those groups. Faulkner’s opinions must be accessed through Quentin because he often contradicted himself in interviews and admittedly rarely told his true opinions to reporters and, thus, to the public. His most honest revelation of his thoughts on issues, such as race, women, and the South, is most accessible through Quentin, who also resembles Faulkner biographically. Beyond his suitability as a medium through whom Faulkner’s connection to the Fugitive-Agrarians may be established, Quentin is useful as a demonstration of Faulkner’s early progressivism. His expression of racial confusion, misogyny, and ambivalence toward the Old South followed by his suicide,

may be explained as an early attempt at release of these undesirable qualities by Faulkner.

The third chapter draws out the differences that existed between individual Fugitives and Agrarians and aligns Faulkner (through Quentin) with those whom he most closely resembled. Faulkner appears to be on the liberal end of nearly every issue that caused dissention among the Fugitives and Agrarians, and his use of Quentin Compson as a method of expulsion of racist thoughts, misogynist opinions, and ambivalent stances on the South shows him to be far more progressive in these areas than even the most progressive of the Fugitive-Agrarians, Robert Penn Warren.

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Introduction:

The Ineradicable Nature of Racism and Misogyny in the Literature of Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians

Slavery, secession, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow are phases of life that transformed the South and changed how the rest of the United States looked at it. With the glorified moonlight and magnolias of the antebellum lifestyle left behind, the South appeared to much of the world to be nothing more than a violent, culturally backward waste. In his 1917 essay entitled “Sahara of the Bozart,” H. L. Mencken “condemned the South as a cultural desert.”¹ The confluence of the phases I listed likely contributed to Mencken’s judgement. However, these tragic circumstances and the transformation that followed them are also the catalysts for the southern literary renaissance that began in the 1920’s, only a few years after Mencken’s premature judgement. In that light, C. Vann Woodward argues, “[T]he Southern heritage is distinctive. For Southern history, unlike American, includes large components of frustration, failure, and defeat.”² These negative group experiences, he goes on to explain, have resulted in “the powerful literary potentials of the South’s tragic experience and heritage.”³ According to Allen Tate, what unites the authors of the southern literary renaissance is their “peculiar [Southern] historical consciousness.”⁴ Two seminal figures

¹ “Introduction,” *A Modern Southern Reader*, eds. Ben Forkner and Patrick Samway (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, Ltd., 1986), 1.

² C. Vann Woodward, “The Search for Southern Identity,” *A Modern Southern Reader*, eds. Ben Forkner and Patrick Samway (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, Ltd., 1986), 557.

³ *Ibid*, 560.

⁴ Qtd. in Woodward, 560.

of this literary movement, the Fugitive-Agrarian group and William Faulkner, share far more than their sense of Southern history.

There is no record of correspondence between William Faulkner and any member of the Fugitive and Agrarian groups. This lack of communication is strange not only because both the group and the man are cited as seminal to the southern literary renaissance but also because Faulkner shared so many beliefs, biographical traits, and aesthetic concepts with the Fugitive-Agrarians. In the pages that follow, I align Faulkner with the Fugitives and Agrarians biographically and locate him aesthetically and philosophically among the Fugitives and Agrarians, respectively.

Faulkner was far too slippery in interviews for any critic to depend solely upon the opinions that he expressed in those venues, which would conflict from one day to the next, so I use his character Quentin Compson to access his masked yet uncontradicted and accordingly more honest thoughts and feelings on Agrarian issues such as race, women, and the post-Civil War South. The two novels that use Quentin as a narrator—*The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*—are also useful in establishing Faulkner's aesthetic because *The Sound and the Fury* was his favorite among his own works, and *Absalom, Absalom!* is widely cited for its style. It has an envelope structure and demonstrates the fictitious and created aspect that history often takes on for people.

Compensating for the unfortunate and unnecessary silence between Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians is an intriguing project in its own right. Yet, in the process of such an undertaking, I will inevitably air some unpleasant issues. Faulkner was a misogynist, an alcoholic, an adulterer, and for much of his life a racist. Quentin, who I

argue is an autobiographical character, is a confused racist, a defender of social hierarchy, and an ineffectual performer of incest. The group of men that I fit Faulkner, through Quentin, into so neatly is for the most part racist.

There is no shortage of disparagement of Quentin, Faulkner, and the Agrarians in academic discourse on southern literature. The Agrarians refused to treat the race issue in the South in any official capacity, but they must still be taken to task for their frequent and unashamed denigration of African Americans. Likewise, Quentin, and with him Faulkner, has been interrogated by critics concerning his treatment of female characters and the race question.

Strangely, the article that deals most directly with racism in the Agrarian movement is a defense of sorts. In “The Poisonous Snake in the Garden: Racism in the Agrarian Movement,” John Grigsby remarks upon the incongruity of opinions among the Agrarians, which is also discussed at length by other scholars such as William Hovard and Agrarian historian Paul Conkin. Grigsby focuses more narrowly on the various stances on race taken by different members of the Agrarian group; he carves his niche, writing that “[o]ne crucial difference of opinion among the Agrarians that has never really been openly discussed by scholars, but that has nevertheless had considerable impact upon the mixed reputation of the Agrarian movement, is on the race question.”⁵ He goes on to make both general and individuated defenses against the accusations of racism that have been hurled at the Vanderbilt group.

⁵ John Grigsby, “The Poisonous Snake in the Garden: Racism in the Agrarian Movement,” *Publications of the Mississippi Philological Association* (Bena: Mississippi Valley State University, 1988), 46.

Of the group, he contends, “[T]here is not so much racism as one would expect, given the Agrarians’ defense of many aspects of the antebellum Southern lifestyle,” which should be an outrageous claim to anyone who has read *I’ll Take My Stand*.⁶ Frank Owsley, for instance, begins his essay lamenting that during reconstruction, the South “was turned over to the three millions of former slaves, some of whom could still remember the taste of human flesh and the bulk of them hardly three generations removed from cannibalism.”⁷ Preceding and following this shameful and ignorant expression of racism are several like it in essays contributed by other Agrarians. Although Owsley and his peers would not have considered themselves racist and in fact did not take racially violent actions like membership in organizations such as the Ku Kux Klan, many of their beliefs are nonetheless racist.

“The Poisonous Snake in the Garden” does provide useful analysis of where each Agrarian may be located on the spectrum of racial attitudes, but in his eagerness to release Robert Penn Warren from any suspicion of racism and to mark Donald Davidson as the most poisonous serpent in the Agrarian garden, Grigsby tends to ignore some facts and stretch others. His emphasis on Davidson’s indignation concerning Warren’s contribution to *I’ll Take My Stand* eclipses the actual message of “The Briar Patch.”

Warren begins in the same place as Owsley—Africa, only instead of invoking primitivistic ideas like cannibalism, his thoughts are surprisingly modern and liberal. He

⁶ *Ibid*, 47.

⁷ Frank Owsley, “The Irrepressible Conflict,” *I’ll Take My Stand* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 62.

writes, “[T]he jungle, though not many generations behind, was mysterious and deadly.”⁸ Strangely, this essay, in which he denounces Garveyism, is inspired by the same man whose autobiography *Up From Slavery* influenced Marcus Garvey. In “The Briar Patch,” Warren positions himself not only among the Agrarians but also within the African American intellectual movement. His racial stance and expression of it are heavily derived from Booker T. Washington’s ideas. He quotes Washington’s Atlantic Exposition Address, writing, “We can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”⁹ Warren’s fervent concurrence with Washington’s affirmation of the value of separation is accompanied by his criticism of “the Negro radical” who believes that “the demand for less [than personal and professional equality and integration] is treason to his race.”¹⁰ This Negro radical can be none other than W.E.B. DuBois, and his radical notions are actually only demands for justice. Robert Penn Warren’s “The Briar Patch” is certainly more progressive in its treatment of the race situation than any other essay in *I’ll Take My Stand*, but it is still a treatise arguing the benefits of a Jim Crow society.

Although I do agree with Grigsby’s belief in the importance of recognizing that the Agrarian stance toward race is not uniformly severe, it would be naïve to go along with him in releasing Warren from any implication of racism. Even if Warren’s essay is relatively progressive for an Agrarian statement, it is still built upon racist maxims, and he has since admitted as much. The contention upon which Grigsby’s logic relies—that

⁸ Robert Penn Warren, “The Briar Patch,” *I’ll Take My Stand* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 246.

⁹ *Ibid*, 254.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 254.

it is not “necessary to eschew general racist labels” in terms of the Agrarians—is erroneous. To give the Agrarians’ statements honest examination is to apply that “general racist label” and then recognize the spectrum of racism from virulent to mild that exists in those statements.

Similar to Grigsby’s attempt to free some of the Agrarians of the label “racist” is James Snead’s effort at presenting *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* as gestures toward racially progressive ideas. Snead identifies “the paradox that fuels Faulkner’s major novels” as that Southern “fear of racial mixing [which] involves an element of undefined sexual desire for the denied other.”¹¹ He observes the Southern male suspicion of “any other (woman, black, Indian, foreigner),” and explains that this suspicion is a result of the Southern desire that race be an entity with strict, unchangeable boundaries.¹² The woman “other” is subject to suspicion because she may aid in the breaching of the bounds of race if she chooses to sleep with a man who is not white. The “Indian” and “black” must be considered suspicious because unless their sexuality is controlled by the white male, which it cannot always be, they represent a threat to the fortress that the white Southern male desires to erect around the concept of “whiteness.” The foreigner, in turn, cannot be “a definitive specimen of human” because the white, Southern male has no fail-safe method of establishing his lineage.¹³ Racial mixing, which can only occur when either the female other or one of the racial others is involved, is the fear that fuels the suspicion of all these figures. Miscegenation makes establishing

¹¹ James Snead, *Figures of Division* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 105.

¹² *Ibid*, 7.

¹³ *Ibid*, 7.

concrete racial boundaries difficult, if not impossible. Snead's argument, then, is that the logic behind segregation is that social separation will result in sexual separation, and sexual separation will prevent miscegenation, and if miscegenation is avoided, the sharp and distinct line between the races will not be transgressed.

The problem with Snead's argument is that he ignores Faulkner's complicity. He explains away the possibility that Faulkner's own opinion on miscegenation might be revealed in his texts by claiming that "Faulkner...ultimately contradicts [sic] Southern segregationist logic...[by depicting] merging and chaos."¹⁴ He asserts that Faulkner's depiction of figures like Charles Bon and Joe Christmas, who are "'black Caucasian' or 'white Negro,'" serves as a muddling of racial boundaries, "a racial fence-crossing."¹⁵ Snead claims that this intentional "merging and chaos" of race is Faulkner's method of sabotaging the Southern taboo of amalgamation and resultant segregation. Basically, if Faulkner is drawing the racial line and then smudging it within his novels by presenting miscegenation and racially ambiguous figures, then he is making a stand against the Southern fear of those issues and figures. This assertion, however, is a leap in logic. Faulkner's presentation of miscegenation does not necessarily denote his promotion of it, especially since the occurrences of miscegenation in his novels are for the most part negative. For instance, of the two products of miscegenation that Snead cites, one is an aspiring adulterer and committer of incest and the other is a sexually-confused murderer.

Snead's solution to this challenge to his theory is to have Quentin Compson bear the burden of any racism that surfaces in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 103, 39.

He derives from Quentin's commentary on African Americans in *The Sound and the Fury* a distortion of the black object because he "needs these defenses against what he considers to be chaos. He yearns for separating... figures."¹⁶ Quentin is also the guilty party who wishes "to punish the color that stands for his tabooed wishes."¹⁷ In *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin, "as a last resort, restore[s] the black [Charles Bon], whose import as repeated absence everyone had overlooked all along."¹⁸ In every version of the Sutpen narrative other than the last one that Quentin and Shreve construct, the African American does not play a watershed role. Finally, when no other explanation for Henry Sutpen's fratricide suffices, they make Charles Bon the product of miscegenation. The introduction of the African American as the hinge upon which the plot turns, then, is Quentin's last resort to make sense of the narrative. What Snead fails to explain is how exactly he has come to the conclusion that Quentin alone (without Faulkner's help or intention) desires separation, considers racial mixing chaotic, and only rectifies the absence of the African American in Sutpen's story as "a last resort." I would assume that he believes that Quentin is only a figure that Faulkner uses to demonstrate the Southern resistance to racial chaos (the powerlessness to make race a system with specific and unbreachable categories). Snead, thus, relies upon the separation of the author from his creation. However, the philosophical and biographical connection between Faulkner and "his creation" points toward an union of Faulkner and Quentin rather than a separation.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 32.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 126.

Snead's argument is a laudable attempt to acquit Faulkner of any accusation of racism while not going so far as to claim that it does not exist in his text. However, his argument is unsupportable on a biographical basis. Faulkner did not express so much as a hint of agreement with integration until the 1950's, and he never made a statement indicating acceptance of racial mixing. When he was writing *The Sound and the Fury* in the late 1920's, his sympathies would have tended much more toward the ones Quentin expresses: racism coexisting with a mystified respect for the African Americans he knew.

Arthur Kinney offers a more honest approach to Faulkner and the racism in his novels. In his article "Faulkner and Racism," Kinney points out that "[r]acism spreads contagiously through his works, unavoidably."¹⁹ Kinney's argument is that Faulkner's racism is a natural outcropping of the time and place in which he lived, and the changing portrayals of African Americans and racist situations from his early work to his later work are evidence of his effort to transform his own racist opinions. His "profoundly subtle and profoundly deep," yet still racist, portrayal of Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* is "a significant step forward for Faulkner."²⁰ Kinney's only reference to Quentin Compson deals with his unification with Henry Sutpen on the issue of miscegenation, and instead of arguing, as I do, that Quentin's experience with race is analogous to Faulkner's own, Kinney briefly connects William Faulkner to Thomas Sutpen. Yet, in a vague sense, the sentiment that suffuses Arthur Kinney's article underlies my own argument: Faulkner and his novels cannot simply be excused of racism. However, this idea can be taken further; that is, even if Faulkner's prose cannot be excused of racism, his writing,

¹⁹ Arthur Kinney, "Faulkner and Racism," *Connotations* 3:3 (1993), 265.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 266.

and specifically his writing of Quentin, can be seen as his release of and release from his inherited racism.

Just as it is unnecessary to extricate Faulkner from the web of racism that manifests itself in Quentin's narratives of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* it is also unwarranted to claim that both were intentionally racist texts and that Quentin is, therefore, the spokesman for Faulkner's racism. The soundest explanation is that Quentin serves as Faulkner's tool of purification. Through Quentin's thoughts and speech, Faulkner gives voice to his confused admiration for and need for separation from African Americans. Then, as a demonstration of Faulkner's intended (and later verbally-affirmed) rejection of this stance and consequent acceptance of integration, he has Quentin commit suicide.

Minrose Gwin uses the ideas of difference and the disruption of difference in much the same way as James Snead in order to search out Caddy Compson's voice and to validate that her voice does exist, even when the reader is unable to decipher it. In her essays "Hearing Caddy's Voice" and "(Re)Reading Faulkner as Father and Daughter of His Own Text," Gwin claims that at times as he is writing about Caddy, Faulkner relinquishes his authority over the text (his fatherhood), allowing Caddy to speak through his feminized unconscious. Gwin calls these moments of subversion of the father by the daughter "bisexual moments" because both sexes are immediately and equally in control of the creation of the text. She cites the image of the dungeon from the children's book and Quentin's memory of Caddy's explanation of what she would do if she "were king" as evidence of Quentin's "connection of his own sense of loss and entrapment to female

sexuality.”²¹ Gwin argues that Quentin “tries to squeeze [Caddy’s] subjectivity into the objective position” and fails because “[s]he speaks out of the deepest and darkest spaces of his unconscious.”²² These deep, dark spaces are presumably the bisexual spaces in which Caddy’s voice is as present in Quentin’s mind as his own thoughts.

Gwin’s argument concerning Faulkner’s (and by connection Quentin’s) bisexual spaces, in which Caddy is given the formative and generative power of speech, is a response to André Bleikasten’s characterization of Caddy as “a blank screen onto which he [Benjy, Quentin, Jason, and Faulkner] projects both his desires and his fears.”²³ Bleikasten argues that the reader can never “discover” Caddy, only the image of Caddy that resides in Faulkner’s mind and consequently in her brothers’ minds. Rather than consciousness that has an independent (though not clearly articulated) existence in certain bisexual spaces as Gwin contends, Bleikasten’s Caddy is “what woman has always been in man’s imagination: the figure par excellence of the Other.”²⁴ According to Bleikasten’s evaluation of her, Caddy is actually a double-Other, once through her construction in Faulkner’s mind and again through the perceptions of her brothers. She is created by one man and alternately controlled by three others, so all that she really amounts to is an icon that may be viewed through three varying projections.

²¹ Minrose Gwin, “Hearing Caddy’s Voice,” *The Feminine and Faulkner* (Knoxville: The U of Tennessee P, 1990), 50.

²² Minrose Gwin, “(Re)Reading Faulkner as Father and Daughter of His Own Text,” ed. Linda Wagner Martin, *William Faulkner: Six Decades of Criticism* (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2002), 162.

²³ André Bleikasten, *The Most Splendid Failure: Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976), 65.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Gwin's project is certainly noble but perhaps too optimistic, which would explain her anticipated "failure." She admits, "I would suggest another way of seeking the mystery that is Caddy [investigating the bisexual spaces], but one which I admit will not allow us to 'find' her. The inevitability of our failure, though, does not mean we should not look or listen...."²⁵ Gwin's argument is dependent on Quentin's and Faulkner's attempted and failed objectification of Caddy. In order for those bisexual spaces, and, accordingly, Caddy's voice, to exist, Quentin and, through Quentin, Faulkner must fail to "squeeze her subjectivity into an objective position," but Quentin (and through him Faulkner) does finally succeed in objectifying Caddy. By the end of Quentin's section of *The Sound and the Fury*, it is clear that he is a disciple to his father's adages. He recalls that when he told his father that he was going to commit suicide, Jason Compson, Sr.'s response was, "[Y]ou will not do that until you come to believe that even she was not quite worth despair."²⁶ Although Gwin is correct that "Caddy's jarring, disruptive flashes of speeches," which sporadically interrupt Quentin's narrative in *The Sound and the Fury*, are instances of her resistance to objectification, Quentin's choice to commit suicide erases those moments of semi-subjectivity in two ways.²⁷ If we are to take Quentin as a disciple to his father's adages, then we must assume that he waits to commit suicide until the blow of Caddy's lost virginity becomes another meaningless disappointment ("not quite worth despair") to add to the heap his father has shown him. Thus, Faulkner transforms Caddy from a subject capable of causing her brother a summer

²⁵ Gwin, "Hearing Caddy's Voice," 37.

²⁶ William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 113.

²⁷ Gwin, "Hearing Caddy's Voice," 49.

of agony to an object not even worth despair. The act of suicide is the second way in which Quentin nullifies Caddy's possible subjectivity. When Quentin descends into the river, he believes his state of existence will be "non sum," or lack of existence, and by eradicating his own subjectivity, he destroys Caddy's objectivity, which is all he left her with through his decision to commit suicide.

Bleikasten is accurate, then, in his description of Caddy as "a blank screen," as an image with "many and contradictory faces," yet even as Faulkner is guilty in her objectification as are her brothers, he still cannot be entirely indicted for her destruction.²⁸ After Quentin's attempt to destroy even her objectivity by ending his own subjectivity, Faulkner allows her to live on through Jason's consciousness. In fact, it is in Jason's narrative of *The Sound and the Fury* that Caddy has the most agency. Although we can still access her only through his construction of her, she, in a sense, controls Jason. She hampers his independence by sending her daughter home for him to rear, and her daughter, in turn, defies Jason's attempts to control her. In leaving with the man in the red tie, Miss Quentin steps out of Jason's sphere of domination and thus establishes her own subjectivity (although we never access it firsthand) by denying his objectification of her.

Faulkner's motivation in writing Quentin is the matter in which my interpretation deviates from past critical analysis of his treatment of women and race. It is impossible to deny the racist views and objectified women that appear in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* It is also unrealistic to place all the blame for these undesirable

²⁸ Bleikasten, 65.

elements on Quentin. Quentin Compson is a mouthpiece, but he is not just a fictional tool that Faulkner uses to reveal the beliefs that he would like to articulate himself. Faulkner uses Quentin as a means of expelling those notorious beliefs—releasing them not so that they might be accepted by anyone but as an act of discharge and extermination.

The inescapable end to Quentin's narration is suicide, and Faulkner's choice for him to self-exterminate cannot be simply chalked up to Quentin's insurmountable grief at the loss of his sister's virginity. After using Quentin's narratives in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury* as contrivances to vent his regrettable views on African Americans and women, Faulkner abolishes him, and in the act of having Quentin self-destruct, Faulkner effectively does the same with those opinions he used Quentin to express. In essence, Quentin's narratives exorcise the unfortunate thoughts that Faulkner had inherited from the Old South.

It is unfortunate that there is no corresponding exorcism in the literature or propaganda of the Fugitive-Agrarians. In Robert Penn Warren's 1956 essay "Segregation" and even more noticeably in his 1965 collection of interviews entitled *Who Speaks for the Negro?* there is a marked retreat from segregation, but this does not serve as such a thorough release from racism (for the group or for the man) as Faulkner's 1929 literary banishment. However, as we analyze Faulkner's connection to the Fugitive and Agrarian movements, it is necessary that we not put too much distance between the two based upon Faulkner's expungement of racism and female subjugation through Quentin. My first chapter begins with an investigation and extension of Cleanth Brooks's

argument against Daniel Aaron, who addresses the contention between William Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians. Aaron claims that the Fugitive-Agrarians were modern-day Confederates, while Faulkner was a strict critic of Old Southern culture. Brooks corrects him by elucidating several apparent similarities and affinities between the group and the man. I take up where Brooks leaves off, expounding upon the many experiential and conceptual congruences between Faulkner and the members of the Fugitive and Agrarian groups.

Faulkner's experience during World War I and his rejection by his Southern neighbors are mirrored in the incidents of the individual Fugitives' lives. The group and the man also had analogous educations and beliefs about the South and art. The parallels I explore in chapter one lay the groundwork for the examination I do of the philosophical and artistic likenesses between the group and the author in the third chapter. Before I attempt to weigh Faulkner's beliefs against those held by the Fugitives and Agrarians, however, I must first find a reliable way to trace Faulkner's thoughts, and I find that in Quentin Compson. In the second chapter, I unravel Faulkner's biographical representation of himself through Quentin. Further, I demonstrate Faulkner's revelation of his otherwise ambiguous stances on race, women, and the South through Quentin. Having established Quentin Compson as a trustworthy spokesman for Faulkner's beliefs and as a fictional replica of the man, I use Quentin in chapter three hypothetically to situate Faulkner within the Fugitive and Agrarian traditions. The third chapter's analysis of Quentin as a literary achievement and as the representative for Faulkner's stances on

race and the South shows Faulkner to be on the progressive, liberal, and experimental end of both the Fugitive aesthetic and the Agrarian agenda.

Chapter One:

Biographical Convergences and Racist Implications

In his essay “Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians,” Cleanth Brooks takes issue with some comments made by Daniel Aaron concerning the lack of affiliation between the Nashville group and the Oxford writer in his *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War*. Brooks accuses Aaron of commending Faulkner even as he vilifies the Fugitive-Agrarians. He summarizes Aaron as asserting that “the [Agrarians] were extremist Neo-Confederates...whereas Faulkner was able to...regard the faults of the older Southern culture with a critical eye.”²⁹ After this summary, one would assume that Brooks’s argument will be in response to Daniel Aaron’s proposition of a discernible disparity between Faulkner’s and the Agrarians’s responses to the race question in the South. Yet, he spends the remainder of his essay debunking an idea that is only attendant to the difference in their treatments of race, without ever directly speaking to the issue he has deemed Aaron’s central claim.

Rather than disputing their disparate stances on race, Brooks attacks the assumption that underlies that assertion: that Faulkner and the Agrarians did not value each other intellectually or personally. The object of Cleanth Brooks’s essay is to illustrate ongoing appreciation of Faulkner’s literary work by members of the Fugitive-Agrarians group and, with a little difficulty, Faulkner’s reciprocal feelings. He mentions, for instance, Faulkner’s praise of the Cass Mastern episode in Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*, even though that praise is offset by Faulkner’s negative opinion of the

²⁹ Cleanth Brooks, “Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians,” *Faulkner and the Southern Renaissance* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1982), 28.

rest of the novel. He then posits a charming, yet somewhat shaky, theory that identifies the “best literary magazine anywhere” mentioned in passing in Faulkner’s 1940 short story “Knight’s Gambit” as *The Southern Review*, the literary magazine edited by Brooks and Warren. After he establishes that the lack of relationship between Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians had nothing to do with hard feelings on either side, he moves into a description of all the common characteristics that link the two southern literary entities. He notes that both are included in the “great upsurge of letters in the twentieth-century South,” that “the dates of their appearance on the literary scene...almost exactly coincided,” and that the literature they created or promoted, though highly variant in form, took the South as its common subject.³⁰ Brooks ends his essay abruptly with “[m]y time is up,” and in his view it was not necessary to “deal with further parallels” between Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians since his case had been made.³¹

Though Brooks is able to undercut the basis of Aaron’s observation by highlighting the surface similarities between the members of the Fugitive-Agrarian group and Faulkner, there is also a copious number of biographical correspondences among them. I will explore those biographical similarities that Brooks leaves unmentioned and use them to investigate and challenge more fully Aaron’s radical differentiation of the racial views of the members of the Agrarian group and Faulkner.

Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians faced analogous situations at home and at war, and their values and preferences were also roughly equivalent. Faulkner and several of the Fugitives, especially Donald Davidson and Alec Stevenson, had remarkably

³⁰ Brooks, 22, 23, 37.

³¹ *Ibid*, 39.

similar experiences in their involvement in the war effort during 1918. Stevenson and Faulkner were both initially rejected by the military, and direct experience in combat was cut short for Davidson and Faulkner by the end of the war. Like their encounters with the war, Faulkner's and the Fugitive group's experiences at home were also parallel. The lack of support that the Fugitive group received from the townspeople of Nashville and their fellow students and administration at Vanderbilt was astounding, and Faulkner was similarly scorned by his Oxford neighbors as a strange man who wrote unreadable, scandalous books. While he was attempting to write literature, Faulkner found that he was often forced away from his art to writing more popular fiction or Hollywood scripts in order to make money. Likewise, the Fugitive-Agrarians were bothered by the American reading public's lack of patronage, since they all had to set their poetry aside to work at teaching, reviewing, or editing jobs to support themselves. The Fugitive-Agrarians and, to a limited degree, Faulkner also shared an admiration for the aristocratic characteristics of the Old South. Furthermore, they both had traditional educations and, ironically, relocated away from the South. Essentially, the Fugitive-Agrarians and Faulkner were cut from the same pattern, lived similar lives, and possessed analogous experiences and opinions.

I. War Experiences

World War I began long before the notion of the Agrarian group was even conceived. In fact, it was merely an interruption of the casual, philosophical discussions in which the incomplete Fugitive circle took part at Sidney Hirsch's Nashville home. At the time of America's entry into the war, the group was still four years away from their

first publication of *The Fugitive*, so the assembly whose core members would later be Agrarianism's great proponents was in the early stages of germination. Nevertheless, the resemblance (and disparity) between the Fugitive-Agrarians' and Faulkner's involvement in the First World War is well worth examination.

John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson both enlisted and were accepted to Officers' Training Camp at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.³² Ransom served for four months in the war and then was relocated as an officer trainer at Saumur in France, where Vanderbilt students and alumni quickly formed a group "that revolved around Ransom."³³ William Frierson and Alec Stevenson, other Fugitives who did not become Agrarians, were among this Vanderbilt group. Stevenson was initially prevented from joining the war effort because of his Canadian citizenship; however, with time and after an application to a different division of the military, he gained acceptance. Unlike Ransom, Davidson saw only a couple of days of combat before the armistice.³⁴ Interestingly, he took his copy of Ransom's *Poems About God* manuscript along, which suggests that he had leisure time to read and so lends to the notion that the war environment he experienced was relatively relaxed. By the summer of 1920, the Fugitive group had reconvened in Nashville, still hosted by Sidney Hirsch but now meeting at James Frank's residence. Their intellectual circle was not only unbroken by wartime casualty, but, more surprisingly, they were even unmarred by any major injury.

³² Louise Cowan, *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1959), 24.

³³ Paul Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville: The U of Tennessee P, 1988), 10.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 10.

Relatively unaffected by the war, they resumed their intellectual and philosophical discussion and production.

Like Stevenson, Faulkner was initially rejected by his local recruiting station only to be accepted later on by another station. In Oxford, Faulkner's diminutive size prevented his immediate, and much desired, enlistment in the war effort, but "on 14 June, armed with his revised name, an imperfect accent, and a borrowed London address, he made the trip from New Haven to a British recruiting office in New York" and was accepted.³⁵ When the war ended, Faulkner was still stationed at an aeronautics training facility in Toronto. It is questionable whether he ever flew on his own in Toronto and certain that he never engaged in the war firsthand, but he did not intend his family and neighbors in Oxford to understand his war experience in this manner. Before his 1918 homecoming, "his letters began reporting as actual a series of adventures that were only imagined," and when he returned to Oxford, he was "dressed as a hero" and "limping—from an injury, he reported, incurred in a crash during training."³⁶

Just as his initial rejection mirrors Alec Stevenson's first attempt to join the war effort, Faulkner's experience during the war echoes Davidson's. While Davidson's time in combat was done almost before it began due to the armistice, the war's end prevented Faulkner from being deployed, just as he was nearing the "final phase of pre-flight

³⁵ David Minter, *William Faulkner: His Life and Work* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), 30.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 31-2.

training.”³⁷ The few days of combat that Davidson had and Faulkner lacked did not, however, keep Faulkner from attaining the same rank (second lieutenant) as Davidson.³⁸

The key difference between Faulkner’s war experience and that of the Fugitives, then, was how their lack of experience figured in their post-war lives. None of the Fugitives returned home to Nashville immediately. Elliott, Frierson, Stevenson, and Ransom, all funded by the government, took courses at European universities. Davidson returned to his new wife in Ohio and then moved to Kentucky for a teaching job before he finally came back to Nashville to work on his M.A. at Vanderbilt.³⁹ Faulkner, however, went back to Oxford at his first opportunity, and his return was not connected with work, as it was for the Fugitives. Instead, he “resum[ed] his role as a dependent son.”⁴⁰ While the Fugitives were “at ease in their haven” of “heady conversation,”⁴¹ effortlessly leaving the war behind them, the people of Oxford found Faulkner, with his “persona of the injured pilot,” to be “not only silent and watchful but vaguely ‘foreign.’”⁴² Like Quentin Compson, who was still years from being created, Faulkner felt pressure from the legacy of his recent ancestors to perform commendably at war. He allowed his post-war life to be affected by his inability to live up to his great-grandfather, whereas the Fugitive-Agrarians could transition easily from war to poetry.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 31.

³⁸ Minter, 31, Cowan, 25.

³⁹ Cowan, 25, 31.

⁴⁰ Minter, 33.

⁴¹ Cowan, 32.

⁴² Minter, 33.

II. Local Rejection

His return from his war effort was neither the first nor the last time that Faulkner found himself “home...yet at the same time not at home” in Oxford.⁴³ A high school dropout, he had been dubbed “Quair” and “Count” even before he left for military training due to his strangely formal dressing habits and his shy, awkward manners. Even with his newly acquired persona as a heroic soldier, the people of Oxford still found him disagreeable. Discussing Faulkner in the early 1920’s, his close friend Phil Stone remarks, “He had an aristocratic, superior appearance—which most people considered an affectation—and an aloof reserve and an arrogant snappishness when someone tried to get familiar.”⁴⁴ As surely as he repelled others through his feigned arrogance, he was rejected (entirely when his money and fame were yet to be made and tentatively even after he became a wealthy, celebrated author) by the Oxford locals. One of Faulkner’s brothers observed that

[a]cknowledgement of [his] achievement would not come in Oxford...until he made large quantities of money. Even then it would be somehow mixed with poorly repressed resentment, born of the feeling that he had somehow shamed the people among whom he lived.⁴⁵

The conservative Oxford natives experienced a collective sort of embarrassment as a result of Faulkner’s novels, especially *Sanctuary*, which they never admitted to reading but widely agreed were scandalous.

In much the same way, the townspeople of Nashville and Vanderbilt’s faculty and students embraced neither the Fugitive group nor the Agrarian movement. Upon *The*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Qtd. in Minter, 37.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

Fugitive's first publication, Nashville's response was mixed; as Louise Cowan observes, "local pride dictated a welcome to the Muse. But townspeople did not expect her to be garbed in such peculiar robes or to speak in a tone of such forbidding intellectuality."⁴⁶ At the release of the second issue, the local bewilderment was given voice. An anonymous article running in the Nashville *Banner* petitioned the group of poets to "adopt...a more humanely understandable manner of dealing with [their poetical effusions]."⁴⁷ Even after the group had been publishing *The Fugitive* for over a year, the Nashville public was still wary of their poetic practices. An article in the Nashville *Tennessean* jokingly described the exasperation that *Fugitive* poetry inspired in the locals, writing, "We generally read it frontward first, and then try reading it backward like a Chinese laundry ticket, but we never succeed in finding what it's all about."⁴⁸

Although Vanderbilt was an academic haven for the group, it does not appear that its students and faculty were any more tolerant of their brand of intellectualism than were the Nashville philistines. The university's chancellor, for instance, would not subscribe to the magazine, despite Allen Tate's direct solicitation. Even the head of the English department Edwin Mims, who would eventually become more congenial toward the group and at least support them through a subscription, initially "discouraged the venture...[and] dissuad[ed] them from publishing."⁴⁹ A clearly irritated Tate wrote of his

⁴⁶ Cowan, 54-5.

⁴⁷ Qtd. in Cowan, 61.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 134.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 47.

group that “while they were well-known at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, they were a petty nuisance on the campus of Vanderbilt.”⁵⁰

The Vanderbilt reaction to the Agrarians was scarcely more congenial; they “largely created an unwanted notoriety or embarrassed the University by the ensuing political and economic controversies.”⁵¹ Chancellor Carmichael and Vice-Chancellor Sarratt “thought Agrarianism and hell-raising had a common identity and...viewed the surviving Agrarians as enemies.”⁵² When Harvie Branscomb, who thought Southern history less than important, replaced Carmichael as chancellor, the Vanderbilt administration grew even more resistant to the Agrarian cause. The administration’s progressive, and by nature anti-Agrarian, decisions concerning curriculum drove Ransom and Owsley to other universities, and although Davidson decided to remain, his public “southern defense of segregation...embarrassed the Vanderbilt administration...[and] gained only minority support from his faculty colleagues.”⁵³ Essentially, the Nashville and Vanderbilt communities found the same impenetrable superiority in the intellectual fugitive poetry that Faulkner’s neighbors recognized in his demeanor, and Vanderbilt’s faculty and administration were collectively embarrassed by the Agrarian political scandal just as the townspeople of Oxford were communally scandalized by the contents of Faulkner’s novels.

Perhaps the Agrarians’ local rejection was deserved to a greater degree than Faulkner’s, though. The primary facet that the public found objectionable in the Agrarian

⁵⁰ Qtd. in Cowan, 47.

⁵¹ Conkin, 2.

⁵² *Ibid*, 145.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 134, 145, 155.

agenda was their extreme conservatism, so while their racism was only one facet of this conservatism, it still must have contributed in some small part to their unpopularity. The racist ideas that were embedded in the Agrarian economic philosophy and model way of living slipped into the dialogue, even though the Agrarians maintained that race had no part in their agenda. Faulkner's expressions of racism via Quentin Compson were in themselves a conscious attempt to rid himself and his works of any occurrence of bigotry. Although the works of the Agrarian group and Faulkner were both racist, Faulkner's expression of racism was deliberate and well intentioned. The Agrarian salacity, which appears in a much more vicious manner in Owsley's "The Irrepressible Conflict" than in any of Faulkner's literature, was merely a side-note, but a heartfelt one with no plan for emendation.

III. Appreciation for Art versus Financial Need

Despite all the accusations of intellectual arrogance flung at them by their communities, both Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians held their livelihoods in a precarious balance with their common belief in the value of art, and often they were forced to shelve their dedication to art in the form of good literature in order to maintain any semblance of financial stability. Faulkner's declared aim as an artist was "to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that 100 years later when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life."⁵⁴ As an artist, his needs were minimal: "(solitude, pencil, and paper; tobacco, food, and whiskey), and his only

⁵⁴ Minter, 78.

responsibility was to art.”⁵⁵ Yet, with a family to care for, Faulkner’s financial situation needed to provide a little more than writing utensils, mere sustenance, and bourbon.

Before Faulkner’s novels were selling well, he was forced to spend the time writing potboilers and movie scripts that he would have much rather spent writing novels. From 1942 through 1945, he worked on and off for Warner Brothers at a salary of \$300 per week, and he deplored it. In a letter to a friend, he wrote, “I think I have had about all of Hollywood I can stand. I feel bad, depressed, dreadful sense of wasting time....”⁵⁶ Hollywood gave him that “dreadful sense of wasting time” because of his abiding belief in the importance of his art. He claimed, “There is a God that looks after the true artist because there is nothing as important as that and He knows it,” yet the life of the “true artist” would continually leave him with a pile of debt, not “quite a boat’s length ahead of the sheriff.”⁵⁷ The steady salary Hollywood offered allowed Faulkner his “boat’s length” but denied him the opportunity to create what he deemed art.

Before and after his Hollywood detours, Faulkner lived on advances from publishers, and when he could not get money from them, he wrote short, popular fiction and sold it to magazines. For example, upon finishing *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner published four short stories in *Forum*, *Double Dealer*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Scribner’s* within two months.⁵⁸ Although the abrupt financial success resulting from these publications cheered Faulkner at the time, he later referred to writing popular fiction as debasing. When he fell into debt in the process of writing *Light in August*, he

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 240.

⁵⁶ Qtd. in Minter, 207.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 224, 192.

⁵⁸ Minter, 121.

requested a \$250 advance of his publisher Hal Smith; part apology, part truth, and part humor, his justification for his request was “[I]t’s either this, or put the novel aside and go whoring again with short stories.”⁵⁹

The Fugitive belief in the importance of art and the conflict between living this belief and the necessity of making money is apparent both in the personal lives of the members of the group and in the composite production and distribution of their art through *The Fugitive*. After the war, Davidson wished to return to Vanderbilt and his circle of fellow poets, but his “desperate financial straits” forced him “to take a one year position at Kentucky Wesleyan College.”⁶⁰ Like Tate, he had considered moving to New York City in search of a better financial situation and despite his devotion to the South. After spending the summer of 1924 with Robert Penn Warren in Guthrie, Kentucky, “Tate moved permanently to New York City...[and] tried to survive on small fees for book reviews, and at times gained temporary editorial jobs.”⁶¹ By 1923, Davidson, in turn, was back at Vanderbilt, along with Ransom, but as employees of the university, they were forced “to spend much of their lives overwhelmed by academic duties,” which naturally cut into the time they could spend producing literature.⁶² Tate, who was even “less optimistic about the financial survival of the poet, was...reluctant to accept the compromise of teaching, even though a clear-cut choice for literature did not seem available.”⁶³

⁵⁹ Qtd. in Minter, 139.

⁶⁰ Conkin, 12.

⁶¹ Conkin, 43-4.

⁶² Cowan, 96.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Keeping their personal finances in order while attempting to produce literature was not the only pecuniary obstacle the Fugitives were forced to hurdle. In fact, “the discrepancy between artistic and financial success began to be apparent to the Fugitive poets” less than a year after they began publishing *The Fugitive*.⁶⁴ The publication had met with much commendation, but there were only eighteen subscriptions to show for it, and the \$45 these subscriptions generated was not even one-eighth of the money the group had spent on production and distribution. Despite temporary patronage of the publication by Mr. Jacques Back, a Nashville businessman, by 1924 the group owed their printer, Cullom and Ghertner, \$100.⁶⁵ The difficulty of finding patrons and encouraging readers of the publication to buy subscriptions continued until the financial impossibility of *The Fugitive* compounded with dissension among the group members as to exactly how editing responsibilities should be delegated resulted in the termination of the publication. When the final issue was released in 1925, the Fugitives were forced to set aside their production of art and resume their academic and outside editorial responsibilities, which satisfied less but paid more.

Even as the core members of the Fugitive group began leaning more toward Agrarianism, they maintained their belief in art’s value and their disappointment over money meddling with art. In fact, the essential thrust behind Davidson’s essay “A Mirror for Artists,” in *I’ll Take My Stand*, is that industrialism has removed art from both everyday life and work by changing the natures of both. Even when he expresses it in the anti-progressive, anti-industrialism language of Agrarianism, the message is still the

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 95.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 117, 148.

same: the necessity of making money lamentably forces the artist's hand away from his real work. The desire to produce literature was not the only consistency between Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians. In the third chapter, I will discuss the specific aesthetic attributes that Faulkner and members of the Fugitive group shared and how the slight variations of their uses of the same artistic concepts shed further light upon Faulkner's use of Quentin as a tool to cleanse himself of racist attitudes.

IV. Appreciation of Aristocracy

At odds with their personal and group monetary difficulties is the celebration of and reinvestment in the aristocratic aspects of the Old South by Faulkner and some members of the Fugitive and Agrarian groups. Faulkner's tendency to revere and imitate southern aristocracy is at least in part hereditary. The people of Oxford widely acknowledged that "[a]ll of the Falkners thought themselves aristocrats; they could be stiff, proud, overbearing," and William intensified this already existent aristocratic self-conception by changing the spelling of their last name from "Falkner" to the more refined "Faulkner."⁶⁶ Since his family had become increasingly less aristocratic, first with his grandfather, the Young Colonel, and to an even greater degree with his alcoholic father, Murry Falkner, William aspired to "pattern his life after the Old Colonel's," as his brother Jack noted.⁶⁷

His first attempts to return to the aristocratic lifestyle that his great-grandfather had led were made through imitative actions. At a young age, he began to assert repetitively, "I want to be a writer like my great-granddaddy," and he certainly mastered

⁶⁶ Minter, 8, 268.

⁶⁷ Qtd. in Minter, 19.

this aspect of his great-grandfather's legacy.⁶⁸ Even when he did not exactly succeed in mimicking the Old Colonel, for instance in his failure to be a war hero, he supplemented his lack of action with imaginative creation; in other words, if he could not actually do what his ancestor had done militarily, he played the part of the wounded and decorated soldier anyway. His final endeavor to renew his family's aristocratic status was through rebuilding large memorial estates. In his purchase and renovation of Rowan Oak, "He wanted to establish a home so clearly evocative of his family's past that it would make him the acknowledged center of his clan."⁶⁹ When he acquired Red Acres in Charlottesville, Virginia, though, he surpassed even the Old Colonel's measure of aristocracy.

Faulkner's tendency to value and imitate the Old South aristocracy from which his family had since declined is counteracted by his appreciation of poor white southerners. Cleanth Brooks observes that even though Faulkner was "alive to the comic possibilities of the [poor white]," he also reveals a certain sort of sympathy with "the characters who come of poor-white stock, seeing in them an integrity, dignity, and sense of values."⁷⁰ Characters such as Lena Grove of *Light in August* and Cash Bundren of *As I Lay Dying* illustrate Faulkner's sensitivity toward and approval of poor white Southerners, while the Snopes family demonstrates his discernment of the multiplicity of types within this group. Yet, however much his literature demonstrates sympathy with the impoverished white individuals who made up much of the South both before and after

⁶⁸ Minter, 18.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 122.

⁷⁰ Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1963), 11.

1861, Faulkner's biography evinces his life-long craving for and eventual attainment of the aristocratic lifestyle that only a minority of Southerners actually enjoyed.

In the explanatory foreword of the first issue of *The Fugitive*, Ransom wrote, "The Fugitive flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South," but the affinity he and other Fugitive-Agrarians later express for that aristocratic lifestyle and values suggests that rather than fleeing the "Brahmins," they admired them.⁷¹ Granted, there were some exceptions, such as Andrew Lytle who publicly stated his preference for the independent farmer above the country aristocrat in "The Hind Tit," and many of the Agrarians would have argued that they held the same belief, but the lives they actually led often departed considerably from such a conviction. For example, despite the academically rigorous life he led, Ransom "always celebrated the virtues of a country gentleman, with leisure at the top."⁷² Although he initially settled in New York and later worked at northern schools including Princeton and the University of Minnesota, Tate also admired the aristocratic qualities of the antebellum South that were embodied in places like the family estate on his wife's maternal side, Merry Mont. More concerned with aristocratic values than old estates, Davidson lamented the South's forsaking such qualities as "repose, noblesse oblige, romantic love, beauty, good manners, and a belief in God."⁷³ Even John Gould Fletcher expressed a strongly aristocratic, hierarchical plan for a new educational system in his essay "Education, Past and Present" in *I'll Take My Stand*. His reforms call for a system that would allow

⁷¹ Cowan, 44.

⁷² Conkin, 5.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 35.

intelligent white (and probably male, though he did not explicitly say so) children to attend an elite set of schools, while the less intelligent white children and all black children would be forced to go to trade schools.

As John Grigsby suggests in his article on racism in the Agrarian movement, admiration of the antebellum South often goes hand in hand with support for or acceptance of racist attitudes. John Gould Fletcher's call for educational reform is the most blatant manifestation of racism and aristocracy running parallel. Racism is also implicitly present in the relatively innocuous esteem for aristocracy that Faulkner and Ransom evince. When Ransom celebrates "the virtues of a country gentleman, with leisure at the top," he indirectly celebrates slavery, which makes that leisure possible. Similarly, Faulkner's lifelong imitation of the Old Colonel amounts to aspiration toward becoming the ultimate defender of the Old South and the racially oppressive system upon which it depended.

V. Classical Educations

One aristocratic characteristic that Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians undoubtedly shared was their traditional education; of course, the manner in which they obtained this education varies, but the content is nearly identical. As Faulkner began to grow restless in school, at around ten years of age, he became more interested in stories. He listened intently as old men told war stories at the courthouse, and he enjoyed hearing his grandfather describe the adventures of the Old Colonel. The real benefit his interest in stories lent his education, however, was that at a young age, he became an avid reader of Shakespeare, Balzac, Conrad, Dickens, and, through his mother's collection, Plato,

Aristotle, and the Bible.⁷⁴ By the time he would have graduated from high school, he had already educated himself to around the same level as that of the younger Fugitives upon entrance at Vanderbilt.

In the areas in which Faulkner was not as well read, his friend Phil Stone, who had graduated cum laude from both the University of Mississippi and Yale, would provide supplemental knowledge. Stone had read widely in both Latin and Greek, and he was an authority on the Civil War. He provided Faulkner with a more factual basis for the stories he was hearing at the courthouse, and Faulkner likely gleaned some of his antique catch phrases, like “*reducto absurdum*,” the bastardization of the Latin *reductio ad absurdum*, from his friend’s expansive knowledge. Stone’s instruction was not limited to his lectures, though; he also directed Faulkner to read nineteenth-century poetry, and this experience would immediately inform his poetic style.

Both Ransom and Davidson entered Vanderbilt with much the same type of education that Faulkner acquired for himself, though they both received theirs from preparatory schools. Although Ransom had already left on a Rhodes scholarship when Davidson arrived, they were the first two Fugitive-Agrarians to attend Vanderbilt, and in those earlier years (the first decade of the 20th century), “Vanderbilt had clear-cut educational aims, based on the imperturbable structure of all past knowledge and transmitted to its students [sic] an essentially aristocratic attitude.”⁷⁵ The rigid, formal nature of both their secondary and undergraduate training may account for the fact that of

⁷⁴ Minter, 12.

⁷⁵ Cowan, 32.

all the Fugitive-Agrarians, Ransom and Davidson are by far the two most bound to traditional forms and ideas.

Tate, who was known for his academic and poetic experimentalism, did not enter the university until 1918, and by this time, Vanderbilt was becoming increasingly more affected by the New South's philosophies and needs, which meant a more progressive and utilitarian attitude toward curriculum. This liberalization is what eventually compelled Ransom to leave Vanderbilt for Kenyon. However, the university's new understanding of what it was necessary to teach did not disadvantage the younger Fugitive-Agrarians, Tate and Warren. Tate had attended preparatory school, and although Warren was a product of a Kentucky public school, his mother was a teacher, and Davidson, who taught his sophomore English survey class, judged him well read.⁷⁶

VI. Regionalism

The work that both Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians produced is undoubtedly informed by their thorough, traditional educations, but both also subscribed to the belief that art must be inspired by the artist's local habitat. Faulkner once contended that "a man of real ability...[could] find sufficient what he has at hand."⁷⁷ Later he wrote, "I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it..."⁷⁸ Of course, this discovery of worth occurred only after he had written the two novels *Soldier's Pay* and *Mosquitoes*, neither of which was set on his "native soil" and neither of which was deemed valuable by

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 107.

⁷⁷ Minter, 43.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 80.

critics. Faulkner's fictive county, Yoknapatawpha, is reminiscent of his own Lafayette County, and his characters are often based on some actual person or type of person he knew. For instance, Benjy was loosely based upon a mentally challenged man who lived in Oxford and died in an accident when some paper shreds he was playing with next to a fireplace caught fire.⁷⁹

Ransom held similar views on localist aesthetics. According to Cowan, he "based his verse on the values by which the South has lived, relating them to a whole intellectual tradition, and ordering them into a tight and meticulous vision of reality."⁸⁰ Although Ransom refused to use colloquial language, he presented his version, one vision, of the Southern tradition in his poetry. Especially in "Old Mansion," Ransom's academic voice depicts an undeniably Southern subject, a deteriorating "Southern manor," which may be taken also as a depiction of the transitional South.⁸¹ Louise Cowan interprets Ransom's statement that "poetry is saved from being utterly licentious and chaotic by having a form and content based closely upon the Tradition[;] we all know what to look for and how to read it when we see a fresh specimen" to mean that the poet must use "his own language to his own people."⁸² Although Cowan does not mention T.S. Eliot at this point, Ransom's reference to tradition suggests Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," which is an argument for recognizing but not absolutely conforming to the poetic forebears. This approach to poetry, however, is the one upon which Tate modeled his

⁷⁹ I gathered this information from a tour guide in Oxford.

⁸⁰ Cowan, xx.

⁸¹ John Crowe Ransom, "Old Mansion," *Selected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 34-5, Line 13.

⁸² Cowan, 212.

aesthetic. Tate, and likely Eliot, would probably appraise much of Ransom's poetry as missing the "particular medium" requisite of great poetry, due to his dependence upon and reverence for Tradition.⁸³ Although Eliot revered Tradition and outlined its importance in his essay, he also criticized those poets who do not balance creativity with Tradition.

Cowan, however, takes the aesthetic he expresses to mean that in order for a poet's people, in Ransom's case southerners, to read and identify with his poetry, the poet must submit the content, or "fresh specimen," he desires to communicate to his specific audience in the vernacular or familiar "form." Cowan's interpretation would require Ransom to write poems about whatever "fresh specimen" he might fancy but in the Southern dialect, the language of his own people. However, it seems that, much in the vein of Faulkner, Ransom takes his local people and family as his subject but uses his own highly intellectual voice as the primary medium for transmitting his subject to his audience, who will recognize the subject as themselves despite the foreignness of the voice.

VII. Moving from the South

At the same time, however, despite their complete dedication to the South as the subject of their literature, as a place, and as a philosophical entity, Faulkner and many of the Fugitive-Agrarians lived elsewhere. From 1932 to 1951, Faulkner lived in Hollywood on and off. For several years, he lived a divided life, with a wife and daughter in Oxford, and a lover, Meta Doherty, and a new set of friends in Hollywood.

⁸³ T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," ed. M.H. Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 2399.

For a man with only “one friend [Hal Smith] in the North,” Faulkner also visited New York City quite frequently.⁸⁴

Of the Fugitive-Agrarians, Tate was the first to make the move North, relocating permanently to New York City in 1924. Although he eventually returned to the South to teach a semester at Vanderbilt and then at Sewanee, he spent the majority of his adult life in New York, Minnesota, and Illinois. He was not, however, the first to consider the move; as early as 1919, at the end of the war, Ransom “sought a northern position and did not want to return to Vanderbilt.”⁸⁵ Ransom, who later espoused the cause of Agrarianism and who championed rural life over urban, had earlier “in long letters to his family...listed the advantages of urban life as opposed to village life.”⁸⁶ Eventually, he did migrate north, not to New York but to Gambier, Ohio. Warren, in turn, left the South in 1927 for graduate school at the University of California, and from California he went to New York and from there to Connecticut for further graduate study at Yale. Although he taught at Louisiana State University from 1932 to 1942, Warren spent the rest of his life in the North, in Minnesota and Connecticut. Davidson was the only Fugitive-Agrarian to remain in the South for his entire life.

VIII. Academic Companionship and Lack Thereof

Despite all the similarities that link Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians, one glaring dissimilarity separates them, both figuratively and literally. The Fugitive group, and later the four core men who had been Fugitives and became Agrarians, defined

⁸⁴ Minter, 135.

⁸⁵ Conkin, 12.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

themselves through their contact with one another. There could have been no Fugitive or Agrarian movement without the close-knit contact they shared. Ransom worked just down the hall from another Fugitive, Walter Clyde Curry, in his early days as a professor at Vanderbilt. Warren later discussed the manner in which discipleships were essentially formed in the professors' out-of-class time, as a result of the high percentage of them who lived on campus.⁸⁷ It was in Curry's room, for example, "where students were always coming to borrow [his] books or his typewriter," that Tate, as a senior, first met Warren, the sixteen-year-old sophomore.⁸⁸ Later that year, Tate and Warren, along with another Fugitive, Ridley Wills, decided to room together. During the development of the Fugitive group, it was not merely the bi-weekly philosophical discussions that bound its members so closely to one another; it was also their constant proximity to and engagement with one another.

The Fugitive-Agrarians thus shared both living space and a continuous critical dialogue. Ransom, Tate, and Davidson traded poems and criticized one another's work with great frequency. The nature of Ransom and Tate's critical relationship may more accurately be described as adversarial, but as cutting as their criticism of one another's work could be at times, both tended to take the evaluation good-naturedly. Despite the vast dissimilarity between Davidson's style and Tate's, their critical relationship was notably more congenial than that between Ransom and Tate. Although Davidson tended to write more Romantic, traditional poetry, while Tate had a penchant for experimenting with forms and styles, they generally approved of one another's work.

⁸⁷ Cowan, 14.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 106.

Even during the Agrarian period when most of the Fugitive-Agrarians were physically very distant from one another, they were united in purpose and wrote one another often. Although they did not always agree, especially on such issues as race and what exactly should be done to improve the South's economic situation, they were united in their "support [of] a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way," and they couched those beliefs in the terms "Agrarian" for the Southern way in opposition to "Industrial" or "Progressive" as the American way.⁸⁹

Faulkner subscribed to the same principles, though he did not use those specific terms. As he watched the progressive New South replace the last remnants of the Old South, "he saw both grandeur ('the splendid fine things which are a part of man's past' but 'which change must destroy') and ruthlessness (a willingness to...destroy a wilderness in order to make the 'earth grow something' that could be sold 'for a profit.')⁹⁰ Faulkner was clearly resistant to the same aspects of ruthlessness that the Agrarians discovered in industrialism, and he flirted with the Agrarian cause (cultivating land for pleasure) at Rowan Oak to a degree that only few of the Agrarians, such as Warren, Lytle (the only genuine farmer), and Owsley, actually espoused by trying their hands at gardening or similarly tranquil experiences with agriculture. For much of his life, Faulkner also held an understanding of race that could have been incorporated seamlessly into the racist undercurrent of *I'll Take My Stand*.

⁸⁹ "Introduction: A Statement of Principles," *I'll Take My Stand* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), xix.

⁹⁰ Minter, 80.

IX. Envisioning an Academic Community for Faulkner

Despite all the obvious (career, location, and time period), experiential (World War I, rejection by the local public, and living in the north or west), and philosophical (dedication to art and the ensuing monetary hardships, traditional education, and interest in the aristocratic Old South) parallels between Faulkner's life and the lives of the Fugitive-Agrarians, there was absolutely no contact between the individual and the group. Faulkner spent the time he could have used to converse with Allen Tate and Donald Davidson at a writers' conference in Charlottesville, Virginia, in October of 1931, drinking alone. He might have found all that he had in common with the group, but as he later admitted to a reporter, "[N]othing altered the basic uneasiness Faulkner felt, even around people he wanted or needed to meet.... 'I don't like literary people.... I never associate with other writers.'" ⁹¹ He claimed that he did not enjoy conversing with literary figures because such discussions set him to thinking of the 'stupidity of words,' but the reason for his standoffishness may more accurately lie in the nature of his education. ⁹² Even though, as an autodidact, he was well read, had exposure to foreign and ancient languages, and had the same important literary connections, with Malcolm Cowley, for instance, as the other literary people in Charlottesville, he had openly declared that he thought himself a "poet without education." ⁹³ His education was undocumented since he quit high school and never finished a course at the University of Mississippi, but it was far from nonexistent. Through Phil Stone's ramblings and his

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 134-5.

⁹² *Ibid*, 133.

⁹³ *Ibid*.

self-directed reading course, he was, arguably, as educated as the lettered people he avoided.

It was Faulkner's imaginary lack of intellectualism as well as his use of alcohol as a social and emotional crutch, then, that caused him to withdraw and essentially prevented his association with a group with whom he shared so much in common. This is not to suggest that if Faulkner had attempted to befriend members of the Fugitive-Agrarian group that he would have been accepted as a member. The fact that they included a female, Laura Riding, among their ranks suggests a certain degree of open-mindedness, but she had also gone to Cornell on a scholarship. However, their inclusion of Sidney Hirsch, who was a prolific etymologist but had no formal education, as a member of their group softens the image of them as academic elitists. Nevertheless, even if Faulkner could not have been accepted as a member of the Fugitive or Agrarian groups (whether by his choice or theirs), he could at least have had productive conversations about literature and the South with them had he been more receptive to literary conversation since they shared in important ways certain aesthetic and philosophical values.

Although southern literary scholars would stand to gain much from the interaction between Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians that did not occur, perhaps Faulkner's academic isolation benefited him as a person. Faulkner's and the Agrarians' evolution of opinions on race is comparable to the transition that each underwent after World War I. The group transitioned smoothly and naturally from the war environment back into their poetry readings and philosophical debates. In much the same fashion, Robert Penn

Warren's alteration from supporting a Jim Crow society to advocating integration came as a natural progression. He slowly separated himself from the Agrarian movement, both physically and ideologically. He renounced "The Briar Patch" and its pro-segregation tone in interviews. Then, much later he wrote an essay and book that are emphatically integrationist. Faulkner's movement from military life to post-war existence was immediate and altered in the same manner as did his renunciation of a racist attitude. When reality did not live up to what he had imagined for himself, Faulkner denied what he actually was (a short man who had never engaged in battle) in order to re-create himself as a more positive image (a limping war hero). In the same way, he used Quentin to discharge verbally his unpleasant and very personal reality and then immediately created himself anew by executing his vehicle of expression. It is Faulkner's need for academic separation, then, that allowed him to perform an immediate (and early) abandonment of racism, rather than slowly separating himself from his racism as Robert Penn Warren did. Even if Warren had wanted to separate himself from his racism as early as Faulkner did, he was tied to a group whose beliefs were still very racist. In order for Warren to even begin progressing, he first had to separate himself from the Agrarians. Since Faulkner did not have any allegiance to a similar academic group, his opinions were allowed free range in their evolution.

Daniel Aaron is mistaken in his evaluation of Faulkner's and the Fugitive-Agrarians' stances on race in two major ways that Brooks does not acknowledge in his essay. First, he classifies the Agrarians as "neo-Confederates," and such a general taxonomy necessarily ignores the spectrum that John Grigsby usefully identifies in his

“Poisonous Snake” article. More importantly, however, Aaron is at fault for incorrectly identifying the difference between Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians as racial tolerance and lack thereof. Faulkner’s eventual racial progressiveness is actually very similar to Robert Penn Warren’s. Where the group and the man differ most importantly is in their manner of transition from racism to acceptance.

The member of the Fugitive-Agrarian group whose opinions did eventually catch up with civilization transitioned naturally over time from racial ignorance to advocating social justice, and his literature reflected this slow evolution. Faulkner, on the other hand, used his literature to purge himself of racism all at once. Quentin Compson’s drowning was Faulkner’s baptism and renewal. To be sure, he must have found himself backsliding several times after he wrote the last words of the second section of *The Sound and the Fury*, yet his rejection of racism was nevertheless more immediate than that of the Fugitive-Agrarians. In order for it to be true that Quentin Compson is Faulkner’s whipping boy, though, Quentin must be an autobiographical character. In the next chapter, I elucidate the biographical commonalities and similar ambivalences that make Quentin Faulkner’s fictional self-portrait.

Chapter Two: Quentin Compson as Faulkner's Fictional Representation of Himself

Much as there are superficial similarities between William Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians, there are certain trivial issues and characteristics that link Faulkner to Quentin Compson of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* which while minor should not go without mentioning. Faulkner was a “deeply autobiographical” author; one of his brothers commented,

I have never known anyone who identified with his writings more than Bill did....Sometimes it was hard to tell...which one Bill was, himself or the one in the story. And yet you knew somehow that the two of them were the same, they were one and inseparable.⁹⁴

This description applies to the way Faulkner treated each of his works, yet it is even more relevant to *The Sound and the Fury* wherein we find the most profound revelation of Faulkner's self in Quentin's character. *The Sound and the Fury* was Faulkner's pet project, the book he was originally writing only for himself, and even later when it had become what many consider his masterpiece, he still said that he would always feel “the most tenderness” for it.⁹⁵ If all of his novels are “one and inseparable” with his personal identity, *The Sound and the Fury*, and especially Quentin Compson, who is so similar that he seems to be modeled from Faulkner's own life, should rightfully be accepted as slightly fictionalized autobiography. Quentin lives in Yoknapatawpha, Faulkner's fictional version of his own Lafayette County. If Quentin were an actual person, he would have been only seven years older than Faulkner, so it would be most probable,

⁹⁴ Qtd. in Minter, 103.

⁹⁵ Qtd. in Minter, 102.

since Faulkner wrote a character from the same generation and place, that such a character's life might mirror his own in other ways.

An examination of Quentin and Faulkner side by side will reveal a profusion of similarities, but for such a project to have worth, it is also necessary to interrogate Faulkner's intention in writing such a biographical character. Quentin's constant and often very private mirroring of Faulkner's life occurs for the same reason that many readers cannot make it past the first few pages of his narrative: Faulkner's intended audience was himself. In a manner, then, Quentin Compson's section of *The Sound and the Fury* may be viewed as a third-person journal entry. If Quentin may be understood in this manner, as I will argue that he should be, then the next logical question is this: why does Quentin have to die? If he is not only the replica of Faulkner's outward experience but also the written expression of his core values, then it would seem that his creator would celebrate him, not destroy him. For this reason, as I establish the congruity of Faulkner's experiences and beliefs with Quentin's, I will demonstrate that the motivation for Quentin's suicide is Faulkner's eradication of his deeply imbedded racist and misogynist tendencies. The ambivalence toward African Americans and disgust with women that surfaces in Faulkner's biography are also imbedded in Quentin's narratives. By giving expression to those feelings and tendencies of which Faulkner was guilty even as he disapproved them, and then murdering the instrument of expression, he hoped to accomplish a parallel, internal destruction of his own racist and misogynist beliefs.

I. Inserting Biography into Literature

A. Ancestors

Faulkner's great-grandfather was a colonel in the Confederate army as was Quentin's grandfather, and both the character and the author venerate their respective ancestral role models. When Faulkner was a child, his grandfather used to entertain him with old war stories about his great-grandfather, and during one of their visits, he gave him a replica of the pocket watch that the "Old Colonel" used to carry.⁹⁶ Quentin's section of *The Sound and the Fury* opens with this same timepiece, "the mausoleum of all hope and desire," which was originally Colonel Compson's and was passed down from Jason Compson, Sr. to Quentin.⁹⁷ This inherited pocket watch takes on a destructive quality in Quentin's life that we do not have direct knowledge of in Faulkner's.

However, I would argue that Faulkner's later apprehension about death could relate to the anxiety over death that the watch inspires in Quentin. In his older age, Faulkner had a very Quentin-like epiphany that with each tick of the clock "a little nearer now was the moment, instant, night: dark: sleep."⁹⁸ This linking of time's passing to impending death shows up in Quentin's section of *The Sound and the Fury* as special attention to the ringing of quarterly bells and attendant thoughts of death. When "[t]he three quarters began," Quentin's mind moves immediately to "the cool eternal dark."⁹⁹

In an essay that primarily treats female imagery in Faulkner's works, Gail Mortimer remarks on the convergence of Faulkner's understanding of art and his fear of

⁹⁶ David Minter, 13.

⁹⁷ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 48.

⁹⁸ Qtd. in Minter, 217.

⁹⁹ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 111.

death. She describes Faulkner's view of "writing as essentially an attempt to transcend time, to leave a 'scratch' on 'oblivion,'" the same notion that motivates Judith Sutpen to bring Charles Bon's love letters to Quentin's grandmother.¹⁰⁰ Mortimer goes on to liken Faulkner's mental association of human mortality and artistic immortality to that in John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Both, she observes, are taken up with "the question of whether it is better to be suspended somehow outside of time or to live within time, decaying."¹⁰¹ Quentin's conundrum replicates Keats's and Faulkner's in even darker terms; he simultaneously wants to commit an act so horrible that everyone, even the inhabitants of hell, will know about him and despise him, but he also desires to "non sum," to not be. He, like Faulkner and Keats, is torn apart by the pull of death from one direction and the lure of infamy/fame in the other.

For Faulkner and Quentin, the pocket watch so closely associated with an heroic ancestor reminds, with every passing second, of the impending "decay" and the art or act that they have come so near but will never entirely complete. Faulkner's art and Quentin's act are not so different either. As Mortimer discusses in "The Smooth, Suave Shape of Desire," Faulkner regarded perfect art in exactly the same terms as he did the ideal woman, in "'vague shape[s]' of perfection." Caddy, then, who is Faulkner's "heart's darling" as well as Quentin's, is the conflation of idealized art and woman, and her sexuality similarly signifies impending death—literally for Quentin and in a more figurative way for the author. After he failed to realize his legacy by becoming a war

¹⁰⁰ Gail Mortimer, "The Smooth, Suave Shape of Desire: Paradox in Faulknerian Imagery of Women," *Women's Studies* (13:1/2), 151.

¹⁰¹ Mortimer, 151.

hero, all that was left to Faulkner was to be a writer like his great-grandfather. Even if Caddy was his “heart’s darling” and *The Sound and the Fury* was his masterpiece, he still recognized it (and, implicitly, her) as “a splendid failure.” The crack in the urn, Caddy’s inability to be the figure of smoothness, signifies Faulkner’s failure in creating the perfect woman and consequently the perfect piece of art. Although William Faulkner is the member of the family who made their name most famous, with each movement of the pocket watch’s hands, he heard the tolling of his failure to reach the heights of heroism or artistry that he imagined his forebears had reached and demanded.

B. Parents

a. Murry and Jason

Familial similarities between Faulkner and Quentin go beyond grandfathers and great-grandfathers. Faulkner’s nuclear family is repeated in Caroline and Jason Compson. Faulkner biographer David Minter writes, “As the decline triggered by the family’s move to Oxford deepened, Murry Falkner became widely regarded not only as a failure but also as a drinker.”¹⁰² Faulkner also remembered his father as one whose “capacity for affection was limited.”¹⁰³ In *The Sound and the Fury*, the onset of Jason’s nihilism coincides with his heavy drinking. His life philosophy, which is to deny meaning in anything, appears to be one of the factors that have emotionally retarded both Quentin and himself. Each time Quentin attempts to turn to his father for sympathy, he comes away with another intellectual but emotionless catchphrase, which lodges itself damagingly in his consciousness. For instance, when Quentin comes to his father to air

¹⁰² Minter, 15

¹⁰³ Qtd. in Minter, 3.

his discomfort with his virginity and Caddy's lack thereof, Jason coldly replies, "[N]othing is even worth the changing of it."¹⁰⁴ Further, his father, who is the only person he tells that he plans to commit suicide, disdains to console his son; even in that pivotal conversation, he says, "[Y]ou will not do it until you come to believe that even she was not quite worth despair."¹⁰⁵ In other words, you will only commit suicide when you have entirely absorbed all the things I have told you about life. Although Faulkner never had a sister about whose virginity he could worry, and as far as we know never contemplated suicide (though Estelle Oldham Faulkner did attempt to drown herself early in their marriage), the father he gives Quentin acts as his own father would in those imagined situations.

Whereas Quentin inherited his father's nihilism, William Faulkner was heir to his father's alcoholism. Faulkner, of course, had no way of knowing that alcohol would be a contributing factor to his own death as he wrote *Quentin*, so the repetition of death by a trait passed from father to son (nihilism or alcoholism) could not possibly be a conscious insertion on the part of the author. However, if Quentin is, as I argue, a figure of release, the biographical mirroring of a nihilistic, alcoholic father may be regarded as another issue, alongside racism and misogyny, from which Faulkner desired release on some level.

b. Maud and Caroline

Phil Stone has explained that William's mother Maud Falkner ruled the household by "strong domination" and "dramatiz[ed her husband's] failure, his weakness, his

¹⁰⁴ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 50.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 113.

guilt.”¹⁰⁶ Caroline Compson plays a similar role in *The Sound and the Fury* as the mother who pontificates to her husband, without apparently caring who’s around to hear, about the negative effects of his Compson blood on her children: “I cannot stand it let me have Jason and you keep the others they’re not my flesh and blood like he is strangers....[I will] try to forget that the others ever were[.]”¹⁰⁷ Faulkner demonstrates her speech patterns by omitting punctuation when she talks; there is no pause in her abrasive stream of words, so even if Jason did have something to say, he is verbally castrated by her refusal to allow him space to speak. The reason she favors her son Jason is “because he is more Bascomb than Compson,” so even if her husband’s failure is only in her mind, she uses tactics similar to those of Mrs. Falkner to subjugate him.¹⁰⁸

Gail Mortimer argues, in turn, that “woman’s sexuality is what makes her threatening” to Faulkner and his male characters.¹⁰⁹ Initially it seems that Caroline Compson (the fictional character so similar to Maud) would be a proof against Mortimer’s theory. The threat of both the real and the fictional mother seems to be her verbal violence and subjugation of the father, but a closer examination of the words Faulkner writes into Caroline’s dialogue reveal the same threatening female sexuality to which Mortimer refers. The reason she despises all her children except for Jason is that they are not her “flesh and blood.” In the process of producing these children, her traits were not dominant enough, so she relinquishes her role as mother. In declaring her first three children “strangers,” Caroline Compson verbally repossesses her sexuality—

¹⁰⁶ Minter, 10, 15.

¹⁰⁷ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 66.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Mortimer, 150.

ironically, the sexuality that gave them existence in the first place. There is no proof that Maud Faulkner made any similar statement of rejection, but her intensely overpowering personality and disdain for her husband are strong indications that her tirades might have been the model upon which Mrs. Compson's were drawn. If such were the case, the origin of Faulkner's discomfort with women in control of their own sexualities would become suddenly clear.

C. Women

Although Faulkner did not seem to have any Quentin-like problems with sexual conquests, he does introduce his suspicion of female sexuality into Quentin's text of *The Sound and the Fury*. When his daughter began to go through puberty, he said, "It's over very soon. This is the end of it. She'll grow into a woman."¹¹⁰ He is not lamenting his daughter's fleeting youth so much as he is dreading her developing female sexuality. David Minter describes Faulkner as having "a rather strong distrust for women."¹¹¹ For Faulkner, the maturity of a female's sexuality "epitomiz[ed] the Fall."¹¹² As Mortimer notes, Faulkner's distrust of the mature female body affected even his relationships with his romantic interests. Meta Carpenter recalled Faulkner's "need to turn me into a sweet, tremulous girl."¹¹³

The passage in Quentin's narrative that best expresses Faulkner's discomfort with and distrust of the maturing female and female sexuality is spoken by Jason Compson, Sr.

¹¹⁰ Minter, 109.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Qtd. in Mortimer, 157.

but is filtered through Quentin's consciousness. Presumably in response to Quentin's distress over Caddy's sexual activity, Jason says,

Because women so delicate so mysterious....Delicate equilibrium of periodical filth between two moons balanced....With all that inside of them shapes an outward suavity waiting for a touch to. Liquid putrefaction like drowned things floating like pale rubber flabbily filled getting the odor of honeysuckle all mixed up.¹¹⁴

The honeysuckle is Quentin's trademark, but it is in Jason's homily on menstruation that female sexuality becomes at once revolting and alluring. The "outward suavity" that the man desires is impossible without the inward "liquid putrefaction," and that "outward suavity waiting for a touch" is just as undesirable as the "liquid putrefaction" if the female whose sexuality is in question is your sister's, as in Quentin's case, or your daughter's, as in Faulkner's circumstance. Faulkner's personal identification with Quentin in this (re)discovery of female sexuality through a close female family member is made even more significant by the fact that Faulkner called Caddy his "heart's darling." According to Minter, Faulkner "associated her...with the sister he never had," so in writing about her sexual maturation, he is not just identifying with Quentin as a result of his experience with his daughter; he is experiencing the discovery of his only sister's "delicate equilibrium," her transformation from a celibate and serene Mary to the sexually destructive Eve.

Faulkner's transference of this unpleasant (Noel Polk goes so far as to call it "gynophobic") affectation from his life to his literature has been continually remarked

¹¹⁴ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 81.

upon by academics.¹¹⁵ Some critics, like Minrose Gwin, concern themselves primarily with the loss and recovery of the female's, especially Caddy's, voice in Faulkner's fiction. Others approach Faulkner's women as it would appear Faulkner would have us come to them, through his "young and middle-aged males...[who] are susceptible to degrees of anxiety around women far surpassing what objectively appears justified."¹¹⁶ Gail Mortimer is in this camp, and so is Noel Polk, who focuses on the repeated appearance of triangular relationships in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury* in his essay "Faulkner: The Artist as Cuckold." Some academics, like André Bleikasten, prefer to resign themselves to the subordinate role that women play in Faulkner's fiction, without an attempt to rescue the female characters or the author under accusation, and many feminist critics disdain to regard Faulkner's representation of women as anything but a misogynist's mistaken and grossly unintelligent point of view. As Harold Bloom has written, "No feminist critic ever will be happy with Faulkner."¹¹⁷ Despite his observation of how some critics have responded to Faulkner, though, Bloom's take on the author and his female characters most closely resembles Bleikasten's. Bloom freely admits the presence of misogyny in Faulkner's novels, but he does not hesitate to designate those misogynistic works as "his strongest fictions" or to proclaim him "the strongest American novelist of this century."¹¹⁸ I have already outlined Gwin's, Bleikasten's, and Mortimer's arguments. Polk takes up a theme that surfaces in

¹¹⁵ Noel Polk, "Faulkner: The Artist as Cuckold," Ed. Donald Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie, *Faulkner and Gender* (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1994), 34.

¹¹⁶ Mortimer, 150.

¹¹⁷ Harold Bloom, "Introduction," *Modern Critical Interpretations: The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 1.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Mortimer's essay and Bloom's introduction—the connection between female sexuality and death—and expands upon it.

Using Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men* as his starting point, Polk argues that female sexuality is not only the medium through which homosocial triangular relationships (Bon-Henry-Judith, Dalton-Quentin-Caddy, Shreve-Quentin-Sutpen/the South) develop but also the repellent factor that disrupts those relationships. According to Polk, "[w]omen in his fiction are nearly always associated not just with sex and shame but also with filth, excrement, pain, and death."¹¹⁹ Bon is "effeminate and foppish," and "Henry is dazzled by the sophisticated cosmopolite"; Dalton Ames, in contrast, embodies "Quentin's fantasy of masculinity."¹²⁰ However, each of these homosocial, potentially homosexual, relationships is interrupted by the disturbance or revulsion of one or both males by the "cracked foul oozing unscratchable chaste and utterly insatiable uterus."¹²¹ Polk also makes the argument, from which he derives his title, that Faulkner is an "artist as cuckold...[;] one who exploits his...own inner and very private life as the material of fiction."¹²² Polk connects Estelle Oldham's "pre-cuckolding" of Faulkner and the rocky marriage that ensued with his male characters' disdain for sexual females.

Polk's theory is appealing, and his word choice throughout is brilliant. To begin with, his title incorporates several themes from earlier Faulkner scholarship. "The Artist as Cuckold" refers to Mortimer's and Bloom's comparison of Faulkner's work, his art, to Keats's Grecian urn ode. The artist is cuckolded by his artistic impotence, an inability to

¹¹⁹ Polk, 34.

¹²⁰ Polk, 24, 26.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 43.

give form to perfection. According to Polk, death is what ultimately cuckolds Faulkner's male characters, and they open themselves to this cuckoldry by "plac[ing] women on the pedestal of their desire."¹²³ Polk's description of the uterus as "unscratchable" is also particularly telling. As I have mentioned earlier, part of Faulkner's Keatsian sensibility was his fear that he might not "leave a 'scratch' on 'oblivion.'" If the uterus is the culminating image of attraction, disgust, immortality, and fatality, then it works as a figure for both art and death, and both for Faulkner are unscratchable.

I agree with Polk that Faulkner was troubled by female sexuality and death, that those issues are connected, and that those issues surface in Quentin Compson's stream of consciousness as a result of Faulkner's preoccupation with them. I also concur that as he grew older Faulkner's work "reflected [the] mellowing of his sense of sexuality as something shameful, an abatement of his sense of women...as traps."¹²⁴ Polk notes three later Faulkner female characters, "Eula Varner Snopes, her daughter Linda, and Maggie Mallison, in *The Town* and *The Mansion*" and describes them all "as fully realized, complex portraits of three completely different, but equally magnificent women."¹²⁵ The note on which I depart from Polk is in his manner of tying Faulkner's misogyny to the repetition of that misogyny in his literature. There is a better way to connect Faulkner's issues with female sexuality and his projection of those issues into Quentin's psyche than simply to write that he exploited his own life to make his literature interesting, and there

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

is a clearer explanation for both his literary connection of sex and death in *The Sound and the Fury* and the mellowing Polk observes in his later work.

First, Faulkner must be granted even more agency than Polk allows him. Polk comments on Faulkner's use of biographical elements in his fiction, writing, "[I]f it was not conscious use at first, over the course of the several novels...he became very conscious indeed of how he worked his own life...into his fiction."¹²⁶ I would argue that beyond just becoming conscious of how he incorporated himself into his literature, Faulkner intentionally wrote himself into his work. To take that thought even further, his dependence on details from his own life in creating Quentin Compson was not only intentional but also served a specific end. Speaking seemingly directly to the content of Polk's essay, Faulkner used Quentin to pronounce those misgivings about female sexuality that he had acquired from his dealings with Maud Faulkner, Estelle Oldham, and Meta Carpenter. Then, with Quentin's suicide, which also stood as an emblem for his father's emasculation and his own cuckolding (to use Polk's term), he eradicated that part of himself. He, thus, exchanged death for death, killing off one of his greatest artistic achievements in order to rid himself of his sense that femininity was threatening and could be conflated with death.

II. Shared Ambivalences

The biographical facts about Faulkner's family are much easier to ascertain than his opinions. Faulkner once admitted, "I never tell the truth to reporters," so any opinion

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 36.

he might have vocalized is subject to suspicion.¹²⁷ If his bald-faced admission of intentional untruths is not reason enough to question what he has said publicly on issues he clearly thought a great deal about, like race and the post-bellum South, then his contradictory statements and actions are. Fortunately, similar nuclear and ancestral families are not all that Faulkner included from his own life in his creation of Quentin. In Quentin's narrative in *The Sound and the Fury* and his narration in *Absalom, Absalom!* and "That Evening Sun," one may find a more articulate reflection of Faulkner's ambivalent stances on race and the South than anywhere else, even in his statements about himself.

A. Race

Minter describes Faulkner's position on race as "mov[ing] uneasily from position to position rather than along a single, clearly developed line," and his tendency to contradict himself in statements made in interviews makes it even more difficult to discern exactly what he believed.¹²⁸ He was as likely to "denounce racial attitudes and policies" as he was to criticize "forced desegregation."¹²⁹ Quentin's stance on race is just as confused and irresolute as Faulkner's, but it seems that through the fictional character, Faulkner better expresses his uncertain position toward African Americans and especially African Americans in the South.

Nine-year-old Quentin of "That Evening Sun" is developing an understanding of race that is neither typical of the South nor clearly defined. He refers to African

¹²⁷ Qtd. Minter, 233.

¹²⁸ Minter, 233.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Americans only as “Negroes,” for instance, “streets...full of Negro women” and “the sounds that Negroes make.”¹³⁰ Faulkner chooses for Quentin to use this less derogatory term, differentiating him from his two siblings and even the adult jailer, who uses the racial slur to excess: “[N]o nigger would try to commit suicide unless he was full of cocaine, because a nigger full of cocaine wasn’t a nigger any longer.”¹³¹ Quentin reports the dialogue with little commentary, but when Jason repeatedly asserts, “I ain’t a nigger,” Quentin as narrator imputes a sense of absurdity to him that contrasts with his sensitive, yet perplexed, description of Nancy.¹³² When Nancy is afraid, Quentin is so attuned to her emotion that her frightened eyes “got printed on [his] eyeballs, like the sun does when you have closed your eyes and there is no sun.”¹³³ He is the only one who perceives that she is praying when she says “Jesus,” while she lies on her pallet on the floor of the children’s bedroom.¹³⁴ Yet, his understanding does not necessarily impart warmth of feeling. As the children are leaving Nancy’s house with Mr. Compson, Quentin, assuming that Jesus will murder their servant that night, wonders who will do their laundry. Quentin’s heightened awareness of Nancy’s (and presumably other African Americans’) feelings does not necessarily mean that he does not also commodify them in a fashion consonant with his Old Southern upbringing.

Quentin’s feelings of awkwardness find fuller and further articulation in his narrative section of *The Sound and the Fury*. When he gets into the train car, the first

¹³⁰ William Faulkner, “That Evening Sun,” *The Portable Faulkner* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), Ed. Malcolm Cowley, 391, 397.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 393.

¹³² *Ibid*, 399, 400, 410.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 398.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*.

thing he observes is that “[t]he only vacant seat is beside a nigger.”¹³⁵ Having acquired a racist vocabulary and a Jim Crow attitude since his childhood, Quentin scolds himself, “You’ve got to think of them as colored people,” since he is in the North.¹³⁶ He claims that he has “learned that the best way to take all people, black and white, is to take them for what they think they are, then leave them alone,” yet his immediate self-consciousness, aroused by having to sit next to a Northern African American, and his continued reverie on both Northern and Southern African Americans attest to his inability to “leave them alone.”¹³⁷

Quentin uses both disparaging language about and stereotypes of African Americans, yet he also affirms some attractive qualities he has observed in his contact with them. The only person he imagines lamenting his suicide is Dilsey, who would say “What a sinful waste,” which is significant when both Caddy and his father only go so far as to doubt his ability to follow through with the act.¹³⁸ While he paints the Deacon as a charlatan, he also admits that this man has been more intelligent than all the Southern freshmen whom he had “completely subjugated” by playing the part of the “happy darky,” until he “had bled” the duped freshmen’s wallets.¹³⁹ Quentin was presumably one of those inexperienced freshmen, and though he seems to resent the Deacon, he does so in the amused manner of one who has been fooled by him.

¹³⁵ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 55.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

Recalling Dilsey's explanation that Maury's name was changed to Benjamin "because Mother was too proud for him," Quentin expands his appraisal of her knowing to all African Americans.¹⁴⁰ He thinks, "They come into white people's lives like that in sudden sharp black trickles that isolate white facts for an instant in unarguable truth like under a microscope."¹⁴¹ Here Quentin is revealing his sense that African Americans understand him better than he could possibly understand them. With his next thought, he confirms that sense: "the rest of the time just voices that laugh when you see nothing to laugh at, tears when no reason for tears."¹⁴² Quentin as a character and Faulkner as a writer are too self-aware not to realize that such a statement is an admission that they do not comprehend African Americans in moments in which they know Quentin and Faulkner perfectly. Dilsey excises Caroline Compson's motivation for changing her son's name with scientific precision, but Quentin cannot even pick out the catalysts for the more straightforward emotions that she and other African Americans he has known experience.

Through Quentin's thoughts in *The Sound and the Fury* about Dilsey and the Deacon, Faulkner makes his most forthright admission of bewilderment. The bounding he did from one stance to another in his actual life does not expose his simultaneously existing cautious admiration and racist tendency to typecast better than Quentin's thoughts. Further, the way in which Quentin's vocabulary and views toward African Americans change from his early childhood depicted in "That Evening Sun" to his years

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 108.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*.

¹⁴² *Ibid*.

of matriculation at Harvard suggests the same fluidity with which Faulkner moved from his arguments against forced desegregation in the late 1940's to the support of integration that bothered his family so much in the mid-1950's.

Even in the 1950's when Faulkner was at his most racially progressive, though, he still made some racist comments. In the same breath that he admitted that "the white man is responsible for the Negro's condition," he claimed that the "Negro's 'tragedy' may be that so far he is competent for equality only in the ratio of his white blood."¹⁴³ Walter Taylor also makes the important point that even Dilsey, who is the most sympathetic of the African American characters in *The Sound and the Fury* is a "mammy" figure, "whose chief source of identification is the white family [she] serve[s]."¹⁴⁴ Like Faulkner, then, Quentin places value on African Americans and grants that they are intelligent only in relation to how white they are. The other African American who Quentin respects in a manner is the Deacon, and although he does not seem to have any positive "ratio of white blood," he does conform to a white stereotype of African Americans—the trickster figure.

Taylor ends his essay "Faulkner's Pantaloon: The Negro Anomaly at the Heart of *Go Down, Moses*" with a direct quote from Faulkner that was printed in *Ebony* in 1956: "It is easy enough...to say glibly, 'If I were a Negro, I would do this or that.' But a white man can only imagine himself for the moment a Negro; he cannot be that man of another

¹⁴³Qtd. in Walter Taylor, "Faulkner's Pantaloon: The Negro Anomaly at the Heart of *Go Down, Moses*," *American Literature* (44:3), 432.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 432.

race and griefs and problems.”¹⁴⁵ At this late point, he bravely admits his ambivalence and his inability to understand fully members of this race in a direct statement to African Americans across the nation. Quentin Compson serves as an earlier attempt at admission and expungement. In her essay “‘Jim Crow’ and *The Sound and the Fury*,” Thadious M. Davis observes, “Quentin perceives two different realities for whites and blacks; his ‘white facts,’ for example, assume black facts as a corollary.”¹⁴⁶ As early as 1928, then, Faulkner recognized within himself an inability to identify with the race for which he felt so much admiration, and as late as 1956 he was finally accepting his powerlessness to change this racial rigidity.

B. The South

Faulkner and Quentin share an ambiguous stance toward the South to match their indeterminate attitude toward race. Faulkner clearly found much worth and was interested in the South because most of his novels are set not only in the South but in his particular region of the Mississippi. Yet, as David Minter points out, he “regard[ed] family, region, and past both as burden and as field of play.”¹⁴⁷ The initial sense of burden likely came in the form of local rejection, first when he dropped out of high school and cultivated some strange habits, and second when he began writing and publishing. From his early teenage years on, Faulkner’s relationship to Oxford and his neighbors was “at once familiar and alien...[:] he felt at home yet at the same time not at

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 444.

¹⁴⁶ Thadious M. Davis, “‘Jim Crow’ and *The Sound and the Fury*,” *Modern Critical Interpretations: The Sound and the Fury*, Ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 77.

¹⁴⁷ Minter, 30.

home.”¹⁴⁸ As a child, he was drawn in by stories about the town and its people, and as an adult he wrote similar stories, yet he was comfortable with leaving for Hollywood for extended periods of time and felt even more contented at times with the alternate life that he built outside of Mississippi and his family. This feeling of alienation strangely mixed with fascination is repeated in Quentin’s comments on the South in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*

Quentin, in turn, clearly does not belong in Cambridge. If nothing else, he is identified as an outsider to New England by his Southern accent. One of the children fishing for the \$25 trout recognizes that his accent is different and asks if he is Canadian; one of the others corrects him, saying, “He dont talk like them....I’ve heard them talk. He talks like they do in minstrel shows.”¹⁴⁹ Although Quentin with his presumed minstrel accent does not fit in New England, he is just as ostracized in the South. Even the accent the child identifies does not establish Quentin as a Southerner from a Northern perspective; rather, it classifies Quentin as the stereotypical Southern “happy ducky” of the minstrel shows, which is, incidentally, the only African American “type” with whom Quentin is comfortable. It is ironic, then, that the Northern boys typecast Quentin in much the same (incorrect) way that he stereotypes Southern African Americans. His accent, which might or might not be the accent of a Southern African American, is his only attribute that is fitting to the character of a young man from the South of 1910. Other than his accent, he has none of the qualities that are required of a Southern gentleman. For instance, he does not have hordes of women like the pseudo-Southerner

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 123.

¹⁴⁹ Faulkner, 76.

Gerald Bland; in fact, he has not even had one woman, and “in the South you are ashamed of being a virgin” if you are male.¹⁵⁰ Quentin also does not have the courage that is requisite of a true Southern male. When he goes to fight for Caddy’s (and by association his family’s) honor, he “just pass[es] out like a girl.”¹⁵¹ His relative femininity (his virginity and fainting) disqualifies him as a Southern male.

The alienation from the South that Faulkner writes into Quentin’s narrative in *The Sound and the Fury* matches his own, and it is in *Absalom, Absalom!* that Faulkner uses Quentin as a medium to voice his reciprocal ambivalence toward the South. Perhaps the best expression of how Quentin and Faulkner via Quentin felt about the South is Quentin’s last thought in *Absalom, Absalom!* prompted by Shreve’s question, “Why do you hate the South?” Quentin thinks “*I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*”¹⁵² What Quentin and Faulkner mean is, “I hate it and I don’t,” which is somewhat similar to what Faulkner had said about “feeling at home yet at the same time not at home.” Their dividedness between hatred and reverence for the South comes as a result of their esteem for Old Southern traditions and their utter lack of ability to assimilate their lives to those traditions and demonstrate the characteristics of Old Southern gentlemen. Because they are “at home yet...not at home” (they understand but cannot replicate the traditions) in the South, they can only emphatically say (and partially mean) “I don’t hate it!” when they cannot help but hate it.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 50.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 103.

¹⁵² William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1990), 303.

III. Artistic License with Fictive Autobiographical Characters

Unfortunately, for my purposes, the parallels between William Faulkner and Quentin Compson do run out. Faulkner did not go to Harvard, have a sister, or commit suicide. Quentin never got married or had a drinking problem. There is, however, another manner in which to view Quentin as autobiographical.

In his introduction to *Modern Critical Interpretations: The Sound and the Fury*, Harold Bloom notes, “The mark of Joyce’s *Ulysses* is a little too immediate on *The Sound and the Fury*.”¹⁵³ He could expand that statement to claim that the mark of Joyce (generally) is on *The Sound and the Fury*. Benjy’s section of *The Sound and the Fury* attempts the same feat as the beginning of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*—depicting the consciousness of a person whose mind is not fully developed. The tough-to-navigate stream of consciousness and attendant disregard for time as a linear entity is present in *Ulysses* before Faulkner takes it up for Benjy’s and Quentin’s narratives in *The Sound and the Fury*. Although Faulkner never tried to establish contact with James Joyce, probably for the same reasons that he avoided acquaintance with the Fugitive-Agrarians, he undoubtedly read his work and allowed himself to be influenced by him, with no apparent anxiety (unluckily for Bloom).

Stephen Daedalus is not autobiographical in a strictly factual manner, but he is widely accepted as Joyce’s vehicle for artistic autobiography. The reason Daedalus is so widely accepted as a partially fictive autobiographical character is that certain details of his life, like family and home, correspond with Joyce’s. Further, Joyce voices his own

¹⁵³ Harold Bloom, “Introduction,” 5.

opinions about such subjects as Catholicism, Ireland, and literature through Daedalus. If Daedalus is Joyce's autobiographical character based on these premises, then it would be natural to assume that Quentin is Faulkner's because Faulkner writes the same details (about family and native soil) into Quentin's narrative and similarly uses him as a mouthpiece to express his otherwise ambiguous thoughts on matters of importance to him. With Joyce's use of a character whose life does not match his own detail for detail as autobiographical, he sets the precedent so that Faulkner may make Quentin autobiographical without sacrificing the embellishments (like incest and suicide) of which his own life was devoid. In fact, Robert Penn Warren appraised Faulkner's use of artistic autobiography at an even higher value than James Joyce's. Walter Taylor quotes Robert Penn Warren as saying, "Faulkner was able to accomplish 'a more difficult thing' than Joyce's Dedalus: "'To forge the conscience of his race, he stayed in his native spot and, in his soul, in images of vice and of virtue, reenacted the history of that race.'"¹⁵⁴ If Stephen Daedalus may be considered Joyce's fictive representation of himself and his experience with Ireland, then Faulkner's Quentin Compson should be accepted as autobiographical to an even greater degree. Faulkner did not remove himself from the South to create Quentin; instead, he immersed himself in it and allowed the "vice and virtue" of the South to war "in his soul."

Although it is similar to Bloom's criticism in its content, Warren's reading of the literary values of Daedalus and Quentin contradicts Bloom's overall assessment. Bloom complains, "Quentin's voice makes me start when it is too clearly the voice of Stephen

¹⁵⁴ Taylor, 430

Daedalus.”¹⁵⁵ The reason for the discrepancy between Bloom’s valuation and Warren’s is that Bloom assigns the greatest degree of importance to Joyce’s preceding Faulkner in technique. Warren, on the other hand, does not assign a lesser value to the work that has derived some elements from an earlier work; rather, he examines the circumstances under which each author wrote the work in question and assesses the merit of the work with that information in mind. Although Harold Bloom has literally written the book on influence, there are times when that factor cannot be used as proof that one work is more significant than another. In his evaluation of the similarity between Daedalus and Quentin, Bloom does not even address what Warren mentions about the authors’ varying levels of commitment to their texts. Harold Bloom has what appears to be an inexhaustible wealth of deeply perceptive criticism, not excepting what he has written about *The Sound and the Fury*, but it is apparent in this case that he is wearing blinders that block any detail that does not substantiate his philosophical argument about the anxiety of influence.

The third and final chapter will build upon what this chapter has established. I have illustrated here how Quentin is Faulkner’s tool for releasing his ambivalent feelings toward African Americans and the South and his deeply felt dread of female sexuality. The next step is to examine how Faulkner’s writing and views fit into the Agrarian and Fugitive traditions. Again, I will use what Faulkner has written in Quentin’s voice and the views he has expressed through Quentin to place him within these two traditions, since I have established here that Faulkner’s expression through Quentin is as

¹⁵⁵ Bloom, 6.

unadulterated and honest, if not always as coherent, as a sinner's words during confession.

Chapter Three:

Fitting Faulkner via Quentin into the Gaps of Fugitive Aesthetics and the Fissures of Agrarian Convictions

The first chapter delineated the profuse biographical and historical similarities between Faulkner and members of the Fugitive and Agrarian groups. The second identified Quentin Compson as Faulkner's most biographical character and his tool for release of and repentance for his misogyny and racism. Now it is time to examine how Faulkner would fit aesthetically into the Fugitive group and where he would fall on the spectrum of diverse opinions concerning race and the South among the Agrarians. The members of the Fugitive and Agrarian groups were undoubtedly united under common standards, dedication to the perfection of poetry in the case of the Fugitives and devotion to the recuperation of Southern economy and community for the Agrarians. However, despite the accord struck through each group's forged identity, there was marked disarray among individual opinions.

I. Faulkner and Fugitive Aesthetics

Though the Fugitive group was founded on a common commitment to poetry, individual differences are actually what provided the impetus that moved the group from casual gatherings of intellectual friends and colleagues to a recognized force in the southern literary renaissance, a salon of some of the area and time's most eminent minds, and a veritable factory of good poetry. Every week the Fugitives would read their most recent work aloud to the group, and after each reading a general bout of criticism would commence, which would sometimes lend itself to a broader dispute over some particular

aesthetic question or another.¹⁵⁶ The broad aesthetic issues of theme and style are the ones that splintered the Fugitive group. Of the core Fugitives, Faulkner most closely parallels John Crowe Ransom on theme and Allen Tate on style; however, it should be duly noted that the recurring treatment of time by Faulkner finds its best analogue in some of Fugitive latecomer Robert Penn Warren's poetry.

A. Duality in Ransom and Faulkner

In searching for themes that are typical of Ransom, it is nearly inevitable to appraise his opus as a veritable Manichean masterpiece. In a letter to Allen Tate, Ransom voices his belief that art could not exist without dualism due to the fact that art imitates life, and, in his opinion, life is dualistic. He asserts, "[H]ere's a slogan: Give us Dualism, or we'll give you no Art."¹⁵⁷ True to his word, Ransom's art is usually built upon some dichotomy or another. Honor interrupts lust in "The Equilibrists." The "grey word [honor]"(24), which is "cold as steel"(24), separates the lovers whose unfulfilled passion "flamed upon the kiss"(6).¹⁵⁸ Ransom neatly ties the physical dualities of heat and cold to his lovers' emotional reactions to their compromised situation, fiery sexual desire existing simultaneously with a refusal to forsake personal honor by committing sexual acts. In the end, he has his archetypal lovers eternally teetering between consummation and honor.

A similar dichotomy is present in "Spectral Lovers," in which the female falters in the "moment perfect" (11) to follow through with a kiss, and the male envisions her in a

¹⁵⁶ Cowan, 41.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 214.

¹⁵⁸ John Crowe Ransom, "The Equilibrists," eds. Ben Forkner and Patrick Samway, *A Modern Southern Reader* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, L.T.D., 1986), 305-7.

battle metaphor in which the fighting [loving] is not worth “the sack” (27), physical consummation, of “this richest of cities” (26), his female lover, because “it [she] is so stainless” (27).¹⁵⁹ The consequence, which is announced in the poem’s first stanza rather than its last, is a bewilderment of conflicting emotional impulses and logical conclusions between the two: “Lovers they knew they were, but why unclasped, unknissed? / Why should two lovers go frozen apart in fear?” (4-5). Ransom thus makes even their characterization a repetition of the dichotomy that exists in their circumstances. They are “spectral lovers” (33); although the signification “lovers” can only be fully validated through physical sexuality, these two are equally defined as “spectral,” which contradicts any possibility of physicality or physical action. The epitaph Ransom gives the equilibrists may serve just as well for his spectral lovers, for seemingly they, too, will suffer an eternal, unspoken “torture of equilibrium” (26).

Faulkner extensively treats the dichotomy of honor and sex through his character Quentin Compson of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin’s inherited values depend heavily upon honor, and honor for him relies so heavily upon appropriate sexuality that his sister’s pre-marital loss of virginity crushes his entire worldview. Quentin’s understanding of honor is so rigid that instead of bending to accommodate events, like Candace Compson’s promiscuity, that do not fit it, it shatters, disintegrating both his own moral system and the sanity of the individual who holds it so paramount. Caddy’s “[p]oor Quentin you’ve never done that have you” refers to the initial problem, beyond just the fact that sex has occurred, that her sexual indiscretion

¹⁵⁹ John Crowe Ransom, “Spectral Lovers,” *Selected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 4-5.

poses for her brother's honor system.¹⁶⁰ While it entirely warps his Old Southern ideals for his sister to have had sex, it further complicates matters that he remains a virgin. For Quentin the only appropriate "unvirgin" would be himself, yet he, whose purity does not depend upon virginity, is nonetheless one.

The second and even more pressing problematic component of Caddy's violation is the partners she has chosen. Although her having sex with a young, southern gentleman with blood as aristocratic as the Compsons still would have devastated Quentin's idea of family honor, her transgression might not have ruined him in the way that it did. Quentin demonstrates his indignation that his sister would stoop to someone of Dalton Ames's status when he says, "It's not for kissing I slapped you....It's for letting it be some darn town squirt."¹⁶¹ As a result of her "hot hidden furious" activities "in the pastures the ditches the dark woods," Caddy becomes pregnant and must find a husband in such short order that she cannot even marry a man of acceptable class.¹⁶² Quentin calls Caddy's hastily acquired husband a "liar and a scoundrel," who "was dropped from his club for cheating at cards[,]...caught cheating at midterms and expelled."¹⁶³

Quentin attempts to stabilize the dichotomy between honor and sex that Caddy's actions have so severely disrupted for him in two ways. Initially, he tries to mask the discrepancy between his inactive sexuality and his sister's overactive one by claiming that he has also had sex "lots of times with lots of girls."¹⁶⁴ He hopes that in the act of

¹⁶⁰ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 94.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, 84-5.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 59.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, 78.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 96.

uttering these words what he has said will somehow be true, negating his virginity and assuaging Caddy's status as the only "unvirgin" of the Compson children. His false boast does not, however, resolve the larger problems of Caddy's having had sex and her choice of partners in the act. In an effort to mend his family's damaged honor, Quentin employs an incest performative. A performative is what J. L. Austin terms a sentence or phrase that serves as an act as it is being spoken. Examples that he gives in his essay "How to Do Things with Words" are "I do" and "I bet." When one says "I do" under the proper circumstances, he or she is performing the action of becoming married, and when one says "I bet," he or she is making a bet (another action).¹⁶⁵ When Quentin declares, "I have committed incest....Father it was I...not Dalton Ames," he is endeavoring to make an act of incest between himself and Caddy actual by saying it has happened, and he later perceives that this is the case when he tells his father, "[I]f I could tell you we did it would have been so."¹⁶⁶ His later observation of the way language works—"making of unreality a possibility, then a probability, then an incontrovertible fact, as people will when their desires become words"—validates the labeling of his statement, "I have committed incest," as a performative rather than just as a statement or a lie.¹⁶⁷

The natural question that arises from all this incest performative business is this: how does committing incest with Caddy cure the family honor in Quentin's mind? If her sexual partner were Quentin and not Dalton Ames, then the secondary problem of Caddy's lower-class mate is no longer an issue. Being a member of the Compson family

¹⁶⁵ Austin, J. L., "How to Do Things with Words," eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 162-76.

¹⁶⁶ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 51, 112.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 75.

literally makes Quentin most equal in class to Caddy. If consorting with someone of a lower class is more dishonorable than incest, as it most clearly is for Quentin, then incest will solve the problem of class. As Walter Benn Michaels argues in *Our America*, what Quentin is hoping to achieve with his “utopian incest” resonates with the upsurge of nativism in the 1920’s.¹⁶⁸ For the Compsons, the most important social unit is the family, and, so, the most direct way to discern one’s Southernness is by the family to which he or she belongs. According to Michaels, family is of such central importance to Quentin that he is repulsed by Caddy’s exogamy. Caddy’s having sex with males outside of the Compson circle introduces the possibilities of class mixing, miscegenation, and even cultural mixing, and whether that cultural mixing means marrying a Yankee or a Jew does not matter to Quentin. Both are equally unacceptable. By verbally (and in his mind actually) limiting Caddy’s sexual possibilities to endogamy, Quentin makes amalgamation of any sort impossible.¹⁶⁹

Incest would also settle the issue of Quentin’s being a virgin when his sister is not. The way in which incest rectifies the breakdown of Quentin’s perceived honor because of Caddy’s sexual acts is not easy and certainly not desirable, but for Quentin it is better than the broken dichotomy. He and Caddy, having committed a mortal sin, would go to hell and forever be “walled [together] by the clean flame.”¹⁷⁰ In his fantasy of the “clean flame,” Quentin imagines the result of his incest performative, a torture of

¹⁶⁸ Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), 12.

¹⁶⁹ Michaels, 41.

¹⁷⁰ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 74.

equilibrium akin to the one that Ransom depicts. Quentin's need for honor would be satisfied, but only in such a way that he still must suffer eternally because of sex.

Another dichotomous theme that Ransom has in common with Faulkner is the duality of life and death. The poem that best exhibits Ransom's theme of juxtaposing life and death is "Necrological," in which he transposes the living and dead in such a manner that the inherent dualities between the two are reversed and doubled. The friar, who is the only living figure in the poem, is so inactive, so cerebral, that he may as well be dead. His incessant "riddling" (3), which consumes him from the poem's beginning to its end when his head is bowed "as under a riddle" (33), makes bold physical action an impossibility.¹⁷¹ He admires the sheer physicality of the fallen heroes whose bodies lie scattered around his monastery after the previous night's battle, but Ransom highlights how peculiar his presence is when he, a "Carmelite," picks up a sword, an implement of action, to admire its craftsmanship. The Hamlet-like youth is immobilized by his thoughts of action, and in the end his stillness causes him to "[liken] himself unto those dead" (35). The dead, with whom he identifies, however, are similar to him only in their stillness, and that stillness came only as a result of the wide discrepancy that initially existed between them and the friar, namely the frenzied activity of battle. As he observes the various positions of the corpses, the activity that defined them before as living and separated them from the riddling monk manifests itself. There are heroes pierced by swords (14), a "dead warrior" in the clutches of his mistress (22), and a knight thrown from his horse (26-8). Ransom's image of an overly pensive friar surrounded by men

¹⁷¹ John Crowe Ransom, "Necrological," *Selected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 6.

impelled to death by their zealous propensity toward activity achieves a striking juxtaposition between the living dead and those who are dead as a result of living. Some other Ransom poems that reflect this theme in a manner similar to (but not as intricately as) “Necrological” are “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter” and “Dead Boy.”

The inactive monk of “Necrological,” who is prefigured much earlier by Hamlet and just slightly earlier by Prufrock, finds his double in Quentin Compson, who is also held back from acting by his contemplation of action. When Jason Compson, Sr. asks him if he tried to force Caddy into an incestuous act, he admits, “[No,] I was afraid to I was afraid that she might.”¹⁷² He employs the incest performative even as he is impeded by thought from committing the act. This inactivity spurred by thoughts of action is repeated in his dealings with Dalton Ames. He vows to Caddy, “I’ll kill him I swear I will,” but “[w]hen he [Ames] put the pistol in [Quentin’s] hand [he] didn’t” shoot.¹⁷³ In fact, he faints from the thought of physical confrontation with his sister’s lover. The only thought that actually motivates Quentin to action is “[a]nd then I’ll not be...*Non fui. Sum. Fui. Non sum,*” yet even the resultant action of committing suicide derives from a desire to be ultimately inactive, to return to a state of (*non fui*) nonexistence.¹⁷⁴ The necrological monk lapses into inactivity in his contemplation of the activity of others, while Quentin Compson’s desires to act lie dormant, smothered by his fear of those same actions. Yet, both the monk and Quentin are finally dead in their inactivity, whether it be chosen or not.

¹⁷² Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 112.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, 95, 51.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 110.

The dualities of life and death and honor and purity exist in equal degrees in Quentin's narrative of *The Sound and the Fury* and Ransom's poetry, but the way in which the author and poet deal with the final implications of these dichotomies is widely variant and speaks to their ultimate intentions, which are also different. "Spectral Lovers" and "The Equibrists" both end with an infinitely extended tension between honor and sex. Similarly, in "Necrological," death and life, inactivity and activity bend back upon one another, but neither prevails. Ransom's poetry thrives upon unresolved dichotomies. Faulkner, on the other hand, presents similar instances of "the torture of equilibrium" in Quentin's narrative, yet he ultimately resolves them. Rather than leaving Quentin suspended in the smell of honeysuckle with his knife pressing Caddy's skin and thoughts of suicide and incest in his mind, as Ransom would if the project were his, Faulkner removes him and ultimately forces him to action. Where Ransom's fundamental agenda in writing poetry is to reflect the duality of life, Faulkner's primary motivation in writing Quentin Compson is the ultimate release from his internal duality. Faulkner's need for release from his negative feelings toward women and African Americans requires that the duality of Quentin's life be pushed to an end, to closure.

B. The Modernist Styles of Tate and Faulkner

Though Faulkner closely parallels Ransom in his attraction to dichotomous themes, he resembles him only remotely in style. Both the poet and the Oxford author use the Latinate language that earmarks them as modernists, but Ransom's fastidious adherence to form separates him from both his fellow Fugitives and Faulkner as an ironically traditional modernist. That Ransom published only one poem, "God Without

Thunder,” in free verse indicates his discomfort with the modern affinity for absence of form and fixed rhyme scheme. Far from Ransom’s insistence on the necessity of form, Faulkner’s inventive experimentation with style most closely resembles Allen Tate’s attitude toward poetry.

By far the most experimental of the Fugitive poets, Tate discovered and enthusiastically adopted the high modernist styles of Hart Crane, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound. He even attributed his successful publishing of three poems in short succession in *The Double Dealer* to the fact that “their tone is in unison with Eliot, Pound, and Company.”¹⁷⁵ Tate did not fight poetic convention, which Ransom held so highly, but he did see it as a tool rather than an imperative. As Tate biographer Ferman Bishop states, he thought that “freedom in the use of convention helps the poet to avoid being a slave to mechanism,” and in not being enslaved by meter, rhythm, or rhyme, the poet may use (and not use) poetic form at his own discretion to pass on to his audience the particular intuitions and ideas by which he is fascinated.¹⁷⁶ His advice to Donald Davidson not to “ruin a good poem with a bad rhyme,” which put an end to Davidson’s search for a word to rhyme with “counter” in “Dryad,” demonstrates this utilitarian stance toward poetic convention.

Of Tate’s early poetry, the poem that best demonstrates his disdain for blind observance of convention is his parody of Romantic poetry, “To the Romantic Traditionists.” This “ode” is a ballad with a very tight meter and an even tighter rhyme scheme, in which he eulogizes the “sourceless light” (2) of that “immaculate race” (17) of

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 65.

¹⁷⁶ Ferman Bishop, *Allen Tate* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967), 35.

poets who had come before him.¹⁷⁷ Imbedded in his imitation, though, is very evident criticism of the Romantic aesthetic. Tate draws the distinction between the “strict forms / of will” that held Romantic poets to their tradition and “the secret dignity...of dissolute storms,” which poets of his more experimental style toil to depict, all the while insinuating that the “strict forms” were what prevented the Romantic traditionists from conveying the more degraded portions of human nature as loyally as poets of his own school. It is the freedom from rigidity that allows experimentalist modern poets to “speak the crabbed line,” and whether one reads “crabbed” as intellectually difficult or as disregarding iambic tetrameter, writing in a “crabbed” manner is the stylistic choice that Tate believes allows his school of poetry to articulate truth more fully (16). The Romantic poets may be able to reveal “final knowledge...[of] a field of war,” but their depiction is bloodless because of their self-enforced constraints. Tate’s avoidance of enslavement “to mechanism,” his “crabbed line,” allows him to print a picture of war that is much more alive, according to his own intuition, one that not only has blood pulsing through it as a living entity but also has blood on it as a realistic one.

One such poem is “To the Lacedemonians,” the reminiscence of an aged Confederate soldier. In the first half of the poem, there are rhymes but no scheme, and there is no noticeable meter either. Tate uses rhyme not to order his poem but to emphasize certain words. For instance, he rhymes “play” in the last line of the first stanza with “gray” in the last line of the short second stanza both to accentuate the reality of the uniforms of the Confederate dead and to display the way in which the surviving

¹⁷⁷ Allen Tate, “To the Romantic Traditionists,” *Poems* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1960), 7-8.

soldiers of whom the poem's speaker is one have become a spectacle, a mode of drama, in Tate's words "a child in an old play" (7).¹⁷⁸ There is no regularity even within the length of the stanzas until the second half of the poem where after the poem's first regular couplet, "There is no civilization without death; / There is now the wind for breath" (67-8), Tate transitions into highly conventional ballad stanzas. His choice to use conventional rhyme and rhythm patterns in the last six stanzas is precipitated by the transitioning couplet and the subject of these stanzas. The couplet signals the old soldier's conception (and the illuminating realization of the poem) that atrocities like those he experienced fighting in the war are the basis upon which civilization is built. The subject matter of the following highly regulated stanzas is the futility of the war he fought and the damned status of his comrades, the Yankees he fought against, and primarily the people for whom he was fighting. The stanzas conform so heavily to convention because the central subject is those members of his society who "watch us.../...hold the glaze of wonder in their stare" (78-9), the "lords and ladies gay" (69, 73), the citizens of "the country of the damned" (85), whose civilization demands order.

Another of Tate's early poems that illustrates his experimental brand of modernism is "Ode to the Confederate Dead." Again the rhyme is sporadic rather than schematic, and the stanzas come in varying lengths, but true to his modernist roots, this poem is thick with Latinate language and classical allusions, from Zeno to Socrates to Lear. The poem's speaker contemplates the erasure both by natural elements upon grave stones and within human minds of the real past, and the poem climaxes with a desperate

¹⁷⁸ Allen Tate, "To the Lacedemonians," *Poems* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1960), 14-8.

questioning of whether the “ravenous” grave swallows memory even when you “set [it] up.../ In the house” in an attempt to remember better.¹⁷⁹ The poem’s dark and distressed topic of erasure of life and memory by the grave, which is synonymous with nature, is well expressed by its chaotic lack of form.

Faulkner is a modernist in the same manner as Tate. His use of sophisticated language and jumbling of classical allusions with common speech is so extreme at some points that he baffles even his most intelligent readers. Miss Rosa Coldfield is “all polymath love’s androgynous advocate,” and Clytie is “the cold Cerberus of [Sutpen’s] private hell.”¹⁸⁰ References to St. Francis of Assisi, Christianity, and Latin are infused into Quentin’s section of *The Sound and the Fury*, and the complexities of his father’s nihilistic catchphrases tend to punctuate each of Quentin’s experiences or thoughts. Faulkner’s use of highbrow language is not all that links him to the modernist movement of which Tate was a member, though; his stylistic choices, starting with those in what most people consider his masterpiece, also indicate his experimental agenda. Faulkner wrote *The Sound and the Fury* for himself, with no regard for publishers’ concerns, since all his hard work on *Flags in the Dust* had amounted only to his publisher’s stolid rejection of it.¹⁸¹ In writing a novel that was neither geared toward a popular audience nor a publisher’s expectations, he somehow freed himself to experiment with form. The first section, conveyed through the perception of the “idiot” Benjy, is not so much a stream of consciousness as a stream of sensory details, ordered by association instead of

¹⁷⁹ Allen Tate, “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” *Poems* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1960), 19-23.

¹⁸⁰ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 117, 109.

¹⁸¹ Minter, 91-4.

time. Jason's chapter of ribald ranting is still poetic in its laying bare his most basic self. Quentin's section is not only a series of memories, strung together by the image of his sister, but also an attempt on Faulkner's part simultaneously to express and release his own racial and feminine demons. His disregard for convention made it possible for his writing of Quentin to be an honest attempt at this self-exorcism. Such a personal fictional project would not have been as successful in any format other than the highly modern and experimental one that Faulkner chose.

The structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* is as innovative as the style of *The Sound and the Fury*. Although the Sutpen story could easily stand on its own, Faulkner's choice of Quentin and Shreve as co-constructors of the final version of the narrative adds an element of commentary on the South that would not otherwise exist. Furthermore, the fact that the line of information has been passed variously from Thomas Sutpen to General Compson to Mr. Compson to Quentin and from Miss Rosa Coldfield to Quentin and then is parsed and pieced back together by Quentin and Shreve forces upon the reader the realization that the past is never something that anyone can really know, or as Cleanth Brooks terms it, history "is a kind of imaginative construction."¹⁸² The envelope structure of the narrative wherein the account of Sutpen is told in Rosa Coldfield's or Mr. Compson's words and then is filtered through Quentin Compson's imagination before it reaches us lends much to an understanding of Quentin's dynamic character as well. Although there is no direct parallel to Faulkner's innovations of prosaic style and structure in Tate's poetry, the experimental mindset that led to Tate's rejection of slavish

¹⁸² Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, 311.

obedience to convention is the same as the one in which Faulkner wrote *The Sound and the Fury* and finally “discovered that there is actually something to which the shabby term Art not only can, but must, be applied.”¹⁸³

C. Time and Death in Warren and Faulkner

Although Robert Penn “Red” Warren was late in joining the Fugitive movement due to his youth, he has been the most prolific of the Fugitive poets and has arguably had the longest and most successful career. In a broader sense, John Crowe Ransom is the most similar to Faulkner in theme, and Allen Tate is undoubtedly most like him in style, but no Fugitive poet approaches the issue of time, which is central to Quentin’s monologue in *The Sound and the Fury*, quite so closely as Warren does. Even in his very early poetry, Warren examines the way in which physical spaces transcend the pull of time and time’s utter unawareness of all the details of human life with which individual people are so concerned. For instance, in his five-part poem “Kentucky Mountain Farm,” he begins with the action of the “hungry equinox” (1) upon the “stubborn little people” (2).¹⁸⁴ It is not even an interaction because the concept of time is so large that it holds the “little people” in its tight, “hungry,” but nonetheless indifferent grip, while those people whose lives are turned on and off and proceed by time’s edicts have no choice but to concern themselves with it. In the case of those “stubborn little people” mentioned in the opening lines of “Kentucky Mountain Farm,” time controls their means of food production. Since they are “of the hill” (2), they must plant, harvest, and hunt by “the

¹⁸³ Qtd. in Minter, 106-7.

¹⁸⁴ Robert Penn Warren, “The Rebuke of the Rocks,” “Kentucky Mountain Farm,” *Selected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2001), 13-4.

season of the obscene moon” (3). The moon is both “obscene” (3) and “mad” (8) in its complicity with time. It serves as time’s henchman, physically signifying time’s movement. The poem’s speaker counsels the men who must live their lives according to the movement of the senseless and unsensing moon and the time it connotes to make their hearts like the “too old” rocks, which are just as ambivalent toward time as time is toward them and the people who live among them.

In the second section of “Kentucky Mountain Farm,” Warren introduces us to the “eucharist of snow” upon the rocks (1).¹⁸⁵ The action of the frost upon the rocks is a result of the movement of time, and it is at once both violent and renewing. The rocks have already been allied with the people of the hill in the first section of this poem, and in the second section the connection is made even more explicit: “[l]ean men...alone / Were.../Figured in kinship to the savage stone” (7-9). The destructive, yet graceful, action of the frost on the stones, then, is repeated upon those lean men, whose flesh is “knotted...unto the hungry bone” (19) but who are nevertheless still alive to experience hunger and cramping muscles.

It is in “History Among the Rocks,” the third section of “Kentucky Mountain Farm,” that Warren examines the way in which physical spaces are exempt from time’s effects. He uses death to demonstrate the way in which time and place are mutually indifferent toward the events of human lives. He begins, “There are many ways to die / Here among the rocks in any weather” (1-2), so in the first two lines he links time (“any weather”) and place (“among the rocks”) and identifies his vehicle of demonstration

¹⁸⁵ Robert Penn Warren, “At the Hour of the Breaking of the Rocks,” “Kentucky Mountain Farm,” *Selected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2001), 14.

(“ways to die”).¹⁸⁶ Then, Warren begins to outline manners of dying in the various phases of the “obscene moon.” People die of hypothermia and dream the “crystalline dream forever” (6). Nature dies when in the spring flood sycamores are uprooted and sent downstream, and again people as white as the sycamores also could be pulled under the flood and sent to the “blind tides” of the ocean (15). In the autumn, people die of snakebites. All these deaths that result in the confluence of place and time are followed by “other ways” described by the “lean men,” who remember “young men l[ying] dead— / Gray coats, blue coats” (19-21). The reason for the deaths of these Confederate and Union soldiers is as mysterious to the men of the rocks as the other deaths caused by nature. The image of “blood on their black mustaches in moonlight” (25) is as strange as the “hair afloat in waters” (14) of the springtime drowning victim, and though the deaths of the soldiers are “a long time past” (25), they are just as present in the place as the deaths by nature that have happened since.

In his later poetry, Warren still dwells upon the issue of time, and his poetic thoughts are again very similar to those in Quentin’s narrative of *The Sound and the Fury*. He also is still concerned about the relationship between time, place, and humanity, but in his later poetry, instead of using natural indicators of the passing of time, like equinox, moon, and seasons, his poems’ speakers ruminate on man-made physical manifestations of time, clocks. Attendant on this reflection on physical timepieces is a Quentin-like concern with the space between the ticks that mark the passing of one second.

¹⁸⁶ Robert Penn Warren, “History Among the Rocks,” “Kentucky Mountain Farm,” *Selected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2001), 14-5.

In “Forever O’Clock,” the eighth section of “Or Else,” Warren depicts the image of a young African American girl playing in the red clay dust of her front yard, an image that he writes is “not important but simply [is]” (11).¹⁸⁷ This isolated image exists in a moment when time is not known but exists even more than if it were known because it is anticipated. Warren begins the poem, “A clock is getting ready to strike forever o’clock / I do not know where the clock is, but it is somewhere” (1-2). As with Quentin, the not knowing intensifies, rather than desensitizes, the speaker’s concern with time. The apprehension that accompanies the speaker’s anticipation of the clock’s striking is akin to that of a prisoner “tied to a post” as he waits for the “Deputy Warden getting ready to say, ‘Fire!’” (7-8). The striking of the clock is foreboding, and Warren’s choice for it to strike “forever o’clock” speaks a great deal to his earlier thoughts on time’s immutability. It could be striking eight o’clock p.m. or five o’clock a.m., and it would still be striking forever o’clock. To Warren’s way of thinking, each strike of the clock is an echo of the same refrain—that time will go on forever regardless of the lives of the people it measures.

The theme of time and the moments of time signified by the clicking of clock hands emerges again in “There’s a Grandfather’s Clock in the Hall,” which is the sixteenth section of “Or Else.” The poem begins with the image of the minute hand of a grandfather clock and the “jump” that it makes to indicate a minute’s passing. The

¹⁸⁷ Robert Penn Warren, “Forever O’Clock,” “Or Else,” *Selected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State UP, 2001), 158-9.

speaker then remarks, “and in between jumps there is no-Time” (1).¹⁸⁸ The rest of the poem is a second-person dialogue that jumps (like the minute hand) from early childhood to adolescence to an adult watching his mother die in a hospital. In the last two lines, the poem returns to the image of the clock and jumping hands. The speaker exhorts the reader, “[W]atch the clock closely.../...nothing happens...then suddenly, quick as a wink, and slick as a mink’s prick, Time thrusts through the time of no-Time” (17-8). The image of the jump in “Time of no-Time” frames the poem’s inner images of living and dying. Much like “Forever O’Clock,” “There’s a Grandfather’s Clock in the Hall” attests to time’s invasion of human life, identifying the indifferent movement of a set of hands on a clock’s face to the watershed moments of an individual’s life. “There’s a Grandfather’s Clock in the Hall” differs from “Forever O’Clock” only in its sexualizing of that jump of the watch’s hand. Where this anticipated jolt is characterized by sterile violence, the gunshot in an execution, in “Forever O’Clock,” Warren here illustrates the movement of time signified by the movement of clock hands as animal, masculine, sexual invasion—the quick thrust of a “mink’s prick.”

Quentin’s obsession with time and timepieces is at least as present in his section of *The Sound and the Fury* as his anguishing over Caddy’s impurity, and the popularity of this topic in Faulkner scholarship has resulted in a deluge of opinions on exactly how his clock anxiety contributes to the neurosis that ends with his suicide. Jean-Paul Sartre’s article “Time in the Work of Faulkner” is widely recognized as the most authoritative word on time in *The Sound and the Fury*. Sartre claims,

¹⁸⁸ Robert Penn Warren, “There’s a Grandfather’s Clock in the Hall,” “Or Else,” *Selected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge, Louisiana UP, 2001), 170-1.

“Faulkner’s vision of the world can be compared to that of a man sitting in an open car and looking backwards. At every moment, formless shadows, flickerings, faint tremblings and patches of light rise up on either side of him, and only afterwards, when he has a little perspective, do they become trees and men and cars.”¹⁸⁹

Cleanth Brooks criticizes this statement and most of Sartre’s article for attributing this perspective to Faulkner and many of his characters when it should be applied only to Quentin.¹⁹⁰ Perrin Lowrey advances the theory that “Quentin wants to get outside of time; he thinks of sleep as a temporary getting out of it, and he thinks of death as a permanent getting out of it.”¹⁹¹ According to Lowrey, clocks and other indications of time make Quentin nervous because they remind him that time is moving forward toward his death, so he must kill himself to escape this ceaseless moving forward of time. I agree with Lowrey that Quentin desires an eternal stasis of time rather than a mechanically progressing one; however, my own idea about the connection in Quentin’s mind between clocks and death departs from his.

I believe that we access the source of Quentin’s association of clocks with death in the first few moments of his narrative. As soon as he wakes and becomes conscious of the ticking of his inherited watch, Quentin remembers what his father said when he gave it to him: “I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire....I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not

¹⁸⁹ Jean Paul Sartre, “On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the Work of Faulkner,” *A Norton Critical Edition of The Sound and the Fury*, ed. David Minter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 267.

¹⁹⁰ Cleanth Brooks, “Man, Time, and Eternity,” *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Sound and the Fury*, ed. Michael H. Cowan (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1968), 64.

¹⁹¹ Perrin Lowrey, “Concepts of Time in *The Sound and the Fury*,” *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Sound and the Fury*, ed. Michael H. Cowan (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1968), 55.

spend all your breath trying to conquer it.”¹⁹² Not only are these words laden with death imagery, the general message they impart is one that promotes a harmfully bleak view of time and how it should be spent. Notice that his metaphor for the watch identifies it as the grave (or mausoleum) of hope and desire, implying that these positive functions of the mind are dead. The second suggestion of death lies in his advice for Quentin not to “spend all your breath trying to conquer it [time].”¹⁹³ Ironically, Quentin literally spends his last breath in an attempt to conquer time by removing himself from it. In fact, if we accept my identification of this statement as the moment at which Quentin begins linking clocks with death, it is fair to say that this comment from his father marks the point at which Quentin begins spending all his “breath trying to conquer [time].”¹⁹⁴

My reason for believing that the connection between clocks and death in Quentin’s mind finds its root in this statement does not lie in the implication of death in Mr. Compson’s turn of phrase, though. I assign more value to the fact that he raises the idea of the death of “all hope and desire” and links this desolate notion to the watch he is handing his son. It follows that when hope and desire do actually die for Quentin as the result of people repeatedly falling short of his lofty standards throughout the course of his life (Caddy’s lost virginity, his father’s alcoholism, his mother’s coldness, his family’s decision to sell one of his mentally-challenged brother’s few sources of pleasure—Benjy’s pasture—to pay his tuition at Harvard), his mind goes immediately to the watch in his pocket. His father’s speech has so impressed upon him the notion of clocks being

¹⁹² Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 48.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

the tomb of deceased hope and desire that when his own hope and desire die, his pocket-watch is where he inters them.

Mr. Compson's repetitive pontification on clocks and death cements the connection between the two in Quentin's mind. He remembers, "Father said clocks slay time. He said time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life," and he also recalls Mr. Compson saying "that Christ was not crucified: he was worn away by a minute clicking of wheels."¹⁹⁵ Jason Compson, Sr.'s continuous use of death imagery to speak about clocks feeds Quentin's preoccupation with these topics. His father describes clocks as murderous; they slay time and, in so doing, slay life. Further, his statement about Christ's death is essentially an extension of the mausoleum metaphor; much of Western society's "hope and desire" resides in the crucifixion, so in replacing it with a "minute clicking of wheels," Compson reiterates the idea that the clock is both the murderer and the grave of faith, hope, and expectation, so it should come as no surprise that death (for Quentin, suicide) and watches are inextricably connected in Quentin's mind.

Not long after he has vandalized his watch, as he is packing his belongings in preparation for his suicide, Quentin observes, "The quarter hour sounded. I stopped and listened to it until the chimes ceased."¹⁹⁶ Later he notices when "[t]he half hour went. Then the chimes ceased and died away."¹⁹⁷ References to the clock-tower's chimes continue to interrupt his narrative even to the very last paragraph when he notes, "The

¹⁹⁵ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 54, 49.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 51.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 52.

last note sounded. At last it stopped vibrating and the darkness was still again.”¹⁹⁸ It is worth noting that Quentin has not only taken up his father’s association of clocks with death, he also uses the same death-laden language to speak about the physical time indicators: “ceased,” “died away,” “last,” “stopped,” “darkness,” and “still again.”

It is this inherited concern with clocks and human mortality that finds resonance in Warren’s later poetry. Quentin’s observation that “You can be oblivious to the sound [of a watch or clock] for a long while, then in a second of ticking it can create in the mind unbroken the long diminishing parade of time you didn’t hear” and his childhood habit of counting the moments until the bell are prose expressions of the central ideas of “Forever O’Clock” and “There’s a Grandfather’s Clock in the Hall.”¹⁹⁹ Much like the child who sits in front of the grandfather clock, anticipating the moment that the minute hand will “jump,” thrusting time through “no-Time,” Quentin feels that the lurch back into time by the resumed sound of ticking creates a similar thrust of “the parade of [lapsed] time” into his mind, which qualifies as “no-Time” when it is not occupied by time. His experience of this “jump” back into time embodies both the sterile violence of the execution from “Forever O’Clock” and the unwanted intrusion of the “mink’s prick” in “There’s a Grandfather’s Clock in the Hall.”

Quentin’s section of *The Sound and the Fury* ends in a self-execution, and the steps he takes to get to it are defined by their violent sterility and their connectedness with the ticking of the clock and the ringing of the quarterly bells. He is conscious of “hearing the

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 113.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 49, 56.

watch again” as he “touche[s] the letters [suicide notes] through [his] coat.”²⁰⁰ Quentin also remembers the phrase “reducto absurdum [sic] of all human experience,” which his father uses to describe the use of the watch and passing time, when he is purchasing the “six-pound flat iron weights” that will pull him to the bottom of the river.²⁰¹ Everything that Quentin does to prepare for his suicide, from laying out a burial suit to giving his suicide notes to the Deacon for next-day delivery, is carefully calculated yet explosive in intention, like the execution shot in “Forever O’Clock.” The way in which Quentin’s deliberate preparations for suicide are tied in his mind to the anticipation of a clock’s striking is analogous to the speaker’s trepidation with the clock that he knows is going to strike somewhere; only instead of striking forever o’clock, Quentin hopes that his suicide will result in his watches (mental and pocket) striking never o’clock.

As Quentin moves beyond identification with to absorption of Henry Sutpen’s character in *Absalom, Absalom!* he becomes the mink’s prick that thrusts slickly through time. The reader expects Quentin to identify with Henry because they have similar attitudes toward their sisters and to venerate him because he does what Quentin cannot—murders his sister’s intended. However, when Quentin inserts himself into Henry’s mind and effectively becomes Henry, the incestuous intermediary for the romantic relationship between Charles Bon and Judith Sutpen, he mentally forces himself through time, becoming the “prick” that can accomplish with his sister as Quentin-Henry the romantic union that he could only lie about as Quentin Compson.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 61.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 57.

Quentin's time obsession also echoes Warren's earlier concern with natural indicators of time's passing and the implicit connection of those to human death. When he cannot judge time by a watch or bells, he tells it by the movement of shadows in his room and his own shadow. His chapter in *The Sound and the Fury* begins "When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight o'clock and then I was in time again."²⁰² Upon waking on the last day of his life before he can even reach for his pocket watch, he feels time's encroachment in the placement of shadows in his room. Later he is "[t]rampling [his] shadow's bones into the concrete with hard heels and then [he] was hearing the watch, and [he] touched the letters through [his] coat."²⁰³ His report of these actions, which would be casual should they happen outside his narrative, implicitly links natural indicators of time's passing, manmade implements of telling time, and his own death. Beyond the shadows, Quentin recognizes another related natural indicator of time's passing when he notes, "There was a clock, high up in the sun..."²⁰⁴ This combination of natural and manmade time telling apparatuses coupled with a knowledge of Quentin's obsessive abhorrence of time imparts an impression equivalent to the "obscene" and "mad" moon of Warren's "Kentucky Mountain Farm."

As I discussed in the first chapter, Faulkner inherited a pocket watch in much the same way Quentin did, and in his later life he exhibited a fear of death that was implicitly associated with time's passing. As he wrote Quentin's narrative of *The Sound and the Fury*, he certainly knew that Quentin would have to die in the end, even as Quentin

²⁰² *Ibid*, 48.

²⁰³ *Ibid*, 61.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 53.

himself was aware of his impending death, so both the author's and the character's attention to natural and manmade significations of time's passing is thoroughly tied up with their knowledge of Quentin's imminent death. Even though it would be impossible to claim that Robert Penn Warren identified himself with the "stubborn little people" of "Kentucky Mountain Farm" in exactly the way that I make a case that Faulkner identifies himself with Quentin, the poem must be loosely based upon Warren's experience.

Warren grew up on a Kentucky farm in Guthrie, and even though his family's farm was not mountainous, his life on the rural farm likely bore many similarities to the life he describes in the poem. Since the focus of this longer semi-autobiographical poem, as well as numerous of the shorter Warren poems I mention, is the passing of time, Warren likely had a preoccupation with time very similar to Faulkner's. In fact, Warren's uneasiness with time might stem from the same Keatsian artistic limitation that Gail Mortimer suggests affected Faulkner.

II. Faulkner and Agrarian Principles

The Agrarians dealt with disparity of approach and opinion among members from the moment of the group's inception. The three men who formed the core of the Agrarian movement, Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate, began developing together as defenders of the South in the years between 1925 and 1927, but as Paul Conkin suggests, they were each defending "one or another South" conceptually.²⁰⁵ Since they did not view the South in uniform manner, and their methods of defense were also various, they were forced to "cultivate areas of overlap in their doctrines" in order to

²⁰⁵ Conkin, 33.

have any sort of presentable foundation for the movement they desired to get underway.²⁰⁶ The “Introduction: Statement of Principles” of *I’ll Take My Stand*, which was actually written by Ransom, claims that the contributors have “many convictions in common” and “all tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way,” but even such a basic claim is somewhat questionable.²⁰⁷ Their opinions on race and what should be done to remedy the race problems of the South ranged from backing a separate but equal state of segregation to hints of regret at the collapse of the slavery system.

A. Relative Racial Progressivism: Warren and Faulkner

Robert Penn Warren’s “The Briar Patch” only made its way into *I’ll Take My Stand* narrowly and with much revision. In his essay, which was supposed to be his written contribution to the Agrarian cause, he argues that Southerners might solve the race problem if they would “[l]et the Negro sit beneath his own vine and fig tree.”²⁰⁸ Warren’s fellow Agrarians were revolted by his essay in its original form. They indicted him for raising a topic outside the range of Agrarian discussion; apparently the race question was only appropriate to Agrarian discussion when approached by men like Frank Owsley and John Fletcher, who were more comfortable with African American subordination. Even though Warren’s essay amounted to a conservative argument for maintaining a Jim Crow society but one in which the “inarticulate mass in the

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ “Introduction: A Statement of Principles,” *I’ll Take My Stand* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930), xix.

²⁰⁸ Robert Penn Warren, “The Briar Patch,” *I’ll Take My Stand* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 264.

commonwealth” is at least given a political voice, it “horrified Davidson.”²⁰⁹ Davidson, who was most closely allied to Owsley on the race issue, charged Warren’s separate but equal article with having “‘progressive’ implications.”²¹⁰ Tate was the only agrarian who came to Warren’s defense. He called the essay “very good,” but despite his praise, he also conceded to Davidson that the use of the prefix “Mrs.” for a black woman’s name was too liberal to be appropriate in what was to be the agrarian manifesto.²¹¹

If we take what is biographically noted of Faulkner’s stance toward African Americans and the South, we find explicit indications of and comments on his sense of moral duty only twenty years after his feelings were penned implicitly into Quentin’s description of several African American characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* In 1943, Faulkner envisioned “a new era of racial justice” fomented by War World II.²¹² Five years later, he expressed his feeling that “the white people in the South, before the North or the govt. or anyone else, owe and must pay a responsibility to the Negro.”²¹³ This sentiment is in line with Warren’s belief that “the Southern white man...must find a place for the Negro in his scheme.”²¹⁴ The driving idea behind both Warren’s belief and Faulkner’s statement is that racial injustice in the South is a Southern problem that can rightly be dealt with only by Southerners. Although Faulkner’s earlier comments on race may be imputed to have the same sort of Jim Crow quality that Warren’s essay is guilty of, his brother John has indicated that in the mid 1950’s, he “started writing and talking

²⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 264, Conkin, 72.

²¹⁰ Conkin, 72.

²¹¹ *Ibid*.

²¹² Minter, 199.

²¹³ *Ibid*, 212.

²¹⁴ Warren, “The Briar Patch,” 263.

integration.”²¹⁵ No matter what their positions on desegregation, though, both Warren and Faulkner would consider any efforts by the federal government to correct the persisting race problem another Northern intrusion.

The stance on race that Faulkner implies through Quentin’s sympathetic treatment of Clytie and Charles Etienne St. Valery Bon is much closer to that expressed in “The Briar Patch” than his 1943 and 1948 statements, probably due to the fact that Faulkner was writing *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1933, only three years after the publication of *I’ll Take My Stand*. His 1932 novel *Light in August* also addresses the race issue, but I would argue that his treatment in *Absalom* is both broader and more complex because he focuses on several African American characters and their situations through the consciousness of a white Southerner.

Several times in his narrative Quentin projects very positive images of Clytie, whose face is the black duplicate of Judith’s. Her refusal to accept charity from Quentin’s grandfather, manifested in the form of “the rusty can full of nickels and dimes and frayed money paper” that she leaves on the Colonel’s desk, contrasts sharply with the empty plates that the less respectable character, Miss Rosa, leaves on her porch every morning.²¹⁶ It is Clytie who travels for the first time out of Jefferson to fetch Charles Bon’s son, who nurses Charles Bon, Judith, and Henry until their deaths, and who rears Charles Bond. Yet it is also Clytie who is struck and knocked down by Miss Rosa, who must sleep on the floor of Judith’s bedroom, and who is simultaneously half-Sutpen and all-slave, even after emancipation. When Quentin “raise[s] her” and “hold[s] her up,” he

²¹⁵ Qtd. in Minter, 235.

²¹⁶ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 170.

is (perhaps unconsciously) gesturing toward what Warren identifies in “The Briar Patch” as the white Southern male’s responsibility.²¹⁷ His gesture of uplift goes a little way toward correcting the wrong done (both specifically to Clytie and more broadly to African Americans in the South) by men like Sutpen. It is a gesture of help, similar to what Faulkner suggested in the 1940’s. Quentin’s lifting Clytie is an attempt to reverse what Rosa (immediately) and Thomas Sutpen (on a grander scale) have done; he is reincorporating “the Negro in his scheme.” The problem as we will see is that this scheme remains a Caucasian one, and as horrific as what Rosa and Sutpen have done is, the concept of miscegenation that Clytie represents horrifies Faulkner and Quentin to much the same degree.

Charles Etienne is the African American character in *Absalom, Absalom!* whom Quentin depicts as a test in his very person to the strict boundaries that divide white from black in the Old South. As a child he sleeps on a trundle bed, elevated above Clytie, who sleeps on the floor, but not to the height of Judith’s bed. Clytie prevents him from having contact with other black children, and Judith attempts to scour the olive tint out of his skin when she bathes him. Sent to the North with Compson money and the instruction to pass for white and to refer to Judith as “Aunt,” Charles Etienne returns with “a coal black and ape-like woman and an authentic wedding license.”²¹⁸ Quentin describes this desperate attempt to establish himself racially as “hunting out situations in order to flaunt and fling the ape-like body of his charcoal companion in the faces of all and any.”²¹⁹

²¹⁷ *Ibid*, 295.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, 166.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, 167.

Although Faulkner's choice to incorporate the story of Charles Etienne into *Absalom, Absalom!* gestures toward his later rejection of social barriers between races, Quentin's description of Charles Etienne St. Valery Bon's marriage still bespeaks a certain disgust with even such a superficial crossing of those lines. In the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* it is not the incest that disturbs; it is the miscegenation.

Less than twenty pages after Shreve and Quentin became "Charles-Shreve" and "Quentin-Henry," Henry attempts to put a stop to the courtship between Bon and his sister because he has just found out that Bon's mother was a mulatto. Charles-Shreve says to Henry-Quentin, "So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you cant bear."²²⁰ Henry's affirmative silence is repeated by Quentin in the last few pages of the novel when Shreve asks, "So it takes two niggers to get rid of one Sutpen, dont it?"²²¹ In the end, incest is not so bad as miscegenation for both Henry and Quentin because incest (at least most of the time) is the guarantor that there has been no miscegenation. The amalgamation of Sutpen blood with black blood is the destruction of Sutpen blood in Henry's mind, and Quentin can relate because his sister has united Compson blood with common blood, finishing the Compsons' fall from aristocracy.

Quentin's action of uplift and Faulkner's sympathetic depiction of Clytie are small indications that Faulkner's purging of himself through his earlier literary interaction with Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury* was successful to a limited degree. Even though Quentin of *Absalom, Absalom!* is supposed to be the younger version of the character from *The Sound and the Fury*, he was written after the older version. The younger, yet

²²⁰ *Ibid*, 285.

²²¹ *Ibid*, 302.

older, Quentin of *Absalom, Absalom!* reaches out to Clytie and feels a sympathy for her that he does not seem capable of in *The Sound and the Fury*, where he admits that he cannot understand the emotions of African Americans. However, to appraise this later Quentin as evidence that the earlier Quentin's suicide successfully exonerated Faulkner of all racism is impossible. The discomfort that the *Absalom* Quentin clearly feels with miscegenation is also a feeling of which Faulkner could never rid himself. Even as late as the 1950's, when he was a spokesperson for integration of Southern school systems, Faulkner made comments that revealed his aversion to miscegenation. For instance, he once remarked that the African American deserves equal treatment "only in the ratio of his white blood," which is not only a sardonic admission of discomfort with racial mixing but is also a clear indication of Faulkner's lingering belief in the superiority of white blood.²²²

Robert Penn Warren also retracted his Jim Crow sentiment in later written works, such as "Segregation" and *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, and like Faulkner, he also attempted to approach the uncomfortable (for him) issue of miscegenation through literature. In 1955, Warren wrote a *Band of Angels*, a novel that employs the tragic mulatta trope to explore the effects of miscegenation upon the individual for whom the fact of blood can be literally life-altering—in transference from plantation owner's privileged daughter to slave. Upon a cursory glance at who wrote what, it would be easy to make the mistake of appraising Warren as more racially sensitive than Faulkner. Both

²²² Qtd. in Walter Taylor, "Faulkner's Pantaloon: The Negro Anomaly at the Heart of *Go Down, Moses*," *American Literature* (44:3), 432.

men speak to the miscegenation issue through the same medium, yet Warren made a much more thorough evaluation of and explicit stand for Southern African Americans in his essays and book than Faulkner did in his occasional speeches advocating integration. Indeed, if all one considers is who wrote what, Warren seems far more attuned to the race question and far more progressive overall; however, the best measure of racial progressivism for the Southern white male is not “who” or “what.” It is “when.” For this reason, Faulkner’s approach to the race question of the South is more honest than Warren’s. He approached issues, such as miscegenation, head on, even in 1933 when they were uncomfortable for everyone, including himself. When Warren was writing “The Briar Patch,” which is simply a vote of confidence for Jim Crow, Faulkner was grappling with his feelings of ambivalence toward African Americans and attempting to expunge those negative feelings through Quentin Compson. Granted, he revived Quentin just a few years later and again expressed his misgivings about miscegenation through him, but both his initial intentions with Quentin and the partial success of his project are worth noting because they occurred at such an early date. Even if Warren’s approach to the race question is more thorough and perhaps even more fervent than Faulkner’s, it did not manifest itself until the 1950’s and 1960’s when a Southern white male expressing a liberal opinion on African American civil rights was relatively safer, even if it was still unpopular.

B. How to View the Past: Tate and Faulkner

According to Tate’s essay “Remarks on the Southern Religion,” there are two ways of seeing history, the Long View and the Short View. In the Long View, “history

becomes an abstract series,” a string of ideas with no reality to back them up. History, according to the Short View, “is the specific account of doings of specific men.”²²³ After his explanation of the two sorts of history, Tate argues that the Long View of history destroys tradition by eliminating the uniqueness of each event by making them all abstractly the same. As he says, in the Long View, “Christianity is a vegetation rite.”²²⁴ Tate links the Long View of history to the North and the New South and argues that this new method of understanding history actually destroys history by destroying tradition; tradition and the Short View are, of course, associated with the Old South.

As they fill in the details of Thomas Sutpen and his multi-raced descendants, it seems that both Quentin and Shreve are the preachers of Tate’s “whole horse” religion, the prophets of a Short View of history in *Absalom, Absalom!* In the very act of piecing together the details of the Sutpen story, they struggle against the Long View. Through them the Sutpen story preserves its unique and irreplaceable quality. Judith’s scratch in time is not erased by the Long View’s anonymity. Instead of a tragic story identical in its abstraction to *Jane Eyre* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the story of Judith and Henry and Charles Bon retains its condition as original and irreplaceable. In the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, though, it becomes evident that Shreve is not reconstructing the Sutpen story from any duty to a belief in a certain kind of history but merely for the purpose of entertainment on a cold winter night. While the South and its tradition are very real, specific, and concrete entities for Quentin, and the story he has just told with his roommate stands on its own,

²²³ Allen Tate, “Remarks on the Southern Religion,” *I’ll Take My Stand* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 161.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

Shreve is ready to broaden it out and to make it an abstraction. He destroys the specificity of the Sutpen story by making Jim Bond both plural and universal. He says, “I think that in time the Jim Bonds of the world are going to conquer the western hemisphere.”²²⁵ Shreve contextualizes the story in the Long View as a miscegenation story, the generalized “bleach[ing] out.”²²⁶

Unlike Shreve, who, as a Canadian, has no necessary alliance with a certain view of history, Quentin inherited the Short View at birth. “Since he was born and bred in the deep South,” he is forced to live among the “garrulous outraged baffled ghosts,” and he must listen to them “telling about old ghost-times.”²²⁷ Quentin is consigned by birth to be “a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts.”²²⁸ Because of who he (thinks he) is (a young, Southern gentleman, the grandson of a Confederate hero), he cannot choose to not listen to Rosa Coldfield; he is obligated by both his heritage and his identity. It is because he is the first of the “two separate Quentins[,]...the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South...dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts” that he should acknowledge the Short View of history.²²⁹ The other half of Quentin’s identity, “the Quentin Compson who [i]s still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost but nevertheless [has] to be one,” is what makes his acceptance of the Short View requisite.²³⁰ This part of Quentin, which is forced by time and circumstance to “outlive [his other self] by years and years and years,” is also

²²⁵ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 302.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

responsible for his Old Southern concern for his family's honor and his veneration of his grandfather. The ambivalence with which Quentin treats race and his too passionately spoken avowal ("I don't hate [the South]"), which indicates at least uncertainty and possibly even the hatred it denies, are manifestations of his divided nature. Quentin's insistence that he listens proudly to those ghosts of his Old Southern past, Rosa Coldfield, Thomas Sutpen through his grandfather and father, and then Henry, is just the same as his proclamation about the South, "I don't hate it...*I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!*"²³¹ He absorbs the Short View from those old Confederate ghosts, and he really doesn't hate the South because, though he is too young, he has "nevertheless to be [a ghost]" because he *is* a Southerner. He squirms to hear the stories and hates the South in his innermost heart because he is also "Quentin...preparing for Harvard in the South."

Quentin's suicide comes as a result of the two representative selves Faulkner forces his one body to encase because his inward division is what causes the contradictions he cannot live with (honor vs. loss of purity, being a Southern gentleman vs. going to school in Cambridge, inactivity vs. the need to fight for Caddy's honor, respect for African Americans vs. discomfort with them). Just as Faulkner as a man is the "sum of his experience," Quentin as Faulkner's creation is the sum of Faulkner's incongruence. All that Quentin amounts to is the expression of the contradictions, ambivalences, and negativities that Faulkner no longer desired to carry within himself. Quentin's suicide is, thus, Faulkner's attempt at reconciliation.

²³¹ *Ibid*, 395.

Because Quentin is the spokesperson of Faulkner's private fears and prejudices, he makes a reliable conduit for positioning Faulkner within the Fugitive and Agrarian traditions. Yet, Quentin also is the factor that differentiates Faulkner from the members of the group whom he most closely resembles. For instance, the tenuous contradictions that are the substance of Quentin's life make Faulkner, as the creator of Quentin, relatable to John Crowe Ransom, whose poetry depends upon those same sorts of dualities. However, Faulkner's motive in creating Quentin, as a tool of exoneration, separates him from Ransom, who creates dualities for the sake of art. Similarly, Faulkner uses Quentin both to communicate and destroy his ambivalent feelings toward African Americans, and in the course of his life Robert Penn Warren also expressed and rejected his racial ambivalences. However, Faulkner's use of Quentin distinguishes him from Warren. His intention for Quentin was immediate eradication of those racist tendencies, whereas Warren's denial of racism took twenty years to develop fully.

Conclusion: Faulkner's "Scratch in Time"

It would have been impossible to say anything important about William Faulkner and the members of the Fugitive and Agrarian groups relying upon nothing but their biographies. By breaking the Fugitive and Agrarian traditions into their individual components (and variations), relying primarily on the poetic work of the Fugitives and the essays that Agrarian members published in *I'll Take My Stand*, I have uncovered the opinions of these men through what they have written. In the case of William Faulkner, it was even more important to identify certain opinions he might have had about the South through his literature, since he granted relatively few interviews and contradicted himself incessantly in those he did grant.

I started this project by considering the biographical and experiential similarities between Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians. I argue in chapter two that Faulkner's choice to place Quentin Compson within a time and place similar to the one he personally occupied indicates that there will likely be further commonality in the opinions and stances of the two, and, indeed, Quentin turns out to be Faulkner's double and his purge valve. In a similar fashion, the convergence of time, place, and similar experiences for Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians prepares the way for the further philosophical and stylistic parallels that I explore in chapter three.

One of the experiential connections between Faulkner and the Fugitive-Agrarians that I discuss in chapter one is World War I. Faulkner's encounter with the war paralleled Alec Stevenson's and Donald Davidson's in various ways, yet there was a marked difference in the Fugitives' and Faulkner's lives after the war's end. Whereas the

Fugitives resumed their normal work, academic, and social schedules, Faulkner's routine and personality transformed after the war. The war's end signaled his realization that he would not be a war hero like his great-grandfather and applied the pressure for him to become a popular author, in an effort to imitate that ancestor on another level. When he returned to Oxford after the war, Faulkner began seriously to pursue a writing career, one that eventually took the changing South as its primary focus. In his 1959 essay "A Southern Mode of Imagination," Allen Tate gestures toward what Faulkner must have been realizing in the years after the war's end: "the South not only reentered the world with the first World War; it looked round and saw for the first time since about 1830 that the Yankees were not to blame for everything."²³² Tate also connects World War I and the Southern Literary Renaissance in earlier essays, such as "The Profession of Letters in the South" (1935) and "The New Provincialism" (1945); however, "A Southern Mode of Imagination" is the first essay in which Tate argued that World War I was also the trigger for any Southern recognition of the Yankees as not entirely blameworthy. Faulkner's decision to dedicate himself to writing might have been motivated by personal or ancestral reasons, but what he has written in regards to the South ("I don't hate it") evinces the racial ambivalence and confused guilt to which Tate refers when he writes that Southerners realized "that the Yankees were not to blame for everything." It is significant that Faulkner came to this realization in 1918 or soon after, twenty-one years before Allen Tate, because recognition of culpability is what undoubtedly led him to write novels that were regionally and personally introspective and what may also have

²³² Allen Tate, "A Southern Mode of Imagination," *A Modern Southern Reader*, eds. Ben Forkner and Patrick Samway (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, Ltd., 1986), 536.

been the impetus for his use of Quentin Compson as a means to racially exorcize himself at such an early time.

Indeed, Faulkner's ideas tend toward the progressive ends of both the Fugitive and Agrarian traditions. His style of writing is experimental like Tate's, who was by far the most broadminded Fugitive as far as tradition and form were concerned. In his works that were contemporary with *I'll Take My Stand*, Faulkner's stance on race is most similar to Warren's, the most liberal of the agrarians so far as race was concerned. For the modern sensibility, however, Quentin, Faulkner as he was writing Quentin, and the Agrarians all still leave something to be desired in their treatments of race, and the misogyny that surfaces in Quentin's stream of consciousness and in Faulkner's life is as unattractive to many feminist critics as the racist comments in Owsley's essay are to most modern readers.

I have argued that Quentin speaks for Faulkner and that through Quentin, Faulkner may be easily slotted into the Agrarian and Fugitive traditions. Our academic tradition has deemed Faulkner—and especially that work in which Faulkner allows Quentin to divulge his most undesirable opinions, *The Sound and the Fury*—the strongest and best that Southern literature has to offer. The critical reception of *I'll Take My Stand* has not been as positive. There are several issues that contribute to the Agrarian polemic's unpopularity. It is neither cohesive nor feasible, and its ultra-conservatism offended even some 1920's Southern conservatives. Yet, the issue that is at the front in academic complaints concerning *I'll Take My Stand* is its racism, thus John Grigsby's attempted defense. The rejection of *I'll Take My Stand* based upon its racist content is

strange, however, since the Agrarian stances on African Americans are not much worse than those views that Quentin verbalizes. The simple explanation of the concurrent rejection of the Agrarian essays as racist and the success of Faulkner's novel is that as long as racial negativity is written in a fictitious form, it is more acceptable. If, as I have argued, the misogyny and racism in Quentin's narratives are something far more real, more biographically grounded, than the fictional cover under which they hide, we must ask the following question: is what Faulkner has written worthy of preservation to any greater degree than what *I'll Take My Stand* has achieved as a serious political plan?

Nearly everyone who writes about Faulkner would answer "yes" to this question, yet most critics who deal with those aspects of Faulkner's work that if read as biographical would make the literature seem less worthy of preservation too often become apologists. James Snead is Faulkner's racial apologist; he concedes the racism and disgust with miscegenation evident in Faulkner's literature and then pleads that the presence of racially-mixed characters is evidence of the author's racial progressivism, ignoring, all the while, the negativity with which the majority of Faulkner's mulatto characters are presented. Arthur Kinney also tries his hand at defending Faulkner by tracing the progression of the African American characters from simple to complex in his literature. Minrose Gwin, Gail Mortimer, and Noel Polk all attempt to explain and, to some degree, justify Faulkner's misogyny. Gwin argues that Faulkner gives Caddy Compson agency. Mortimer attributes Faulkner's misogyny to his Keatsian need to create the perfect art/woman. Polk identifies the sexually threatening women in

Faulkner's literature with Estelle Oldham's first marriage and other possible adulterous experiences.

My approach to the misogyny and racism evident in Faulkner's life and literature is neither to deny nor to apologize. Instead of searching for a biographical instance to blame Faulkner's misogyny upon or attempting to demonstrate a trend of improvement in his treatment of African Americans, I have represented these negative traits just as they existed. Because of—rather than “despite,” as the other critics would have it—the particular way in which the misogyny and racism from Faulkner's biography manifest themselves in Quentin Compson's narrative, I also answer affirmatively that his work deserves not only preservation but also acknowledgement. Precisely because of the nature of the release of these elements through Quentin, *The Sound and the Fury* should be valued both as a priceless piece of literature and as a very early and immediate and, thus, valiant effort at progressiveness by a Southern white male.

Now, I wish that I could write that Faulkner's ambivalent feelings about women and his racist tendencies ended entirely with Quentin Compson's death—that the effort at exoneration by expressing those ambivalences and then killing the medium of expression worked. However, only a few years after he kills Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner revives him for *Absalom, Absalom!*, and his literary expression of disgust with miscegenation reaches its height in this novel. *Light in August*, which was also written after the attempted purification, reveals Faulkner's continuing distress over female sexuality through Joe Christmas's repeated cycle of attraction and revulsion. Clearly the purgation, if it was even successful, did not last. William Faulkner called *The Sound and*

the Fury his “most splendid failure.” Many southern literary scholars, such as Gail Mortimer and André Bleikasten, interpret this description to mean that this novel was his best attempt at a perfect narrative but, instead, resulted in a piece of literature that was not perfect but was still priceless. In the light of what I have written, Faulkner could have also meant that his failed endeavor to release all racism and misogyny through Quentin Compson was nevertheless his most splendid and significant project simply because of its intention.

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Vita

Brandi Stearns was born in Somerset, Kentucky on March 31, 1981. She was raised in Monticello, Kentucky and attended grade school, junior high school, and high school at Monticello Independent School. She graduated from Monticello Independent High School in 1999. From there, she went to Centre College in Danville, Kentucky and received a B.A. in English, with a minor in Religion in 2003. Immediately afterwards, she went to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and received an M.A. in English in 2005.

Brandi is currently working as a production editor at Publications International, Ltd. in Lincolnwood, Illinois.