To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Christian Leigh Faught entitled "Their Old Kentucky Home: The Phenomenon of the Kentucky Burden in the Writing of James Still, Jesse Stuart, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren." I have examined the final paper 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.

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THEIR OLD KENTUCKY HOME: THE PHENOMENON OF THE KENTUCKY BURDEN IN THE WRITING OF JAMES STILL, JESSE STUART, ALLEN TATE AND ROBERT PENN WARREN

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to my husband, Kenny, who has taught me to live strong and laugh often. You will forever be my soul mate and my sweetest friend.

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Abstract

The focus of this project is to investigate the phenomenon of the Kentucky burden, and to explore the impact of that burden on four Vanderbilt-educated Kentucky authors of the early twentieth century. The works of James Still, Jesse Stuart, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren reveal not only characteristics common to Southern regionalism in general but also traits radically particular to Kentucky. Through an exploration of the poetry and prose of these prominent Kentucky writers, we can gain a better understanding of the significance of their identities as Kentuckians and recognize the many obstacles and challenges the Kentucky burden posed for each of the four writers. I posit that the individual reactions of Still, Stuart, Tate, and Warren to the Kentucky burden dramatically affected their critical and popular success, thus deciding their place, or lack thereof, in the canon of American literature. By investigating this phenomenon, this project enters the debate concerning the existence of subregions within regionalism and further emphasizes the importance of the literature of the individual regions of this country which make up the whole of American literature.

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Introduction

In the introduction to *Good Poems*, Garrison Keillor observes, "If you read a lot, labels start to seem meaningless. 'Regional,' for example, which only means writers whose work might include references to farming, is a useless term" (xxiv). When misunderstood as merely a reference to the pastoral or agrarian, the term *regional* may be of no use. However, when recognized as a phenomenon not limited to such stereotypes, regionalism represents much more than a particular physical location. In actuality, regionalism is an attempt to articulate the relatively vague and problematic relationship that nearly all people have with place—not just the physical relationship with locale, but the sense of emotional and spiritual belonging or connectedness to a region and its history. Though seemingly simple, the acknowledgement of a regionalism as opposed to the cataloguing of basic eccentricities within different parts of the country has become a wellspring for scholarly debate, and literary regionalism has been no exception.

This project enters that debate by investigating the relationship between regionalism and both scholarly and popular acclaim among four prominent Kentucky writers of prose and poetry: James Still, Jesse Stuart, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. More specifically, I will investigate the existence of an innate Kentucky regionalism in selected poems and prose of each of the writers. While it is apparent in the writings of Still, Stuart, Tate, and Warren that they are undeniably Southern regionalists, they also display a distinct Kentucky regionalism in at least some of their works. This phenomenon does not necessarily exist in the works of these writers by choice; in fact, I contend that it is an inescapable part of their identity and thus seeps both consciously and

inadvertently into their writing. It is the manner in which each of the four writers reacted to what will be called for the remainder of this paper the Kentucky burden that has led to their popular and critical reputations as either enduring or forgotten Southern writers.

Before investigating further the concept of a Kentucky burden, acknowledgment must be made that similar literary burdens may exist for other geographical or cultural "regions" of the country. These may include northern and Southern, urban and rural, race and gender, or educational and economic subgroups. While the purpose of this project is to explore exclusively whether and to what extent a specifically Kentucky burden exists, embracing this concept suggests the need to explore the existence of other literary subregions as well.

It should also be noted here that there are other important authors from Kentucky during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century whose works could be explored as potential reflections of the Kentucky burden: Elizabeth Madox Roberts, James Lane Allen, John Fox, Jr., Caroline Gordon, Harriette Arnow. However, I have chosen to focus on Still, Stuart, Tate, and Warren primarily because they each left Kentucky to attend Vanderbilt University and were there at a time when it was rising to fame as the cutting edge school of the literary South. These four writers were instrumental in the progression of the literary revolution of the South to higher levels of popular and critical acclaim. Accordingly, they were each exposed to virtually the same literary environment at Vanderbilt, including the Fugitives and Agrarians, and their differing responses to this literary revolution can serve as precursors to understanding their respective reactions to the Kentucky burden. While these writers reflect vastly different views of and reactions

to their various backgrounds, the evidence of the Kentucky burden in their writing suggests the existence of a uniquely Kentucky regionalism.

Although the study will consider carefully the Vanderbilt connections and Kentucky roots of these four writers, the bulk of the project rests upon defining Kentucky regionalism through the writings of the chosen authors and also demonstrating that Kentucky regionalism is, in fact, different from Southern regionalism in general. One of the goals of this study is to contribute to a debate already in progress concerning whether subsections of Southern regionalism exist. By comparing these writers, this project is an attempt to demonstrate that Kentucky regionalism is a legitimate subsection of Southern regionalism. Also, this study will investigate further the possibility that additional subsections exist within Kentucky regionalism—namely mountain and agrarian regionalisms. After definitions for each type of regionalism are established, they can be investigated in terms of each writer and help determine how the authors' reactions to such boundaries affected their success as writers.

Before investigating the idea of a specific Kentucky burden and its respective subsections, it is important to establish the definition of both regionalism and Southern regionalism as it applies to this project. To the literary mind, the term *regionalism* conjures up a multitude of images ranging from the pleasantly quaint and comfortable to the surreptitiously controlling and confining. Understanding the human relationship to place is difficult, but trying to understand a writer's relationship with a region tends to be even more problematic (Gray ix). Authors' careers have been born from and/or broken by the label, and few care to embrace its power as a primary binding force behind their

work. Although regionalism has often been used as the panacea of literature by opportunists seeking a "get-rich-quick" endeavor (Warren, "Some Don'ts for Literary Regionalists" 357), Richard Gray explains that the term *region* is generally "applied to an area that was judged to exist somehow on the fringes" (1). The critic Raymond Williams points out that "[t]he life and people of certain favored regions are seen as essentially general, even perhaps normal, while the life and people of certain other regions are, well, regional" (1). Consequently, many writers from the South who found themselves labeled regionalists by influential critics faced the dilemma of attempting to write themselves out of their Southernness or face utter marginalization. While some writers chose to embrace the regionalist label and forego literary prominence with critics, the long-term consequences were sharp and still remain. In terms of critical acclaim, most who embraced regionalism were ultimately "assigned a peripheral status" and "banished to the edges of literary history" (2).

Yet others tried their entire lives to get beyond the seemingly marginalizing label of regionalism. For example, Richard Gray describes the Southern author Ellen Glasgow's struggle "to escape . . . from the provincial to the universal" (36). Glasgow, a Virginian, tried desperately to overcome her regionalist label; however, Glasgow's life in itself magnified the regional characteristic of peculiarity. The more Glasgow attempted to suppress her Southernness, the more obvious it became that "the ebb and flow of sympathy that so much of her writing betrays [was] . . . a function of her place in history—which is to say, the literary and other histories of Virginia and the South" (Gray

94). Even while Glasgow fervently proclaimed her desire to escape the confines of the South, Gray argues that she was unable to abandon completely its basic ideals:

> Even on her own terms, her relationship to the literary transformations she both anticipated and celebrated was more convoluted and problematic than she cared to admit. For one thing, while she might mock the "sentimental infirmity" of Southern novelists of the old school, she was just as disparaging about what she termed the 'patriotic materialism' of those who sought to reject the sentimental tradition. . . . More to the point, perhaps, in attacking the 'uniform concrete surface' of modern life and the 'mediocrity' of 'Americanism' that she felt the New South had embraced, she began to sound rather like someone suffering from a 'sentimental infirmity' herself. (46)

Glasgow's inability to separate herself entirely from the regionalism that she found so aversive undeniably contributes to the conflicted nature of her writing.

Glasgow's desire to find an identity separate from her region is certainly not isolated, and this indicates the uneasiness and discomfort writers have felt regarding regionalism. Perhaps the most formidable aspect of regionalism is the lack of clear-cut criteria and understanding of exactly what it entails. For the purpose of this project, the definition of a regionalist is a writer whose work reflects the conscious and unconscious influence of the history and characteristics of a particular area in his or her thought processes and habits. These influences can be apparent either directly through settings, characters, plots, etc., or indirectly through obvious or subtle attempts at avoidance and disconnectedness from the past. Regionalism is not always attempted by an author; in

fact, even those who are most prominently successful regionalists often find the label discomforting. It is an inherent quality that often shows itself through subtleties and something that cannot be easily manufactured by "outsider" authors. That is, regionalism is an innate part of the personality of the writer and cannot be easily or genuinely extracted from the author's character just as it cannot be easily manufactured by an outsider.

Regionalism is not the same as nationalism; it is not a "community . . . based on the denial of difference and conflict" (Gray 502). It allows for differences, but at the same time recognizes the commonalities the people of a certain region share. As Gray points out, what is clear is the fact that regionalism does exist and most prominently so in the South:

> Even within the relatively small world of American literary history, there are many examples of those often unspoken assumptions of a cultural "center" basic to the language of regionalism: that tendency to accept some texts as somehow determining national identity and others as somehow aberrant or peripheral, odd or abnormal or strange. But perhaps that tendency has found strongest expression, and that language its loudest voice, in the acceptance of Southern writing as distinctively regional: an acceptance that characterizes many writers from the South themselves as they struggle with the sense of being "other," writing somewhere of and from the margins. (2)

In their attempts to define regionalism and gain some kind of control over its limitations, most Southern writers, including some of those to be discussed here, were not completely

at ease with either the concept in general or with being labeled as regionalists themselves. Consequently, it is this struggle for identity and constant battle against marginalization that serves as a defining characteristic of Southern regionalism.

Southern regionalism is certainly dependent upon the characteristics of regionalism in general, but its most important components are the underlying awareness of the history of the South, specifically the Civil War and its aftermath, and the constant battle against marginalization within the nation state. Elements of Southern regionalism, such as frontier realism and the novels of writers such as William Gilmore Simms, did exist before the mid-1800s. However, it was the first real crisis of the South which led to the full development of its unique literature. Following the Civil War, the South was faced with much more than simply the dilemma of defeat. Perhaps the most devastating effect of the Civil War was the loss of a particular Southern identity. The South no longer existed as the romantic Dixie Land but lay in ruin and shame. It thrived no more as a self-sufficient and prospering economy but had to depend on other regions of the country for support. As a result, the South and its inhabitants found themselves in a constant search for an identity separate from that of the North but also one different from what they had always known in order to capture the new world the war and Reconstruction had left them and to which they must adapt. This search for identity was evident in just about every facet of the Southern production, including its literature.

As a result of this identity crisis and historical past, an underlying conflict reveals itself in Southern regionalism and remains a defining characteristic of its literature. One characteristic that separates the Southern from other forms of regionalism and from the

broad genre of nationalism is an innate yearning or nostalgia for the past and an intense search for an identity in the present. As a result, the South harbored a rather uneasy relationship with the rest of the country because of an unwillingness to let go of its past glory and an inability, or rebellious refusal, to accept that it was forever gone:

> Placed in the position of an aberrant minority, forced to recognize that theirs was an old and shrinking economy set amid a young and growing nation, challenged on every front—morally, intellectually, racially, and politically—Southerners felt themselves compelled to defend their position and yet at the same time explain why they were in decline, to stick by the choices they had apparently made while trying to work out why those choices had not enabled them to prosper. Even those committed most fiercely to the pose of feudal aristocrat could not entirely suppress the hope that the Southern economy and Southern society might be revitalized. (Gray 8)

Whether blatantly obvious or painfully subtle, this "strange mixture of defiance and depression" (Gray 8) remains a seminal part of the phenomenon of Southern literature.

Since the Civil War, one of the greatest questions surrounding Southern literature is what it means to be Southern. Edgar Allan Poe spent most of his career trying to construct for himself the persona of a Southern aristocrat despite the fact that he was not born in the South and did not have the money of an aristocrat. However, according to Gray, "if Poe's Southern patriarchal status was primarily a product of his imagination, a matter of knowing rather more than being, then so was that of, say, the so-called First Families of Virginia" (5) because "the fact is that the Old South invented itself, in the

way that perhaps all patriarchal cultures do, by trying to interpret and regulate life according to some idealized version of the past" (6).

Ultimately, Poe's desire to pass himself off as a Southern aristocrat is really of very little importance where the problem of his "Southerness" is concerned. It is much more telling to consider his body of work. Indeed, Poe did edit the *Southern Literary Messenger*, and he did take on the role of "intellectual flag-bearer of the region" (6), but his body of fiction and poetry reflects a Southern quality that has helped to shape our understanding of Southern regionalism as a separate entity. In fact, it can be argued that it is the gothic tales of Poe, rather than those of William Gilmore Simms, who is without question Southern, that best exemplify the concept of the Southern gothic. Though Poe's Southern status may have been more of a state of mind than an actual heritage, his writing leaves little question of his identity as a Southerner.

Even though by the early twentieth century the Civil War had long been over and the South had been rebuilt, the subtle search for an identity remained a constant in the literature of the South. In fact, the nostalgia and sentiment which had characterized the post-war South was reborn at Vanderbilt with the rise of the Agrarians and the publishing of the controversial *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930. According to Louise Cowan, the Agrarian movement was a direct result of the 1925 Evolution Trial in Dayton and "the savage and misinformed journalistic attacks upon the South" (208) by critics such as H.L. Mencken. Even as the literary Fugitive group claimed to not recognize "any deep and pervasive connection between the poet and his native tradition" (208), John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren, some of the prominent

members of that group, responded to the Scopes trial and the subsequent attack on the South. In response to the critics, these men declared "open war against the New South program of industrial progress and . . . affirm[ed] a positive belief in the principles of the Old South" (240). Thus, Agrarianism was born, and these Southerners embraced their native traditions and declared their literary independence from the rest of the country. While some of the enduring characteristics of Southern writing had already been expressed before this time and even though the Fugitive group is credited with ushering in the Southern Renaissance, the Agrarians are ultimately responsible for inspiring in literature the awareness of an unique Southern tradition that already existed. Certainly, the Agrarian view of the history of the South was romantic and, as many critics argue, mythical; however, it was the idea of a tradition which ultimately gave Southern literature a serious and hardy identity as an important literary regionalism. In essence, the Agrarians willed and wrote Southern literature into an official existence by publicly declaring the sanctity of its tradition and by no longer accepting the negative stereotypes. However, though through their work Southern literature became a reality, the search for the true Southern identity still remains.

Much research has been done regarding Southern regionalism and its history. It is accepted as a separate literary entity, and the minutest details of its characteristics are often argued. However, virtually no critical work has been done regarding subsections within Southern regionalism which share many of the same characteristics of the literature of the South but also bring uniquely subtle characteristics to the literature. Just as the South's differing characteristics make for a literature contrary to that of other parts

of the country, so do the various regions within the South make for a diversified southern literature. This project will embrace the modernist idea of radical particularity by focusing on the literature of Kentucky as that of a subregion of the South and by emphasizing the unique characteristics brought to Kentucky literature by four of its most famous writers.

Though this study concentrates solely on Kentucky, other subsections within the South could certainly be targeted for a similar inquiry. However, I posit that Kentucky is particularly important to such a study due to the complexity of the conflict inherent in its literature. There are several facets to this Kentucky burden which characterize, and stigmatize, Kentucky as independent from yet connected to the Southern tradition of literature. It is important to note, however, that not all the characteristics of the Kentucky burden about to be described will be present in every author's work. In fact, not all of the criteria will even be obvious or intended by the author. It is the very subtlety of these characteristics which contributes to the mystery and irony surrounding the Kentucky burden, and analysis of this paradox will ultimately lead to a better understanding of the psychological components of Kentucky regionalism and regionalism in the broader sense.

The Kentucky burden is based on one central concept: the presumed inferiority of Kentucky. Different aspects of the state's history and culture create an awareness in the Kentucky writer of unspoken marginalization by other parts of the country, including the rest of the South. These aspects include an even more complex identity crisis than that of the South, the conflicted and often haunting history of the state itself, and the stereotype of intellectual inferiority that affected the state and its inhabitants; and this is why I term

these circumstances the Kentucky burden. However, the uniqueness of the literature of Kentucky does not stem solely from the existence of the burden but also from the various reactions to the burden by the Kentucky writers. For many years, it was inconceivable to the rest of the country that anything of value could come from such an economically and culturally poor area as was Kentucky; as a result, those hailing from Kentucky felt the burden to overcome such marginalization much more than the normal, run-of-the-mill obstacles for writers. Reactions to the Kentucky burden varied from those of authors who inadvertently or very deliberately attempted to overcompensate not for their own weaknesses in their writings but for that of their birthplace to those of others who refused to accept the notions of Kentucky as an authorial liability and, instead, emphatically embraced the state of their birth as an inseparable and positive part of their own identity. Each of the Kentucky writers in this study reacted, then, in particular ways to the Kentucky burden, and those reactions helped to shape their literary opus and reputations.

In order to address the reactions of each writer to this phenomenon, some of the key components of the Kentucky burden most relevant to this study must be further explained. Although south of the Mason-Dixon Line, Kentucky's geographical location calls into question its categorization as a Southern state; therefore, Kentucky writers are faced with an identity crisis on two levels: seeking an identity as a Southerner and seeking a Southern identity. For a Kentuckian, the question of Southernness is not just a philosophical issue; it is also deeply intertwined with physical locality. As a border state, Kentucky is situated too far north to be acknowledged as a sister to the Deep South but too far south to be anything but Southern. Even during the Civil War, Kentucky was

evenly divided between proponents of the Confederacy and Union supporters, making it impossible for the state to declare its war loyalty to the South as undeniable proof of its Southernness. Kentucky did not secede from the Union, yet major parts of the state were occupied by the Confederacy for a large part of the war. Acclaimed Kentucky historian J. Winston Coleman, Jr. describes Kentucky as a state torn in the same way the entire nation was torn during the war: "The crisis split churches and communities, pitted fathers against sons, brothers against brothers—only natural perhaps for a state that could claim both Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln. In the end there was hardly a village that did not send men to fight on both sides" (71). Consequently, the liminal space in which Kentucky exists is a major source of the conflict apparent in much of Kentucky literature. Part of the Kentucky burden is comprised of the confrontation with this liminal space. In other words, Kentucky authors are often haunted by the task of writing Kentucky into a Southern existence lest they be left with no identity at all. As a result, an insistence upon the southern qualities of characters, plots, settings, and so on is found in the writing of many Kentucky authors including those used in this study. This intense yearning for a definite identity evident in much of Kentucky literature far exceeds that of the literature of the South in general and is a significant defining characteristic of Kentucky regionalism.

Perhaps the most subtle characteristic of the Kentucky burden is the relevance of history. Indeed, history is also very important in Southern literature, and on the surface this obsession with history seems unique to the South and not necessarily to Kentucky; however, upon closer inspection, the obsession with history is rather different for

Kentucky writers than for those from other parts of the South. By the time white explorers had reached the area, Native Americans had named it "Kentucke" meaning "Dark and Bloody Ground" (Coleman 10). From very early on, Kentucky was tainted with the blood of thousands of Indians, and the violence only escalated with the invasion of the white explorers. For many Kentucky writers, including some of those discussed in this study, Kentucky is thus a land of mystery. It is beautiful and serene, yet those aware of its past are haunted by the idea of the "Dark and Bloody Ground." Further, the obsession with Kentucky history is not an obsession with the broad history of the state found in current school books but with the legendary history passed down from generations through the oral tradition. In *'To Shoot, Burn, and Hang': Folk-History from a Kentucky Mountain Family and Community*, Daniel N. Rolph explains the importance of the oral tradition to Kentucky families:

> Communal histories are often preserved within family narratives. These histories contribute to a greater understanding of family folklore as a 'reflector' of communal values, beliefs, fears, and prejudices. When used in conjunction with public records or documents, it is possible to obtain a 'grass-roots,' 'folk,' or personal definition of events, as opposed to the often impersonal 'elitist' and 'official' representation of occurrences. Oral tradition narratives can breathe life or vitality into little-known events and illuminate the 'belief system' of a given people. (xi)

These stories passed down orally involve actual names of real people and places, and the reality of their truth is often undeniable. Kentucky history found in books was, of course,

important to those who love Kentucky and its past, but the Kentucky burden is more pointedly a deep and intense obsession with the history of Kentucky legends. In fact, some Kentucky writers find themselves obsessed with Kentucky's past and thus attempt to own and control it by rewriting the old stories while others try to write Kentucky out of its violent reputation. Regardless of the reaction, this sense of the Kentucky past often presents itself in some manner, and the obsession becomes more geared toward controlling it than accepting it. Kentucky writers are seeking identity through Kentucky history, and this search often shows up even in stories and poems that on the surface have nothing to do with Kentucky.

The final aspect of the Kentucky burden to be explored through the works of the chosen authors in this study is the stigma of Kentucky as being a breeding ground for the intellectually inferior. Just as the South was viewed as harboring a less intelligent species than the North, so was Kentucky considered inferior to the rest of the South. Perhaps Kentucky was viewed in this light because of its mountain culture and connectedness to the Appalachians. Or perhaps Kentucky was viewed, as Gray describes, as "some unfortunate lesser breed or area . . . because it was not at the center of things" (1). Whatever the reason, Kentucky had this reputation, and as a result, many writers felt the unwelcome pressure of inheriting this rigid prejudice. Some Kentucky writers responded by rejecting their past and attempting to disassociate themselves from the stereotyped "hick" state. Others felt "compelled to invent themselves" (Gray 510) by becoming increasingly critical of Kentucky and thus trying to write themselves out of being deemed intellectually inferior. In doing the latter, however, the regional forces become even

more evident, and control of self-making is often surrendered to the Kentucky burden. As for Still, Stuart, Tate, and Warren, their responses to such the notion of innate inferiority were seemingly different, yet each chose to leave Kentucky for intellectual pursuit in Nashville, Tennessee. Their respective Vanderbilt experiences further complicate their reactions to the Kentucky burden making for a Kentucky literature rich in diversity and psychological depth.

Since very little critical analysis has been done on James Still and his work, he is an appropriate beginning for this study. As a student at Vanderbilt around the same time as Jesse Stuart and under the influence of Robert Penn Warren as a professor, James Still experienced much of the same Southern enculturation as did the other chosen writers. However, his response to the Kentucky burden was vastly different from those of the other three. Rather than romanticizing Kentucky as his beloved homeland or rejecting Kentucky as inferior to the rest of the South, James Still chose to embody Kentucky regionalism—he disappeared into its mountains in an almost hermit-like manner. He did not try to escape the confines of Kentucky; instead, he overtly attempted to preserve Kentucky regionalism by recording mountain stories and writing about mountain life. Limiting himself to Kentucky mountain regionalism, James Still never reached the level of popular or critical success of Stuart, Tate, or Warren. By examining his body of work including his famous novel *River of Earth* along with some short stories and a poem, this study will illustrate the existence of a specific Kentucky-mountain (or Appalachian) regionalism, which differs greatly from the regionalism of the other writers.

Furthermore, I will explore his negotiation of the Kentucky burden and the subsequent literary consequences that befell him.

Similarly, Jesse Stuart did not try to escape the Kentucky burden despite coming under the influence of some of the South's great literary leaders of the time during his years at Vanderbilt. In fact, it seems that his time away from Kentucky served to create in him an intense appreciation for the state in which he grew up and to which he would eventually return. He found unacceptable much of his Vanderbilt experience, including the major beliefs of the Agrarians. Stuart's rejection of some of their notions of life in the South seems to have sparked his romantic and optimistic vision of Kentucky as a paradise on earth. In fact, Stuart's writing portrays Kentucky is such an idealized way that Andrew Lytle labeled his work as "heavy with the worst kind of regionalism" (Stoneback 5). His sentimentality and boyish enthusiasm turned critics against Stuart, but his popularity with readers was constant in his own time. Instead of pushing against the Kentucky burden, Stuart embraced it fully, but this reaction has contributed to his disappearance from today's literary canon. Using such works as *Beyond Dark Hills*, *The Thread That Runs So True*, *My World*, several short stories, and his well-known poem "Kentucky Is My Land," this study will examine Stuart's Kentucky burden and investigate the relationship between that burden and his literary demise. Virtually no discussion has ensued as to why Stuart's deeply ingrained love for his state and equally passionate embrace of regionalism led to his marginalization, so such exploration will be attempted here.

Perhaps the most problematic section of this project will be dealing with Allen Tate's Kentucky regionalism. None of Tate's work, with the exception of "The Swimmers," takes place in Kentucky, and he acknowledges his connection to the state only reluctantly and very rarely; however, it is precisely through this denial of his background that we see Tate's struggle to separate himself from the inescapable Kentucky past in his writing. Considering Tate's meticulousness in wanting to be in charge of the characters in his poems and stories, the evidence of the Kentucky burden can be found in his seemingly unceasing effort not to be controlled by outside forces, especially those he deemed unworthy of himself. By avoiding such a tight and controlling regionalism in his prose and poetry, Tate makes the strongest argument for the power of the innate Kentucky burden. If this proves to be true, Tate's push against Kentucky regionalism could be understood to have played a part in his more recent fall from grace as a Southern writer. For the purpose of this study, Tate's *The Fathers*, his only novel, will be explored along with many of his poems.

As the best known author from Kentucky, Robert Penn Warren's success as a writer plays a critical role in this project. It seems that he is the only writer of the four who discovered how to negotiate the Kentucky burden in a manner which pleased both readers and critics. While his identity is not and never was completely grounded in Kentucky, it is apparent in his writing that he was unable to escape fully the demands of the Kentucky burden. Instead, he went where the burden led him, as is the case in *World Enough and Time*. The story is based on a murder that happened in Kentucky in the nineteenth century, but he develops the characters far beyond what he could have heard

of them. Warren incorporated what he knew of the Kentucky attitude and past, which had become a part of his own past, to bring the characters to life. The story ultimately haunted him until he was able to lay the ghosts to rest by finishing it. Several other works, including the poems of "Kentucky Mountain Farm" and the narrative poem *Brother to Dragons,* are set in Kentucky, but they each transcend the land. At the same time that Warren captures the rhythm of life and the unrelenting connection to the past which is uniquely Kentuckian, he transcends Kentucky by dealing with man's struggle with original sin and imperfection. As a result of this response to the Kentucky burden, he defined Kentucky regionalism even as he wrote beyond it. This is why he has and will continue to endure as a writer regionally, nationally, and universally. Due to the space constraints of this study, the majority of the investigation will focus on the works already mentioned as well as *All the King's Men.*

There is no debate about the existence of regionalism. The South is incredibly unique in virtually every possible way, and its literature is no exception to the rule of regionalism's particularity. In the same way, different sections of the South display very different characteristics from each other due to aspects such as local culture, historical occurrences, and geography. As a result, the literature of each subregion is sure to be as unique as the South is in relation to the rest of the country. Understanding the different personalities of each region is important in understanding the diverse richness of Southern literature and appreciating it as fully as it deserves. By exploring the regional bonds of four Kentucky authors who experienced similar education and exposure to the same literary stimuli during the Southern Renaissance, I am attempting to demonstrate

the existence of this particular subsection of Southern literature. Despite where these writers eventually settled, Kentucky remains a telling presence in their lives and writings, and just as each had a need to establish his identity as writer, Kentucky had a need to be identified as a Southern state. By identifying these Southern writers as Kentuckians, I am also claiming Kentucky as a unique but connected part of the South and these writers as unique but connected parts of the spirit of that Commonwealth.

I. Kentucky Mountain Regionalism: James Still's Escape

Being of these hills, being one with the fox
Stealing into the shadows, one with the new-born foal,
The lumbering ox drawing green beech logs to mill,
One with the destined feet of man climbing and descending,
And one with death rising to bloom again, I cannot go.
Being of these hills I cannot pass beyond.
--James Still, from "Heritage"

James Still was not born in Kentucky, nor did he spend his childhood there, but his literary muse came alive once he entered the mountains of the eastern part of the state in 1932. Originally from Alabama, Still traveled to Tennessee for educational purposes; he attended Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate as an undergraduate and received his Master's degree from Vanderbilt University. Although they were acquainted as undergraduates at LMU, it was at Vanderbilt that Still formed a close relationship with aspiring author and eventual ministerial student Don West--a relationship that would eventually lead Still to a long life in Kentucky. After Still had graduated from the library school at the University of Illinois, and after failed attempts to find employment elsewhere, he found himself back in Nashville. Desperate for work, Still agreed to accompany West and his wife as a director of recreational programs for some of the Bible schools the Wests were directing in Knott County, Kentucky. During his stay at the Bible schools, Still quickly grew "enamored with the forested mountains, the valleys and hollows of this backwoods country, and with the independent and forthright folk" (Still, "James Still Autobiography: Section 2"). When the Hindman Settlement School in Knott County offered him the job of librarian on a volunteer basis in 1932, Still settled into life in the mountains and became a thoroughgoing Kentuckian.

Despite his not being a native of Kentucky, Still's writing indicates some of the

central characteristics of Kentucky regionalism and its burden. His novels, short stories, and poems are filled with an underlying awareness of the inferiority and conflicted identity associated with mountain life. However, his work reflects only an awareness and not an immediate and urgent need to gain control over these limitations. Still's reaction to the Kentucky burden is thus much different from those of the other writers to be explored in this study. Rather than feeling the need to defend the honor and splendor of Kentucky or to join in the chorus of criticisms heaped upon the state, Still embodied Kentucky regionalism by retreating into the mountains of Knott County for the last sixty-nine years of his life. In doing so, he was not trying to escape the confines of Kentucky; rather, through his writing he was overtly attempting to escape "into" and to preserve Kentucky mountain regionalism before it became too drastically altered by the outside world. At first glance, this escapism appears to reflect cowardice and a fear of the rapidly progressing nation; but upon closer inspection, it becomes plausible that Still's reaction to the Kentucky burden may have been the most courageous of the four writers. He did not mold his Kentucky characters, or his writing, to fit the expectations of people on the outside; instead, Still allowed his characters to exist on their own terms and with their own understanding of the world. Thus the burden remained, and Still was able to manage it by living within his own writing and through his own characters, celebrating their differences.

Still's choice to disappear into the mountains should not be credited to a lack of opportunity or knowledge of more cultured environments. Upon his death, Kentucky author George Ella Lyons remembered Still as "a very cosmopolitan man living down there in Knott County" (Egerton, "Author James Still"). His Vanderbilt experience alone

offered him much the same southern enculturation as the other writers in this study experienced and exposed him to leading southern literary figures such as Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, and Donald Davidson. Following his schooling at the University of Illinois, Still traveled over much of the Eastern United States seeking work, thus affording him the opportunity to settle in other, more socially acceptable areas if he chose to do so. Still also traveled to many different cultures including several Central American countries in addition to a stay of almost three years in the Middle East and Africa with the United States Army Air Corps in World War II (Summers 244-5). Throughout his years as a writer, Still published in prestigious magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Republic*, *The Yale Review*, and *The Saturday Evening Post* (Egerton, "Author James Still") and authored many books that received high praise from critics and literary peers. Furthermore, he developed relationships with some of the most critically acclaimed authors of the time including Katherine Anne Porter, Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, and Eleanor Clark. However, Still chose to form his closest relationships "with the people of Knott County and the neighbors near his two-story log house at Dead Mare Branch, particularly the teachers and students of the Hindman Settlement School" (Egerton). While it is tempting to label Still a hermit or a simple mountain hillbilly, such categorizations are simply incorrect and ill-informed. The key to understanding Still's control of the Kentucky burden lies in this knowledge that he chose the mountains and culture of Eastern Kentucky not just as his home but as the place to which he dedicated his life and left his legacy.

No other area of the Commonwealth has been more marginalized by the nation, including even the rest of the state, than the eastern region of Kentucky. Graced by a

portion of the Appalachian mountains, Eastern Kentucky was once called the "other Kentucky" by John Fox, Jr. (Ward 210) because of the peculiarity of its people compared to the rest of the state. Just as Kentucky was seen as intellectually inferior to most of the South, Eastern Kentucky was believed to be less intelligent than other parts of the state. Still's decision to live in what was one of the most stereotyped areas in the country could be seen as literary suicide for anyone hoping to gain any kind of prominence in intellectual circles. However, Still's interpretation of the plight of the mountaineer far exceeds the superficial demands of a universal standard of intelligence. When he first arrived in Hindman, "the machine age in the hills was less than thirty years old; and of the millions of people whose lives it had affected perhaps no one, even the coal-mine owners, sincerely believed it was a blessing" (Cadle, Foreward v.). What he witnessed and wrote about were the hardships of formerly self-sufficient and independent people now faced with the daunting task of adapting to a new age of industrialism.

After the lumber supply in Kentucky was depleted by loggers at the turn of the century, the state turned to coal as its main industry. World War I created an overnight boom in the coal-rich Kentucky mountains because of the sudden need of steel mills to produce military supplies; as a result, "[t]he price of coal soared, wages in the coal mines rose to heights never before dreamed of, and miners began to receive more cash in a month than they formerly received in a year" (Ward 210). However, as soon as the war ended, the demand for large quantities of coal experienced a sharp and swift decline. As the coal boom died, so did employment for many mountaineers who had uprooted themselves to work as coal miners. According to William Ward, "before the miners had learned to manage the money they were so little accustomed to" (210), the workers who

had briefly enjoyed prosperity because of the mines found themselves unable to pay rent, to settle debts acquired at the company store, and, eventually, they were even unable to buy food for their families. By the time Still arrived in Knott County in 1932, the poverty and unemployment in Hindman was widespread, the community haunted by "the coal boom that faded in the mid-1920s and forced the mine to operate on part-time schedules" (224). The life of the mountain people struggling to recover from or, simply, to survive this devastating economic hardship seized Still's interest, and in his poems, stories, and novels, he "seems to be reaching toward it, attempting to see it whole in his imagination" (Berry, "A Master Language"). The hardships and sacrifice are evident in his stories, but the purity of the mountain people and the urgent need to preserve the dying culture became his literary focus.

The mountain people of Eastern Kentucky after whom Still modeled his characters were far from educated by the standards of the outside world, but the intelligence and education of the world beyond the mountains would amount to nothing in the starving and desperate situation in which many of the coal miners and their families found themselves. Still recognized the survival skills of these people and did not try to invent a false worldly intelligence for them to satisfy national standards. Their presumed intellectual inferiority to the rest of the nation was irrelevant because the characters did not exist in the milieu of the outside world. In the world of mountain people, immediate concerns such as adaptability and survival were far more valuable than the bookish education of even the most gifted scholar.

The unfortunate hardships of the coal mining mountaineers appear throughout Still's short stories, but the most poignant example of Still's rejection of outside

standards of intelligence is found in his acclaimed novel *River of Earth* (1940). Brack Baldridge is faced with the dilemma of supporting a family by working in the mines. Throughout the novel, Brack and his wife, Alpha, must continuously come up with ways to provide food for their family despite the fact that his mining career offers little more than an on-again, off-again future. The natural wisdom, intelligence, and survival skills of both Brack and Alpha are understated but apparent throughout the novel. Although Brack is, by outside standards, nothing short of ignorant, he serves as an invaluable part of the community in which he lives. Brack serves as the unofficial veterinarian of Flat Creek; the narrator explains that his father was "handy with stock and knew a lot of cures" (Still, *River of Earth* 22). Brack is often sought out by neighbors who need help with ailing or pregnant animals. In one particular incident, his skills are tested when Saul Hignight's calf gets a cob stuck in its throat. In a time when money was scarce, a cow that supplied milk was a necessity they could not afford to lose, so Hignight's initial trust in Brack's abilities is evident. When the cob refuses to budge, the frustrated owner of the calf gives up and leaves the calf to die at Brack's house. Brack continues to work on the animal until he finally decides that the only chance to save the valuable calf is to cut the cob out of its neck. Certainly, Brack was not formally trained to perform surgery on an animal, but his detailed precision in the matter indicates his crucial knowledge of the anatomy of the calf:

> "Father dug fingers into the calf's throat, feeling the proper spot, seeking a place free of large veins . . . . Father opened a space between the muscles of the calf's neck, steering clear of bone and heavy vein . . . . At last Father put the knife aside. He eased thumb and forefinger into the opening, and jerked. The cob came out,

> red and drenched. It spun into the dark. The calf fell back weakly, though beginning to breathe again . . . . Father folded the inner flesh and wed it together, and then stitched the outer cut" (64-5).

The calf lives as a result of the surgery and provides for the Baldridge family until Hignight learns of its survival and demands that his calf be returned to him. Without Brack's ability for quick thinking and his knowledge of farm animals, the calf would not have lived to provide for anyone. Brack's untutored operation on the animal would by no means have been expected to succeed; however, in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky it served as proof of his extremely beneficial survival skill.

Alpha Baldridge also displays an innate intelligence and adaptability throughout the novel. In the beginning of the story, Alpha is faced with the dilemma of not only feeding her own children but also providing food for three of Brack's relatives who show up and fail to leave. Even though there is barely enough food to feed the family, Brack insists, "[a]s long as we've got a crust, it'll never be said I turned my folks from my door" (Still, *River of Earth* 5); therefore, Alpha must find a way to feed her family and deal with the pride of this mountain man. Though she does not seem in conversation to possess outward intelligence, Alpha often displays her intelligence by cunning actions and necessary sacrifices. She knows that Brack's relatives will never leave as long as they are provided with food and shelter. When Uncle Samp becomes violent with the young narrator and ultimately becomes a threat to the safety of her children, Alpha does something that at first seems rash and irresponsible. After moving all of the family's vital belongings into the smokehouse, Alpha sets fire to the house. In her wisdom, she realized that the only way to rid her family of the danger and burden of the unwanted

relatives was to take away their incentive for staying. By setting fire to the house, she protects her family and, once again, helps them survive the harsh mountain life.

Life experience, knowledge of nature, and adaptability were the primary forms of intelligence necessary for surviving in the harsh mountain environment. Ironically, the only institutionally educated person in the novel is Jonce Weathers, the teacher of the Flat Creek School and the only person in the novel who is killed because of his ignorance of or disrespect for the mountain mores. Jonce has bookish intelligence, and so he is put in charge of teaching eighty-eight "scholars" of different ages and abilities. He teaches the students worldly facts such as the length of the Amazon River and how to read simple books such as *Henny Penny*; he even discovers a rather scientific way to rid the school of annoying bats. The narrator is impressed by Jonce's knowledge: "I bet he's sharp as a shoe sprig" (Still, *River of Earth* 84). However, Jonce's scholastic intelligence is not able to sustain him when he is confronted with the harsh reality of the mountain people. After finding out that Jonce whipped his son, Hodge Mauldridge confronts Jonce and warns that this had better never happen again. As smart as Jonce seems, he misjudges his opponent and refuses to heed the warning. Bee Mauldridge is whipped again by Jonce when he causes a bat to bite the narrator's sister, and the result is Jonce's being shot by Hodge Mauldridge. Though Jonce may have known his fate and chose to surrender his life for the matter of principle, wisdom in the Appalachians is measured by one's ability to survive. Jonce may have felt that he had an advantage because of his schooling, but in this trial of human nature, his education led him astray or, worse yet, meant nothing. To the world beyond the mountains, such an action would be legitimately deemed too harsh and would be proof of the primitive nature of the mountain people. Still is not trying to

defend the murder of Jonce—he merely reports it and withholds judgment so that the reader is free to reach his or her own moral conclusions.

Although Still's works allow the conventional wisdom of his characters to compensate for their lack of formal schooling, he was aware of and was an advocate for education in Kentucky. Still, with three degrees from three different educational institutions, was himself a learned man and fond of scholarship. He actively conducted biological experiments on plants in his secluded cabin, and he avidly read all the books available to him through the Hindman library and other venues which would send him books through the mail. Furthermore, Still spent a great deal of his life supplying books to back road communities in Knott County by "walking from school to school with a carton of children's books on [his] shoulder" (Still, "Autobiography: Section 2") and then teaching at Morehead State University from 1962 to1970 (Egerton, "Author James Still"). Despite their suspicion of highly educated people, Still's characters also acknowledge the importance of education. For example, in *River of Earth*, neither the father nor the mother of the narrator has been formally educated; however, both understand the importance of schooling for their children. At one of the mining camps, the narrator and his sister finally have the chance to attend school, but teachers are scarce and tended to be forced to leave or worse. When it seems inevitable that Jonce Weathers will eventually be forced out as the teacher of Flat Creek School, the mother admits her dismay: "I allus wanted my chaps to read and spell and figure . . . . Allus put a lot of store by that. Another rusty cut and they'll close the school shore. As long as we keep living here, Flat Creek School is their only chance earthy" (90). As this example makes clear, Still was certainly not trying to minimize the importance of education; he just

understood, as did the mountain people, the difference between being educated and being intelligent.

In his article entitled "The Seamless Vision of James Still," Fred Chappell notes that Still's characters possess a "certain cold insularity of understanding." Though Chappell is not necessarily implying that their inherent skepticism of outsiders suggests a lack of intelligence, it does indicate the rigid dichotomy between the ways of the mountain people versus the rest of the world. As Richard Gray points out in his discussion of regionalism in *Southern Aberrations*, anything different from the norm is discounted as inferior (1); while the mountain people were skeptical of the outside, so was the outside skeptical of the Appalachian people. In addition to being culturally different, the characters in Still's stories "are never highly educated; the wisdom they possess they have acquired by dint of harsh personal experience" (Chappell). However, the personal experience to which Chappell refers and applies to the Appalachian people is not sufficient evidence to convince scholars unfamiliar with the mountain culture to apply the same objective criticism and credit the mountain people with their own brand of intelligence. Chappel admits that Still's characters "hold stubbornly to their notions, right or wrong, and are skeptical about the knowledge and intuitions of others" ("The Seamless Vision"), but he appears to understand that skepticism and intelligence are two separate issues. It is certainly true that some of Still's characters indicate deep skepticism of people outside of their community. In "A Master Time," for example, an aged midwife named Aunt Bess Lipscomb keeps questioning the birthplace of the narrator: "Was I the granny-doctor who fotched you?" (Still, *Pattern of Man* 8). When the narrator finally admits to not being born on Logan Creek, Aunt Bess expresses the

inherent skepticism of outsiders that Chappell notes by exclaiming, "Are ye a heathen?" (13). Ironically, those who deem the mountain people as primitive and inferior because of their inherent distrust of outsiders are themselves demonstrating a type of skepticism similar to that of Aunt Bess. The mountain life of Still's characters is not one that is easily understood by outsiders, so those not familiar with the culture of the Appalachians find themselves holding on to their own notions of the world just as ardently as do the mountain people. This represents the typical clash of cultures: since the Appalachian people are the minority group who fail to live according to conventional societal norms and essentially do live in their own "insularity of understanding," then they must be tragically flawed, intellectually inferior people. The problem for both the Appalachian people and those outside of the mountains is not just the differences in cultures but the fear of those differences and the refusal to attempt a greater understanding of each other.

Not surprisingly, then, a re-occurring theme in Still's stories addresses the fact that being from a different culture and having a different understanding of the world is not the same as lacking intelligence. In "The Sharp Tack," for instance, there is, according to Chappell, "a clash between an enlightened world-view and an extremely narrow fundamentalist mountain view" ("The Seamless Vision"). The story is comprised of a series of letters from the Reverend Jerb Powell, a mountain preacher, warning Talt Evarts that he is "within singeing distance of hell-fire and eternal damnation" (Still, *Pattern of Man* 80). Mr. Evarts, who has just returned from a stint in World War II, has claimed to have been to the Holy Land, crossed the Jordan River, and even toured the city of Bethlehem. Of course, Reverend Powell is stunned by the impropriety of Mr. Evarts's "lies strong enough to melt the wax in a body's ears" (79). Powell does not believe those

places exist on earth: "The Holy Land is yonder in the sky and there's no road to it save by death and salvation" (81). After he has learned some geographical details of the Middle East, Powell's letters become more accepting and calm until he is finally at peace with Evarts's claims. Yet, although Powell's vicious intolerance and skepticism appear ignorant to the reader, there is another side to be considered. As Jim Wayne Miller points out, "[t]he Reverend Powell's geography and general knowledge of the world may be imperfect, but his theology is sound" ("At Home in This World"). Based on what Powell had been taught, Mr. Evarts was, in fact, being blasphemous. This story is not about the outright stupidity of the mountain preacher, then; instead, it "deals with the relationship of Appalachia to the outside world" and emphasizes the fact that the people of this part in Kentucky are "mostly unknowing about the forces of larger history" (Chappell, "The Seamless Vision"). Perhaps the mountain people were insulated in their culture, but it was the innocence of that culture that Still found worthy of preserving.

Chappell also claims that " there is something a little suffocating about their narrowness, and the reader is so thoroughly immersed in their milieu that he can form no accurate judgment about how the characters are to be perceived outside it" ("The Seamless Vision"). However, Chappell has missed the purpose of Still's characterization here: Still was not asking the reader to decide how the characters would be perceived outside of their world because their existence was not dependent on that world. Their intelligence cannot be measured against that of the rest of the South, or the rest of Kentucky, because their circumstances were much different. He allowed the characters to develop based on the concept of wisdom that he witnessed in the mountain people of Hindman. Still does not try to prove or invent the intellect of the Eastern Kentucky

people; instead, he invites the reader to enter into their world and to make judgments about that intellect for himself/herself. However, it is difficult for a reader who is not familiar with the Appalachian culture to separate Still's stories from his or her own understanding of cultural norms and ideas of intelligence. Comparisons between the mountain people and those on the outside are inevitable because by allowing outsiders a peek into the lives of the Appalachian people, Still has made their culture vulnerable to both comparisons and criticisms. These criticisms are legitimate when a true understanding of the Appalachian culture is attempted as is the case with Chappell; however, the illegitimate criticisms of Still's work, and the work of other Appalachian writers, are those which perpetuate false stereotypes based on ignorance of the mountain people and overall disgust with Appalachian culture.

Still also refused to surrender his characters to the stereotype of intellectual inferiority by bombarding readers with meaningless eye dialect. After being completely disillusioned with the use of dialect in the writing of Johnson Jones Hooper's *Some Adventures of Simon Suggs*, Still found writing about Kentucky and negotiating the dialect to be both problematic and challenging. Instead of focusing on capturing a pure dialect, Still chose to emphasize another quality of the mountain language: "My intentions are to evoke speech. Dialect too strictly adhered to makes a character appear ignorant when he is only unlettered" (Still, "Autobiography: Section 1"). As Ward points out, Still's use of mountain speech is certainly authentic but not overwhelming:

> He is totally free of the faults of the local colorists of the turn-of-the-century era, when the typical writer played up the quaint and outlandish dialect and behavior of his or her characters—and even exploited them. In Still's work, however, the

> behavior and speech patterns are authentic. Completely absent are dialect spellings and typographical symbols that suggest elisions . . . but Still has chosen to give the flavor of dialect by using a limited number of authentic words and expressions. Thus with characteristic words of hill country speech he achieves his purpose without forcing his reader to decipher words that are typographically strange to him (228).

While it is true that Still wanted to make the speech of the mountain people more accessible to the readers, he is also protecting his characters from the automatic assumption of their ignorance by the reading public. For instance, in the short story "Mrs. Razor," six-year-old Elvy speaks of her imaginary husband in language that certainly indicates the mountain vernacular: "A day will come when my man's going to get killed down dead, the way he's living" (Still *Pattern of a Man*, 2). In actuality, words such as "going" would be transcribed as "goin'" and "living" as "livin'" in dialect, but Still chose to use the proper spellings for the sake of readability. At the same time, Still does not misrepresent the mountain speech because he allows the use of authentic Appalachian phrases such as "get killed down dead." Dialect is almost always equated with regionalism, which is often in itself deemed inferior. Accordingly, the more awkward the dialect is to the eye of the reader, the more likely it is that that particular dialect and the people who speak it will be presumed inferior. As Ward suggests, "[l]anguage is one of the most important means through which a culture can be portrayed sensitively and convincingly" (228), and Still chose not to undermine his characters by unnecessarily emphasizing the difference in their dialect.

Traces of the Kentucky burden of history are also apparent in Still's work. Despite the fact that Still, himself, suffered through unemployment woes during the Great Depression, his writing indicates that he was much more interested in the history and economic problems of Knott Country, Kentucky, than with those of the rest of the country. According to Catherine Allameh, "Still's work reflects the perspective of an author totally immersed in Kentucky culture and fascinated with the common Kentucky family" ("James Still"). As Still became immersed in the mountain culture, he began to "record anything unique to the region, of a community that hardly exists today" (Still, "Autobiography: Section 3"). Although many of his stories deal in the main with the stability of the coal industry and the effects of this on the miners and their families, his focus was on Appalachia; Still "chose not to follow the mountaineers who migrated to the outside world of Detroit and elsewhere but rather to portray what happens to miners and their families who remain behind and try to ply the only trade they know" (Ward 224). In fact, those who moved to the larger cities were often looked upon with scorn by the mountain people. In "The Moving," Still Lovelock expresses this attitude to the man moving his family away from the mining camp that has run out of work: "They's Scripture ag'in' a feller hauling off the innocent . . . . I say, stay where there' floor underfoot and joists overhead" (Still, *The Run for the Elbertas* 98-9). As the family pulls away, Lovelock exclaims, "You're making your bed in Hell!" (100), and the rest of the town commences to break out the windows of the family's house with rocks. Starvation and suffering were much more acceptable than leaving the mountains; those who did the latter were viewed as traitors. Ironically, the people in this story exhibit the same judgmental attitude toward their own people who are forced to leave the mountains that

Still, and other defenders of the Appalachian culture, appeared to be warning those outside of Appalachia against.

Besides *River of Earth* and "The Moving," many other Still short stories, such as "I Love My Rooster" and "The Proud Walkers," deal specifically with the economic hardships associated with mining while the coal camps serve merely as the backdrop for other stories. Although Still did witness the destruction and poverty left behind in Knott Country by the coal boom and though he did witness the region's devastation during a brief stay at a coal camp, much of his knowledge of details was passed down orally through the storytelling of the members of the older Hindman community. Even though much was going on in the world at the time and other authors were churning out stories about famous battles of the Civil War, the destruction of World War I, or the drama surrounding the Great Depression, Still focused his attention on "the personalities and lives of Appalachian people, a group different from any other in the world but often left uncaptured by an author not involved in the community" (Allameh, "James Still").

While many of his depictions of the human experience are broadly relevant, Still was not attempting to write specifically about universal problems; instead, he developed characters based on his own experiences and those of the people around him in the mountains of Hindman. By doing this, Still was preserving a part of Kentucky history that, though not glamorous, is important in understanding the culture of the eastern part of the state. Dean Cadle points out in the Foreword of the 1978 reprinting of *River of Earth* that the destruction left behind by the coal boom is now a permanent part of the Kentucky landscape: "Read today with the strip-mined region as a map—the scalped hills and gashed mountainsides, the ruined farmlands, the dead streams, the flash waters

the earth can't contain—even the title assumes a prophecy of doom undreamed of by Brother Mobberly" (x). Though his stories are fictional, they are real enough to be reminders of the predicament of the "[f]olk living in the nineteenth century with the twentieth threatening" (Still, "Autobiography: Section 3"). Farming ironically took a backseat to the land desecration of mining. Still illustrates how the land and the people of Appalachia became victims to an imposing outside world yet how those who chose to stay found ways to survive and maintain their livelihood regardless. The burden of this specific Kentucky history is almost haunting in the works of Still and constitutes the importance of his literary contribution.

To understand further the implications of the Kentucky burden in Still's works, it is important to consider his reaction to identity. According to Ward, "[m]ore than most writers of fiction Still keeps himself out of what he writes. He takes no sides, preaches no social doctrine, offers no propaganda" (225). Still did not try to reinvent the Appalachian identity, nor did he campaign for its improvement. In his stories, he usually used a child as a narrator, and "always he remained unnamed, perhaps because by remaining so he is less a fixed personality, for without a name he remains a boy still in the process of discovering his identity" (Ward 226). This indeterminacy allows for the identity of the character to be formed while experiencing the events of the plot along with the reader, thus drawing the reader emotionally closer to the characters. Consequently, the readers become more involved in the story and are more likely to learn about themselves through the character's inevitable "journey into life in search of meaning and purpose" (227). Often Still's authorial intent cannot readily be found in his narratives in that the stories are often "so severe in the restriction of authorial intrusion that to the

unaccustomed eye they might look like reportage" (Chappell, "The Seamless Vision). The reader must decipher what he/she can about the narrator based on personal experiences.

Still's work, then, cannot be read without the realization that he is writing about the world in which he lives—perhaps not accounts of the exact circumstances or a precise time in history, but the culture depicted in Still's stories is his own. His characters resemble so closely the people of Knott County and the community in which he chose to live that he could not help being identified through his works. However, a conflicted identity is not apparent. If anything, his literary works indicate a wholehearted acceptance of the identity associated with his Kentucky region and with his mountain characters. The sophistication of his writing reveals Still's strong sense of identity. Chappell explains, "His mastery of values that he must have in some sense passed beyond, his very reticence and restraint, argue for a steadfast self-confidence on his part. He knows what person he is; he understands and fully accepts his relationship to his heritage" ("The Seamless Vision"). In fact, in the poem "Heritage," Still's self-conception is perfectly clear as he indicates the peace he feels with his relationship to the mountains of Kentucky in the final line: "Being of these hills I cannot pass beyond" (line 15). Kentucky may not have had a clear and positive identity in terms of the nation's view, but James Still definitely had a clear and dynamic sense of identity as a Kentuckian.

In contrast to other prominent Southern writers of his time, very few critical studies have been conducted of Still's works. His critical and popular audience was relatively small throughout his career and has remained so after his death. Even when he

was at the height of his career, Still recalls that "[a]lthough my stories and poems were appearing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Yale Review*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, and a variety of other publications and I had three published books, I do not recall encountering anybody during these years who had read them. I wrote in an isolation which was virtually total" (Ward 231). Perhaps his small following can be attributed to the fact that he wrote at the same time as Jesse Stuart who was widely read by the general public. However, it is more probable that Still's work reveals a reality that tends to make the popular audience outside of Appalachia uncomfortable. Unlike the work of Stuart, Still's stories do not always wrap up neatly and end happily. Often, there is no resolution at all—just continuous life. As Miller suggests, "[c]losely identified with the earth, the hill people of James Still's poems and prose narratives are subject to the same natural conditions—often harsh and perilous—as plants and animals" ("Appalachian Literature"). Still's works emphasize the harshness of human experience captured by a masterful control of language: "The poems, short stories, and novels of James Still are a distinguished, unified body of work, at once unique and universal, illuminating a particular place and way of life by providing poetic vision of the facts" (Miller, "At Home in This World"). Unfortunately for the reader seeking comfort, the facts are not always comfortable. For instance, in *River of Earth*, the novel ends in uncertainty for the very young narrator and his family. The grandmother has died, and a baby has been born, indicating the natural cycle of death and birth; however, the birth of the child is not necessarily a good thing for the family. They are poor, and a new baby means one more mouth to feed. The realization of this leaves the reader feeling uneasy not just because of the story's open ending but because of the documentary reality of the story. Though

often entertaining, Still's work is not always guaranteed to be a pleasant reading experience.

Still's reputation with critics is more complicated. Although during his lifetime he was awarded two Guggenheim Fellowships, received four O. Henry Memorial Award Prizes, was a co-winner with Thomas Wolfe of the Southern Authors' Award for *River of Earth*, won awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and had three stories included in *Best American Short Stories*, Still has virtually disappeared from the literary world. Wendell Berry, who is perhaps Kentucky's best known contemporary author, asserts that James Still's minimal recognition by scholars is due to "prejudice against country people and country things, whatever is perceived to be regional or local" ("A Master Language"). Berry accuses critics of misunderstanding the complexity of Still's work by narrowly viewing it only as a record of "regional, rural, and 'backward'" people. As a result, these critics fail to recognize the quality of his writing: "It is evidently tempting, when speaking of this body of work, to carry it into the neighborhood of words such as 'folk,' 'primitive,' 'archaic,' and 'Americana.' Thus an incoherent culture condescends to a coherent one, and in the process overlooks the artistry of James Still" (Berry, "A Master Language"). Berry's description of Appalachia as a coherent culture is interesting and reveals an underlying question in Still's work of cultural authenticity. It appeared that both Berry and Still believed that Appalachian culture was, perhaps, more authentic than the other cultures in the country because it was basically untouched, until the coal boom, by the outside world. The rest of the American culture was tainted by industrialism, commercialism, and other outside forces and thus had lost a great deal of its authenticity. Still, seeing that the

Appalachian culture was being victimized by the outside world, sought to record the Appalachian culture before it, too, lost its authenticity and, became just as incoherent as the rest of the world. The Appalachian culture would remain a "real" culture, but its authenticity endured only through the preservation of its past. Through his works, Still recorded one of the last truly authentic cultures in America. Despite Berry's defense of Still's opus, Still's works have failed to earn inclusion in either popular American or Southern anthologies.

While Berry's assertion that Still's lack of critical acclaim is due to critics' failure to recognize his complexity as more than a regional writer makes sense, Still's reaction to the Kentucky burden may also provide a possible explanation. Instead of trying to escape the presumed inferiority of any Kentuckian, writer or not, Still chose to preserve Eastern Kentucky regionalism in its purest form by recording the disappearing mountain culture. Elements of the Kentucky burden are evident in Still's writing, but he did not try to redeem himself or the state by creating anything other than authentic Kentucky characters and stories. If these characters and stories appeared too regional or strange to the outside world, so be it. James Still's goal was far greater than his receiving accolades; his stories "constitute a metaphor for the essential human experience" (Miller, "Appalachian Literature") and represent the Appalachian people as they truly are and not how the rest of the world wants them to be. At the same time, his writing also indicates that the essential human experience is cross-cultural—all humans experience life, death, happiness, sadness, acceptance, rejection—regardless of whether they are from the most primitive mountain communities or the most cosmopolitan cities. For instance, Still's most famous metaphor, "this mighty river of earth" (*River of Earth* 76), which comes

from Brother Sim Mobberly's sermon in the novel, captures the whole of the essential human experience as "a natural cycle of birth, reproduction, and death" (Miller, "Appalachian Literature"). His writing is, for the most part, specific to the Eastern Kentucky mountains, but it is universal in the sense that human beings are universal and thus share the characteristic of simply being human. By not forcing his characters and his writing to conform to the national standard of literature, Still basically eliminated his chances for any real critical acclaim. Instead, he has been deemed a regionalist and an Appalachian writer and ultimately forgotten in the greater scheme of American literature. While Still has often been called "a writer's writer" (Ward 231), he will never be recognized as a critic's writer.

Although Still was not a native Kentuckian, no one has ever argued that he is anything but a Kentucky writer. In fact, H. R. Stoneback sees in his work the essence of Kentucky literature: "When I think of Jim Still then, I think of sense of place, sense of community, and a deep sense of the rational holiness of the earth—major themes in all Kentucky writers" ("Roberts, Still, Stuart, & Warren"). James Still's literary burden is, however, more complicated than just that of being a Kentucky author. His writing is imbued with all things Kentucky but also represents a part of the state that is very different from the central and western sections. When one compares Still's work to that of other Kentucky writers, it quickly becomes apparent that while it does contain many of the common characteristics of the entire state's unique regionalism, his writing also powerfully asserts that at least one unique cultural subset exists within Kentucky—that of the Appalachian mountains. Since he became an inhabitant of the mountains, Still's literary burden exists on two levels: that of Kentucky regionalism and that of

Appalachian regionalism. Whether the majority of Still's literary burden rests with his Kentucky background or his Appalachian mountain heritage is yet to be determined, but both are clearly important components of his literary opus and constitute his contribution to American literature.

II. Kentucky Is My Land: The Romantic Quality of Jesse Stuart's Kentucky

And when I go beyond the border,
[. . .] I take with me Kentucky embedded in my brain and heart,
In my flesh and bone and blood
Since I am of Kentucky
And Kentucky is part of me.
--Jesse Stuart, from "Kentucky Is My Land"

Unlike James Still's affiliation, Jesse Stuart's connection to Kentucky began even before he was conceived. His great-grandfather Stuart traveled to America from the Scottish Highlands and eventually settled on the Big Sandy River in Lawrence County while his mother's family, the Hiltons, arrived in Kentucky from North Carolina. Stuart's parents, Mitchell and Martha, married, settled in W-Hollow of Greenup County, "where miners come to dig coal in the high hills" (Stuart, *Beyond Dark Hills* 13), and begat seven children, the second being Jesse born in 1906. At a very early age, Stuart became fascinated by the landscape and nature surrounding his small W-Hollow world as "[h]is father led him by the hand over the farm and sometimes carried him on his back" (Richardson 9). He learned to farm and hunt with his father, but perhaps the most important lesson he learned as a child was the reverent reliance on the environment which fostered the deep appreciation for the land of his birth found in his writing. Thus began Stuart's long love affair with the hills of eastern Kentucky.

Though he attended Plum Grove Elementary School for only a total of twenty-two months, Stuart's authorial ambitions became evident long before he entered Greenup High School. When he was eight, he wrote his first story (Richardson 11) and thereafter continued to derive pleasure from writing sketches and stories for school assignments. In high school, Stuart's desire to write was further nurtured by the encouragement of his

English teachers, especially Mrs. Robert Hatton. During his junior year, she "whetted Jesse's interest in the literature and traditions of Scotland and England" (40) by introducing him to the poetry of Robert Burns. Not only did his discovery of the poet serve as the beginning of his love of poetry, but the verse of Burns awakened Stuart to the existence of a world separate from W-Hollow:

> I would read his poetry every spare minute I had. I carried his poems wherever I went. I thought I had never heard words more beautiful than those in "Flow Gently, Sweet Afton." It was sung in school once or twice each week. The sentiment of that song choked me for I loved it deeply. . . . I feasted on the poetry of Robert Burns. It seemed as if something big in life had taken hold of me. I wanted to write poetry like Robert Burns. . . . I knew it didn't always take the boys that wore sweaters like Burl Mavis to do things. (*Beyond Dark Hills* 40)

From that point on, Stuart was overtaken by the desire to write verse. He took the advice of Mrs. Hatton by writing about the Eastern Kentucky land that he knew best, but his ultimate goal for the rest of his career was to achieve the high art status of Burns' work: "And my prayer, if I ever prayed one then, was to write poetry that would endure like the poetry of Robert Burns" (40).

However, even before graduating from high school, Stuart became restless with the confines of Eastern Kentucky. Once he had tasted the world of Robert Burns, he longed to escape and explore beyond W-Hollow and Greenup County. During his junior year of high school, he would tell his mother at night about his dreams and ambitions; though she was surprised, she also admitted to him that "sometimes I have felt like I would just like to get out and go and go and go. I have felt that these hills could not hold

me" (Stuart, *Beyond Dark Hills* 41). Stuart decided to fulfill his mother's youthful dreams and leave W-Hollow to experience life beyond Kentucky. The more philosophical Stuart became about his life, the more he yearned for something beyond the hills of his birthplace.

According to H. Edward Richardson, Stuart's friend and biographer, in 1926 he "graduated into a world of ambivalence toward himself" (57). His father had asked him to stay home and help with the farm, but Stuart's need to escape the boundaries of his youth was much stronger than his loyalties to his father. Stuart told his father that "[f]ifty acres of land is not a big enough place for me" (58), and he left home with very little money and no immediate plan. After brief stints of working for a traveling carnival and then enduring the brutality of work in a steel mill, Stuart packed a pasteboard suitcase and headed to Berea College in Kentucky without even applying. Unfortunately, there was no room in the college, so the dean recommended that he go to Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee. With only $29.30 to his name, Stuart enrolled in LMU with the agreement that he could earn his way through college by working half of the day and attending class the other half. Accordingly, he joined James Still as a hungry student and flourishing writer at LMU. Several of his poems appeared in the *Railsplitter*, the campus magazine for which he served as editor (Richardson 67-89).

After graduating with a B.A. from LMU in 1929 and then serving as principal of Greenup County High School, Stuart once again left the hills of Eastern Kentucky to join the academic community at Vanderbilt, which Stuart thought was a school where "teachers wrote books and farmed" (Richardson 117). Previously, he had been attending Peabody College in Nashville during the summer and while he was there Stuart had the

opportunity to read many works by the leading Fugitives and Agrarians. He initially found their idea of supporting "a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way" (*I'll Take My Stand* xix) of industrialization quite appealing, and he also believed that their literary works were ingenious. As a result, Stuart yearned for the opportunity to study under these men whom he could identify with as both a farmer and a poet. According to Richardson, the Agrarians were "articulating to some extent what Jesse Stuart believed he had been living" (Richardson 163), and he assumed that their lifestyle would reflect the basic Agrarian ideas. So, in 1931 Stuart headed to Vanderbilt with little more than he had taken to LMU determined to complete a graduate degree program and continue to write, only this time he would do so under the guidance of some of the most noted Southern literary figures of his time.

Upon entering Vanderbilt, Stuart quickly found that the Fugitives were "a closed shop" (Stoneback) and that the Agrarian theory was artificially based on romantic ideals. In a 1969 interview with H.R. Stoneback, Stuart recalled his disdain toward the practices of the infamous group versus the grim reality of his people:

> Regarding the Agrarians, not one farmed that I knew. It was a sweet theory. I saw a few wilted tomato plants in one Agrarian's garden. When we at my home in the hills of Kentucky had 500 sheep, 50 head of cattle, two teams of mules and one of large horses, milked 18 cows and had as many as 20 hogs. And ending today, we have put in part of the first cutting of hay, 2885 bales. . . . What do you think I thought of Agrarian farming of Vanderbilt men? Sweet theory, but silly and yet books have been written on it. . [*sic*] what? Written on the wind." (Stoneback)

Though he enjoyed classes taught by Robert Penn Warren, the only member of the Vanderbilt group that Stuart ever truly became closely acquainted with was Donald Davidson. Davidson served as Stuart's mentor and friend during Stuart's tumultuous years as a graduate student in Nashville, and Davidson also helped him get poetry published in various magazines around the country. Stuart revered Davidson as a counselor and critic who "brought him renewed determination to succeed in academic work and genuine encouragement, even excitement about his future prospects as a writer" (Richardson 146). Stuart's struggle at Vanderbilt was evident; he was constantly hungry from living on eleven meals a week or less, he was sparsely clothed, he was exhausted from having to go to class and then to work for seemingly endless hours, and then he was victimized by a dormitory fire which destroyed all of his belongings including his clothes, his poems, his typewriter, and his master's thesis on John Fox, Jr. Especially in light of these hardships, Davidson's friendship was one of the few bright spots for Stuart, and his influence on the young budding poet continued for years to come. For Stuart, Davidson's office and classroom provided "a little bit of Heaven on the Vanderbilt University campus" (147). Due to the thesis disaster and other circumstances still not entirely clear, Stuart did not take a degree from Vanderbilt, but Davidson gave him the confidence to continue in his writing and pursuit of publication.

Years after Stuart's Vanderbilt experience, Davidson responded rhetorically to questions about his influence on Stuart: "Did Jesse Stuart, true Kentuckian, true poet, need more than a prod or gentle poke, to discover for himself that what he really meant was what he ought to write?" (Richardson 153). Stuart wanted to write long before he met Davidson, but it was this mentor's encouragement that likely guided the determined

boy from the hills in the right direction. Davidson helped Stuart to realize that the land of his past was far more valuable as material than he had ever imagined. His background provided Stuart with a perspective of the world that was unique and fresh in the literary world. From the beginning of their friendship, Davidson encouraged Stuart to write about what he knew best: his life in Kentucky. When he strayed away from his experiences, Stuart's poetry sounded inauthentic and superficial. In fact, Davidson once warned him when he attempted to write poetry in the style of Ernest Hartsock, "Stuart, don't be a pretty boy. These are pretty boy poems" (Richardson 145). Davidson recalled that particular incident nearly a quarter of a century later and reminisced of his discovery of the true core of Stuart's works:

> The bundle in his hands contains some pretty but rather worthless poems of his that had appeared in certain even more worthless poetry magazines. They were what he thought he was supposed to write in the way of poetry. But the bundle also contained a rough draft of what later became his "[Elegy] for Mitch Stuart," which was something Jesse Stuart really meant when he was thinking of Kentucky and the world. (145)

Davidson saw greatness in Stuart and would later promote him to magazine editors as "an American Robert Burns" and "the first real poet (aside from ballad makers) ever to come out of the southern mountains" (214).

Besides the friendship and guidance of Donald Davidson, Stuart gained a new perspective on his homeland while at Vanderbilt. He had been more than ready to leave and had even considered never returning to the hills of Eastern Kentucky, but such a whim was only temporary rebellion. Immediately following his unfortunate experience

at the prestigious school, Stuart went home to W-Hollow to resume farming the land and writing about its splendor with a renewed sense of belonging and a respect for an authentic agrarian lifestyle: "He would go home and farm *and* write, and practice what the Agrarians preached" (Richardson 171). He may not have gotten his Master's degree at Vanderbilt, but while there he learned a great deal about himself and about the rest of the world. Suddenly, Stuart no longer felt the confines of Kentucky; instead, he felt that his home on W-Hollow with its poetic landscape and bountiful wildlife served as his shelter from the reality of the outside. Thus, Stuart's time at Vanderbilt with some of the literary giants of the South was beneficial to his growth as a writer and dramatically influenced his reaction to the Kentucky burden so evident in his works.

Stuart's reaction to the Kentucky burden is interesting in that even when he desperately wanted to escape his home as a youth, he would generally always return to the Kentucky hills in his writing. To say that he portrayed Kentucky positively is quite an understatement; he was so complimentary of Kentucky that his work often comes across as exceedingly romantic and sentimental. While other writers shuddered at the thought of being labeled regional, Stuart thrived on verse and short stories praising his homeland, and he ardently defended his territory as "The heart of America" (Stuart, "Kentucky Is My Land" line 200). Stuart's extreme romanticizing of Kentucky was, however, more than an attempt to illustrate his love of the state; Stuart was also defending its people against the prevalent stereotype of inferiority often imposed on Kentucky residents. If he could convince not just Kentuckians but everyone in the country that the Commonwealth was an Edenic paradise, then he could single-handedly rid the state of the inferiority complex it suffered. He could create a swelling of pride

among Kentuckians and at least influence outsiders to reconsider assuming that the state was inferior. He attempted to do all of this by embracing his heritage as a Kentuckian and by celebrating everything it afforded him. Through his writing and his work within the school systems, Stuart sought to redefine the perception of what it meant to be a Kentuckian. In essence, Stuart did not try to escape the Kentucky burden; instead, he sought to glorify it by concentrating on its merits.

Like Still, Stuart did not accept the notion that Kentucky people were intellectually inferior to those in the rest of the country. Instead, through his writing he attempted to convince the outside world that if given the right opportunities, the youth of Kentucky could make valuable contributions. Much of his work deals with the problematic educational system of Kentucky in his lifetime. At the age of seventeen, Stuart received his first taste of teaching in Greenup County as the summer instructor at Cane Creek Elementary School. Eventually he would become the principal of Greenup County High School and superintendent of the school system before retiring to a life of farming in W-Hollow, writing, and lecturing around the world. Those experiences with the educational system, which are partially fictionalized in his novel *The Thread That Runs So True* (1949), revealed the wretched conditions of many of the more primitive areas of Kentucky. They also marked the beginning of Stuart's campaign to improve the Greenup County school system so that the Kentucky youth could have the chance to excel in the rapidly developing nation.

The Thread That Runs So *True* is full of stories about the hardships of teaching in a rural school and highlights some of the problems facing that school system. However, Stuart also includes stories emphasizing the abilities of even the most rural Kentucky

students. For instance, in the chapter entitled "The Contest with Landsburgh High School," Stuart remembers his small school of fourteen pupils taking on a much larger school in a scholastic competition. Beyond recalling the incident for the sake of entertainment, Stuart also uses the story as proof that all children can excel if given the opportunity. After traveling seventeen miles on hitched mules through snow and "a whipping wind—stinging, biting wind" (259), the students of the economically deprived Winston High School soundly defeat the Landsburgh High School students in a scholastic contest featuring state-mandated questions in subjects such as grammar, English literature, history, civil government, algebra, and plane geometry. Though obviously romanticized, this story captures a central theme in Stuart's work: Disadvantaged is not the same as ignorant. The students of Winston did not have the same educational opportunities as Landsburgh, but they proved their capabilities and determination by winning the contest. Both of these schools were in Kentucky, but the perception of Winston as "a little mudhole in the road" (262) represents precisely the way Kentucky was viewed by the rest of the nation. Just as the Winston students were not intellectually inferior to those from Landsburgh, Stuart did not accept that Kentuckians were less intelligent than the people in the rest of the country. Nonetheless, he was also keenly aware that many of the school systems in Kentucky were not up to an acceptable educational standard, and he worked to improve education his entire life.

Stuart's characters in his various works thus also illustrate his refusal to accept the Kentucky burden of presumed intellectual inferiority. His autobiographical novel *Beyond Dark Hills* (1938), which was actually written as a term paper for Dr. Edwin Mims at Vanderbilt, spends significant time characterizing Stuart's parents. Both were

uneducated in terms of formal schooling, but both possessed a natural intelligence that allowed them to thrive in the often harsh mountain conditions. Though little specific detail is given about Stuart's mother, the reader is allowed small glimpses of Martha Hilton Stuart, and from these it is evident that she was not ignorant. Since Stuart's father was often away working various jobs with the railroad or in the coal mines, Martha was often left with the task of raising the children and tending to the farm with the help of Stuart and his young brother. Stuart recognizes the vigilance she displayed in performing these responsibilities, and he points out that she was sometimes "called over the country for sickness. She would get out of bed at midnight and go. It did not matter, rain or shine, when a child was sick she would go" (Stuart *Beyond Dark Hills* 35). Similar to Brack Baldridge's attending to the animals in Still's novel, Martha Stuart was relied upon to care for the sick children of the community. She was not formally trained, yet her medical services were called upon at moments of crisis. Stuart also reflects upon her artistic ability as he remembers her most endearing hobby: "But above all the time it took to do this work she found time to work on her quilts. She would go out and find a wild flower she liked. Then she would make the same kind of flower with quilt pieces. She loved to do it. She would sit far into the night looking at the beauty in a new design she was creating" (35). Certainly the quilts were used for the practical purpose of keeping warm, but Martha Stuart's quilt making also reflected her artistic abilities.

Perhaps the most revealing moment in the novel concerning Stuart's mother occurs when she admits her past restlessness within the confines of Eastern Kentucky. As Stuart confides in his mother about his desire to leave the hills of Greenup County, she sympathizes with her oldest boy and confesses, "You know, sometimes I have felt

like I would just like to get out and go and go and go. I have felt that these hills could not hold me. And if I had been a man I would have gone" (41). However, in this moment she reveals as well her devotion to her children and husband as she explains to Stuart that she wanted to raise her children to represent her well to the rest of the world. She chose to forgo her own dreams and allow her legacy to exist through her children. Martha taught her children how to survive on a farm, but she also taught them grace and patience. During one of these conversations between mother and son, Stuart remembers trying to milk a very unaccommodating cow. When the cow kicked the milk bucket over, he wanted to hit her with a stick. Martha quickly stopped him and reminded him how much he relied on that cow: "You mustn't hit one of the cows. They feed you half you eat. The way you like milk and then hit a cow!" (41). Martha was, indeed, teaching her son the proper treatment of animals, but she was also teaching him a much larger lesson in respect for all that nature provides. Stuart's work reflects such a respect for nature and reverence for life. Though not formally educated by the standards of the outside world, Martha Hilton Stuart had tremendous depth of character and demonstrated an intelligence not taught in schools.

In *God's Oddling* (1960), Stuart wrote "[n]othing ever escaped my father for he was an earth poet who loved the land and everything on it" (217). This was quite a compliment for a man who could not read or write, but Stuart was steady in his praise of his father's gifts with nature. Mitchell Stuart never attended school, but he possessed such a vast knowledge of his environment that even his Vanderbilt-educated and successful poet son found him perhaps the most impressive man he ever met. When Stuart was a child, his father would walk with him all over the farm on W-Hollow and

teach him about the signs of nature and the techniques of planting. Stuart called his father his "instructor through example" (*My World* 6) and, though "Mick" was never formally trained within the walls of a school, "[h]e studied the land, plants and seasons each year. He could never learn enough" (6). Stuart uses his father to emphasize the intelligence of even the most unlearned Kentucky man; he was wise in the aspects of life that helped him to survive and provide for his family. Stuart did not try to rationalize or excuse Mick's lack of education, but he did romanticize his father's knowledge of and kinship with his land in order to push against the stereotype of the intellectual inferiority of the Kentucky farmer:

> No one who really knew him ever felt sorry for my father. Any feeling of pity turned to envy. For my father had a world of his own, larger and richer than the vast earth that world travelers know. He found more beauty in his acres and square miles than poets who have written a half-dozen books. Only my father couldn't write down the words to express his thoughts. He had no common symbols by which to share his wealth. He was a poet who lived his life upon this earth and never left a line of poetry—except to those of us who lived with him. (*God's Oddling* 223)

While Stuart indirectly attempted to challenge the reputation of Kentucky as being intellectually inferior to the rest of the country, he overtly sought to claim its landscape as superior to all other places in the world. In the poem "Kentucky Is My Land," Stuart praises the distinctness of the seasons in the state with descriptions such as "[t]he twilight softness of Kentucky spring" (line 187) and the majestic autumn which ripened the persimmons until they were "[y]ellow-gold in color and better than bananas

to taste" (110). He also compares Kentucky not merely to the rest of the South but to every region of the country and after exploring north, south, east, and west in the poem, he reaches a final conclusion: "Then I was as positive as death Kentucky / Was not east, west, south or north / But it was the heart of America / Pulsing with a little bit of everything" (ll.196-99). Stuart was clearly proud of and devoted to his Kentucky surroundings, but his insistence on its unique splendor also served as a way to combat the Kentucky burden of inferiority. Kentucky may have been presumed inferior in many sociological ways, but Stuart's literature made the landscape seem unmatched in its beauty.

Evidence of the Kentucky burden of history is also evident in Stuart's work, especially in his short stories. In *The Jesse Stuart Reader* (1963), Stuart wrote brief introductions to each of the chosen short stories. These introductions reveal Stuart's reliance on the deep oral tradition of the Kentucky people for a great many of his pieces. For instance, Stuart first heard the original story of his "Battle with the Bees" when visiting with relatives who lived on the Big Sandy River. In the introduction, he described hearing the tale in the grand old tradition of storytelling:

> In this area where I visited, there were no paved roads, no telephones, no radios in those days. But in my experience, I have learned that where people lack some things they make up for this lack in other ways. When we were seated around the supper table, my uncle and my cousins began telling stories that had happened in this community. I never heard such fascinating, unbelievable stories as they told at the supper table. (74)

Since he relied so heavily on the oral tradition for his short stories, those tales are rich in the dialect of the Kentucky mountain people. Stuart comments about the relatives telling the story that "they didn't talk in perfect English. They made all kinds of grammatical errors. They used words that were used in Chaucer's time in England" (75). Though it is certainly true that the Eastern Kentucky mountain dialect directly descends from Elizabethan English, Stuart is determined not to allow the people to be dismissed as unintelligent because of their speech. In the story of the bees, the characters speak in dialect but not so much as to be misunderstood by the reader. When Pa counts his bee stands and declares that he has one hundred, Ma reminds him "You're not a-countin' the bees we got upstairs" (75). The word "a-countin'" is authentic mountain speech as well as are other words used in the story such as "Young 'uns," "riled," and "oughta." The dialect highlights many details of mountain speech by omitting words and syllables of words: "Musta been the smell o' Toab's hogs that riled 'em this way" (80). By authentically representing the dialect of the people of Eastern Kentucky, Stuart attempts to preserve in writing the rich oral tradition of his homeland.

Although much was going on in the world during Stuart's life, he still chose to concentrate on stories of his own community. He was more concerned with preserving the history of W-Hollow and Greenup County than that of the rest of the state or the larger world; further, he "dealt with the people of W-Hollow as individuals or small groups rather than in a collective or sociological sense" (Ward 233). The history he was concerned with was the history of his own people and his own land. Stuart thus illustrated the preoccupation with Kentucky legends which is characteristic of the Kentucky burden; however, the Kentucky legends he was most interested in were those

concerning his ancestors. In *Beyond Dark Hills*, Stuart introduces the reader to his Grandfather Stuart, who seems to fascinate the author to the point of obsession. Early on Stuart admits that he is not necessarily proud of that part of his ancestry, but at the same time he describes his grandfather in great detail and shares the stories of him that had been passed down from Stuart's father. Through this detailed description of Grandfather Stuart, the reader is introduced to a violent figure in the author's past, and Kentucky's reputation as the "Dark and Bloody Ground" is thus reaffirmed. That is, he describes the legendary figure of his grandfather and the violence that surrounded him his entire life. His grandfather entered the Civil War not to defend a cause but for the simple act of fighting. Even after the war, "he was not satisfied with the peace among the hills" (7), and he entered a feud with a family named the Houndshells. As Stuart describes the death of his own relatives and the Houndshells through the years of this feud, he poetically describes the outcome by personifying the land and recognizing the ultimate fate of those who surrender to the "Dark and Bloody Ground": "Kentucky drank the blood of both her native sons" (9).

In the end, Stuart's grandfather was also a victim of the violence endemic in Kentucky. Stuart's mother referred to her father-in-law as a man who was "not afraid of the Devil himself" (7), but eventually the demons of Kentucky caught up with Grandfather Stuart. The author recalls the death of his grandfather and the curious, yet somehow appropriate, circumstances that surrounded it:

> And Grandpa did die on Big Sandy. We don't know how he died. We didn't know that he was dead until he was dead and buried. We heard that he was beaten to death. We do not know. Uncle Joe's boys said they knew who did it

> and it would be his turn next. But his turn came sooner than Uncle Joe's boys expected. It came at the point of someone else's gun and the suspect sleeps under the Big Sandy clay not far away from Grandpa. (8)

Even after Grandfather Stuart died, the vicious cycle of violence continued to ravage the hills of Eastern Kentucky. This mysterious violence haunted Stuart, and his reaction to it often showed itself in his writing. Though there are some fights in his stories, most end in a peaceful resolution—an ending that his grandfather and other figures of the Kentucky past never managed to reach. By doing this, Stuart attempted to redefine Kentucky as possessing the potential for peace rather than as a land tainted with blood.

Through his description of his grandfather, it is also apparent that Stuart felt the Kentucky burden of identity. When writing about his grandfather's Civil War experiences, he felt compelled to justify his grandfather's association with the Northern cause by explaining that "[h]e joined the Federal Army at the age of twenty. He joined the North because the recruiting station for soldiers for the Northern armies was nearer. He just wanted to fight" (*Beyond Dark Hills* 2). He goes on to explain how his grandfather killed a comrade and was to be court-martialed by his own men before the battle of Gettysburg. Instead, he was put on the front lines during the legendary battle but somehow lived through it. Stuart also tells how he was twice captured by Confederate soldiers; each time he was treated well and released after actually enjoying his time as their captive. Stuart's southern sympathies seem apparent as he remarks that "I sometimes think my grandfather was in the wrong army" (3).

Recalling the characteristic Southern pride found in the work of other Southern authors, in "Kentucky Is My Land," Stuart writes "I would have chosen W-Hollow, / The

place where I was born, / Where four generations of my people have lived, / And where they still live" (ll. 26-9). However, Stuart is not completely committed to connecting Kentucky with any other part of the country. Just as he declared himself an individualist and not part of literary circles, he also claims Kentucky as independent from the South:

> Then I went beyond the hills to see
>
> America's South of which I had always thought
>
> We were a distinct part.
>
> But I learned we were different from the South
>
> Though our soils grew cane, cotton and tobacco . . .
>
> We moved faster and we spoke differently. (162-7)

In some of his writing, he appears to insist on Kentucky's southern status, but at other times, he seems comfortable with allowing the state to exist separately. While his vision of Kentucky's identity was rather conflicted, what is perfectly clear is his own identity as a Kentuckian. Stuart was not only comfortable with his heritage, but after returning to his land at a young age, he announced repeatedly that he was proud of his distinction as an Eastern Kentuckian. His reaction to the Kentucky burden was never to deny his connection with the state but to embrace it fully and defend the sanctity of its reputation.

Stuart's propagandistic praise of Kentucky continued throughout his life. During a speech at a small midwestern college, Stuart was asked to reveal the greatest thing that had ever happened to him. He replied that being born was the greatest thing, but he quickly supplemented his response by saying, "I would choose, if I had the choice, the same parents, the same little one-room cabin on a Kentucky hill. I thought, as a boy growing up, that it was the prettiest land in the world. Now after traveling in forty-eight

of the United States and ninety countries of the world on six continents, I *know* it is the prettiest country in the world" (*My World* 1). This idealistic view of Kentucky and the romanticism of his writing are the reasons for the overwhelming popular success he enjoyed during his lifetime and for some years following his death. Those living in Kentucky loved Stuart for his optimistic vision of their homeland and heritage while those living beyond Kentucky admired the neat resolution and happy endings his work offered. When Jesse Stuart first entered the public eye as a budding writer, the nation was on the cusp of entering World War II and soon witnessed some of the most trying times in American history including the Korean and Vietnam Wars, assassinations of great leaders, race riots, political scandals, and other national disasters. In the literary world, the unrest of the country gave way to the modernist movement and revealed the alienation of the new "lost generation" of authors. In such a confusing and violent time, the reading public found Stuart's writing, though highly romantic and sentimental, to be a much needed positive escape from reality. His novels, stories, and poems were easy to read and offered his audience what Robert Frost called "a momentary stay against confusion." Stuart's sentimental characters and redemptive endings were a neat diversion from the harshness of the real world.

Even Stuart's villains were likable in some way. In the short story "Ezra Acorn and April," the main character is a man named Ezra whose ultimate goal every April was to cause as much trouble as he possibly could for whomever he could. He would hit his neighbors and record his success in a little black book, and he would start quarrels between neighbors that would end up being full-blown neighborhood wars. Despite all the trouble he caused, the townspeople all attend Ezra's funeral and laugh over his

mischievousness; even the neighbors he victimized seemed to like him. In the end, Ezra's death brings all the estranged neighbors back together to remember Ezra and his April antics, and the narrator pictures Ezra in the afterlife: "I wondered if Ezra had gone into another land where there was an April like we had now and if he would find friend and neighbors like us and if he would start another little book" (*A Jesse Stuart Reader* 95).

As Ward points out, "[i]t is an idle sort of guessing game to try to outwit time and assign a large or small place in either our state or national literary pantheon to a writer whose merits have been as controversial as Jesse Stuart's" (244). Despite his popular success, critics were unimpressed by the romanticism and sentimentality of Stuart's work. Many critics "dismissed him summarily as an undisciplined writer with few ideas and small literary merit" (Ward 244). Stuart was not just considered a regionalist, but he was often called a "third rate regionalist," and his writing was criticized by Southern critics and other writers as being "too narrowly regional, too much dialect, too much attention to mountain quaintness in his Appalachian characters, too overwritten, too sentimentalized" (Stoneback). Fugitive-Agrarian and *Sewanee Review* editor Andrew Lytle rejected all of Stuart's works sent to the magazine because he felt they were "heavy with the worst kind of regionalism" (Stoneback). Thus, the same romanticism and sentimentality that Stuart used to counter the Kentucky burden and that earned him popular success turned critics against his writing; for them, his fiction and poetry did not "live up to modernist views of literary standards" (Stoneback). Stuart "never ceased to be a bit sorry that he failed to win favor with a substantial segment of the literary establishment and with some of his fellow writers whose approval he would have

relished" (Ward 245), but he responded by taking a jab at the Vanderbilt Agrarians who were so highly revered by the Southern literary world: "I'm glad that I have remained an individualist and not a joiner and that I live within one mile of where I was taught to farm the same land, my father and grandfather farmed. I am an honest Agrarian" (Stoneback). Although he seemed to muster only a lukewarm reception from critics, Stuart was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize more than once, received the Academy of American Poets Award, and became the first Poet Laureate of Kentucky in 1954.

Before his death, Stuart and his work were acknowledged by some critics as exemplifying "effectiveness in handling an episode, skill in descriptive narrative, power of language, and excellence in the portrayal of a static character" (Ward 45), but he was mainly marginalized as a regionalist. After his death, Stuart was basically forgotten. He was dropped from popular American and Southern anthologies except those including a section of Appalachian authors. One of Kentucky's most prolific writers, outside of Kentucky very few people are even familiar with the name. As H.R. Stoneback points out, Stuart is "doomed never to achieve permanent literary status among students and teachers of American and Southern literature," but he did authenticate a genuine love of land and of heritage for Kentucky people. Yet, however limited his legacy, critic William Ward argues, "it seems safe to predict that his best verse and stories will have a secure place in Kentucky literature and that he will be remembered among the regional writers of our national literature of the middle third of the century" (245). He will always be Kentucky's son.

III. Kentucky's Best Kept Secret: Allen Tate's Biographical Burden

And his art, disjected from his mind,
Was utterly a tool, so it possessed him;
A passionate devil, informed in humankind,
It turned on him—he's dead. Shall we detest him?
--Allen Tate, from "Intellectual Detachment"

Allen Tate's background is as complicated as his often-criticized, purposefully ambiguous writing. Born in 1899 to John Orley Tate and Nellie Varnell, Tate's childhood was spent being smothered by his "domineering and neurotic" (Underwood 4) mother and being afraid of his "brutal and unpredictable" (7) father. Since he and his mother lived a rather nomadic existence because Nellie "lived on the run from Orley" (7), Tate's sense of home was obscured very early. Tate seldom lived longer than a few years at a time in any one place and, as a result, he was never able to form lasting relationships with school friends or a comfortable attachment to a geographic location. Unfortunately for Tate, he was the youngest child of Nellie and rather sickly throughout his boyhood, which resulted in a zealous overprotection by his mother. With no lasting sense of domestic tranquility and no relief from an overbearing parent, Tate's childhood was far from ideal; in fact, for the remainder of his life Tate dealt with the psychological consequences of his youth. For Tate, his mother served as a major source of conflict which was not only apparent in his relationships with others but also figured prominently in his writing. Tate's relationship with his mother was so traumatic that even after her death in 1929, she remained a haunting presence in his works.

The conflict between mother and son appeared to be inevitable, especially when one considers the control Nellie exercised over Tate even up to his freshman year at

Vanderbilt University when she moved to Nashville with him. However, upon closer inspection of the relationship, the "romantic feelings Nellie nurtured for her Southern ancestors" (Underwood 8) precipitated a conflict much more influential than her own smothering presence. Nellie Tate, born Eleanor Custis Parke Varnell, was a staunch supporter of the Old South way of life and often used her sacred genteel Virginia ancestry as proof of her total superiority over her husband or anyone else upholding New South conventions. Although she and Orley were both actually born in Illinois and both were descendants of old Virginia families, she vehemently claimed her birthplace as Fairfax County, Virginia, and accused Orley of being "sprung from a family of Yankee extraction" (8). To Nelly, who claimed to be a distant relative of Robert E. Lee, her supposed birthplace and genealogy validated her as a genuine Southern belle and enhanced her intellectual and social superiority over Orley and his descendants. According to Underwood, "[s]o inflated was the myth she attached to this estate and the surrounding land, known as Pleasant Hill, that while she herself had moved to the border state of Kentucky, she referred to Yankees who had been in Virginia for the forty years since the Civil War as 'those new people'" (8).

Tate spent much of his childhood being taught Southern ideas and worshipping Southern heroes. For instance, one of Tate's first memories of reading was during the fall of 1906 when he was bedridden with various childhood illnesses: "I liked best of all Page's *Two Little Confederates*, the heroes of which I envied the blue, double-barreled guns sent them after the war by the wounded Yankee they had helped to nurse back to life in their farm house" ("A Lost Traveller's Dream" 18). During this period of sickness and throughout his entire boyhood, Nellie "seemed to relish playing a role in the

formation of his Southern identity, and told him stories—some true, others not—about the slaves and Civil War heroes in her family . . . . Since she had no other way to spend her time, she made a career out of lecturing Allen on his genealogy" (Underwood 10). Even though Tate and his mother spent most of his boyhood in various Kentucky cities, he was always taught the superiority of Virginia as the authentic Old South.

As a result of his mother's inflated sense of superiority, Tate was subjected early on to her infatuation with the idea of Southernness. Just as Nellie falsely claimed her birthplace as Virginia, Underwood explains that she also deceived Tate as to where he was actually born: "Wanting her son to be more Southern than he actually was, Tate's mother deluded herself into thinking he was born in Fairfax County, Virginia, 'among her family, who had not been wrong-sided' during the Civil War" (4). Tate was born in Winchester, Kentucky—a border state and one which harbored some Confederate sentiment during the Civil War but did not submit fully to the Southern cause by seceding from the Union. Because Kentucky was only marginally Southern, Nellie felt that it was certainly not a suitable birthplace for her son; instead, she invented an unquestionable Southern heritage for Tate perhaps more for her own peace of mind than for his.

According to Tate, he was not told of his actual birthplace until the death of his mother in 1929. On a car trip in Kentucky with his father, Tate was told very matter-of-factly, at the age of thirty, that he had been born in Winchester rather than Virginia. Orley guided him to the area of his birth, pointed to a white frame house, and said, "You were born in that house" (7). Tate recalled his father's method of delivering the shocking news: "My father would not have forced upon me his revised version of my birth; that was not his way; but he could do it casually, as if, when we drove through Winchester, I

were a sightseer and he my guide" (8). Tate went on to explain the shock he felt over the news and further recalled how his mother had been so adamant about teaching him to be Southern throughout his childhood. The autobiographical essay in which Tate relays the story is rather tranquil in tone, yet it is clear that Tate was also trying to express his feelings of betrayal by his mother. Tate's anger toward his mother's deceit is apparent, if only subtly, as he explains the significance of the revelation: "Had we not taken that trip I should be thinking to this day that I had been born in Fairfax County, Virginia, for that was where my mother had said I was born, and she always bent reality to her wishes" (7-8).

However, Tate's story of how he discovered that he was a Kentuckian appears to have been fabricated as well. Although Tate claimed that "[u]ntil I was thirty I didn't know where I was born" ("A Lost Traveller's Dream" 5), Underwood asserts that Tate knew of his birthplace several years before his admission of it:

> There is ample evidence that Tate knew he was born in Kentucky long before his mother died in July 1929. As early as 1923, he wrote, "I suppose I'm a Kentuckian only by the accident of birth; I have hardly been in the state for over ten years, and that long ago I was a little past the stage of being a small boy; so, although I spring from the Blue Grass, people back there now find it hard to believe." In April 1929, he again told Tunstall, "I am fated to remain a Kentuckian from a small town." Yet in his application for a 1928-29 Guggenheim Fellowship, which he filed on 13 December 1927, Tate reported that he was born in Fairfax County, Va. (Underwood 314)

While the question of Tate's true birthplace is no longer a mystery, what remains unclear is why Tate felt inclined to make up such a story. Underwood suggests that "[p]erhaps he had come to believe it himself. Perhaps he was punishing his parents again for a childhood that left him unsure of their affections and ambivalent toward the South" (4). Close friend and scholar Walter Sullivan claims in his essay "What History Teaches: Lewis Simpson and the Literature of the South" that "the revelation came too late" for Tate because "[s]piritually and intellectually he remained locked in the myth of his Virginia heritage." Certainly, these are viable explanations, but other factors need to be considered as well in order to gain an understanding of Tate's relationship to his past. Tate had always been taught to invest "Virginia with qualities that informed his perception of other sections of the South and the nation—Kentucky and all other states represented an inferior way of life" (Stanonis par. 2). Perhaps it was specifically the presumed inferiority of Kentucky that prompted Tate to hide his background for as long as he did. At the very least, it seems evident that his biographical issues with his Kentucky birth created a conflict of identity that became increasingly evident throughout his years as a major writer and critic of the South.

Although Tate undeniably suffered from what historian C. Vann Woodward called "the burden of southern history" (Underwood 299), evidence exists in his writing which indicates an innate Kentucky burden as well. However, Tate's Kentucky burden is more complicated than that experienced by most other writers from the state because of the tension between his history and his identity. While others approach the Kentucky burden from the inside looking out at the rest of the world, Tate was forced to deal with the innate burden from the outside looking in at what seemed to be foreign territory.

After discovering that he was not really a Virginian and could no longer claim without question the history of that state as his sole heritage, Tate was faced with an identity crisis. As Stanonis suggests, "[f]or a young Southerner immersed in his heritage, ties to place determined identity" (par. 2); therefore, the meaning of place in his life was no longer solid. Never before had anyone called into question his Southernness; rather, his Southern heritage had been at the center of his relationship with his mother and had been emphasized throughout his childhood. The question for Tate was not just how to relate to his mother from whom he now seemed completely disconnected but also how to relate to the South. Was he still a Southerner? Tate's entire identity at times seemed to rest upon that single question.

In essence, Tate suffered from an identity crisis similar to that of the state of Kentucky. Kentucky was and often still is referred to as a border state. It is neither completely northern nor completely southern; it is essentially caught in a state of limbo in terms of a regional identity. Upon learning of his birthplace, Tate found himself in a comparable state of limbo. Kentucky bordered the "real" Southern states, and so Tate's authenticity as a Southerner was in danger. Even before he admitted to knowing of his Kentucky heritage, Tate's identity crisis was evident. Upon entering Vanderbilt in the fall of 1918, Tate was becoming extremely restless with the constant presence of his mother "who remained firm in her command over the family" (Underwood 36). By the fall of 1919, he had finally broken away from the clutches of his mother and formed strong bonds with older professors who would give "the intellectual guidance denied him by his parents" (37). Two years later, the senior rebelliously began pushing against the traditions of the Old South (and subsequently his mother's obsessions with those

traditions) by openly embracing the writings of H.L. Mencken. According to Underwood, "Mencken's disrespect for the traditions of the past was especially appealing to Allen, who was already developing his argument that Southern literature before World War I was of no use to Southerners his age because 'there was nothing there'" (49). Since it is unclear exactly when Tate learned of his Kentucky birth, it cannot be concluded definitively that by rejecting the Old South traditions he was overtly lashing out at his mother for her deceit and for birthing him in Kentucky. However, it does seem evident that even as early as his college years, Tate was feeling a sense of displacement and a need to escape the rigid identity his family had falsely ascribed to him throughout his life.

Tate's early poems reveal the identity crisis he was enduring in the early to mid 1920s. When he was asked to join his professors in what was soon to be the illustrious Fugitive group to share and discuss the members' poetry, Tate's desire to win the approval of the group led him to turn to the new modern poets for inspiration for his own poems. In his contribution to the first issue of the *Fugitive* called "To Intellectual Detachment," Tate's modernist imitation is clear (Underwood 55), but his jaded tone and harsh mockery of himself is indicative of his conflicted mood:

> This is the man who classified the bits
> Of his friends' hells into a pigeonhole—
> He hung each disparate anguish on the spits
> Parboiled and roasted in his own withering soul. (lines 1-4)

Though the poem was certainly not one of Tate's best, it did highlight a change in his boyhood Southern identity of deeply engrained traditions and loyalty to Southern causes.

Nothing in the poem points to Tate's Southernness; instead, it concentrates on his desire to find "peace" (5) and to escape the "tool" (10) that "possessed him" (11), which could be read as his Southern identity that was forced upon him by Nellie Tate. If so interpreted, the last line of the poem is profound in that it is the question that Tate struggled with for the next several decades: "It turned on him—he's dead. Shall we detest him?" (12). Tate would eventually swing back and forth in his feelings for the South; at times he did "detest him," and at times he found himself yearning to return home. Most likely, the poem is not intentionally about his feelings for the South, but the tone of mockery and dejection would remain in his writing as he struggled with his identity. The poem's imitation of the Modernist aesthetic further separated Tate from the South; it indicated his new interest in the more cosmopolitan literary world.

That very cosmopolitan world of the Modernists would offer Tate his first real escape from the South, but it would also create even more confusion for Tate concerning his identity. After virtually reformulating his entire poetic aesthetic to fit the mold of Modernists such as T.S. Eliot, Tate began to long for the intellectual stimulation of those who upheld the Modernist principles. Most of the Fugitive group had rejected those principles by "questioning the value of poems that were unintelligible to read" (Underwood 63). In Nashville, Tate "felt so cut off from the mainstream of literary life that even his colleagues had begun to bore him" (86), and he became increasingly frustrated with the sentimentality of Southern literature and obsessions with tradition. When he finally had the opportunity to go to New York in 1924, he began to separate himself even further from his regional identity, at times making remarks such as "[a]t Vanderbilt University they used to call me the 'Yankee'" (Underwood 108). Underwood

suggests that "[n]owhere was Allen's uneasiness with his Southern past more pronounced than in his ambivalent attitude toward the *Fugitive*, which was almost defunct" (108). On the other hand, the longer Tate was in New York and "continued to fight off his Southernness" (109), the less he wanted to be a New Yorker. As his identity hung in the balance, Tate began to consider the ambivalence of these urban poets toward the poetic principles and intellectual ideas he developed during his time in Nashville and now found most important:

> These young writers, he discovered, were every bit as talented as those he had left behind in the South, and in many ways they appeared more worldly. Yet he noticed how little interest any of them had in the complicated philosophical and asthetic [*sic*] ideas that propelled discussion in the Fugitive meetings and that dominated his own thinking. And while he had discovered 'a thousand groups in New York,' he found that the New York poets he met cared little about the group ethos the Fugitives had used to their professional advantage. Being around people who lacked the Southern sense of fraternity made Allen pause to consider his roots. (109)

Nonetheless, it was still some time before Tate would reconnect with his identity as a Southerner and return to an appreciation for that community and tradition.

Several incidents occurred while Tate was in New York that caused him, once again, to question his identity and, eventually, return to his appreciation for the South. At this stage of his life, Tate had tried to purge himself of his Southernness and blend in with the New York literary scene as "a Modernist poet repressing his Southern identity" (Underwood 111). Two events that marked yet another shift in his identity directly

involved the great enemy of the South, H.L. Mencken. During a meeting with Mencken, Tate proposed an idea for an article on the South for the magazine Mencken edited, the *American Mercury*. Mencken quickly "grew somewhat condescending in tone and apparently warned him that he would have to write the piece in the sarcastic style typical" (112) of the magazine. Since Tate was at that time singing the unheralded praises of the South, he was greatly annoyed by Mencken's attitude and promptly left the inebriated editor to find his own way home: "From that evening onward, Allen was not a devotee of Mencken, but an enemy" (112). The next event, and perhaps the most significant, was the infamous 1925 "Monkey Trial" in Dayton, Tennessee. As the trial unfolded and the entire nation watched, "Mencken, who not only helped to plan Scopes's defense but covered the event for the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, used the trial as a forum for publicizing his indictment of the South" (112). Tate argued that his own attacks on the South were justified because "he had the right to strike back against his own people when they interfered with his artistic development," but was infuriated by Mencken's crusade against the region because he "attacked Southerners without understanding them" (113). Suddenly Tate had to figure out how to negotiate voicing his own criticism of the South while also defending it from the criticism of outsiders.

Another indication of Tate's gradual journey toward a reconnection to his identity as a Southerner was the creation in 1926 of his most famous poem, "Ode to the Confederate Dead." Despite the title, the only "Southern" details in the poem are the setting and the various Civil War references which prompted Donald Davidson to criticize Tate for "reducing the grand themes of Southern history to 'personal poetry'" (Underwood 124). Tate explained the theme of his poem as "the cut-offness of the

modern 'intellectual man' from the world" and "heroism in the grand style" ("Narcissus on Narcissus" 599). Others, such as Louis D. Rubin, interpreted the poem as a precursor to the ideals of the Agrarians: "The problem that the twelve Agrarians felt confronted the modern South was the same problem, then, as that which Mr. Tate's modern man at the graveyard faced" (209). However, the timing and the overall tone of the poem reveals a much more personal conflict than even Tate himself admitted. Tate's "Ode" symbolizes not just his feeling of "isolation from what were now his region's ways" (Rubin 209), but it also reflects Tate's isolation from his own past:

> What shall we say who count our days and bow
> Our heads with a commemorial woe
> In the ribboned coats of grim felicity,
> What shall we say to the bones, unclean,
> Whose verdurous anonymity will grow?
> The ragged arms, the ragged heads and eyes
> Lost in these acres of the insane green? (61-7)

Just as the former "glory of the Old South" (Stanonis par. 7) and the struggle of the Confederate soldiers in the Civil War were unimaginable to the modern people of the South, so was Tate unable to grasp his own mythic history. As an adult, Virginia and his false perception of it as a part of his past still haunted him, and the eerie tone of the poem signifies his distance from the culture which held "his eminent Virginian forefathers" (Stanonis par. 6).

Though the graveyard is not named and the narrator is not specified, the references to the famous Virginia Civil War battles, "Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill,

Bull Run" (line 48), and calls to "Stonewall, Stonewall" in line 47 referencing Stonewall Jackson of Virginia indicate a definite location. For the "Ode," Tate was imagining himself wandering past the tombs of his fallen Virginian ancestors. In making the poem so personal, he was not just trying to "reclaim the energy of a tradition which is gone" (Meiners 92), but to reclaim a part of his past which never really existed. In a letter to Davidson, Tate later admitted that writing the poem had conjured "up a whole stream of associations and memories, suppressed, at least on the emotional plane, since my childhood" (Underwood 124). Stanonis explains that the poem serves as Tate's lament for his feeling of separation from his Virginia history:

> The spatial division, also signified by the gate, reveals the importance of Virginia to the poem and to its author. By not entering the cemetery, the observer fails to participate in a traditional, agrarian lifestyle in rhythm with the cyclical occurrence of life and death. This separation was laden with importance for Tate, who lived outside Virginia. Tate came of age as an exile from the sacred burial grounds in which his ancestors rested. The Appalachians, like a stone wall, barred access to his home. The closed gate represents a childhood and young adulthood isolated from the molding power of Tate's glorified forefathers. (par. 8)

Through the poem, Tate was clearly trying to come to terms with his own uneasy past so that he could reclaim or reinvent his identity in the future.

According to Underwood, the poem "marked the beginning of the twelve-year period recognized by many scholars as the era in which he was absorbed by Southern culture and the history of his own family" (Underwood 123-4). During those years, Tate's sense of identity changed dramatically from his time in New York, and he grew

increasingly infatuated with his genealogy. He began "feeling a deep need to cull from the history of his Southern ancestors some explanation for the nomadic, rootless lives he and his parents had come to lead. Soon he began theorizing that the Union depredations during the war were to blame" (126). This new obsession with tracing his ancestral roots would eventually lead to the creation of *The Fathers*, his only attempt at writing a novel. Long before that, however, Tate would announce his Southern loyalty by becoming a major part of the Agrarian movement and the ensuing Southern Renaissance. The events leading up to these defining moments in Tate's career mark another gradual shift in his identity from being a native of the South trying to repress his regional characteristics to a Southerner proudly trying to revive and reinforce the traditions of the Old South.

Though by 1927 he was becoming increasingly more comfortable with his Southern background, Tate was still not fully at ease with his Kentucky birth. To Tate, Virginia was still the epitome of everything Southern. He had spent a great deal of his life trying to regain his Virginia heritage by pouring over his genealogy in an attempt to locate proof that he derived from an aristocratic Virginia family (Underwood 126-7). Even though he was not successful in locating all the records of his family, "the absence of records did not keep him from concluding, on skimpy evidence, that his father's side of the family descended from 'one of the oldest and finest Southern families'" (127). Tate did not combat the assumed inferiority of Kentucky; instead, he refused to be subject to it. If he could not prove for certain that his lineage made him an exception to the Kentucky burden of inferiority, then he would invent a heritage which would overshadow whatever inferiority his actual birthplace might afford him.

When asked in 1927 to write a biography of Virginian Stonewall Jackson, Tate had yet another opportunity to praise "the stable aristocracy present in Virginia" (Stanosis par. 10). The biography, which was published in 1928, reads more like a novel than a true historical reference, and it allowed him to do more than just record Jackson's life. He also used the biography as an opportunity to compare Virginia favorably to the rest of the South; he "argued that the 'frontier' areas west and southwest of Virginia failed to evolve the social stability found in the Old Dominion" (par. 12) and, as a result, "the Western States were parasitical communities, looking East economically and spiritually" (Tate, *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier* 38). Ultimately, Tate revealed his belief of the inferiority of the people of the "frontier" states, including Kentucky. Jackson's heritage represented the lineage that Tate longed for himself; he wanted to believe that his "ancestors were noble men. How good it would be to be like them . . . " (200).

In contrast to the flattering biography of Stonewall Jackson, Tate followed with a rather sharp analysis of Jefferson Davis's years as the Confederate president. In Tate's book, entitled *Jefferson Davis: President of the South*, "this dramatic four-year period serves as a tragic narrative of the weaknesses of the southern nation as epitomized by the character of its political leader" (Stanosis par. 14). Davis's biography is one of the few places where Tate's Kentucky burden is overt. As a Kentuckian, Davis represented a part of Tate that he did not want to accept so he used the opportunity as a way to compare his birth state with his inflated view of Virginia:

> Tate's analysis is again shaped significantly by his personal sentiments. As a result, the biography of Davis is Tate's examination of himself as much as it is a study of the politician. Tate had resided in Kentucky for most of his childhood,

> adopting some of the traits common to the state. His attachment to Virginia heritage, however, allowed Tate to attack Davis while insulating himself from judgment (par. 14).

The two biographies represent Tate's views on the two states which figured most prominently in his life, and it was obvious with which one he wanted to be identified. He "stood firm in his high regard for Virginia throughout the biographies. In his eyes, the Old Dominion remained the 'mother of States and Statesmen'" (par. 20), and Kentucky remained just another border state.

Despite the unbalanced approach to Jackson and Davis, the biographies did allow Tate to "set forth his view that southern culture was more humanistic than northern industrialism" (Ward 161), an idea that would help spark the formation of the Vanderbilt Agrarians. After publishing the essay "The Fallacy of Humanism" in 1930, he began to re-launch the campaign that he had proposed several years earlier to some of his Fugitive brethren after his clash with Mencken—a campaign which "would be the most important in Tate's life" (Underwood 155). His plan was for "several of the Fugitives [to] contribute to a symposium defending Southern culture against Northern industrialism, commercialism, and materialism" (155). The result was the birth of the Agrarians and Tate's greatest legacy as well as the controversial *I'll Take My Stand* (1930)—the Agrarian manifesto which would both bring the Vanderbilt Agrarians fame and eventually damn them as romantics and racists. Yet another stage of Tate's shifting identity, this monumental movement placed Tate firmly in the category of regionalist, a category he had at one time deplored. Accepting the role, Tate began a crusade to validate regionalism as more than local color—a crusade which would continue for many

years. In his 1945 essay entitled, "The New Provincialism," Tate defends the merits of having a regional literature:

> Yet no literature can be mature without the regional consciousness; it can only be senile, with the renewed immaturity of senility. For without regionalism, without locality in the sense of local continuity in tradition and belief, we shall get a whole literature which Mr. John Dos Passos might have written: perhaps a whole literature which, in spite of my admiration for Mr. Dos Passos's novels, I shall not even be able to read. (536)

For the time being, Tate played the role of regionalist and defended it as long as it upheld the Agrarian concept. Later in his life, he would once again go through a dramatic identity crisis and abandon the Agrarian ideas he had fought so hard to advance.

Though he was coming to terms with his Southern regionalism, Tate still refused to accept the fact that he could not claim Virginia as his birthplace. After abandoning an attempt to write an interpretive biography of Robert E. Lee, Tate began working on an extended genealogy of his Virginia ancestors and "thinly disguised autobiography" (Young x.) called *Ancestors of Exile* and then *The Legacy*. However, Tate struggled with recording his family history because of the "contradiction between historical evidence and the knowledge that his mother had exaggerated the Virginia virtues he supposedly shared with his ancestors" (Stanonis par. 25). Eventually, he realized that he could write the book if he approached it as a novel rather than a history. He turned the concept into *The Fathers,* which was his first and only novel. According to Stanonis, the novel allowed Tate to critique and reconstruct his own image of Virginia separately from the place of his mother's dreams:

> His deep personal investment in the plot emerged as he carefully modeled the characters after members of his own family, a new approach that permitted Tate to engage his Virginia ancestors critically. He freed himself from the limitations of fact to meet the mythic Virginia so often described to him by his mother on its own ground, the land of fiction. (par. 26)

Echoing his own sentiments regarding the mythological land of his ancestors, the narrator Lacy Buchan claims, "it was my distinct impression until manhood and education effaced it, that God was a Virginian who had created the world in his own image" (Tate, *The Fathers* 129). Through Lacy's interactions with the Buchans and the Poseys, Tate deconstructs the myth of Virginia and exposes its flaws. Eventually both Tate and Lacy gain a new perspective on the history that has haunted them for most of their lives. This project was a drawn-out and sometimes painful process for Tate but one that resulted in his finally gaining freedom from the past that had controlled him for a major part of his life.

By writing the novel, Tate was able finally to dispose of the Virginia monkey on his back. Like Lacy, Tate "awakens to the fiction of the over-glorified Virginia present to him throughout his youth" (Stanonis par. 28). Most significant is the fact that Tate was able to "revise his bitter childhood memories" (Underwood 305) with the completion of *The Fathers*: "Having written a book that exposed the delusions of his mother and father both, he was poised to let go of his obsessions with his family history" (305) and to begin to form an identity based not on people and events from his past but on those in his future. Tate's identity crisis was not over, but for the first time an end was in sight.

Anthony Stanonis claims that Tate "was unable to find comfort with being

Kentuckian until he came to terms with the mythic nobility of his Virginia forefathers" (par. 32). There is no textual evidence that Tate found comfort in being a Kentuckian; rather, he finally rejected the mythological Virginia of his mother's stories and simply accepted his border state birthplace. Acceptance, however, should not be confused with comfort. For instance, in "The Swimmers," which was part of a trilogy written in the early 1950s along with "The Maimed Man" and "The Buried Lake" (Stanonis par. 31), Tate recalls a childhood experience in Kentucky in which he witnessed the remnants of a lynching. This poem represents one of the few times Tate actually mentions his birth state in his works and also indicates his conflicted relationship with the Commonwealth. In the first stanza, Tate emphasizes place: "Kentucky water, clear springs: a boy fleeing / To water under the dry Kentucky sun" (lines 1-2). Though it appears at first to be a pleasant childhood memory of a group of boys going swimming, the language indicates a subtle tension between the memory and the narrator. Words such as "Savage" (7), "dead" (7, 48, 68, 79), and "fear" (9, 37, 43) mix with more innocent language such as "childhood's thin harmonious tear" (7) and "spring of love" (9) in such as way as to make the reader feel uncomfortable even from the beginning.

Contrary to Stanonis's suggestion of Tate's growing comfort with Kentucky, the poem exposes his suspicion of mankind in general and emphasizes the Kentucky burden of violent history. As the young swimmers approach the river, evil enters the idyllic childhood world: "Into a world where sound shaded the sight / Dropped the dull hooves again; the horsemen came / Again, all but the leader: it was night" (34-6). Violence enters the life of the narrator as he sees, probably for the first time, a murdered African American man. The young narrator experiences the curse of "The Dark and Bloody

Ground," and the reader can assume that the child's life is dramatically altered from that point on. Tate's final indictment of the town comes at the end of the poem when he points out the indifference of the townspeople: "This private thing was owned by all the town, / Though never claimed by us within my hearing" (83-4). Though probably not intentional, Tate illustrates the preoccupation with the violent Kentucky history which is inherent in the work of the other authors studied here. Certainly, as Stanonis claims, he has come to terms with his connection to Kentucky, but he does not express a comfort with it or with the memories associated with it.

In no other poem is Tate's reaction to the Kentucky burden of violent history as explicit as in "The Meaning of Life." Subtitled "The Monologue," Tate uses the poem to develop one of his most consistent themes: "Man's capacity for error" and "his essential unpredictability" (Brooks 158). Just as in "The Swimmers," Tate uses a childhood memory to expose the Kentucky potential for unnecessary violence:

> When I was a small boy I lived at home
> For nine years in that part of old Kentucky
> Where the mountains fringe the Blue Grass,
> The old men shot at one another for luck;
> It made me think I was like none of them. (10-4)

Tate seems to be attempting, once again, to separate himself from the state and its arcane manners, but he realizes that he nevertheless retained some of the characteristics he grew up trying to avoid:

> At twelve I was determined to shoot only
> For honor; at twenty not to shoot at all;

I know at thirty-three that one must shoot

As often as one gets the rare chance—

In killing there is more than commentary. (15-9)

Tate thus realizes the lesson learned from the Kentucky shooters: "the opportunity for any meaningful action rarely offers itself at all" (Brooks 160). According to critic Cleanth Brooks, "[t]he symbols of the concrete, irrational essence of life, the blood" (160) is a part of a much larger meaning of the poem, but at the same time it cannot be separated from "old Kentucky / Where the mountains fringe the Blue Grass" (lines 11-2). Simplifying the poem to a mere critique of the cultural climate of Kentucky would be to ignore Tate's wonderfully complex theme, but recognizing the significance of Kentucky as the setting is also crucial to understanding the complex psyche of Tate and thus to comprehending his poetic intentions. When he does mention Kentucky in poems, there is an evident disconnect between Tate and his memories of Kentucky. He is never truly comfortable with the role Kentucky plays in his life, and, as a result, he uses it as a backdrop for poetry of "violent disorder" (Brooks 151), which further indicates his complex relationship not just with the state but his past in general.

Though his particular discomfort with being a Kentuckian is evident in his work, Tate's identity crisis was much more complex than just a problem with place. Tate was tormented by his own intellectualism which, in turn, did not allow him to claim a particular place as a marker of his identity. The "irrational essence of life" (160) that Brooks refers to when discussing "The Meaning of Life" was exactly what Tate was seeking for his identity. He wanted to be able to respond automatically to and accept his world without the immediate reaction of analyzing everything around him. Since his first

response to stimuli was to separate himself from it and then completely deconstruct it before eliciting a response, he was not capable of authentically identifying with the world around him. He was, in essence, an alienated spirit and desperately lonely as a result. Just as the character in "The Last Days of Alice," based on Lewis Carroll's Alice, Tate had become "Empty as the bodiless flesh of fire" (line 24), devoid of the ability to be. Interestingly, Tate was an intellectual who was suspicious of intellectualism, but he was unable to escape his own analytical mind. Evidence of Tate's torment shows up in earlier poems such as "To Intellectual Detachment" and "Ode to the Confederate Dead." In both poems, Tate finds himself detached from events going on around him because of his highly intellectualized way of dealing with the world. He could not function in the moment because of his intense intellectual need to deconstruct the components of that moment. In the same way, Tate turned his back on Kentucky because it did not offer a concrete, impenetrable identity and thus it just added to his torment. Tate yearned for such an "irrational" identity, one that he could automatically accept without question, but his intellectualism made it nearly impossible.

Tate finally found the solution to his identity crisis when he converted to Catholicism in 1950. Catholicism not only offered Tate the concrete identity he had sought for so long, but it also provided an escape from the Kentucky burden in favor of the universalism of the Catholic Church. Following his conversion, Tate composed his three terza-rima poems, "The Maimed Man" (1952), "The Swimmers" (1953), and "The Buried Lake" (1953). Written in the tradition of Dante and as a result of his new found faith, the largely autobiographical poems indicate that Tate's "long search for unity, order, and faith [was] over" (Brinkmeyer 71). Each serves as a reexamination of Tate's

life and subsequently describes a different spiritual confrontation and search for God's love. Appropriately, the last poem, "The Buried Lake," ends not just with the resolution to this group of poems but also to Tate's search for self: "The dream is over and the dark expired / I knew that I had known enduring love" (lines 125-6). These poems mark the end of Tate's career as a poet; he wrote and published very little afterwards. Critic Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., asserts that Tate ceased writing poetry following the three terza rima poems because "he had resolved the tensions and problems that for so long had fired his created genius" (71). Poetry had served Tate as a way to deal with the inner turmoil which accompanied his painfully intense identity crisis. Once he was secure in his identity as a Catholic, the poetic muse within Tate quieted.

Though he emerged as one of the most prominent literary figures of his lifetime, Tate's critical acclaim has fallen significantly over the last few decades. He has not completely fallen from the graces of American literature, but "[l]iterary history and her myrmidons, the anthologies, have hacked down his poetic ranks—often to a single poem, 'Ode to the Confederate Dead'—and left the rest to lie where they fell, out of print" (Yezzi 66). Considering his early reputation as one of America's most robust men of letters, such a decline is quite a mystery. Perhaps Tate's unconscious push against the stereotype of presumed intellectual inferiority associated with his Kentucky birth led to his often impenetrable modernist verse and prose style—a style which "made the subject matter of his poetry even less intelligible—even to his most sympathetic and learned readers, the Fugitives" (Underwood 63). Or perhaps in the contemporary American literary climate so bent on categorizing authors, especially those deemed regional, the inability to place Tate's writing definitively into a regional or cosmopolitan category has

led to his critical demise. After calling Tate "cosmopolitan in taste," Kentucky scholar William Ward goes on to say, "Such a statement may seem to conflict with our identification of him as a regionalist, but both characterizations are accurate enough" (159). His gradual disappearance from the American literary canon may be linked to his fervent attempt to overcome his biographical Kentucky burden; by trying so hard to belong to what he deemed a more fitting place, he completely orphaned himself from really belonging anywhere. When he finally did find peace with his identity through his conversion to Catholicism in 1950, the literary world was shifting toward a more liberal climate which Tate found undesirable. As a conservative, Thomist Catholic, Tate was shocked by the occurrence of Vatican II, and he did not condone the more liberal political stances that were seen as progress in the 1960s. As a critic, Tate declared his ambition of becoming the "Catholic Matthew Arnold" by attempting to "protect the foundational insights of classical Christianity from the cultural erosion threatening vital Western institutions" (Huff 99). When he refused to change with the times by clinging to his conservatism, Tate and his writing were no longer deemed fashionable among intellectuals.

Appropriately, Allen Tate does not fit neatly into any literary category. His writing indicates a conflict far more complex than categorization allows. He represents exceptions to rules, especially when discussing his Kentucky burden. Tate is perhaps Kentucky's best kept secret, yet it is unfeasible to ignore completely the effect being a Kentuckian had on Tate and his writing. Critic M.E. Bradford states that "everything that can be argued of Tate is attributable to the place and time of his birth, Clark County, Kentucky, 1899" (195). Although his reaction to Kentucky regionalism is not the same

as that of other writers from the state, Allen Tate did deal with his own Kentucky burden in an indirect way -- his best defense against it being an attempt to separate himself from the Commonwealth to avoid the stereotype of inferiority and thus to realign himself with the more acceptable Southern state of Virginia. However, Tate's burdens were not limited to a specifically Kentucky burden but an overall biographical burden—the burden of an overbearing mother, the burden of a violent and aloof father, the burden of a mistaken birthplace, the burden of conflicted identity, the burden of being misunderstood, and the burden of a tormented soul. Understanding Tate's Kentucky burden is impossible without sufficient attention to all of the other aspects surrounding his career and life; nonetheless, to understand Allen Tate as the complex and controversial figure that he was, his place of birth is perhaps the best place to start.

IV. Kentucky's Sage: The Endurance of Robert Penn Warren

When I was a boy I saw the world I was in.
I saw it for what it was. Canebrakes with
Track beaten down by bear paw. Tobacco,
In endless rows, the pink inner flesh of black fingers
Crushing to green juice tobacco worms plucked
From a leaf. The great trout,
Motionless, poised in the shadow of his
Enormous creek-boulder.
But the past and the future broke on me, as I got older.
--Robert Penn Warren, from "Old-Time Childhood in Kentucky"

In a 1924 letter to Donald Davidson, Allen Tate proclaimed what the rest of the literary world would soon discover for themselves about Robert Penn Warren: "That boy's a wonder--has more sheer genius than any of us; watch him: his work from now on will have what none of us can achieve—power" (Cowan 150). The Guthrie, Kentucky, native entered Vanderbilt University in 1921 at the age of sixteen after failing the physical exam for admission to the United States Naval Academy, and by the time he was eighteen found himself an important part of the newly acclaimed Fugitive group. Though he had entered Vanderbilt to pursue a degree in chemical engineering, Warren quickly became enthralled with writing, more specifically with poetry, under the tutelage of John Crowe Ransom (Blotner 30-47). Thus began the long and illustrious career of not only Kentucky's most celebrated author but also one of the most distinguished men of letters in the history of American literature.

Despite his reputation as Kentucky's greatest writer, Warren's relationship with the state was, at times, problematic because he was hesitant to claim it as a significant part of his identity. Warren's Kentucky burden reflects his need to redefine Kentucky regionalism by dismissing simplistic characterizations in favor of more complex figures

engaged in the psychological battle with original sin that all human beings face, and it also indicates his desire to separate himself from the physical, emotional, and literary confines of its borders. Though he never denied his Kentucky heritage, Warren did—unsuccessfully--attempt to maintain an emotional distance from his experiences there. However, his writing would often expose his obsession with Kentucky and its reputation as "The Dark and Bloody Ground." In a 1982 interview with Thomas Connelly, Warren revealed his overt attempt to disengage himself from the state of his birth:

> I always felt myself more of a Tennesseean [*sic*] than a Kentuckian because . . . [I was born] only a hundred yards from the state line . . . And then I lived in Tennessee a lot. I went to college in Tennessee and taught there later on. So I always felt Tennessee . . . I knew it better as a state. I felt it much more my own country than Kentucky. I began to systematically investigate Kentucky later on. ("Of Bookish Men" 96)

Regardless of Warren's proclaimed disconnection from his home, Kentucky remained a telling, and sometimes haunting, presence in his poetry and prose.

Perhaps his early memories of Kentucky contributed to Warren's reluctance to being identified as a product of the Commonwealth. Born just north of the Tennessee border in Todd County in 1905 to Ruth Penn and Robert Franklin Warren, he spent much of his childhood trying to understand his emotionally distant father who had, for mysterious reasons, "'written off his early life' and sealed off 'his own past'" (Blotner 22). As a result, Warren loved his father but was never close to him; instead, the bright spot in his childhood was the strong bond he formed with his Grandpa Penn who "was the central focus of Warren's Kentucky boyhood" (Connelly 8). His grandfather, who

was a Confederate veteran, stood in stark contrast to the child's father as he allowed Warren more than a glimpse into his past by enthralling the youngster with painfully realistic stories about his war experiences. According to Charles Bohner, the summers he spent on Grandpa Warren's farm in Cerulean Springs, Kentucky, were for the young boy "idyllic, and on a number of occasions he has remarked on the rich store of memories and images from those days which has sustained and nurtured his art" (13). Unfortunately, the rest of his childhood in Kentucky was less than ideal.

Though the summers on the Cerulean Springs farm offered Warren the tranquility of nature and the pleasant company of his grandfather, the winters in Guthrie were particularly troubling for the young boy because of the "era of economic and political turmoil" (Walker 89) that cast a deep shadow over the Black Patch tobacco region. During this troubling time, the local tobacco planters grew desperate in their bid to survive:

> When international tobacco trusts arbitrarily fixed prices for all classes and grades of tobacco, the local planters fought back by organizing their own associations. Attempting to force the mavericks into their fold, they formed bands of 'night riders' to burn barns and scrape plant beds. The ensuing violence led to the establishment of martial law in Kentucky, and one of Warren's earliest memories concerns an encampment of state guards who had been called to Guthrie to preserve order. (Bohner 13)

Regardless of the state guards, the Black Patch War "was a struggle that 'pitted neighbor against neighbor' and led to intimidation, shootings, and burnings like nothing since the days of the Ku Klux Klan" (Blotner 10). Although he was too young to understand the

enormity of the situation, the memories of these violent times endured, and Warren's experiences witnessing the Black Patch War would later provide the inspiration for various fiction pieces such as his first novel *Night Rider* (1939) and the 1931 novelette "Prime Leaf" (13).

Further complicating his childhood were Warren's experiences in the public schools. According to Warren's biographer, Joseph Blotner, the Guthrie School was a "place of learning and violence" (16) which did not offer the necessary challenges to occupy the intellectual mind of young Warren. Small for his age and by far the brightest boy in his class, Warren was frequently harassed by larger boys jealous of his academic abilities and achievements, and, as a result, he had a relatively lonely childhood with the exception of a few close friends. One particular incident ultimately shaped Warren's overall impression of Guthrie as "a place to be 'from'" and nothing more:

> Once some older and bigger boys got me in a deserted building . . . and put a rope around my neck and started pulling on it. They said they'd teach me about grade-making. They lifted me off my toes two or three times, to scare me. Then one of them, suddenly, got ashamed, or sick of what they were doing, and made them quit. Later one or two tried to apologize, and I said, 'Go to hell.' That is the one [true] story of all the persecution stories. I was lucky—I seriously considered shooting the ring-leader to death, then thought of the family trouble. (Blotner 26)

When he finally graduated from Guthrie High School in 1920 at the age of fifteen, Warren was given his first taste of freedom from the confines of Guthrie. He was unable to apply for the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis because he was still a year too young. Instead, in the fall of that year, he entered Clarksville High School as a

special student and was introduced to "a larger world in Tennessee" (Blotner 28). This marked the beginning of Warren's gradual break from the state of his birth: "After fifteen my life became very full and self-centered, and I never really lived at home again, at the best just making long visits" (Blotner 29).

Unfortunately for Warren, but very fortunately for literary scholarship, he never made it to the Naval Academy because of an accident that left him partially blind in one eye; instead, he headed to Vanderbilt University in Nashville where he would play a major role in the Fugitive group and eventually embark on his expansive literary career. Other than summer vacations and school holidays, Warren's break from Kentucky was a clean one, yet his writing suggests a preoccupation with the place he tried so hard to escape. Scholars such as Connelly minimize the importance of Warren's Kentucky heritage by suggesting that "[s]ome writers have overblown the image of Warren as a Kentuckian. His home at Guthrie lay just across the state line, in the rich oval of the Middle Tennessee bluegrass . . . . Warren was a child of Middle Tennessee—part of that intriguing social-cultural complex dominated by Nashville" ("Robert Penn Warren as Historian" 7). Connelly admits that "Kentucky certainly became a rich source of descriptive imagery in several of Warren's novels and a number of poems," but he also argues that this was not an indication that Warren was "a product of his own Kentucky upbringing" (7). Rather, Warren's use of Kentucky imagery in his work represents nothing more than "a cultivated trait—something that Warren acquired through actual research" (7). However, an important consideration is absent in Connelly's argument. While it is true that Warren consistently identified himself as a Tennessean and professed a better understanding of the intricacies of that state, it is the Kentucky of his youth

which most regularly appears in his poems and fiction. To begin to understand Warren's writing, the reason for his obsession with Kentucky and its violence, its controversies, and its oral history must be investigated. Understanding his Kentucky burden is vital to demystifying his literary psyche.

Elements of Warren's Kentucky burden began to appear in his poetry during his college years at Vanderbilt. Though he had left Kentucky behind for good, his poems were etched in the state's landscapes and filled with images of his family and other memorable people of his childhood community. In "Sonnet of a Rainy Summer," published in the *Fugitive* in 1924, Warren recalls one of the rainy summer days spent with his grandfather in Cerulean Springs. Though the memory appears pleasant, the tone of the poem reveals a certain sadness about the passing of time and reveals Warren's loneliness following his grandfather's death:

> Strange now, this rain, not summer's, on the roofs
> And windy fingers at the window pane
> Stir pitiless remembrance of things I knew—
> The scent of wet whitehorn along a lane,
> One twisted silver-penny moon, slow hoofs
> Plashing the mud as I rode home from you. (9-14)

The poem also illustrates Warren's discomfort with his own Kentucky home in Guthrie. In the last line, Warren's use of the word "home" is unconventional in that home does not appear to represent an ideal place of comfort for the speaker. Instead, the journey home is taking him away from his desired place—being with his grandfather. This poem thus

indicates Warren's struggle with sense of place and identity which would reappear quite often in his works, especially his poetry.

In a poem resembling Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Warren's Kentucky burden of identity is once again detectable. Though "Kentucky Mountain Farm" dealt more with "the air and the rocks than it was about the tillage of the earth and the tillers," this seven-part poem served as "an early promise that he would later turn to his native earth as a subject" (Watkins 69). The poems were written between 1926 and 1932 and are set in the eastern part of the state which Warren claimed to have never seen, but Watkins suggests that "the poems also perhaps show the influence of the division in Todd County between the small hill farms in the north and the large rich bottomlands in the south" (69). Warren takes the reader through a sequence of natural scenes of the Eastern Kentucky landscape. In his book, *A Colder Fire,* Victor Strandberg points to the second section entitled "At the Hour of the Breaking of the Rocks" as revealing the overall theme of the poem (14):

> The hills are weary, the lean men have passed;
> The rocks are stricken, and the frost has torn
> Away their ridged fundaments at last,
> So that the fractured atoms now are borne
> Down shifting waters to the tall, profound
> Shadow of the absolute deeps. . . . (10-5)

The poem, according to Strandsberg, is a philosophical search for the self: "Only by peering down the corridors of time, dark and interminable as they seem to be, can the individual find the meaning of his own existence, and with it, his true identity" (14). The

"shifting waters" represent Warren's efforts to "find some basic identity beyond the reflected image of the self" (14). If this is true, and certainly identity was a concept that Warren visited in several poems, then it is interesting that Warren chose to use imagery scrupulously drawn from Kentucky when seeming to search for his own true identity. Unlike other Kentucky writers, Warren's identity crisis was much more complicated than simply his relationship to the state or even to the South. Warren's search was rooted in deep philosophical ideas of nature and the universe, but in order to find those answers as they applied to him, he had to return to the origin of his universe which was Kentucky. Strandberg claims that "Warren's eventual answer to the search for identity is prefigured here also in the image which concludes Section II. Here the river of time, by emptying all its loads—men, redbuds, stone—indiscriminately into the deeps of eternity, brings about an ultimate oneness of all things" (15), and only that oneness will result in his finding that true identity. However, to achieve the spiritual unity with nature necessary for self-realization, Warren had to return to the land of his ancestors from which he had sprung.

Another striking aspect of the poem which reveals Warren's problematic relationship to his home state is the section subtitled "History Among the Rocks." In this subpoem, Warren explores "the many ways to die / Here among the rocks in any weather" (1-2). Humans could freeze to death in the winter, drown in a flood, or get bit by a snake. Warren points out that despite the many natural ways to die among the rocks, man added a very unnatural way by killing in the war. The image of Kentucky as "The Dark and Bloody Ground" contrasts with the naturalness of the rocks and the state's

neutrality during the Civil War to create a sense of the conflicted nature both of the state and Warren's own feelings toward it:

> In these autumn orchards once young men lay dead . . .
>
> Grey coats, blue coats. Young men on the mountainside
>
> Clambered, fought. Hells muddied the rocky spring.
>
> Their reason is hard to guess, remembering
>
> Blood on their black mustaches in moonlight.
>
> Their reason is hard to guess and a long time past:
>
> The apple falls, falling in the quiet night. (20-6)

As with the majority of Warren's work, the poem is not simply pondering the particular region evident in the setting; rather, it is directed at the larger world and its people. This stanza, according to Walker, indicates Warren's submission to a naturalistic approach to death: "however perplexed he may be about the motivations that prompted young men to action in the Civil War, he cannot summarily dismiss the enigma of their fate by proving it empty of moral content like the fall of the apple 'in the quiet night', although he might wish to, to be rid of the problem" (46). However, the stanza also highlights Warren's awareness of the neutrality of Kentucky in the Civil War because the deaths of the "gray coats" and the "blue coats" blend together earning equal sympathy from the poet. Though such a fact may seem irrelevant to the meaning of the poem, Warren was raised on stories about the Confederacy, and it was likely an important part of his identity as a Southerner. Charles Bohner points out, "[i]n this border country where sectional loyalties were often divided, Warren's family was staunchly Southern. Both his grandfathers and his granduncle fought with the Confederacy in the Civil War, and throughout his

childhood he heard stories of the fighting from people who had witnessed it" (11). In such a crucial part of a poem which deals with the complexity of death, it seems appropriate that Warren would emphasize an important part of Kentucky's identity crisis while dealing with his own. At the end of this particular subsection, there is no comforting resolution—only the narrator's acknowledgement of not understanding the motivation of the soldiers which led to their death. Similarly, Warren does not, until much later in his life, reach a comfortable acceptance of his identity as a Kentuckian—only an acknowledgement of Kentucky as "a place to be from."

Regardless of his hesitancy toward claiming Kentucky as his native state, the images of the state and its people remained a consistent presence in Warren's poetry. In 1957, Warren published a book of poems, many of which recall his Kentucky childhood, called *Promises: 1954-1956*. Although most of these poems were written while Warren was in Italy with his wife, Eleanor Clark, and his two children, many of the poems in this collection revolved around his family and boyhood in Kentucky. Warren described the book as "half Kentucky-Tennessee, and half Italy . . . . It's the long withdrawal from south Kentucky . . . ; the book is really on that theme as much as any other theme, the other being father-child, father-daughter, father-son, as infants" (Blotner 311). Though he was beginning to revisit his Kentucky background and produce more colloquial poetry, Warren was still engaged in an identity crisis. Perhaps the passage most indicative of his conflicted identity is presented in the poem "Gold Glade." This piece recalls a childhood memory in which the young Warren finds a golden glade while wandering in the woods. As the poet recounts the story, he becomes frustrated with his fading memory:

But of course dark came, and I can't recall

What county it was, for the life of me.

Montgomery, Todd, Christian—I know them all.

Was it even Kentucky or Tennessee?

Perhaps just an image that keeps haunting me. (26-30)

Since Warren's childhood was spent almost entirely in Kentucky, it seems likely that the memory was of Kentucky; however, this part of the poem represents more than just a boyhood discovery. The stanza basically sums up Warren's conflicted relationship with Kentucky— the "gold glade" is the realization of his identity, and this part of the poem reveals his struggle to come to terms with place. The indistinct location of the gold glade is important in understanding Warren's problematic relationship with Kentucky and his desire to define himself beyond his boyhood roots. It also indicates his inability to define his own selfhood separate from place. Is his identity etched in the farm of Christian County with his Grandpa Penn, in Todd County with his aloof father and smothering mother, in cosmopolitan Nashville with his Agrarian brethren, or is his identity rooted in a spiritual unity which transcends place? Just as the poem comes to no certain resolution as to the location of the gold glade, neither is the question as yet answered for Warren. Nevertheless, his personal sense of identity appeared to be very much connected to place, and he would continue to seek that place for many years to come: "It stands, wherever it is, but somewhere / I shall set my foot, and go there" (34-5).

Toward the end of his career, Warren's Kentucky burden of identity reappears, only this time it has come full circle. In "Old-Time Childhood in Kentucky," Warren once again reminisces about time spent as a child with his grandfather. Most of his

earlier childhood poems indicated Warren's emphasis on literal geography and sense of place; however, this poem reveals a much more mature poet who comes to realize the importance of not just a literal place but also the "cultural geography" and the "symbolic geography . . . , a geography of the mind and the spirit" (Lewis 14-5). As a result, "[i]n the poetry of his prime, Warren set out to explain himself, to himself, via poems that traced his own geography, or better, geographical history" (15). That history, literal, cultural, and symbolic, came from his grandfather, and Warren's identity might be found "somewhere among those vanished voice and faces" (Hendricks 68) of his grandfather's stories. Grandpa Penn supplied Warren's sense of his own ancestral history which would be a key to the formation of his identity. The climax of the poem comes when the boy essentially asks his grandfather what life is about: "what do you do, things being like this?" (33). The wise old man who was responsible for shaping the boy's sense of self answers by saying "All you can" (33) and then follows up with :

> [. . .] Love
> Your wife, love your get, keep your word, and
> If need arises die for what men die for. There aren't
> Many choices.
> And remember that truth doesn't always live in the number of voices. (34-9)

The poem serves as much more than simply another chance to recall his time with his grandfather; the composition of the poem represents the moment when the boy's question at the end of the poem is answered, a question which Warren had carried with him for

most of his life: "What I would be, might be, after ages—how many?—had rolled over" (47).

Perhaps the most obvious evidence of Warren's Kentucky burden was his deep and intense preoccupation with the folk history of Kentucky legends. From very early on, Warren was exposed to various stories and legends through the storytelling of his grandfather and through the oral tradition of the people in Guthrie. As Warren got farther away from the state of his birth, he became even more obsessed with retelling the violent tales he had heard all of his life in another attempt to seek his own Kentucky identity. By reinventing these parts of Kentucky history, Warren was subconsciously attempting to gain a sense of control and ownership over that part of his own past. Likewise, Warren could take the brutal Kentucky stories and "deal with the complexities of human personality, exploring them against the background of a particular culture while infusing the whole with his perennial concerns with original sin against the ongoing process of history" (Blotner 469). Warren not only found his niche with storytelling, but he also discovered a medium for some of his most difficult themes. For instance, "The Ballad of Billie Potts" (1943) was Warren's first use of an event in Kentucky history in verse and "the first accomplished poem with distinctly country and Kentucky character and origins" (Watkins 80). The ballad is based on "an ancient Kentucky story of frontier robbers and filicide" (80); more specifically, it chronicles the botched sin, frantic escape, inevitable return, and subsequent death of young Billie Potts. After being given the opportunity to be a part of his father's scheme of killing and robbing men who stayed in his inn located in Western Kentucky, Billie fails in his first attempt and is, instead, wounded himself. He flees Kentucky only to return ten years later when he decides that he "cannot continue

to live with the denial of himself implicit in his false innocence and must cleanse himself by accepting his identity" (Walker 68). Upon his return, he withholds that identity from his parents in order "to tease 'em and fun 'em" (line 292); mistaking him for a stranger, his father murders young Billie for the money he may have only to discover later the true identity of his victim. Billie's parents are eventually "forced to accept the verdict of the birthmark, which is 'shaped for luck'" (69). This poem marks Warren's introduction of "the universal 'you' that he would use over and over during the years ahead" (Ward 179), but, more importantly, it highlights Warren's characteristic juxtaposition of past and present, his generalization of facts into "an archetypal pattern of the discovery of guilt" (Bohner 44), and his notion of the return of the wandering son to the origins of his identity.

While the poem is important in revealing some of Warren's most consistent themes, it is also an indication of his Kentucky burden of history and identity. In an introductory note before the poem, Warren explains that he first heard the story from his great-aunt and then he later read the tale in a history book. According to Walker, Warren uses the old woman's story to approach the subject of original sin, a concept which would find voice in Warren's work for the remainder of his career:

> She assumed that the events occurred in a region of Western Kentucky between the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers. This section of the state is known as 'Between the Rivers', hence the repetition of the phrase like a refrain throughout the ballad, connecting its locale with Mesopotamia, that other 'land between the rivers,' birthplace of man and scene of his original sin. Warren thus 'subtly hints

> as early as line 2 of this poem the origin (and outcome) of the myth he is recreating in terms of the New World and innocence and its Fall'. (68)

While it is certainly true that original sin plays an important role not just in this particular ballad but in Warren's entire opus, he also unconsciously reveals his feelings regarding the relationship between his own past and personal identity. Just as Billie Potts' motivation for returning to "the land between the rivers" (line 9) was to reclaim the identity he had lost during the past ten years, Warren's own search for identity in his writing was leading him back to his past and to the land of his father. Warren understood that "recognition of the significance of the past is necessary to self-identity" (Hendricks 42), and he also realized that the past and the self are indivisible (Bohner 44), but his response was rewriting the folk history of the Kentucky past, a gesture symbolizing his attempt to seize control over his own. If he could somehow gain control of his past through his writing, then he could eventually also take control of his quest for selfhood. In an interview with Floyd C. Watkins, Warren explains Billie's return:

> Well, now, this is the question of the man who goes to the West to become a different man—redeemed—prospers and comes back. He must come back. Something calls him back. He doesn't know why he wants to come back. He comes back to his true 'human' father—he dies by his own blood—and name. Now when they kill him he accepts from his father's hand the natural gift. He's a sacrifice this time. But he's returned. He's performed the human cycle. He had the human gift. He received it from his father's hand. (343-4)

Warren's description of Billie's return parallels his own life, especially when dealing with Kentucky. He leaves, prospers, yet returns again and again to Kentucky in his

writing. Similar to many of Warren's Kentucky stories, "The Ballad of Billie Potts" also reiterates Warren's obsession with Kentucky as "The Dark and Bloody Ground." Billie's gruesome death at the hands of his father and his subsequent return to the land of his birth represents the first of many violent Kentucky stories Warren explores.

Perhaps his most ambitious poem based on Kentucky folk legend is *Brother to Dragons* (1979). Though he originally published it in 1953, Warren republished the poem after some significant revisions, and he claimed in his new Foreword that the second was the better and sharper version of the two. Representing Warren's return to poetry after a hiatus of nearly a decade, this poem recounts a horrific murder in Livingston County, Kentucky, in 1811 in which Lilburn and Isham Lewis, nephews of Thomas Jefferson, grotesquely kill, dismember, and cremate a slave. Through the oral tradition of his family, Warren "had known the folk-tale" but had received only a "garbled version" (Watkins, "A Dialogue" 340) in childhood. In the 1940s, he began soaking himself in the folk history of Kentucky and was struck by how little information existed about Lilburn Lewis and his family. Though he "generally follows the recorded story of the Lewis family and the murder of John" (Simpson 135), with the little information available to him, Warren reconstructed the tale in narrative verse as "an elaborate fiction, which . . . includes not just two major historical figures—Thomas Jefferson and the explorer Meriwether Lewis—but a figure known only by the initials R.P.W., who is described as 'the writer of this poem'" (Simpson 135) and the writer's elderly father. According to Warren's adaptation of the story, the Lewis family arrived in Kentucky in 1807 from Albemarle County, Virginia, under rather strained conditions: "Of some aristocratic pretension among the gentry of the Tidewater society, the Lewises

presumably did not move by choice but were compelled by a pattern of hope that still urges Americans who have fallen on hard times to seek the promised land in the west" (133). Life was harsh on the frontier compared to that in the more culturally rich Virginia, and tragedy befell the Lewis family. Lucy Jefferson Lewis, beloved mother of Lilburne and Isham, died, and Lilburne was engulfed by a bitter hatred which came to a climax on the night of December 15, 1811:

> Lilburne commanded his slaves to gather in a cabin that served the plantation kitchen (Warren calls it "the meat-house"). And here, in the terrified presence of the huddled slaves, aided by Isham, Lilburne literally butchered a seventeen-year-old male slave . . . . George's (named John in Warren's version) death by incredible brutal act of the Lewis brothers was punishment for his having broken a pitcher prized by their mother . . . . Lilburne and Isham tried to hide their deed by having the slaves who witnessed it burn the body parts of George in the kitchen fireplace. But this disposal scheme was thwarted a few hours thereafter when the chimney of the fireplace collapsed onto the cabin during the first great tremors of the New Madrid quake. A second attempt to hide the murder by stuffing what was left of the flesh and bones of George in the masonry of a hastily rebuilt fireplace and chimney was confounded about two months later, when, as a result of the aftershocks of the New Madrid quake, the rebuilt chimney collapsed and George's remains were once again exposed. (Simpson 134)

When Lilburne's and Isham's crime was discovered, they were arrested. In order to avoid trial, the two planned a suicide attempt which went horribly awry, leaving Lilburne

dead and Isham left to stand trial for the murder. Isham was then convicted and sentenced to death but escaped and was never heard from again.

Despite the history surrounding the story, Warren claimed that his intentions were not to uncover the mystery of what actually happened in Livingston County. Instead, Warren asserted that he was "trying to write a poem, not a history, and therefore had no compunction about tampering with non-essential facts" (Warren, "Foreword" xiii.); he was, in essence, using the Kentucky folk tale to approach, once again, the subject of the human condition. Jefferson's presence in the poem represents "the delusionary belief in man's rational capacity to act on the basis of innate goodness," which belief is ultimately destroyed by the proof of "the innate capacity of man for acts of evil . . . demonstrated by his own flesh and blood" (Simpson 138); or essentially, an affirmation of the doctrine of Original Sin. Since Warren was unable to find any documentation of Jefferson's acknowledgement of the brutal crime of his nephews, he also uses Jefferson's interaction with the living poet R.P.W. to emphasize the relationship between the past and the present: ". . . the ghostly author of the Declaration of Independence . . . comes to the realization that his redemption depends on his acknowledgement of his intricate entanglement in the drama of good and evil that is human history" (Simpson 145). Since all of the characters with the exception of the narrator and his father have "returned from the past and from death to agonize about the meaning of the crime" (Schwartz 45), the role of R.P.W. becomes even more important. Besides the interaction with Jefferson, R.P.W.'s and his father's presence are indicative of Warren's desire to relate these local events to the modern world. In his essay entitled "*Brother to Dragons*: The Fact of Violence vs. the Possibility of Love," Richard G. Law claims the poem as Warren's

dramatic shift from the Eliot-esque impersonal and invisible authorship to "a new willingness to take the direct risks of self-involvement in the issues he raises" (127). If this is the case, R.P.W. can be viewed as more than simply Warren's tool for introducing his own voice into the poem; that is, R.P.W. can be viewed as Warren's "telling the story of his own quest as a twentieth-century American poet for a redeeming vision of the meaning of history" (145).

Though the poem serves as another example of Warren's use of a Kentucky story to express universal themes, the state's role in the poem is of much more importance and prominence than scholars have recognized. In fact, Kentucky provides more than simply the setting—it is the catalyst for the violent activities in the tale. The Lewis family was presumably forced to leave Virginia due to financial difficulties, and the frontier offered the prospect for land ownership and other new opportunities no longer available in Virginia. However, from the beginning of Warren's poem, it is evident that the move was not a positive one for the family and already the presumed inferiority of Kentucky compared to the more aristocratic Virginia becomes a reality in the poem. Colonel Charles Lewis laments over the move and foreshadows the tragedy that lies ahead:

> I built the house,
>
> Left Albemarle and ease,
>
> Took wife and sons, slaves, chattels, beasts, and goods,
>
> My marks of rank and occupation, all
>
> [. . .] So fled,
>
> Sought new world, new birth, tension and test, perhaps terror.
>
> Said I'd renew, if for an instant only,

[. . .] But knew it was illusion. Knew that I fled,

Not as redeemer but the damned. (11-2)

This image is compounded when Lucy explains her role in the story to the narrator and reveals her longing for her Virginia home: "There is little to know, for I know only / The way the sunlight fell across the leaf in Albemarle / So long ago in Albemarle" (17). She attempts to illustrate her acceptance of moving to Kentucky, but she cannot because the only really significant event that she can relay is the fact that she died there: "Came only to Kentucky, by my love / I did the best I could. No, that's a lie / I did not do my best. I died" (17). For the Colonel and Lucy, the move to Kentucky marked the beginning of the end of their dream of prosperity and thus began the nightmarish demise of their family beginning with the death of Lucy and the subsequent psychological downfall of Lilburne.

Though they came from a genteel family in Virginia, Warren points out that "the wilderness gets the other Lewises; they become brutes" (Watkins 347)--the "other Lewises" being Lilburne and Isham. Kentucky begins to play an even more prominent role in the poem as it becomes evident that "the frontier was absorbing the brothers" (346), and Lilburne, in particular, begins to harbor resentment toward his father for the move to the frontier of Kentucky. In an interview conducted by Floyd Watkins, Warren explains that "Lilburn [*sic*] hates the father because the mother—he brought his mother to Kentucky—the mother, who presumably loved Virginia, the old ties, the blood ties" (346). The longer they are in Kentucky, the more the brothers lose their sense of gentility and show signs of being overtaken by the wildness of the frontier. Warren thus shows their gradual devolution from their aristocratic roots to their formation into brutal frontiersmen by pointing out the change in their drink of choice: "Now in the present

poem I have Madeira in the beginning of the poem and corn whiskey in the end. Now the gentleman in Virginia didn't drink corn whiskey. They drank Madeira. They drank port, as a great eighteenth-century gentleman would. Now it is said in the poem that the decanter of Madeira has long since been replaced by the jug" (Watkins "A Dialogue" 347). Though Isham was certainly being consumed by the wildness of the west, it was the transformation of Lilburne into a brutal sadist that was the most dangerous: "the frontier brutality entered the soul of Lilburn [*sic*] too, even though he, at one level, hated it and looked back to Virginia" (347). When Lucy died, Lilburne "blamed his father for killing his mother by bringing her to the wilderness" (347), and he became insane with rage, hatred, and guilt, resulting finally in the violent crime against the young slave.

If, as Lewis P. Simpson suggests, Warren adapts "the history of the Lewis family in Kentucky" into a glorified "ghost story" (135), then Kentucky becomes, arguably, the most important character in the poem. The Lewis brothers appear to be victimized by their surroundings—Lilburne and Isham are overtaken by the foreign frontier and the brutality of the wilderness. Kentucky's mythical reputation as the "Dark and Bloody Ground" is no longer a myth to the characters in the story, and eventually Lilburne reenacts the state's history with the brutal axe-murder of the slave. Further, the "Dark and Bloody Ground" becomes the force even beyond the demise of the Lewis family; it claims not just Lucy and John but also Lilburne before allowing Isham to escape as the only person left who knows the truth. The blood of the Lewis family soaks the Kentucky ground, and the mystery of its violence remains.

In the poem, Warren attempts to minimize the importance of physical place by the formal indication of the setting at the beginning of the poem: "Place: No place; Time:

Any time" (3). It becomes clear, however, very early on that the Kentucky setting provides crucial dichotomies such as Jefferson's character, and the aristocracy that he symbolizes, in stark contrast to the wild frontiersmen found in the western part of Kentucky. More important, perhaps, is the fact that Warren felt inclined to visit the place of the murder before writing about it, claiming to be in search of "concreteness" (Blotner 232). These trips would find their way into the poem and provide an important link between the present and the past. According to Dennis M. Dooley, the R.P.W.'s trip to Smithland represents important stages of the narrator's, and perhaps Warren's, spiritual development. During the first trip, the condition of Smithland is similar to that of the Wasteland and it appears to be stuck in the past. Dooley suggests that the condition of Smithland is representative of the condition of R.P.W.'s spirit. He climbs up the mountain to Rocky Hill not just in search of the place of the crime, but R.P.W. is also seeking meaning and identity in the same place that his father had found truth years earlier. By doing so, he is both searching for his identity and trying to reconnect to his past and reconcile with his estranged father. Climbing the mountain is literal, but it becomes even more important as a metaphor for seeking spiritual maturity and accepting one's humanity: "In this humble acceptance lies the discovery and knowledge of one's own name and reconciliation to the father. And in reconciliation one gains spiritual maturity" (107). When the narrator approaches the mountain on the second trip, he comments, "Strange now, today it doesn't look so high / Not like it did the first time here" (128). R.P.W. completes his spiritual journey, and he is now able to accept his own humanity and that of others which ultimately allows him to reenter the world as a part of it rather than alienated from it. Warren was very deliberate in the location of this

spiritual journey of R.P.W. To connect with the characters in the poem, the narrator had to become a part of their world, and R.P.W.'s experience on that mountain allows for that connection. Kentucky's presence in the poem, then, is more than just a coincidental setting; its mysterious and violent force is a vital part of the story. Just as identity cannot be separated from the past, neither can a crime of such magnitude be separated from the place in which it happens.

Warren's 1950 *World Enough and Time* is another example of his keen interest in Kentucky folk history. As was the case with *Brother to Dragons*, Warren adapted a legendary, but true, Kentucky story of murder and hatred into a universal critique of the human soul. Known as the "Kentucky Tragedy," the story had already been treated by such notables as Edgar Allan Poe, William Gilmore Simms, and Thomas Holley Chivers; however, "Warren's inspiration for the novel was a pamphlet which Katherine Anne Porter showed him in 1944 when both were fellows at the Library of Congress" (Bohner 84). According to Bohner, the historical accounts of the actual events are "compounded by high tragedy and farce comedy, innocence and corruption, honesty and duplicity," all of which add to the extreme melodrama of the story:

> A young attorney, Jereboam O. Beauchamp, heard the story of the seduction and betrayal of Ann Cook by the solicitor-general of Kentucky, Colonel Solomon P. Sharp. Beauchamp impetuously sought her out and proposed marriage, but she would consent only on condition that he vow to murder Sharp. Although Beauchamp was an acquaintance of Sharp and easily provoked a quarrel, Sharp repeatedly refused to accept a challenge. The lovers then conspired together to murder Sharp, and Jereboam stabbed him to death on the night of November 6,

> 1825. Beauchamp was arrested and pleaded not guilty, but he was convicted after a trial which was marked by corruption on both sides. Although the grand jury released Ann, she joined Jereboam in his cell where they awaited the day of execution by composing prayers and poems, singing hymns, and making love. When the governor refused a plea for pardon, they attempted suicide by taking laudanum the night before the execution was to take place. When this failed, Jereboam stabbed Ann to death and wounded himself; but he lived long enough to be hanged the following day. (Bohner 85)

In Warren's version, Jeremiah Beaumont vows revenge on Colonel Cassius Fort for the betrayal of Rachael Jordan. Warren uses the story, once again, to revisit themes such as the conflict of good versus evil, the indivisible relationship of the past to the present, and the recognition of original sin. Most prominent in Warren's story, however, is Jeremiah's search for identity through knowledge of the self and the world (Bohner 87). This theme paralleled Warren's own intensive search for the self and further highlighted the internal turmoil such a search inevitably caused. Jeremiah's tormented question of "Oh, what am I?" (295) echoes many of Warren's previous works highlighting his own identity crisis. His deep, personal connection to Jeremiah's plight could explain why Warren was haunted by the idea of the book until its eventual creation: "I read it (the historical account) in five minutes . . . but I was six years making the book" (Bohner 85).

While his fictionalized version of the "Kentucky Tragedy" essentially served Warren as another forum in which to explore the conflict of the human psyche, the vivid imagery of Kentucky as the "Dark and Bloody Ground" is again an important aspect of the story. Just as in *Brother to Dragons*, the Kentucky frontier becomes a major factor in

the development of the main character: "The youth of Jeremiah is portrayed against a background of frontier Kentucky during the early nineteenth century. He is a stiff-necked, aloof young man whose natural shyness preserves his innocence in a society both coarse and brutal" (Bohner 88). Like Lilburne Lewis, Jeremiah is brutalized by the frontier culture, and, with the murder of Colonel Fort, he eventually takes part in the violent ritual of staining the land with more blood. In a moment foreshadowing the mysterious force of the Kentucky frontier, the narrator of the novel suggests that "perhaps the land and the history of the land devised Jeremiah Beaumont and the drama in which he played, and the scene is the action and speaks through the mouth of Jeremiah Beaumont as through a mask" (7). Perhaps Jeremiah was, as Walker suggests, "devised by his place and time rather than as the maker of his own drama" (112) and had simply become a tool for the violent force at work in the Kentucky frontier.

Warren's Kentucky burden is further highlighted by the circumstances surrounding the death of Jeremiah Beaumont. Abandoning the historical facts concerning the main character's eventual death at the hands of the law, Warren allows Jeremiah and Rachael to escape from jail and take refuge with a river pirate. According to Bohner, this "flight out of time and into nature" represents "a mindless and furious descent into the mire of bestiality" (91); Jeremiah is transformed even further by the land until his very soul, like the Lewis brothers, becomes a part of the brutal frontier. Rachael is also affected by the brutality of frontier culture but is eventually overcome by it and stabs herself in the chest just as Colonel Fort had been stabbed by Jeremiah. At this point, Jeremiah's death seems imminent. Interestingly, though, instead of dying at the hands of the more civilized establishment, Jeremiah is murdered by the same kind of frontier

brutality that he had begun to embody; his attempt to escape the frontier to turn himself in was thwarted by another beast of the frontier, and his blood is added to the "Dark and Bloody Ground." Ultimately, he becomes a part of the mysterious violence of Kentucky, which fate the narrator suggests was perhaps already predetermined from the very beginning. Warren ends the novel with a passage about present day Kentucky: *"Things went on their way, and the Commonwealth of Kentucky has, by the latest estimation, 2,819,000 inhabitants . . . "* (465). Though the population has grown and the state has progressed, Warren points out the injustice that still reigns in the state and the indifference of many to that injustice. He emphasizes that "*things are improving as all statistics show and civilization is making strides, and we can look forward to a great future for our state (if we accept the challenge, if we carry on our great tradition, if we pass on the torch), for it is a fair land . . . .*" (468). Just as in the past, injustice is rampant in Kentucky because of human flaws, but, in the end, the land will avenge the abused and justice will prevail:

> *In the days before the white men came, the Indians called the Land of Kentucky the Dark and Bloody Ground. But they also called it the Breathing Land and the Hollow Land, for beneath the land there are great caves. The Indians came here to fight and to hunt, but they did not come here to live. It was a holy land, it was a land of mystery, and they trod the soil lightly when they came. They could not live here, for the gods lived here. But when the white men came, the gods fled, either into the upper air or deeper into the dark earth. So there was no voice here to speak and tell the white men what justice is. Unless Cassius Fort heard that*

voice in the night. That, of course, is unlikely, for Cassius Fort was only an ignorant back-country lawyer. But men still long for justice. (468)

Further evidence of Warren's Kentucky burden beyond just setting can be found in the novels *Night Rider* (1939) and *The Cave* (1959). *Night Rider* was Warren's first novel and centered on the Black Patch Tobacco Wars which raged in Western Kentucky during Warren's childhood. Warren's Kentucky burden is, perhaps, the most deliberate in this novel; the violence of the Night Riders was a haunting presence in his childhood and evoked similar images of Kentucky as the "Dark and Bloody Ground" as did *Brother to Dragons* and *World Enough and Time*. On the other hand, *The Cave* offers a different glimpse of Warren's Kentucky burden. Based on "the attempt to rescue Floyd Collins, a real-life Kentucky cave explorer, from a crawl-passage where he had been trapped" (Ward 175), which was a huge 1925 media event, Warren used the incident to write a modern variation on Plato's allegory of the cave: "Like Jasper in his literal cave, each character is trapped within the figurative cave of his or her own nature, mistaking shadows for reality" (Walker 185). However, to categorize the novel only as an adaptation of Plato's myth would be to grossly oversimplify Warren's most complicated work. Through twelve main characters and no obvious protagonist, Warren attempts his most ambitious investigation into the search for selfhood. What is most interesting about Warren's story, as it applies to his Kentucky burden, is the fact that he moved the setting from Kentucky to the fictional Johntown, Tennessee. It is possible that Warren moved the setting in order to separate his fictionalized tale from the historical event surrounding it so as to foreground the themes. Despite the change of setting, this novel exemplifies how the history and legends of Kentucky often consumed Warren's imagination. Both

Night Rider and *The Cave* call upon different characterizations and plots to deliver the same central themes inherent in all of Warren's work including the search for identity, the concept of original sin, the relationship between the past and the present—essentially, "the truth of human nature" (Ward 169). However, they also indicate the extent of Warren's Kentucky burden as the state remained a constant presence throughout his long career.

Even in works not directly related to Kentucky, Warren's inherent Kentucky burden is still evident and powerful. While teaching at Louisiana State University, Warren developed the idea for a story based on the rise to power and subsequent assassination of prominent Governor turned United States Senator Huey P. Long. In *All the King's Men* (1946), his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, Warren returns to the Kentucky reputation for violence through Jack Burden's investigation into the Cass Mastern story. Until late in the novel, there is no overt revelation of place though the reader aware of the historical circumstances surrounding the novel could easily recognize that the events were set in Louisiana. Through the narrator Jack Burden's interaction and fascination with Willie Stark and those surrounding the political giant, Warren once again uses the story to approach themes of the "interdependence of good and evil, human freedom, and human worth" (Walker 106). However, Burden's own conflicted character is revealed most clearly through the episode of Cass Mastern. While a graduate student in American history long before he encountered Stark, "the heir of Gilbert Mastern, recollecting that Jack Burden . . . was a student of history . . . sent him the packet of letters, the account books, and the photograph, asking if he . . . thought the enclosures were of any 'financial interest' since he . . . had heard that libraries sometimes would pay for such antique

documents" (Warren, *All the King's Men* 160). After answering that no real fortune exists in the records of an unknown such as Cass Mastern, the heir gives the papers to Burden for "sentimental reasons" and thus he "made acquaintance of Cass Mastern" (160).

The story of Cass Mastern offers an important insight into the character of Jack Burden, but it is also another example of Warren's innate Kentucky burden. Though Warren did not find it necessary to specify the location of the main action of the novel, he was very specific in placing the tragic story of Cass Mastern in Kentucky. Mastern, "who becomes involved in a love affair with the wife of his best friend, Duncan Trice" (Bohner 74), enters into a world of deceit and tragedy only to find that because he is involved in the suicide of Duncan Trice, he is responsible in part for the universal tragedy of human failure (Walker 104). Warren's placement of the story in Kentucky reiterates his use of the state as a ground zero of human tragedy, unnecessary violence, and intense suffering. However, there is a significant difference in the Mastern story from earlier tales of violence: Cass is redeemed at the end. He does not become a victim of the Kentucky violence, and his blood is not added to the already "Dark and Bloody Ground." Rather, he dies honorably in Georgia during the Civil War. Though the theme of this story would have been just as obvious if it were set in another place or if it had been like Willie's story and not placed at all, it is no coincidence that Cass Mastern's story of moral dilemma is set in Kentucky; in fact, this reflects a pattern in Warren's work in terms of the importance of the state in Warren's development as a writer and as a person. By setting the story in Kentucky, Warren revealed not just his own Jack Burden-like

search for identity, but he also returned to the state of his own past once again thus indicating his belief in the indivisible nature of the past and the self.

Without doubt, Warren enjoyed more critical and popular acclaim than any other Kentucky writer. He has become one of the most acclaimed Southern writers in American literary history. His work appears regularly in major American anthologies, and scholars continue to praise his masterful development of universal themes. Perhaps the reason he has endured longer than other Kentucky writers is his remarkable ability to go beyond the regional sentiment and encompass universal meanings while also staying true to the colloquial nature of his region. However, he has also endured as a writer because of his reaction to the inherent Kentucky burden evident in his work. Warren did not try to escape the burden or push against it; instead, he molded it to fit his larger purposes of tackling difficult and emotionally sensitive themes throughout his work. While he captures the rhythm of life and the unrelenting connection to the past which is uniquely Kentuckian, he also transcends the physical borders of the state by dealing with the crucial questions concerning humanity and imperfection. As a result of this reaction, Robert Penn Warren ultimately redefined Kentucky regionalism as something more than local color; Warren's Kentucky is complex, mysterious, and filled with stories of human defeat and triumph—not an inferior frontier state controlled by the lowest levels of human life. Warren portrayed the Kentucky people as complex human beings who were dealing with the same human struggles as others in the South and the rest of the country. Essentially, Warren made Kentucky a legitimate literary place in which to investigate the human soul.

In an article on four of Kentucky's greatest writers, H.R. Stoneback comments that ". . . there are Kentuckians—I have often heard this said—who would deny Warren the identity of Kentucky Writer because he left Kentucky as a young man and never really returned . . . ." Certainly, Robert Penn Warren's legacy far exceeds the regional boundaries of Kentucky; yet, the state remains a central presence in his works and is not to be overshadowed by his involvement with the Fugitives and Agrarians and his more cosmopolitan relationship to the literary world. The image of Kentucky as the "Dark and Bloody Ground" appeared often in Warren's work, but he is remembered more as a Southern writer than a Kentuckian. However, it was precisely Warren's ability to transcend the limits of a regional categorization that makes the Kentucky presence in his writing even more important. Though he did leave the state and never permanently returned, "he never stopped writing Kentucky; he may have left Kentucky early, but Kentucky never left him; Kentucky informs his work from beginning to end" (Stoneback). He remains Kentucky's sage.

Conclusion

Robert Penn Warren insisted that regionalism "is a present manifestation of a force that has expressed itself in many ways in the past" ("Some Don'ts for Literary Regionalists" 358). American readers craved works of regionalism during the country's infant years as an independent nation when there was a call for a uniquely American literature. After the country's critics had established the boundaries of a national literature, however, regionalism became a category meriting only derision—a label to avoid at all costs. Anything regional was deemed inferior, especially so if the particular region in question was Southern. Until the rise of the Vanderbilt Agrarians and the subsequent Southern Renaissance, Southern writers hoping to gain positive status in the literary world had to fight hard against the marginalization that being a Southern regionalist often entailed. Even though the Agrarians brought prestige to Southern regionalism and made it a legitimate and important part of the whole of American literature, the existence of subsections within Southern regionalism has been largely downplayed. The importance of the present study is its focus on a specifically Kentucky regionalism. By investigating the intricacies of the subsections within Southern regionalism, we can gain a better understanding of the particular regionalism as part of a whole.

The four Vanderbilt-educated Kentucky authors explored in this study reveal the importance of the Kentucky burden in their respective works. Equally important to the study of subregions, perhaps, are the effects of their reactions to that Kentucky burden on their scholarly success and literary endurance. For James Still, the Kentucky burden was not a burden at all—his perception of his contribution as a writer was to preserve the

culture of the Eastern Kentucky mountain people by recording their stories and their unique traditions without weighing down the reader with too much of the imposing dialect which was much harder to decipher on the page than it was to hear in person. He did not react to the Kentucky burden by feeling the need to defend the people against their presumed inferiority; rather, he let them exist on their own terms and let them speak for themselves through their stories. What is most interesting about Still and his Kentucky burden is the fact that, unlike the other writers in this study, he was not born into it; instead, he chose Kentucky as his state after becoming an adult. Though originally from Alabama, Still willingly embraced the Kentucky burden and defended the mountain people in the best way he knew how: he authentically portrayed them as they were and allowed no outside force or threat of estrangement from the literary world to taint the authenticity of his characters. Unfortunately, by altruistically protecting his territory, Still forfeited his chance to be remembered as anything more than a regional writer. In the greater scheme of American literature, he is virtually nonexistent, but in the subcategory of Appalachian writer, Still's legacy has endured.

The most important aspect in studying Still's work as it relates to Kentucky regionalism is the revelation of subregions within the state. Kentucky mountain regionalism, while it shares some of the characteristics of Kentucky regionalism in general, also portrays eccentricities unique to the mountains. As is apparent in Still's work, the people of the mountains are much more cut off from the rest of the world; as a result, they display an overt suspicion of anything or anyone foreign to the mountains. Another result of this isolation is their inherent self-sufficiency and ability to survive, which James Still not only wrote about but embodied by living alone in a cabin in the

mountains of Knott County. The people of the mountains were not influenced by the outside world mainly because they were not a part of it until that outside world invaded the mountains by the mining of coal. It was this clash of cultures and its consequences which most concerned Still and led him to take on the task of preserving the culture in its purest form while it still remained. Still's work, along with that of a few other Appalachian writers, may be the only remnants of the vanished Appalachian culture of Eastern Kentucky. This idea of subregions within a state opens up a whole new area of research not just for Kentucky subregions but for other states as well.

Since Still is a virtually forgotten writer and scholarship surrounding his work is quite limited, the possibilities for furthering the study of his works are extensive. However, the question that seems most relevant to this study deals with the relationship between Kentucky regionalism and the Appalachian Mountains. The Appalachian mountain range runs through several states, so the question remains whether the regional characteristics of the people are contingent on the particular state or if Appalachian regionalism is consistent through the whole of those mountains. Though Still's work certainly displays various characteristics of the Kentucky burden, whether his work reveals more of a Kentucky burden or an Appalachian burden is open for debate. Before a definitive understanding of his Kentucky burden can be reached, we must first gain a better understanding of Still's life, overall motives, and intentions for writing. With limited biographical information, it is difficult to grasp fully the psychological effects of the Kentucky burden on Still, and it is risky to assume that he was or was not aware of the stigma placed on him and on his state. Given a complete biography, investigating James Still's connection to the Appalachian Mountains may prove to be the most

important breakthrough into his fascinating literary career and could lead to a greater understanding of his place in American literature.

Similarly to Still, Jesse Stuart has been denied a place in the history of American literature because of his reaction to the Kentucky burden. However, during his long, productive career and several years beyond, he was considered Kentucky's literary son and hailed as the voice of the Commonwealth. Stuart, like Still, spent the majority of his life after college living in Kentucky and writing about his surroundings. Unlike Still, though, Stuart's reaction to the Kentucky burden was to defend the state by romanticizing it as a paradise on earth. Stuart's work is a constant attempt to break away from the inferiority complex forced upon the state by the rest of the South. By writing about the conditions of the Kentucky schools and his own experiences as a school superintendent and teacher, Stuart was placing much of the responsibility for the intellectual marginalization of the state on government officials in charge of funding. He was, in effect, making the argument that the youth of Kentucky had the same intellectual capabilities as the young people of the rest of the country; it was the opportunities that they lacked.

This reaction to the Kentucky burden, though noble, led to Stuart's reputation as a hopeless romantic and sentimentalist. Singing the praises, sometimes outrageously, of a state deemed inferior by the rest of the country was simply not in vogue with critics, and, as a result, Stuart's critical acclaim faltered. Unlike Still, however, Stuart had quite a public following which allowed him to continue writing without financial hindrances. Stuart's writing was easy to read and enjoyable. He was someone with whom the common people of Kentucky could relate. Also, he was authentically a farmer and not

simply a philosophical agrarian, such as those in Nashville then causing quite a stir, so he knew the hardships and the plights of the small farmers of the state. He was a writer for the common man and left the critical acclaim for the Vanderbilt group.

Though he, too, was from a mountainous area, Stuart was largely an agrarian writer; his characters were mainly farmers and/or teachers in small communities. Since he was one of Kentucky's most prolific writers, further investigation into Stuart's reaction to the Kentucky burden could lead to a better understanding of the concept in general. Perhaps the best method for examining further his Kentucky burden would be to use his life and writing as a case study along with a case study of a more critically acclaimed Kentucky writer such as Robert Penn Warren. In this type of study, the two could be compared, and we could examine more specifically the way Stuart's reaction to the Kentucky burden alienated him from the literary community and resulted in his being dropped from the canon altogether whereas Warren prospered in every way.

Allen Tate's and Robert Penn Warren's works indicate totally different dimensions of the Kentucky burden that were not found in the work of Still and Stuart, and their reactions to the burden resulted in much different critical responses. Essentially, Tate and Warren formed their identities separate from Kentucky while those of Still and Stuart were intentionally grounded in the state. Neither Tate nor Warren returned to Kentucky for long periods of time following their departure. Tate did live in Kentucky for awhile after his departure as a college-bound young man but only because of financial difficulties which led him and wife Caroline Gordon to seek shelter with her family. As Fugitives and Agrarians, both Tate and Warren were thrust into the critical spotlight and exposed to positive and negative criticism of their works. In a sense, the

two learned to cater to the critical climate without misrepresenting themselves or their ideas. Tate became influential not just in the Southern Renaissance but also in the Modernist movement taking shape in America during this time. He subscribed to many of the Modernist principles which, in turn, resulted in an elitist literature far too difficult for the average reader to comprehend. Consequently, Tate was never a popular writer, and he had to rely on critical acclaim to boost his career. Though he was originally touted as one of the rising young stars of the Modernist movement in the South, the fickleness of the critics never afforded him consistent acceptance, and he has since gradually faded from the American literary memory. It seems likely that his reaction to and push against the Kentucky burden and all the characteristics associated with it aided in this slow demise.

Unlike Still and Stuart, Tate did not choose to protect or defend Kentucky; in fact, he refused to claim it as his birth state at all until he was thirty years old. Though it might appear that Tate's literary acclaim, which rested mostly on his ability as a critic, was not linked to his burden, his intense search for identity evident in everything from his poetry to his novel to his criticism is indicative of a Kentucky burden. Tate's burden is not apparent on the surface like Still's and Stuart's but exists more in his internal struggle with the self and the turmoil surrounding his biography. Thus, Tate's work makes the best argument in this study for the inherency of the Kentucky burden. He was certainly not aware of it and would never have claimed it, but the burden definitely existed in his interestingly complex and yet tragically conflicted life and career.

A more in-depth study of the second half of Tate's life, including a closer look at his conversion to Catholicism coupled with his intense search for selfhood, may shed

more light on Tate's identity crisis and thus his innate Kentucky burden. Further investigation of Tate's relationship with his controlling mother and emotionally absent father could also provide insight into his reaction to the Kentucky burden, but only in part. Deciphering Tate's reaction to the burden is no easy task and is not contingent on one particular aspect of his life. Tate and his works are mysteries that may never be solved, but the closer we come to understanding his resistance to being a Kentuckian, the closer we will be to understanding the writing of Allen Tate.

Though on the surface his Kentucky burden does not seem as complex as Tate's, Warren's reaction to his burden provides vital clues to understanding his endurance not just as the most famous Kentucky writer but also as one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century. In an essay on Hawthorne, Warren assesses the New Englander's negotiation of regionalism in what could be a statement of his own successful balancing act: "He lived in the right ration—right for fueling his genius—between an attachment to his region and a detached assessment of it; between an attachment to the past and its repudiation" (Blotner 393). It is this ability to balance the regional qualities, history, and biographical connections of Kentucky with universal themes of human struggles and imperfections which has led to the endurance of Warren as a regionalist and as a literary giant. Warren's reaction to the Kentucky burden was to redefine Kentucky regionalism while also transcending it—something that none of the other three writers in this study was able to do successfully. Unlike Tate, Warren never denied being from Kentucky, nor did he celebrate it like Stuart. Neither did he choose to embrace it like Still. Rather, Warren respected the Kentucky burden as a viable part of

his identity and used it to fit his authorial needs. He basically took control of his Kentucky burden and ultimately adapted it to fit his specific literary agenda.

While the entire scope of his opus is not grounded in Kentucky like Stuart's, much of Warren's work can be investigated profitably in terms of his Kentucky burden. Space restraints in this study allowed only a few of those works to be explored; therefore, further inquiry into the works of Warren would be desirable to continue investigating the burden of Kentucky regionalism in his work. More specifically, novels such as *Band of Angels*, *Night Rider*, and *The Cave* could be explored more thoroughly along with numerous poems and essays. Another interesting concept to explore would be Warren's writing of poems about Kentucky and his boyhood in places such as Italy and France. It appeared that the farther away Warren found himself from his childhood home, the more nostalgic he became toward it and, perhaps, the more he longed to return to it. Although he claimed to have been a Tennessean at heart, Warren often returned, if only in his mind, to the land of his birth, thus revealing the innate connection he always maintained with the Commonwealth.

Though this study was limited to the Kentucky men who attended Vanderbilt in the early twentieth century, the concept of the Kentucky burden is certainly not limited to that particular group or time period. Another such study could concentrate on the Kentucky burden of female authors such as Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Caroline Gordon, Harriette Arnow, and others. The inferiority complex inherent in the burden would likely be even more complicated and seem more challenging for them to overcome. The Kentucky burden compounded by a gender burden would have made literary survival almost impossible, yet these women did survive and are looked upon as great influences

not just on other women writers but on prominent literary men as well. During a tirade about the declining quality of Southern novels, Allen Tate praised Roberts as the only Southern novelist who was still popular even though she "ignored" the dangerous new trend of producing a "literature of social agitation, through which the need to perform may be publicized" ("The New Provincialism" 543). Along with Tate, other Southern literary leaders praised Roberts's *The Time of Man* (1920) as one of the greatest Southern novels in history. Similarly, Caroline Gordon and Harriette Arnow have been praised for the quality and depth of their work. A study of these women and others from the Commonwealth could add a whole new dimension to the understanding of the concept of the Kentucky burden.

If the Kentucky burden is a legitimate characterization of a Kentucky writer, then it should withstand the test of time. Therefore, a study of the Kentucky burden in early writers such as John Fox, Jr. and James Lane Allen all the way through contemporary authors such as Wendell Berry, Bobbie Ann Mason, and George Ella Lyons would be beneficial in many important ways. Aspects such as the effects of cultural influences and historical circumstances on the Kentucky burden could be investigated as well as how changes in writing trends and regional attitudes influenced the burden of the state. Whatever the time and whoever the writer, the Kentucky burden is a link that unites the writers of the Commonwealth and ultimately influences the literary climate of the state and the nation.

Just as Sydney Smith denounced in 1820 chiding "Who reads an American book?" so did people of the South marginalize the inadequacy of Kentucky writers. Exactly why Kentucky was deemed inferior early on is unclear though it most likely had

to do with the reputation of the state as the "Dark and Bloody Ground" coupled with the reputation of Kentucky as a wild, uncivilized frontier. Stories concerning Daniel Boone's frontier days, the infamous family feuds of the Hatfields and McCoys, and the coal mine disasters and violence further fueled the Kentucky reputation of inferiority. When the East Coast was settled and most of the land already claimed by the wealthy and prosperous, the poor had no choice but to travel west in search of new opportunities. Unfortunately, the wilderness of Kentucky did not offer much comfort or stability for settlers, and, therefore, those who did stay were often undone by the brutality of the frontier—they either became a part of the frontier, or they succumbed to it and perished. Those who did survive had to work extremely hard to maintain their livelihood, and it was a long time before education actually became a priority in the state. Though times changed and conditions improved, the reputation of the state as inferior to the rest of the South remained, and the writers who hailed from Kentucky had no choice but to deal with this Kentucky burden. Certainly, other states also foster similar burdens—perhaps racial burdens, intellectual burdens, aristocratic burdens, and many more. By including these concepts of regional-specific burdens in any ensuing discussion on literary regionalism, unexplored territory and new possibilities for scholarship are emerging. Literary regionalism is an important component of the whole of our uniquely American literature, and the more we investigate the literary eccentricities of the various regions of our country, the greater will be our understanding of what it means to be American.

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