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“It Made the Ladies into Ghosts”: The Male Hero's Journey and the Destruction of the Feminine in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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**“IT MADE THE LADIES INTO GHOSTS”: THE MALE HERO’S JOUR-
NEY AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE FEMININE IN WILLIAM
FAULKNER’S *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!* AND TONI MORRISON’S *SONG
OF SOLOMON***

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR CHERYL WALKER
PROFESSOR JACQUELINE WERNIMONT**

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“To realize that all your life—you know, all your love, all your hate, all your memory, all your pain—it was all the same thing. It was all the same dream. A dream that you had inside a locked room. A dream about being a person... This is a world where nothing is solved. Someone once told me, 'Time is a flat circle.' Everything we've ever done or will do, we're gonna do over and over and over again”

Rust Cohle, *True Detective*
Nic Pizzolatto

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**Introduction: “Bullets in the dining room” -
Identity, Race, and Gender in Faulkner and Morrison**

The writings of William Faulkner and Toni Morrison, two of the most revered authors in the American canon, seem to come from different worlds. Indeed, the perspective of a white Southern man, writing in the first half of the twentieth century and a black woman from Ohio writing in the latter half are unquestionably different, yet the two share similar narrative styles, structural codes, and thematic concerns. I propose that Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* can be read together to productively consider the ways in which the male protagonist’s journey to selfhood is contingent upon the objectification of women, as well as the significance of race and gender performance in the construction of these subject-object relationships.

In both of these novels, the male protagonist undergoes an identity quest in an attempt to locate himself within history, both familial and political, bringing to mind the traditional *Bildungsroman* coming-of-age novel. Charlotte Goodman defines the *Bildungsroman* as a novel which concerns “a sensitive male child who grows up in a provincial environment where he finds constraints placed upon his imaginative life...the *Bildungsroman* explores the young man's progressive alienation from his family; his schooling; his departure from home; his sexual initiation; and his ultimate assessment of life's possibilities” (28). While these journeys look very different in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Song of Solomon*, both novels follow this basic structure, and more importantly, detail identity quests that demand,

as a price, the lives and bodily autonomy of women, and most often, black women. In showing the destruction of the feminine as a product of the masculine attempt to form a self, Faulkner and Morrison delve into the fault lines along race, class, and gender that make up the American psyche.

Despite the differences between the authors' historical period, geographic location, race, and gender, a vast body of criticism exists which puts Faulkner and Morrison in conversation. Critics often begin at a structural level, considering the similar circular, non-linear construction of both novels. Quentin Compson's assertion that "*Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished*" (*Absalom* 210) suggests that time is a continuous loop and the events retold and imagined throughout the novel are not only past, but present and future as well. The first image of *Song of Solomon*, Robert Smith leaping to his death from Mercy Hospital, is echoed in its last image, as Milkman "surrender[s] to the air" and jumps from Solomon's Leap (337). While *Song of Solomon* unfolds slightly more cogently than *Absalom, Absalom!*, it still relies on narrative ellipses, intrusions of memory, and immersions in history. Carolyn Denard suggests that "Time, character, and situation are strengthened and heightened in their stories, connected with the past and pointing toward the future," (21) and the circuitous nature of time in these novels creates a lineage between past and future that becomes key in their protagonists' attempts to construct their own identity. Additionally, both authors operate on a grand, mythologized scale, evidenced, for example, by their incorporation of Biblical narratives and naming. The title of *Absalom, Absalom!* is, of course, a reference to

the Biblical Absalom, who killed his half-brother Amnon after Amnon raped their sister, Tamar (2 Samuel 13), setting Henry's murder of Bon in conversation with that of an epic Biblical drama. *Song of Solomon's* very title is a book of the Old Testament known both as Song of Songs and Song of Solomon, one of the only books of the Tanakh not concerned with law or God, but simply with love and devotion. Susan Neal Mayberry suggests that Morrison reveals some of her intentions with *Song of Solomon* "by naming her story after the Biblical Song of Songs, also associated with erotic love, the myth of its singer's ascension, and the preservation of tribal identity. Both texts essentially represent flight or survival manuals for their respective communities as related through song" (72-3). The naming of the women of *Song of Solomon*, from Pilate and Hagar to Rebecca and Ruth, further codifies the importance of the Biblical imagination at play in these texts.

The thematic concerns of love, race, identity, and alienation also unite the authors, a connection most clearly seen in Morrison's own interest in Faulkner's work: in 1955 she wrote her Master's thesis at Cornell on William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf's use of isolation and suicide (Denard 18). The question of Faulkner's influence on Morrison then becomes a pertinent one in considering the many thematic and structural relationships between the two texts. While many critics cite Morrison's comments in a 1983 interview with Nellie McKay as proof that Morrison was offended by comparisons to Faulkner, it actually seems that Morrison is more concerned with ensuring space for black women's creative

agency in the American canon than in a complete denial of Faulknerian influence. She told McKay, “Our - black women’s - job is a particularly complex one... We have no systematic mode of criticism that has yet evolved from us, but it will. I am not like James Joyce; I am not like Thomas Hardy; I am not like Faulkner. I am not like in that sense” (qtd. Duvall 6). Elsewhere Morrison has put forth her respect for Faulkner, speaking at a 1985 Faulkner Conference where she remarked that “There was something about Faulkner which I can only call gaze. He had a gaze that was different. It appeared at that time to be similar to a look, even a sort of staring, a refusal-to-look-away approach in his writing that I found admirable” (Faulkner and Women 297).

Morrison’s relationship with Faulkner is far too complex to simply deny his influence upon her writing, but, as Morrison’s plea for recognition of black female creative power implies, one must be wary of the patriarchal implications of influence theory. John N. Duvall articulates this concern in his piece *Toni Morrison and the Anxiety of Faulknerian Influence*. He suggests,

Any discussion of Toni Morrison’s work in relation to modernism (or post-modernism) in general or to William Faulkner in particular is fraught with the possibility of misunderstanding. To speak of a possible Faulknerian influence on Morrison’s work runs the risk of calling up memories of racial and sexual abuse in the American past. Does not positing such an influence imply that, without a white Southern man’s seminal texts, those of the African-American woman would never have come to fruition? But arguing for an intertextual relationship between Morrison’s and Faulkner’s fiction does not require granting Faulkner’s the status of master text. (3)

Duvall’s piece moves the discussion from influence to intertextuality, which he suggests is a more socially conscious mode of literary criticism as it does not de-

mand that later authors, more likely to be women and/or people of color, are seen as indebted to their white forefathers. Of course, Harold Bloom's canonical text *The Anxiety of Influence* comes into play when considering this relationship, and in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein propose that Bloom's understanding of the relationship between two texts actually often verges on intertextuality, but his privileging of the author is what marks Bloom's arguments as influence theory (9). The two ways of reading are inextricably linked, and often bleed into each other, as evidenced by Clayton and Rothstein's claim about the ambiguity inherent in the very foundational text on the matter of influence. However, they purport that the main difference is that "influence has to do with agency, whereas intertextuality has to do with a much more impersonal field of crossing texts" (Influence 4). Julie Kristeva, who first coined the term intertextuality, claimed that "any text is a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva qtd. Influence 20). This definition of intertextuality allows us to consider Morrison through the lens of Faulkner without yoking the theory of white patriarchal influence to her work, leaving room to consider her texts as including Faulknerian responses without suppressing her African American and female sensibility, as well as her own creative genius. While chronology clearly renders a Morrison-influenced Faulkner reading impossible, the theory of intertextuality allows for criticism rooted in comparison and conversation. Additionally, critics such as Patrick O'Donnell have suggested that, in fact, we can usefully read Faulkner via Morrison by taking

into consideration Morrison's groundbreaking work on critical race theory, *Playing in the Dark* (O'Donnell 220). In *Playing in the Dark* Morrison argues that the "championed characteristics of our national literature - individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell," (Playing 5) are all reflective of a signifying Africanist presence. Morrison defines the Africanist presence as "the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" (7). While the Africanist presence is often coded or subverted in white American texts, it is still very much present, and in fact is crucial to the construction of these texts; one only needs to hunt a little for it. This imagery of hunting in a text is reminiscent of a comment Morrison once made on *Absalom, Absalom!*, where she suggested that Faulkner forced readers "to hunt for a drop of black blood [by trying to ascertain Charles Bon's lineage] that means everything and nothing" (Morrison Paris Review). Therefore, the prospect of finding new meaning in *Absalom, Absalom!* through the lens of *Playing in the Dark* is not only logical, but, given these considerations, inevitable.

Articulating difference between Faulkner and Morrison through critical race theory is an increasingly popular trend in criticism on the subject, and many authors invoke Henry Louis Gates' seminal text on the creation of black literature in a white supremacist society, *The Signifying Monkey*, to explore the issue (Du-

vall 4, Jackson viii). Gates suggests that “Our task is not to reinvent our traditions as if they bore no relation to that tradition created and borne, in the main, by white men. Our writers used that impressive tradition to define themselves, both with and against their concept of received order” (xxii). Therefore, black authors produce work that is double-voiced; it both signifies upon the white canonical texts and reinvents with a distinctly black positionality, one which is often marked by the use of “the black English vernacular tradition” (xxii). Gates’ theory of the double-voiced text reinforces the intertextual potential in reading between Faulkner and Morrison, and allows for the foregrounding of issues of race and gender. Morrison’s texts, therefore, draw upon the white canon that went before her, including Faulkner, but are heavily marked by difference. Lorie Watkins Fulton points out that Morrison has described *Song of Solomon* as “my own giggle (in Afro-American terms) of the proto-myth of the journey to manhood’ so she readily admits that this novel deliberately alters the idea of the masculine quest, a theme Faulkner held sacrosanct” (Morrison qtd. 10). This framing of Morrison’s text as a “giggle” on the genre held reverent in the white male imagination creates a space in which Morrison’s novel can be considered subversive, almost rebellious, an imagining that distances this reading from a theory of influence which prioritizes white masculine hegemonic concerns. Tommie Lee Jackson proposes that Morrison signifies, to use Gates’ term, on Faulkner by drawing upon his symbology and then reversing the reader’s expectations for how signs will be read (34). Mayberry provides one such example of Morrison’s signification in her dis-

cussion of Dr. Foster's dying body, which Morrison describes as "looking like a white rat...dead and white and puffy and skinny" (*Solomon* 73). Mayberry connects this image to Faulkner's description of "Emily's bloated body" in "A Rose for Emily," as a symbol of the decay of the Old South (90), and I would also argue that it is a signification on the decadently decaying Sutpen mansion in *Absalom, Absalom!*, which is also a symbol of the Lost Cause¹ and the agrarian fantasy of the antebellum South. "Thus," Mayberry writes, "Morrison inverts Faulkner's description of rotting white gentility to examine its diseased black counterpart and to illustrate the 'puzzle' that is African American paternity" (90).

While many critics develop the case for intertextuality by citing Gates' theory that black texts signify on the white canon, few actually focus specifically on critical race and gender theory in studies of Faulkner and Morrison. Philip M. Weinstein's *What Else But Love? The Ordeal of Race in Faulkner and Morrison* presents a nuanced and intertextual reading of the intersections of race and gender in the work of these two authors, whom he considers among the few to eloquently "register the mix of love and hate that seethes through the American experience of race relations" (xvii). Weinstein suggests that each author asks his or her reader to "rethink the meanings of race and gender" (xix) and consider "race and gender as neither biologically given nor settled once and for all, but as differential social positions that entail differential experiences and from which significantly divergent insights and procedures become available" (xxiii). This reading of race and

¹ To be discussed in greater detail later in this introduction.

gender as unstable, socially constructed entities is key to this thesis, as both novels construct their hero's journey around the relativity of such categories. In Faulkner, this is articulated in the character of Charles Bon and, later, his son Charles Etienne de Saint Valery Bon. Both are black men, feminized and read alternately as white and black, a tension perhaps most clearly explained in the scene where a court accidentally begins to try Charles Etienne as a white man until the lawyer is corrected, and turns, repulsed, to demand "*What are you? Who and where did you come from?*" (*Absalom* 165). Morrison paints a similar portrait, and critics such as Susan Neal Mayberry focus on the performance of "female masculinity" in *Song of Solomon*. Racial instability is also a key issue in this text; for example, when the men of Shalimar attack Milkman, Morrison writes that, "They looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers" (267). Despite being clearly identifiable as black, Milkman is often read, both by the text and by other characters, as white, as is his father, whom Guitar accuses of being "a strange Negro" who "thinks like a white man" (223). The instability of race and gender as categories are essential features of both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Song of Solomon*, and this instability complicates and dictates the construction of female object positions in the course of the male hero's journey.

While the writings of Weinstein offer great insight into the role of race and gender in these texts, he does not directly compare the two texts I am working

with, and in fact few critics consider these works together. Fulton's "William Faulkner Revisited: Isolation in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" pairs the two texts and proposes that Morrison's own dissertation "provides the basis for drawing thematic comparisons between Quentin Compson's story in the two Faulkner novels it considers, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*, and Morrison's own bildungsroman, *Song of Solomon*" (8). I will touch only briefly on *The Sound and The Fury* to discuss Quentin's death and his relationship with Caddy, but Fulton's argument that there is much to be gained by comparing these novels in light of Morrison's dissertation leads to an enlightened examination of Quentin and Milkman's alienation, and proves that there is still much to be written on this pairing, despite the fact that it is not often privileged in criticism.

Before we can effectively analyze the way women's lives and bodies are used by the men, it is crucial to first consider what exactly it means for a male character to embark on an identity quest in each of these novels. Both Henry Sutpen of *Absalom, Absalom!* and Milkman Dead of *Song of Solomon* are faced with a world in which they feel somewhat adrift. In *Absalom, Absalom!* this confusion is further compounded by the slippage between Henry and the narrator, Quentin Compson, who is also the subject of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. In Quentin and Shreve's section of the narrative, the text often slips back into the past so that there was "four of them and then just two - Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry" (267). It is not just that Quentin sympathizes with Henry; instead, there is a slipperiness of identity that connects Quentin and Henry across time and

space. Faulkner writes “Four of them there, in that room in New Orleans in 1860, just as in a sense there were four of them here in this tomblike room in Massachusetts in 1910” (268). This collapse allows the reader to consider Henry and Quentin’s identity quests as distinct, yet often intertwined, for the struggle to create an identity also seems to mandate an extrication from the infinite loop of past and future. Additionally, in *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner*, John T. Irwin proposes that, because so many of the details of the narrative that unfold in *Absalom, Absalom!* are unknown, what the reader may actually be experiencing in many places are Quentin’s own desires or fears, projected onto Henry, which further reinforces the reading of Henry and Quentin as doubles (26).²

Henry comes of age during the Civil War, so his masculine identity is shaped against the backdrop of the conflict between the Old South and the New. The Old South is epitomized in the vision of the Lost Cause myth which obsessed white Southerners in the Reconstruction period. As David W. Blight articulates in *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, “Here indeed was the full-blown myth of the Lost Cause - a glorious, organic civilization destroyed by an avaricious ‘industrial society’ determined to wipe out its cultural foes” (257). The narrative of the successful, simple agrarian society, “a lost racial

² While there are four narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Quentin is considered the main narrator because “the other three only function as narrators in relation to Quentin” and “Quentin’s consciousness is the fixed point of view from which the reader *overhears* the various narrators, Quentin included” (Irwin 26).

utopia” (Blight 281), certainly never existed, but the types of idealized masculinity associated with the era are embodied in the character of Henry, and to a lesser extent Quentin. Blight proposes that Southern authors such as Faulkner were naturally interested in analyzing and deconstructing this myth, for

The Lost Cause had left such a legacy; it was not essentially inhuman in character, but its very existence depended upon dehumanizing a group of people. And as a reactionary revitalization movement, it constricted creative impulses and stultified historical understanding. The Lost Cause made itself a ready target; it forced a confrontation with the past that bred a Faulkner, a Warren, a Flannery O’Connor, and many others in white Southern letters. Piety rarely lasts forever as a substitute for knowledge among those determined to probe the depths of human drama, and twisted loyalties can produce good literature. (292-3)

Considering Faulkner through this lens, it becomes easy to read Henry’s struggle with identity as a microcosm of the greater struggle for Southern identity taking place at the time. His attempts to grapple with race, gender, and sexuality are all part of a larger national conversation about the direction the country would take in the wake of the trauma of the Civil War. While the Civil War plays a part in *Absalom, Absalom!* as Henry and Quentin enlist, it is considered more in terms of the personal, rather than political and social, ramifications. Faulkner writes that “neither Henry and Bon, anymore than Quentin and Shreve, were the first young men to believe (or at least apparently act on the assumption) that wars were sometimes created for the sole aim of settling youth’s private difficulties and discontents” (269). The War therefore appears to mostly be considered as an intermediary step in the resolution of the conflict between Bon and Henry. Regardless, the ramifications of the Civil War and the resulting tensions between the Old

South and the New define Henry's ability to develop a concrete identity and formulate his place in the world.

These tensions are embodied by what Lillian Smith calls the "race-sex-sin spiral" (121), a psychological state of anxiety and dysfunction born of slavery/segregation, repressed sexual desire, and a religiously conservative background. Henry embodies the race-sex-sin neurosis, which manifests itself in his relationship to the women around him, who often end up being collateral damage in Henry's attempts to overcome these anxieties. Other cataloguers of the Southern experience, such as Anne Goodwyn Jones, point to the extremely paradoxical nature of white Southern masculinity. On one hand, it was a position of extreme social power, yet the stereotype of the Southern man as "weak, vacillating, and self-indulgent" (18) was also largely present in the cultural dialogue. Henry embodies this contradiction, for Faulkner describes him both as an all-American, "strong-blooded," hardened outdoorsman (*Absalom* 87), but also emphasizes his softness and indecision. Miss Rosa recalls a scene where Henry's sister and half-sister look on in earnest at the slaves fighting in the barn, unfazed by the blood and violence, while Henry is "screaming and vomiting" and has to be carried out by his mother (21). Additionally, the final narrative section of the book is marked by Henry's indecisiveness about Bon, to the point that Henry leaves it up to Bon to decide if he will go through with the incest, and when Bon decides, Henry is eternally grateful, saying "'*Thank God. Thank God, ' not for the incest of course but because at last they were going to do something*'" (*Absalom* 277). Therefore, it is

because of this contradiction, not in spite of it, that we can consider Henry as emblematic of the Southern white man, marked by contradiction and neurosis as he attempts to navigate a changing world.

Milkman Dead also grapples with finding a space for himself in a shifting political climate, and although his struggles manifest themselves in very different forms, his journey, like Henry's, appears to be contingent on the sacrifice of the bodies of women. Just as we considered Henry as the paradigmatic representation of the white Southern male, critics such as Mayberry have suggested that Milkman can be viewed as the composite black American male (71). Black masculinity, Mayberry argues, has been defined by the struggle, born of slavery's violence against the family, to construct a lineage and sense of belonging in the American narrative (80). This struggle is compounded by the oppression of a white supremacist society, so "Because white male control imposes a split or incomplete self on black boys like Macon and Guitar, their understanding of compassion, honor, and responsibility becomes distorted, so they engage in unhealthy, life-denying enterprise" (Mayberry 98). Morrison has spoken extensively of her intentions with *Song of Solomon*, which she conceives of as a sort of intervention into the damaging effects of white society on the black male psyche, and the journey that must be undertaken to address this damage (Critical Perspectives 410). Part of the reason this intervention is necessary, according to Morrison, is a fear that black children are not growing up hearing stories of their ancestry and culture; "parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological ar-

chotypical stories that we heard years ago,” despite the fact that these type of stories are essential to survival, selfhood, and community (qtd. Mayberry 79). Morrison’s emphasis on the past is reminiscent of Blight’s claim that

Long before [W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of a struggle with the ‘double consciousness’ of being American and black, African American freedmen had to decide how to look backward and forward...Memory is sometimes that human burden we can live comfortably neither with nor without. [Frederick] Douglass believed that black memory was a weapon and that its abandonment was dangerous to his people’s survival. [Alexander] Crummell argues that a people can ‘get inspiration and instruction in the *yesterdays* of existence, but we cannot healthily live in them’” (319)

Douglass and Crummell, two leaders of the black community in the Reconstruction period, differed in their ideas of the role memory should play in constructing the new black American identity. Morrison seems to fall into Douglass’ camp, emphasizing that black Americans are lost without an understanding of their place in history, which is the impetus for Milkman’s quest in *Song of Solomon*.

It also seems that this understanding must be forged collaboratively between black men and women, as “Morrison admits to choosing a man to make the journey in *Song of Solomon* because she believed a man had more to learn than a woman” (Mayberry 78-9). Milkman has to learn to negotiate between the different models of masculinity available to him; his father’s detached, emotionless quest for white capitalist markers of success and Guitar’s hyper-vigilant, war-like commitment to black vigilante justice. He can only learn to balance the two, Mayberry suggests, by listening to Pilate, who occupies the position of a griot in the novel (106). Milkman’s quest is difficult and often quite painful, but *Song of*

Solomon ends in a fundamentally different place for the protagonist; he has learned that “If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it” (*Solomon* 337). In this final ambiguous image of flight, it appears that “black men can fly free only when they establish a strong self-identity yet simultaneously maintain a positive connection to the community” (Mayberry 72).

While Milkman’s journey is far more successful than the suicidal endings of Henry and Quentin³, the novel still requires the sacrifice of black female bodies in order to achieve this end, and this tension exists within Morrison’s call for gender parity and female teachers in the black community. Mayberry claims that Morrison conceives of mercy as “the resolute core of black womanhood, [which] makes possible the black male’s fluid wholeness” (102), and while the sentiment is obviously one of praise, it is also somewhat limiting as it relegates the role of women in this novel to vehicles which exist to assist Milkman in his quest. In the interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison dismisses McKay’s concern that there are “disturbing implications in this type of plot - the young woman dying so that the young man can learn and rise” by claiming, “There is something here which people miss, Milkman is willing to die at the end, and the person he is willing to die for is a woman” (Critical Perspectives 401). While this is certainly true and by no means unimportant, I am not convinced that it negates the disturbing implications of Hagar’s death, especially when coupled with the violence, both literal and emo-

³ See next chapter for a more detailed discussion of the Henry’s symbolic suicide.

tional, done to women throughout the course of the novel in the service of Milkman's rise.

The ramifications of this "type of plot," as McKay called it, will be considered in the light of both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Song of Solomon*. It is easy to consider the differences between where the protagonists end their journeys as reflections of the author's differing attitudes towards the communities they portray. Faulkner's grappling with the nature of the Lost Cause and the Old South produces an air of revulsion and decay that permeates his work, while Morrison genuinely writes from a place of love, albeit an occasionally critical one, towards the black community. Faulkner sees the South in terms of "an unhealing wound and an unavailing legacy" (Weinstein 119) while Morrison envisions healing and uplift in black America. Despite the different destinations for the male protagonists of these novels, both Quentin and Milkman are complicit in a system of abuse and dehumanization that positions women, particularly black women, in object positions. Chapter One will consider the role of the characters who occupy the object position of lovers, Charles Bon and Hagar Dead, and their relationships with the male protagonists. In Chapter Two, I address the state of living death that traps the mother and sister figures in the lives of Henry/Quentin and Milkman. Finally, Chapter Three will examine the women who occupy teaching positions and impart what the novels construe as "feminine" knowledge to the men in their quests for identity, concluding with an analysis of the price required for such develop-

ment, as well as the inherent broader implications for societal understandings of race and gender.

1) “Ain’t love heavy?” - The Doomed Romantic Other

I. Introduction

In her study of the role of women as both authors and subjects in the *Bildungsroman* genre, Charlotte Goodman suggests that while “female characters sometimes play an important role in male *Bildungsromane* by helping the hero define his identity...there is no question who the real hero is” (30). As I discussed in the introduction, both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Song of Solomon* function essentially as coming of age novels, in which Henry/Quentin and Milkman search for their identities by attempting to find their place in history, on both a familial and national scope. In these journeys they are aided by a romantic Other, who is objectified and treated as a tool with which the male protagonist can develop the self, but the collateral damage of this male growth is the destruction of the woman (or female-coded man) occupying the object position.

II. *Absalom, Absalom!*

As Karin Andrews posits in *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Gender, and Miscegenation in Faulkner*, the narrative construction of *Absalom, Absalom!* points the reader to the text’s enduring question: “Why did Henry Sutpen murder Charles Bon?” (203). I propose to answer this question with a reading that places Bon in an archetypal female role in the novel, and suggest that it is the threat Bon poses as a racial and sexual Other that motivates Henry. The feminized position which Bon - despite his sex - occupies in the novel can best be understood through Butler’s theory of gender construction. While I am not suggesting that

readers are supposed to somehow interpret Bon as being “secretly” female, I argue that Charles Bon occupies a feminized and marginalized space in the novel that marks him as a subjugated Other⁴ against whom Henry and Quentin can define themselves in the course of their identity construction journey. Therefore, Henry is motivated to kill Bon to negate the destabilizing effect Bon’s ambiguous race and gender have on Henry’s identity, and the reactions of both Henry and Quentin traverse history to portray the rage of white humiliation and decline in the Civil War era.

The character of Charles Bon is an enigma; his race, gender, and lineage are all unstable and often difficult to unravel. He is “extravagantly overdetermined: American yet New Orleans French, male yet seductively female, white yet ineffaceably (if invisibly) black,” a paradoxical, “socially impossible figure” (Weinstein 53, 54). Bon is rarely allowed narrative voice, and when the reader does learn about him, it is through avenues removed from the character himself; stories reconstructed years later, filtered through another character’s narration and tinged with the slipperiness of memory. Wesley Morris points out that each narrator presents a slightly different version of Bon, none of which can be held up as more true than the others, so readers must do their best to navigate all narratives as forms of possible truth (ref. Andrews 204). These conflicting renditions further obscure Bon and suggest that he symbolizes the text’s unarticulated Africanist

⁴ I use “Other” in the Lacanian sense to mean a “provocative, perturbing enigma” that threatens the subject’s grasp on reality (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* “Jacques Lacan”).

presence. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison asserts that American literature is contingent on “Silence from and about the [Africanist] subject,” which allows the “master narrative,” used here to indicate the white protagonist’s narrative, to remain untouched (51). In denying voice and agency to Bon, Faulkner crafts a presence in the novel that is loaded with racial anxiety.

However, just as race and gender are inextricably bound in social construction, Bon’s feminization is intrinsically tied to his race. His positionality as an Other is first articulated through Faulkner’s persistent association of Bon with feminized language, and although his race is not revealed until the end of the narrative, this dual move suggests that there is something in Faulkner’s imagination which sees blackness as a deviation, a disfiguring force that obscures one from the normative hegemony of white masculinity. For example, Faulkner writes that he wears “almost feminine garments” (76), or is dressed “in the fine pants that fit his leg and the fine coats that fit his shoulders” (243) and at one point is described as “finicking almost like a woman over the fit of a new coat” (90). The overt references to womanhood aside, the novel identifies Bon as female by continually associating him with clothing and other material possessions, linking femininity to decadence and placing it in opposition to Henry’s more traditional, sparse masculinity. Butler claims that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constructed in time - an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of facts*” (emphasis original, 900). Considering Bon with this claim in mind, it becomes clear

that his gender is not a fixed entity, but a series of performances that act both in concert and in opposition to his sex and allow the narrative to place him in the object-position that would traditionally be assigned to a female lover. Butler's attention to gender as "tenuously constructed in time" is especially significant for this novel, which hinges on understanding time as a "fluid cradle of events" (*Absalom* 51). The instability of Bon's gender presentation is made further tenuous by the flux of time and history that destabilizes all attempts to establish truth and identity in the novel.

While it is not revealed that Bon is black until the end of the novel, his feminization is compounded by the foreshadowing of his racial heritage, through Mr. Compson's construction of his foreignness. Many scholars find Mr. Compson's narrative the most problematic, as it is unclear if he knows Bon is Sutpen's son or not, a fact that inherently challenges his understanding of the dynamic between Bon and Henry (Andrews 207)⁵. However, the section is still important in that it gives us insight into the gendered and racial construction of Bon; Mr.

⁵ Many writers propose that the reason this section is so unclear is that it was one of the most heavily revised by Faulkner. Due to the multiple drafts and uncorrected versions of the novel, some critics, such as Gerald Langford, argue that Faulkner originally wrote this section to reflect that Mr. Compson knew Bon was Henry's half-brother, then changed his mind, then reverted back to his original plan without completely fixing the text. This accounts for some of the narrative confusion and explains why some critics feel less comfortable relying on the Mr. Compson section. Additionally, Mr. Compson is far more speculative than other narrators, particularly Shreve, despite having more direct access to information than Shreve does. Mr. Compson frames his story with doubt ("I can imagine him", "I can see him", "Perhaps" (86-7)). However, I propose, as do Andrews and other scholars, that regardless of narrative confusion, this section can still be read productively, for it offers some of Faulkner's most nuanced examinations of race and gender in the novel (Langford qtd. Andrews 207, Andrews 206).

Compson tells Quentin how Henry and the other boys at the University of Mississippi must have looked at Bon

as though he were a hero out of some adolescent Arabian Nights who had stumbled upon (or rather, had thrust upon him) a talisman or touchstone not to invest him with wisdom or power or wealth, but with the ability and opportunity to pass from the scene of one scarce imaginable delight to the next one without interval or pause or satiety...lounging before them in the outlandish and almost feminine garments of his sybaritic privacy.
(76)

This description conceptualizes of Bon as an almost ethereal creature of pleasure and indulgence. He is made foreign in Mr. Compson's imaging of him as a vision out of "Arabian Nights," both ethnic and exotic, evoking the hypersexuality and feminization of Orientalism. The emphasis on his self-indulgent way of living also removes Bon from the myth of the hard-working, self-made American man, suggesting that he is out of place and time in this world, and this Othering further reduces Bon to an object to be used by Henry and later Quentin.

This impression is further codified by the fact that Bon is from New Orleans, a city described in *Absalom, Absalom!* as "foreign and paradoxical, with its atmosphere at once fatal and languorous, at once feminine and steel-hard" (86). The city's French history is also used to further associate Bon with a bygone European era, as Mr. Compson describes "Bon knocking at a small adjacent doorway from which a swarthy man resembling a creature out of an old woodcut of the French Revolution erupts...speaking to Bon in French which Henry does not understand" (89). The past is bleeding through every description in this scene, and Bon is linked by his shared language abilities to this figure of another European

epoch. Like the association with Arabian Nights, this description works to isolate Bon as an Other who has no place in the modern day South in which he finds himself. The man, presumably the owner of the brothel where Bon's wife resides, is shocked that Bon has brought Henry there, and asks "With him? An American?" (89). In explicitly naming Henry as such, the man suggests that Bon is the opposite - he is un-American. America belongs to men like Henry, and men like Bon are left by the wayside, set apart in time and place by their Otherness.

The association with New Orleans reinforces Bon's status as Other and makes clear the fact that he exists as a vision of feminized masculinity antithetical to that of Henry, who is a representative of the traditional world of white plantation Southern masculinity. Mr. Compson tells Quentin

So I can imagine [Bon], the way he did it: the way in which he took the innocent and negative plate of Henry's provincial soul and intellect and exposed it by slow degrees to this esoteric milieu, building gradually toward the picture which he desired it to retain, accept. I can see him corrupting Henry gradually in the purlieu of elegance, with no foreword, no warning, the postulation to come after the fact, exposing Henry slowly to the surface aspect - the architecture a little curious, a little femininely flamboyant and therefore to Henry opulent, sensuous, sinful. (87)

Here, Henry's purity and virginity are emphasized in contrast to Bon's decadent sexuality, constructing the gender performance of the two youths as in opposition.

While later narrators complicate the question of Bon's intentionality (Andrews 211), it is clear that Bon is seen as a feminine and exotic object that is both alluring and terrifying to Henry. If we see Henry as a representative of Southern masculinity, Bon can be read as Morrison's signifying Africanist presence, never fully

articulated by the text and presented only hazily through the lens of imagination as a force against which the protagonist attempts to define himself (*Playing 5*).

Bon exists as an insubstantial Otherized object, shaped by Henry's perceptions of his race and gender, and is used as a tool to assist in Henry's own effort to come to terms with his world.

Henry first directly interacts with Bon as an Other when he accompanies Bon to New Orleans to meet Bon's mistress and son, in a narrative imagined by Mr. Compson. Henry describes the neighborhood as "a little decadent, even a little sinister," (88) articulating the threat of the Africanist presence that Henry's "puritan" mind (88) perceives as both desirable and revolting. Mr. Compson describes the discomfort of "the country boy with his simple and erstwhile untroubled code in which females were ladies or whores or slaves," as Henry tries to reconcile Bon's marriage to a mixed race prostitute with his own traditional upbringing (91). Henry encounters prostitutes, for perhaps the first time in his life, and imagines them as "a row of faces like a bazaar of flowers, the supreme apotheosis of chattelry, of human flesh bred of the two races for that sale - a corridor of doomed and tragic flower faces" (89). The phrase "flower faces" in conjunction with the description of these women as "the supreme apotheosis of chattelry" suggests, on Henry's part, a racially loaded reduction of these women to natural objects. There is an element of dehumanization, evoking the pervasive association

of black women with the natural world⁶. In conjunction with Henry's description of Bon's mistress as having "a face like a tragic magnolia" (91),⁷ these images work to equate black women with exotic floral imagery. Therefore, the earlier description of Bon as a "hothouse bloom" (77) situates Bon within this lineage, moving him more firmly into the symbolic female space while hinting at his racial heritage.

Faulkner also draws the reader's attention to Bon and Henry's opposing attitudes towards virginity and sexuality in this scene. In the three pages Faulkner takes to describe the visit to the whorehouse, Henry is identified as a "puritan" (88) or as having a "puritan's provincial mind" (91) on numerous occasions. Not only does this repetition convey Henry's moral objection and naive fear of the prostitutes, it also firmly locates Henry in an American genealogical and historical lineage. Bon is excluded from this lineage, not just as the European and implicitly Catholic Other, but because he is conceived of as almost inhuman, as in Mr. Compson's speculation that he must have "appeared almost phoenix-like, fullsprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time" (58). Mr. Compson's narration continues to emphasize Bon's intention to shock Henry with the display, "counting upon...the puritan's provincial horror of revealing sur-

⁶ See Smith 117 for a discussion of the hypersexualization of black women and associations with nature.

⁷ This image is made more interesting when one considers the fact that the magnolia is widely regarded as a symbol of the South. In describing the mixed race prostitute as the symbol of the South, Faulkner makes a point about the persistence of the miscegenation threat and evokes Smith's "race-sex-sin" spiral as representative of Southern attitudes as a whole (Smith 11).

prise or ignorance, who knew Henry so much better than Henry knew him, and Henry not showing either” (89). Bon not only anticipates, but counts upon Henry having a strong reaction to the prostitutes, and he imagines that in Henry’s mind “all of morality was upside down and all of honor perished” (91). Bon seems to revel in this destruction, foreshadowing the antagonism of their final conflict and further positioning Bon as a source of anxiety that Henry will have to destroy in order to overcome the threat Bon presents to Henry’s own understanding of his position as a white Southern man.

The threat of unbridled sexuality seems to be the driving force of Henry’s anxiety in this scene. Mr. Compson describes him as a “young, strong-blooded, victim of the hard celibacy of riding and hunting to heat and [which] make[s] importunate the blood of a young man, to which he and his kind were forced to pass time away” (87). The delineation of “he and his kind” classifies Henry as a class of Southern gentleman that Bon can never gain entrance to, situating him in a lower object position. The emphasis on Henry’s virginity is interesting as well, for there was no societal requirement for white Southern men to maintain virginity; in fact, there was an expectation that they would have spent their youth “practicing” by raping slaves on their plantations (*Absalom* 87). Henry’s virginity, then, seems to be a source of neurosis to him, a fact which Bon appears to know and take advantage of. John T. Irwin proposes that, much like Quentin, Henry is obsessed by his virginity.

In Quentin's world young men lose their virginity as soon as possible, but their sisters keep their virginity until they are married. The reversal of this situation in the case of Quentin and Candace makes Quentin feel that his sister has assumed the masculine role and that he has assumed the feminine role. Quentin's obsessive concern with Candace's loss of virginity is a displaced concern with his own inability to lose his virginity, for, as both novels clearly imply, Quentin's virginity is psychological impotence. Approaching manhood, Quentin finds himself unable to assume the role of a man. (38)

Irwin is discussing Quentin's own struggles with his virginity and incestuous desire here, but due to the narrative slippage between Henry and Quentin we can extrapolate the point to consider how the virginity stigma would have affected Henry in his relationship with Bon as well. If we consider Bon as the half-sister instead of the half-brother, the same incestuous panic which will eventually cause Quentin to commit suicide in *The Sound and The Fury* can be understood as the impetus for Henry's murder of Bon. Quentin's decision to lie to his father about his incestuous relationship with Caddy is triggered by what Irwin calls "psychological impotence," and it follows that Henry, plagued by anxieties about his own virginity, his desire of both Judith and his half-brother, is plagued by a similar condition. This understanding of virginity and fear of sex as a force that limits the male ability to mature further codifies the reading of Bon as a trigger in Henry's development. Henry experiences Bon as a locus for these fears, and in killing him Henry is attempting to excise this anxiety and allow himself to progress into manhood.

And indeed Henry does desire Bon, and much of the writing on *Absalom, Absalom!* focuses on the incestuous love triangle between Henry, Bon, and Judith

as a possible explanation for the murder motive.⁸ In reading Henry's mimicry and obsession with Bon as homoerotic desire, it becomes clear that it is this drive, coupled with the threat of Bon's unstable race and gender, which ultimately brings Henry to pull the trigger. Henry's homoerotic desire is most clearly articulated in the Quentin Compson/Shreve McCannon narration, which takes place in their dorm room at Harvard; "And now," Shreve announces to Quentin as they "play" at telling, "we're going to talk about love" (224, 253).

Shreve suggests that Henry's desire for Bon took the form of imitation, telling Quentin, "There must have been nights and nights while Henry was learning from him how to lounge about a bedroom in a gown and slippers such as women wore, in a faint though unmistakable effluvium of scent such as women used, smoking a cigar almost as a woman might smoke it" (254). Shreve not only aggressively repeats his descriptions of Bon's female gender performance, but suggests that Henry was attempting to become Bon as an expression of his love towards him. Quentin conceptualizes their relationship as such too, suggesting a scene in which Henry and Bon drank together in their dorm and Henry

over the bottle one night said, blurted - no, not blurted: it would be fumbling, groping: and he (the cosmopolite ten years the youth's senior almost, lounging in one of the silk robes the like of which the youth had never seen before and believed that only women wore) watching the youth blush fiery red yet still face him, still look him straight in the eye while he fumbled, groped, blurted with abrupt complete irrelevance: 'If I

⁸ See, for example, Irwin's landmark text *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner*, or more recently Hillary Matthews' thesis "*When He Put The Pistol in My Hand I Didn't: Homoeroticism and Gender Performance in Faulkner's The Sound and The Fury and Absalom, Absalom!*."

had a brother, I wouldn't want him to be a younger brother...Yes. And I would want him to be just like you'. (253)⁹

The language of sexual exploration (“fumbling”, “groping”, “blushing”) eroticizes Henry’s ironic desire to have Bon as a brother and reinforces the allure of Bon to Henry. However, as was articulated in the New Orleans scene, this allure is tinged with disgust and Henry’s revulsion becomes increasingly clear in his reaction to the revelation of first their biological relationship, then of Bon’s racial background.

In Shreve’s section of the narrative, Henry’s use of Bon as an object with which to codify his own growth becomes even more explicit, for Shreve and Quentin imagine the revelation of Bon’s genealogy and race, finally making clear the factors that have contributed to the construction of Bon as a libidinous object in the text. It is in this section, relayed via the omniscient narrator, that the scene most often used to explain the murder appears. In this version of the story, Henry has learned of his biological relation to Bon (but not of Bon’s racial background), when he gives Bon his blessing to marry Judith.

And then Henry would begin to say ‘Thank God. Thank God’ panting and saying ‘Thank God,’ saying ‘Dont try to explain it. Just do it’ and Bon: ‘You authorise me? As her brother you give me permission?’ and Henry: ‘Brother? Brother? you are the oldest: why do you ask me?’ and Bon: ‘No, He has never acknowledged me. He just warned me. You are the brother and the son. Do I have your permission, Henry?’ and Henry: ‘Write. Write. Write’. (279)

⁹ The parallels between this scene and the one currently taking place between Shreve and Quentin reinforces the reading of Shreve/Quentin as a homoerotic pairing and further codifies the slippage between Henry and Quentin.

In this iteration of the marriage confirmation, the omniscient narrator suggests that Henry has managed to justify the violation of the incest taboo without permanently damaging his own moral code, as he is prepared to allow Bon to go forward with the marriage to Judith. Bon's confirmation "*You are the brother and the son*" appears to serve as a sort of identity-structuring for Henry; despite his agony over the incestuous blessing, he is able to tolerate it because his identity is still intact (279).

However, it is the revelation of Bon's racial background, which takes place in this version when Sutpen visits the boys' regiment during the final days of the Civil War, which ultimately unhinges Henry and leads to Bon's speculative question "*So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you cant bear*" (285). When Bon first draws his gun, anticipating that he will have to act in self-defense, Henry pleads;

"- *You are my brother.*

- *No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister*" (286).

This is the threat that ultimately proves to be too much for Henry; the violation of the incest taboo was, if uncomfortable, at least not in direct violation to the tenets of white Southern manhood, as is the black man/white women miscegenation taboo.¹⁰ The simple violence of Bon's retort, a stark sentence that stands isolated in a novel driven by complicated, overwrought syntax, further demarcates Bon as

¹⁰ See Andrews 202 for a more nuanced discussion of the black man/white woman miscegenation taboo and its relationship to the permissibility of white man/black woman sexual exploitation.

Other and signifying Africanist presence. The Africanist presence serves as “a marker and vehicle for illegal sexuality, fear of madness, expulsion, self-loathing,” and in this scene, Henry is forced to confront all of this darkness in the face of Bon’s threat (Morrison 52). The omniscient narration fades out, but Shreve speculates that the two rode all the way back home together, and it was just before Bon crossed the threshold onto the plantation that Henry pulled the trigger (286). It is significant that it was not until this moment of ultimate trespass that Henry acts on his panic and murders Bon, for the crossing of the threshold invokes images of transgressing sexual and racial taboos, a very real threat should Bon cross the porch. Therefore, it is not until the climactic moment, where Bon’s entry into the home would have truly unhinged the values and structural restrictions of the Old South, that Henry chooses to act.

John N. Duvall suggests that “Charles Bon, seductive and charming, serves as the white Southern community’s repressed ideological horror in Faulkner’s ghost story: if white men can father black men who appear white, then these same ‘white’ black men can beget children on white women. This is the precipice Faulkner continually leads up to and dares his white reader to peep over” (*Influence* 13). Bon, therefore, is a threat not just to Henry, but to the entire segregated Southern agrarian way of life. However, in killing Bon, Henry also destroys himself, for “There is as well about the suicidal murder of the double a suggestion of the *liebestod*, as if the only way that the ego could be joined with the beloved yet fearful other self is by a reflexive death in which the ego plunges itself into the

otherness of the unconscious evoked by the double” (Irwin 35). Irwin invokes Freud to develop his understanding of the murder/suicide, which suggests that when the Self (here, Henry) attempts to kill the Other (Bon), it is a violent, desperate plea to reconcile the aspects of the Other that are alluring, yet repulsive, with the codified social order that constructed the Self, a reading which reinforces the positioning of Bon as an object for Henry, and later Quentin, to use in an effort to mature into masculinity. When Quentin returns to Sutpen’s Hundred with Miss Rosa, Quentin enters “the bare stale room” where he sees “the wasted yellow face with closed, almost transparent eyelids on the pillow, the wasted hands crossed on the breast as if he were already a corpse” (*Absalom* 298). Henry is living, yet already dead, for he was symbolically killed the day he shot Bon and now exists in a sort of liminal space between life and death.¹¹ Jackson describes the suicide as “the attempted exorcism by Henry of his own demons or incestuous impulses” and whether it was successful or not, it appears that the effort also cost him his life (48). Henry’s symbolic suicide foreshadows Quentin’s very real suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*, and their brief, circuitous conversation reinforces the connection between them and suggests that they are still trapped in a closed, repetitive loop of time.

¹¹ Interestingly, this liminal space between life and death is what characterizes the majority of the object positions assigned to women in both *Absalom* and *Song of Solomon*. Considering that the text positions Henry as the more feminine of the Sutpen children and undermines his masculinity through his desire for Bon, it is revealing that he ends the novel in a similar state as the women are forced to occupy. *Absalom* is a tragedy, then, because Henry cannot grow and come to terms with his history and identity, and instead ends up trapped and feminized.

And you are - ?
Henry Sutpen.
And you have been here - ?
Four years.
And you came home - ?
To die. Yes.
To die?
Yes. To die.
And you have been here - ?
Four years.
And you are - ?
Henry Sutpen. (298)

The conversation feels almost like a Möbius strip, twisting endlessly around and around, reinforcing the doubling between Quentin and Henry. This conversation takes place only months before Quentin's suicide, so the reader can see that Quentin has, to a certain extent, assumed the role of Henry, which also makes the motivations behind Quentin's suicide more apparent (Irwin 35). In the end, Faulkner suggests that the threat of the Other, physically distinguished by race and gender performance, is more powerful than the protagonist's attempts to use him to construct and maintain an identity, and the symbolic act of murdering Bon is the ultimate instantiation of the male protagonist's attempts to use the romantic object partner to stabilize his own identity.

III. *Song of Solomon*

On an archetypal level, Hagar Dead occupies the same role in *Song of Solomon* as Charles Bon does in *Absalom, Absalom!*. They are both the object of sexual desire, alluring to the protagonist yet also worthy of contempt and fear. Like Bon, who is coded as female by the text, Hagar is dead by the end of the

novel, and her death acts as a turning point in the arc of the male protagonist. However, while Charles Bon was murdered by Henry in a violent manifestation of the dual allure and revulsion generated by the Other, Hagar's death after her abandonment by Milkman, has very different implications. In "She Had No Self Left: The Sacrificial Love of Miriam in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* and Hagar in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," Sharon Raynor contends that Hagar is written as a "sacrificeable" character (260), just like her namesake, the concubine of Abraham and mother of Ishmael (Genesis 16). Morrison's Hagar Dead is written in "a Biblical tradition of women who were destined to play a certain role," and Raynor claims that in naming her character as such, Morrison prepares the reader not to "displace our sympathies from the protagonist," even when Milkman treats Hagar poorly (260). Hagar's very name, therefore, conditions the reader to not only anticipate, but also tolerate, her fate in the novel. Her role, then, is to be an object, and Milkman's cold disposal stages one of the central themes of the work, suggesting that the diaspora of slavery still creates painful fault lines in the black community, realized here in patriarchal abuses of women.

While there appears to be another parallel between the characters of Bon and Hagar in the fact that they are biologically related to their romantic interests (although Milkman and Hagar are cousins, not half-siblings), the implications are quite different. Mayberry cautions against reading Milkman and Hagar's affair as an illicit incestuous relationship, suggesting that the biological distance of cousins is enough to negate the threat of the incest taboo (Mayberry 86). While it is ac-

knowledged that Hagar and Milkman are biologically related, and when he wants to break up with her Milkman thinks “I’ll remind her that we are cousins” (98), there does not appear to be a level of shame or societal condemnation that would suggest the violation of the incest taboo. This taboo is still present in the novel and will be discussed more in depth in an analysis of *Ruth Dead*, but the connotations of incest evoked in *Absalom, Absalom!* are not present in the same way in Milkman and Hagar’s relationship.

Milkman is only twelve when he first meets his cousin, Hagar, but he is immediately entranced by her; “She was, it seemed to him, as pretty a girl as he’d ever seen. She was much much older than he was. She must be as old as Guitar, maybe even seventeen. He seemed to be floating. More alive than he’d ever been, and floating” (45). Milkman has been strangely disengaged from the world since his birth, for when he learned “that only birds and airplanes could fly - he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother” (9). In light of this, his enchanted attraction to Hagar stands out as a particularly rare moment of engagement, and in describing his state as “floating”, it appears that he has perhaps stumbled upon, at least to a limited degree, a way to fly. Originally, he finds himself swept up and consumed by her, a state of obsession much like Henry’s for Bon. In his boyish innocence, Milkman finds Hagar, and the way she, Pilate, and Reba live, very enticing because it contrasts sharply to the authoritarian oppression of his own home. Milkman feels as if “Ha-

gar's voice scooped up what little pieces of heart he had left to call his own" (49). The sense of Hagar's possession of Milkman persists through his teenage years, and even when "his breath was no longer that of a puppy, Hagar could still whip it into a pant when he was seventeen and she was twenty-two" (92). Milkman, who exists in a state of arrested development for most his life, is sexually dominated and controlled by Hagar. The role she plays in his imagination is also purely sexual; there is no indication in the novel that Milkman ever invests time in learning about Hagar's personality, and he even complains at one point about how difficult it is to shop for her because she had no interests (91). While it is more likely that Milkman simply never took the time to find out her interests, the reader experiences Hagar in the same way Milkman does, never getting the chance to understand her character on a level beyond Milkman's objectification of her as a sexual toy. Just as the reader is never allowed to directly access Bon's thoughts or motivations, we are kept at a distance from Hagar, which fuels the sense of her as merely functional within the novel.

This is compounded by the revisionist manner in which Milkman understands their relationship. He reflects that "When he first took her in his arms, Hagar was a vain and somewhat distant creature. He liked to remember it that way - that he took her in his arms - but in truth it was she who called him back into the bedroom and stood there smiling while she unbuttoned her blouse" (92). Despite the fact that Hagar initiated their sexual relationship and very much held him in thrall, Milkman rewrites the past in order to accommodate his need to control both

Hagar and his own life story. In a novel where oral history and storytelling generate truth (Mayberry 73), this type of rewriting is very important as it indicates a degree of patriarchal power that can be exercised to redefine the lived truths of women's lives and erase the substance of Hagar's existence. This is emphasized even more clearly in Morrison's narrative intervention into Milkman's musings in the scene where he punches his father; "Sleeping with Hagar had made him generous. Or so he thought. Wide-spirited. Or so he imagined. Wide-spirited and generous enough to defend his mother, whom he almost never thought about, and to deck his father, whom he both feared and loved" (69). Morrison's repetitive negation, "Or so he thought" and "Or so he imagined" suggests that the narrative disapproves of the way in which Milkman uses Hagar to construct illusions and justify his own actions to himself. This disapproval translates into the novel's overarching concern with the ramifications of patriarchal injustice in male/female relationships in the black community.

From the outset of Milkman's "Ulysses theme[d]" journey to identity, Hagar is cruelly left behind (Raynor 270). Milkman ends their relationship, he tells himself, principally, because he is unhappy with the amount of responsibility she demands of him; "She began to wait for him, and the more involved he got with the other part of his social life, the more reliable she became. She began to pout, sulk, and accuse him of not loving her or wanting to see her anymore" (98). Essentially, Milkman becomes bored with Hagar as soon as she begins to ask any-

thing of him beyond sex. He spends a good deal of time justifying his actions to himself on the grounds that she has begun to impede his development.

He seldom took her anywhere except to the movies and he never took her to parties where people of his own set danced and laughed and developed intrigues among themselves. Everybody who knew him knew about Hagar, but she was considered his private honey pot, not a real or legitimate girl friend - not someone he might marry. And only one or two of the various women he dated 'seriously' ever put up a fight about her since they believed she was less than a rival. (91)

In reducing the magnitude of her role in his life, and refusing to acknowledge her as a social peer, Milkman essentially denies Hagar personhood. Thus he inflicts upon her a form of "social death,"¹² a complete denial of a human being's personhood in society. In staging a form of social death for Hagar, Milkman reproduces the oppressive consequences of slavery across gender lines in the black community. His dismissal of her even comes in the form of a non-human metaphor, as he decides "She was the third beer. Not the first one, which the throat receives with almost tearful gratitude; nor the second, that confirms and extends the pleasure of the first. But the third, the one you drink because it's there, because it can't hurt, and because what difference does it make?" (91). This cruel rendering of their relationship literally paints Hagar as an object for Milkman's consumption, and erases the ecstatic pleasure he originally felt in her presence.

¹² The term "social death" gained popularity as a way of describing the dehumanization of a group based on race, religion, sexuality, gender, or class in Orlando Patterson's 1982 book *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, and is now widely used in discussions of slavery, genocide, and the Holocaust (Patterson 38).

Milkman's abandonment sends "Hagar spinning into a bright blue place where the air was thick and it was silent all the time...where everything was frozen except for an occasional burst of fire inside her chest that crackled away until she ran out into the streets to find Milkman Dead" (99). Her countless attempts to murder Milkman, which she of course never follows through with, are seen in the community as a manifestation of her obsessive love. Milkman originally takes pride in her murderous intentions, for "it told men and other women that he was one bad dude, that he had the power to drive a women our of her mind, to destroy her, and not because she hated him, or because he had done some unforgivable thing to her, but because he had fucked her and she was driven wild by the absence of his magnificent joint" (301). However, Morrison suggests the pain behind Hagar's attempts, and cites the very reasons Milkman thinks she should have no trouble with the break-up, "her maturity and her blood kinship," as having converted "her passion to fever, so it was more affliction than affection" (127). In the final attack portrayed in the book, Milkman seems to issue a sort of ultimatum to the world; "Either she will kill me or she will drop dead. Either I am to live in this world on my terms or I will die out of it. If I am to live in it, then I want her dead. One or the other. Me or her. Choose" (129). Considering the performative power of oral narrative and spoken word in this text, Milkman's words seem almost like a curse, which comes chillingly true when Hagar does indeed drop dead at the end of the novel, apparently of neglect and heartbrokenness. It also serves as a turning point in his own development. He is, in a way, the very

deity he is talking to here; he chooses himself, and he chooses his own life over hers, as this climactic confrontation happens just before his departure for Shalimar. As Mayberry writes, “Hagar spends her days trying to kill Milkman, while he becomes more involved with searching for his family’s heritage and discovering their secrets. For Milkman, this was the key to his identity but for Hagar, Milkman consumed her identity” (268). Milkman is able to leave home and go on a journey to learn of his family history and develop his sense of what it means to be a man. Hagar never has that chance, for by the time Milkman is through with her, “she had no self left” (136).

The idea of the woman who loves too much is a pervasive image throughout the book, and one Milkman will encounter again in Shalimar. These type of “doormat women,” as they are called, cannot accept that a man can live without their love (306). This type of obsessive love seems to mandate the erasure of the women’s identity. Milkman himself realizes that in his final confrontation with Hagar, “she stood there like a puppet strung up by a puppet master who had gone off to some other hobby” (301). This image reinforces the fact that Milkman has used and manipulated Hagar to suit his own needs, then left her suspended, unable to progress forward, even as he moves towards self-actualization and manhood. Like Henry, Milkman needs his opposite in order to cast sharper light on what he himself stands for. However, Henry’s confrontation with this Otherness destroys him, while it allows Milkman to grow and become a better man. This divergence highlights the fundamental difference of the texts; Morrison allows Milkman to

proceed towards redemption, while Henry is left to rot along with the Sutpen manor.

After their final confrontation before Milkman departs for Shalimar, Hagar is left frozen and paralyzed until Guitar comes home and finds her. Hagar “cradled her breasts as though they were two mangoes thumbed over in the marketplace and pushed aside” (305). Hagar’s body is again conceived of in images of food or drink, reinforcing the almost cannibalistic consumption of her spiritual being by Milkman. Guitar brings Hagar home but she is left in a stupor for days, until she suddenly comes to life, proclaiming “Look at how I look. I look awful. No wonder he didn’t want me” (308). She springs into action, embarking on a wild shopping spree that culminates in the cosmetics aisle, where she is enchanted by “Peachy powders and milky lotions grouped in front of poster after cardboard poster of gorgeous grinning faces. Faces in ecstasy. Faces somber with achieved seduction. Hagar believed she could spend her life there among the cut glass, shimmering in peaches and cream, in satin. In opulence. In luxe. In love” (311). The markers of wealth and beauty are all coded as overwhelmingly white - “satin,” “milky,” “peaches and cream.” Hagar is desperate to live in this world, but it is a world which fundamentally rejects her and her black skin, and again the use of food imagery suggests that these products mark women for consumption, just as Milkman consumes Hagar. Like Bon, she is an Other in a world constructed to destroy the Other, not just politically, but socially (Weinstein 51).

This is further compounded by Hagar's return trip home, which she completes almost in a trance "oblivious of other people, street lights, automobiles, and a thunderous sky. She was thoroughly soaked before she realized it was raining and then only because one of the shopping bags split" (313). Hagar's bags all begin to break, and her new purchases, all the markers of beauty approved by white society, fall to the rainy, muddy ground and are ruined, implying that no matter how hard she tries or how much she spends, Hagar can never gain entrance into the world of societally codified standards of beauty and femininity. She makes it home before she collapses with fever, and her final conversation with her mother, Reba, further reinforces Milkman's treatment of Hagar as a form of "social death," which soon translates into a very literal death. Hagar asks "'Why don't he like my hair?...He don't love it at all.' 'No he don't. He don't know what he loves, but he'll come around honey, one of these days. How can he love himself and hate your hair?' 'He loves silky hair...Penny-colored hair...And lemon-colored skin...And gray-blue eyes...And thin nose...He's never going to like my hair'" (315-6). In listing traits associated with white/light-skinned women, Hagar is further portrayed as an outsider, abandoned by Milkman and degraded by a society that has no interest in her. Raynor cites bell hooks to better frame this passage:

For black people, the pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves (if our vision is not colonized), or how we are seen is so intense that it rends us. It rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identity. Often it leaves us ravaged by repressed rage, feeling weary, dispirited, and sometimes just plain old brokenhearted.

These are the gaps in our psyche that are the spaces of mindless complicity, self-destructive rage, hatred, and paralyzing despair. (qtd. 269)

Hagar is destroyed by her inability to see herself reflected in society's mirrors, making her into an Other and crippling her with self-loathing. She dies moments after this speech and her already diminished self is destroyed; "Hagar never established her own identity as a woman or developed any ideas or values about her life. She instantly became Milkman's sacrifice, being used, abused, and abandoned before her self-discovery" (Raynor 269). Milkman's abandonment is what finally breaks Hagar, but her death is also a product of a society that has abandoned her, not just a man.

On that note, it is important to realize that Morrison cautions her reader against placing the brunt of responsibility for Hagar's death on Milkman. As has already been referenced, Morrison adamantly defends Milkman as a powerful character who has the capacity to change and grow.

The important thing about Hagar's death is the response to it - how Pilate deals with the fact of it - how Milkman in his journey caused real grief. One can't do what he did and not cause enormous amounts of pain. It was carelessness that caused that girl pain. He has taken her life. He will always regret that, and there is nothing he can do about it. That generally is the way it is - there is nothing that you can do about it except do better and don't do *that* again. He was not in a position to do anything about it because he was stupid...When he goes South with Pilate he is ready to do something else. That is the thrust of it all. (Morrison, qtd. McKay 403)

The implications of demanding a woman's death as the avenue towards male enlightenment offer a condemnation of society, not Milkman himself, and Milkman in fact rises above this society as he develops into a man. As Guitar tells Hagar,

“He can’t value you more than you value yourself” (306). This is not meant to be an attack on Hagar’s ability to develop her own self-worth, but rather to direct the reader to the real culprit in Hagar’s death - the society which has prevented her from forming a sense of self and a concrete identity. Morrison intervenes in Guitar’s thoughts to assert, “She needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her - and the humor with which to live it” (307). This vision of black female community is what could have saved Hagar; Milkman is not the cause of her death, only the instigator. She has never had this community, so she has never been able to form a strong sense of identity; she is only ever an outsider. This vision of community is also an answer to the violence of slavery that still forms fault lines in the black community, for the traffic in black female bodies that characterized the slave trade is reproduced in a society where black women cannot come together to build community and forge bonds of support. In the course of the text, Morrison suggests that black men, like white people of all genders, still rely on black female bodies as the currency upon which to build their success, and she envisions this type of supportive female black community as a protective response to these demands. While Hagar did have the support of black woman such as Pilate and Reba, Morrison herself has stated that Hagar was too fundamentally different to live as happily as they did. “Hagar has even less” exposure to positive relationships with men than Pilate and Reba, and

She is weaker. Her grandmother senses it. That is why Pilate gives up the wandering life. Strength of character is not something one can give another. It is not genetically transferred. Pilate can't give Hagar her genes in that sense, can't give her that strength; and Hagar does not take what she has available to her anyway. The first rejection she ever has destroys her, because she is a spoiled child. (Morrison, qtd. McKay 401-2)

While Morrison's assessment of Hagar does seem ungenerous, it nonetheless suggests that readers should not direct their anger at Milkman. I believe Morrison slightly overcompensates here in her dismissal of Hagar, perhaps a function of years of negative response to Hagar's death, but the principle behind her claim implies that the reader should not hold Milkman entirely responsible for Hagar's death and should not begrudge him the development that comes from this moment, unlike Henry, who is very much at fault for Bon's death and is therefore virtually already dead.

IV. Conclusion

While Milkman is able to fly away and become the man he was meant to be, Hagar is left for (literally) Dead. Like Bon for Henry, Hagar represents the physical cost of Milkman's attempts to find his place in the world. These two figures, Bon, ambiguously coded in regards to both race and gender, and Hagar, who "so desperately tr[ies] to love" (Raynor 260) are both relegated to an oblique, secondary position in these novels. Quentin/Henry and Milkman define themselves through and against their lover figures, rendering them less than human, expendable characters killed in the name of triggering male learning.

2) “I’m already dead” - Mothers and Sisters, Living and Dead

I. Introduction

While Charles Bon and Hagar Dead occupy similar object positions as the sacrificed lover, their characters represent just one of many ways feminized bodies and lives are deployed in these texts. The mother/aunt and sister figures of these texts, Rosa Coldfield and Judith Sutpen of *Absalom, Absalom!* and Ruth Foster, Magdalena Dead, and First Corinthians Dead of *Song of Solomon* all share a similar positionality; one that is subordinated and predicated on the denial of their personhood. This translates to a state of almost living death, in which the women are frozen, held in limbo by the intricacies of their respective patriarchal communities. As Mr. Compson tells Quentin “Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts. So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts?” (*Absalom* 7-8). The masculine devastation of war, slavery, and patriarchy destroyed the feminine as a collateral damage of sorts, and almost a century later the women are still struggling to be recognized as anything more than ghosts. However, this understanding of women has more to do with the male protagonist’s conceptions of what women’s lives mean, and the text occasionally affords the women brief moments of triumph or awakening.

II. *Absalom, Absalom!*

Early on in his narrative, Shreve describes Rosa Coldfield as an “old dame that grew up in a household like an over-populated mausoleum” (144). His com-

ment is only an aside in a larger conversation, but it provides a concise description of the fate of most women in this text; they are alive, but living amongst the dead. The state of the feminine in *Absalom, Absalom!*, which is inextricably tied to race and class, can be mostly clearly understood through Patterson's concept of social death, defined by Weinstein as the complete denial of another human being's "kindred subjectivity requiring treatment in kind" (51). In a society that largely refuses to acknowledge their personhood, Rosa Coldfield and Judith Sutpen are held hostage in this state of living death, and in his narrative construction, Quentin routinely codifies the status of these women as he attempts to delineate his own sense of self as differentiated from the feminine, which he views as a terrifying, corruptive force. In *Robbing the Mother* Deborah Clarke writes,

the men of the novel often create the fantastic quality of the women through their tortured interpretations of the female psyche. Faulkner's authorial reticence in 'explaining' his women leaves them open to the rather clumsy scrutiny of the men, who want them to submit quietly to their places in the patriarchal social order. When the women fail to do so, thereby threatening that order, the men attempt to dismiss them as unreal and thus to remove them from central consideration. (127)

Quentin has a vested interest in destroying female ways of knowing and being in the world, for they represent a threat to him and his particular brand of patriarchal Southern white masculinity, like Bon did to Henry. However, this desire is put in tension with the fact that, like the reader, Quentin Compson enters into the narrative of the Sutpen tragedy via Rosa Coldfield, the spinster aunt of Judith and Henry and sister to Ellen Sutpen, who is crucial to the unfolding of Quentin's own

narrative and, ultimately, his suicide. He is summoned to her and his immediate impression situates Rosa as a sort of ethereal child, frozen in time.

Miss Coldfield in the eternal black which she had worn for forty-three years now, whether for sister, father, or nothusband none knew...her legs hung straight and rigid as if she had iron shinbones and ankles, clear of the floor with that air of impotent and static rage like children's feet, and talking in that grim haggard amazed voice until at last listening would renege and hearing-sense self-confound and the long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration would appear as though by outraged recapitulation evoked, quiet inattentive and harmless, out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust. (3-4)

Quentin's images of impotent adolescence ("static rage," "children's feet," "indomitable frustration") suggest that he sees Rosa as a limited, unchanging receptacle of rage, not as an old woman. However, she is also positioned as a mother figure of sorts, giving birth to the narrative and Quentin's position in it (Clarke 130). The contradiction of virgin spinster aunt and life-giving mother positions Rosa as a paradox, one which Clarke terms "notmother" (125). This contradictory role is consistent with the erasure of mother figures in the novel as a whole, and on a larger scale, with the rejection of the feminine. Looking beyond the tangible absences of the mother produced by the the death of Ellen Sutpen, the bizarre absence of Rosa's mother, and the erasure of Bon's mother, Clarke argues that this rejection "is further enforced by the attempts of the male characters, and possibly Faulkner himself, to undermine maternal power by desubstantializing the women, for the ghostly aura associated with the feminine is born of and sustained by the perception of men" (127). Quentin perceives Rosa as "notmother" from their first encounter, and as she tells her story, he comments that "Her voice would not

cease, it would just vanish” (*Absalom* 4). Even in the middle of her testimony Quentin is able to erase her physical and vocal presence, superimposing his own imagined narration over her’s, and thereby asserting his way of knowing as truth while denying her very existence. This is further emphasized by his suggestion that the ghost of Sutpen is haunting Rosa’s voice (*Absalom* 4), implying that even her voice is not really her own, but is actually the lingering presence of the male influence which controlled her life, denying Rosa’s physicality and agency. Quentin is also struck by “the rank smell of female old flesh long embattled in virginity” (4), suggesting that her only ties to the physical world are contingent on her sexuality and her function, or failure to function as, a mother.

The image of notmother is further complicated in Rosemary Coleman’s imagining of Rosa as both the mother and the “seminal father” of the text, a claim that is possible considering the already slippery nature of gender and sex in the novel (423). This overdetermining of Rosa as mother, father, and aunt works in opposition to the male attempts to deny her substance; instead of being nothing, she is everything. This role beyond notmother, which could perhaps be also considered “notfather,” is consistent with the text’s non-binary performances of gender, as was seen in Bon’s occupation of an archetypal feminine space. Rosa tells Quentin that she lived one summer “*not as a woman, a girl, but rather as the man which I perhaps should have been*” (197). This is not to suggest that Rosa does not identify as female, but rather to point to that fact that occupying a paternal role is not inconsistent with the way she imagines her own gender in the text and

to suggest that Rosa conceives of masculinity as an avenue for subverting the patriarchal limitations of the role society has afforded her.

The erasure of Rosa in the novel coincides with her refusal to play the role of mother in the tragedy of the fall of Sutpen. After Ellen's death, Rosa moves into Sutpen's Hundred in an attempt to fulfill her sister's dying wish that she protect Judith, despite the fact that Judith is actually older than her Aunt Rosa (*Absalom* 15). Ellen, dead for most of the novel yet essential to the plot, serves a sort of cloaking presence; she is meant to lend Sutpen respectability and standing in the community and make him a gentleman. Rosa's pent up rage at the destruction Sutpen has wrought often bubbles over in her narrative, as when she tells Quentin "Marrying Ellen or marrying ten thousand Ellens could not have made him [a gentleman]" (*Absalom* 11). Therefore, Ellen is another woman reduced to an object rather than a subject, as she is mostly used as an object to lend Sutpen standing in the community and dies soon after giving birth to Henry and Judith, thereby fulfilling her role as incubator for the Sutpen dynasty. Additionally, the persistent chrysalis and butterfly imagery used to describe Ellen during her time on Sutpen's Hundred suggests that she attempts to rebirth herself and overcome the limiting role that Sutpen and her father have prescribed for her, but this attempt is abortive as she dies before she can cast off this role (Clarke 136). Ellen's abortive death harkens back to the death of Rosa's mother immediately after Rosa's birth, which "suggests an incomplete birth," and Rosa "seems to suffer from never having been fully born" (Clarke 142). This image evokes Pilate Dead birthing herself

from her mother's corpse in *Song of Solomon*, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, but creates an interesting linkage between motherhood, women's physical existence, and death. When Rosa unceremoniously becomes engaged to Sutpen, he is so desperate to rebuild his dynasty after the destruction of the Civil War and the death of Bon (and by extension the erasure of Henry) that he proposes they have sex and marry only if Rosa gives birth to a son (*Absalom* 134). Rosa is horrified by the event and compares it to the afternoon when Henry shot Bon. She tells Quentin "And then one afternoon - oh there was a fate in it: afternoon and afternoon and afternoon: do you see? the death of hope and love, the death of pride and principle, and then the death of everything save the old outraged and aghast unbelieving which has lasted for forty-three years" (136). Sutpen's proposition reinforces a state of living death for Rosa; like Henry after that fateful afternoon, she is suspended in between life and death.

Mr. Compson reinforces the denial of Rosa's personhood in his narrative sections. He compares the Southern spinster aunt to a parasitic creature, saying "It is as though she was living on the actual blood itself like a vampire, not with insatiability, certainly not with voracity, but with that serene and idle splendor of flowers abrogating to herself, because it fills her veins also, nourishment from the old blood that crossed uncharted seas and continents and battled wilderness hardships" (68). Clarke reads Mr. Compson's description as a vision of a woman where "the womb which should create and nourish is transformed by lack of use into a parasite which ultimately feeds off and destroys family life" (Clarke 129).

This portrait of Rosa as less than human, vampire or parasite or some other beast, further erases Rosa's substantive existence, and casts her in a position of culpability for the tragedy of the Sutpen family as she refuses to perform the role of mother.

However, her status as "notmother" is further complicated by the fact that she gives birth to the narrative, and, as Clarke suggests, symbolically births Quentin as well. In situating Quentin in this narrative Rosa implicates him in the tragedy of the South itself, and, considering Quentin's suicide, which is both future (less than a year after his game of telling with Shreve) and past (a key plot point in *The Sound and the Fury*, published seven years earlier), it is clear that Quentin cannot escape from this legacy. Indeed, Mr. Compson suggests that Rosa selects Quentin because he is going away to Harvard, thereby escaping from the closed order of the South. But Quentin's suicide, as well as his embroilment with Shreve in the constant telling and retelling of the tragedy, contradicts this, for it seems that the South cannot so easily be escaped. Therefore, Clarke positions Rosa as a biological mother, writing, "Quentin, in some ways, is born from this story, for it is the story of the South, the heritage which has created him. The still-born dream, then simultaneously suggests Thomas Sutpen, southern history, and Quentin Compson" (132). This relationship is further emphasized in Quentin's conversation with Shreve, in which Shreve repeatedly erroneously refers to Rosa as "Aunt Rosa," suggesting a biological tie between Quentin and Rosa. Quentin denies this and corrects Shreve the first several times (289-300), but in the final

moments of the telling, he leaves Shreve's last "Aunt Rosa" uncorrected ("Quentin did not answer; he did not even say *Miss Rosa*" (301)). This suggests, as Clarke writes, that "Quentin seems finally to acknowledge his connection to, and even his re-engulfment in, his notmother, the woman who has birthed both the tale and his role as teller" (131). Quentin's forthcoming suicide then, makes sense as a product of the weight of the cultural and familial history he has assumed complicity in. As Shreve says, "The South. Jesus. No wonder you folks all outlive yourself by years and years and years" (301), positioning the South as an inescapable trap of history and memory, a locus of anxiety starkly marked in Quentin's final internal insistence to Shreve's question "Why do you hate the South?" (303). As he mutters, over and over "*I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*" (303), it is not hard for the reader to anticipate the despair at being embroiled in such a culture that will eventually drive Quentin to suicide. Despite his consistent denial of her humanity, Quentin is irrevocably made (and unmade) by Rosa, suggesting that the male attempts to destabilize female existence are a product of the power and influence women possess (or at least that men fear women possess).

This conflict between male desire and female power is further articulated in the different ways of knowing that are performed throughout the novel. Quentin's attempts to order the events of the Sutpen tragedy are actually quite similar to Mr. Compson's, suggesting that they are indicative of a larger, male way of knowing marked by an emphasis on fact and sight. Rosa repeatedly asserts

that she cannot truly know what happened, saying “But I was not there. I was not there to see” (22) and reminding Quentin “*But I never saw it*” (118). Her description of the day of Bon’s murder, “*I heard an echo, but not the shot*” (121) suggest that female ways of knowing are rooted more in intuition and memory, not actual sight. On the other hand, Quentin claims “*If I had been there I could not have seen it this plain*” (155), suggesting that even when Quentin participates in the imaginative recitation of history with Rosa and Shreve, his point of access is always visual. Although abstracted, male knowledge is still intrinsically tied to sight, whereas the female is rooted in a sixth sense, consistent with the air of the supernatural that pervades Faulkner’s description of the female characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* (Clarke 126). The contrast between these two approaches to constructing historical reality further articulates the relegation of female characters to a ghostly liminal world, neither living nor dead. Quentin and Mr. Compson, as tellers of the tragedy, actively work to cast women in such a light, suggesting that these auxiliary female family members are disposable in the male imagination, useful for identity structuring and biological life-giving functions, but nothing further. In the male-generated narratives, particularly those of Quentin and Shreve, language and telling is treated with a degree of reverence on par with “Biblical creativity” (Clarke 143) that has the power to bring events into tangible being. The men of the novel understand the female refusal to tell or see¹³ as a failure of

¹³ For example, Rosa never actually relates Sutpen’s sexual proposition to her, instead the reader must infer it on her own (134).

meaning, rather than a form of female generative power, as Clarke claims, in which women can draw on female intuition to reach a purer sense of truth (Clarke 137).¹⁴ Coleman asserts that “Rosa is born into the stream of male discourse, but she manages to disrupt that stream through her influence on, and her uses of the son, Quentin” (424). Despite male attempts to explain away or justify her behavior, Rosa asserts her right to exist by demanding her narrative be heard. In bringing Quentin out to Sutpen’s Hundred in the final climactic scene of the novel, she uses him as a proxy;¹⁵ he may drive the buggy but she drives the action, so despite male efforts to trap women in this position of living death, the women are occasionally able to subvert male destruction and access some power. As Shreve tells Quentin, Rosa “refused at the last to be a ghost” (289); even though her attempt to draw Henry from the house is ultimately thwarted by Clytie, she has inscribed herself as a substantial presence in the narrative.

Like Rosa, the novel conceives of Judith as a living dead figure, a female body used and abused and cast aside in Henry’s blundering attempts to secure his space in the world, and then again done violence to in the retelling. Judith, who never gets to speak for herself in the novel, is consistently imagined, like Rosa, as less than fully human. She is usually conceived of as a sort of intermediary, as in

¹⁴ See, for example, Clarke’s exploration of Rosa’s intuitive knowledge that Henry is concealed within the old Sutpen house (137-9).

¹⁵ The fact the Quentin learns to hear, instead of see, from Clytie in this final scene is highly relevant to this issue of masculine and feminine ways of knowing, but will be discussed in the following chapter in a consideration of Clytie’s positionality within the text.

Mr. Compson's description of her as "just the blank shape, the empty vessel in which each of them strove to preserve, not the illusion of himself not his illusion of the other but what each conceived the other to believe him to be" (95) and his later suggestion that to Bon, Judith only ever "merely the shadow, the woman vessel with which to consummate the love whose actual object was the youth" (133). In reducing Judith to simply a receptacle for male emotion and desire, it becomes clear that Mr. Compson cannot fully conceive of her as a human being. Indeed, Clarke suggests that in Mr. Compson's description the "privileging of homoeroticism over heterosexuality implies a distrust of women, not of heterosexuality" (144). As Shreve's question, "didn't the dread and fear of females which you must have drawn in with the primary mammalian milk teach you better?" (213) suggests, this distrust of women is enacted by all the white male protagonists of the novel in their attempts to erase women's access to reality.

Shreve's narrative also dehumanizes Judith; in his imagined response as Bon to Henry's descriptions of Judith he says "*I am not hearing about a young girl, a virgin; I am hearing about a narrow delicate fenced virgin field already furrowed and bedded so that all I shall need to do is drop the seeds in, caress it smooth again*" (261). This image of woman as virgin field is evocative of both Mr. Compson's "vessel" imagery and his parasitic imagining of Rosa's decrepit womb, indicating a larger pattern of male dismissal and erasure within the text when women fail to perform in ways that are comprehensible to men.

One reason for Judith's consistent displacement in the text is that she does not fit neatly into the patriarchal order of gendered expectations for daughters. From the beginning, it is clear that it is Judith who is the heir apparent of Sutpen, not his son Henry. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the slave fight scene, discussed in detail in the previous chapter. It is worth returning to, however, to note that while Henry is sickened by the fighting and runs to his mother "screaming and vomiting," Judith and Clytie¹⁶ hiding in the rafters, eagerly watch the bloodsport. Additionally, Rosa tells Quentin that Judith loved to ride wild in the buggy, making her driver speed recklessly, and everyone was shocked to discover "that it had been Judith, a girl of six, who had instigated and authorised that negro to make the team run away. Not Henry, mind: not the boy, which would have been outrageous enough; but Judith, the girl" (18). Even Mr. Compson conceptualizes her as the true child of the demonic Sutpen, saying "I can imagine her if necessary even murdering" Bon's wife (96). Her actions align her more closely with conceptions of masculine performance, particularly her father's brutal breed of it, which therefore complicates her position as an object to be used by the men of the novel. For example, when Mr. Compson narrates Judith's decision to purchase tombstones for Charles Bon and Charles Etienne de Saint Valery Bon, he finds it apparently incomprehensible that Judith would spend the little money she had memorializing these two men. He muses "They lead beautiful lives - women.

¹⁶ Clytie is considered as another carrier of Sutpen's legacy, but her role in this scene will be analyzed in the following chapter.

Lives not only divorced from, but irrevocably excommunicated from, all reality” (156), suggesting that Judith’s actions have no possible grounding in reality and can only be explained in a patronizing and dismissive manner inherently tied to her gender (Clarke 143). Clarke does not dwell on this, but it also seems worth noting that Mr. Compson validates Sutpen’s purchase of a tombstone for Ellen and himself, but finds it unbelievable that Judith would perform a similar function for her fiancé and his son, both of whom are black. This suggests that, once again, race and gender are inextricably linked in this text; Mr. Compson justifies his dismissal of Judith’s actions as tied to her incomprehensible feminine decision making, but it does not seem unreasonable to consider it as a round-about way of criticizing Judith’s honoring of non-white family members. Considering Weinstein’s claim that “you simply cannot build a dynasty by killing some of your children, without thereby maiming those that remain” (51), it is clear that Judith’s state of living death can be considered as intrinsically tied to Bon’s physical death, just as race, gender, and power are inextricably bound in this text.

Finally, Quentin and Shreve further estrange the narratively constructed Judith from the real in their consideration of how she would have won over Charles Etienne; “*speaking to it, her voice soft and swooning, filled with that seduction, that celestial promise which is the female’s weapon: ‘Call me Aunt Judith, Charles’*” (169). The claim that Judith would have only been able to exert power via sexual manipulation and seduction reveals the limited way that the boys are able to understand women and the potential motivations of a woman (Clarke

145). In again limiting women to their capacity for sexual and maternal function, the men of the text attempt to ensnare women in a state of living death by estranging them from the real and denying them access within the narrative world-building to any substantial or nuanced identity.

III. *Song of Solomon*

Several times throughout the course of *Song of Solomon*, Macon “Milkman” Dead jokes “My name’s Macon; I’m already dead” (270). The pun on his name is actually indicative of the state of the entire Dead family; like the women of *Absalom, Absalom!* they are trapped in a state of living death. However, unlike the female characters, Milkman is allowed to wake-up from this state and embark on his journey to manhood, while the women are allowed significantly less chance for growth and development, coming alive only briefly and in ways inherently related to, and perhaps meant to trigger, Milkman’s own development. The surname “Dead” is given to Milkman’s grandfather by a drunk white man when he goes to register with the Freedmen’s Bureau (53). Milkman is annoyed that his grandfather would have kept such a name, and asks his father why Macon Sr. wouldn’t have changed it, to which he replies “Mama liked it. Liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out” (54). But when Milkman demands “What was his real name?”, Macon doesn’t even respond to the question, saying instead “I don’t remember my mother too well” (53). This account of the naming stages two tableaux of social death and literalizes the condition by giving it as a name; the first is an act of violence from the white man

who denies Macon Sr. the right to name himself, thereby denying him his identity, and the second from Macon himself, who does not acknowledge Milkman's attempt to probe his family history for his "real" last name, which would perhaps allow him a greater understanding of where he fits in in the world.¹⁷ Milkman is implicated in the toxic denial of the self, but it is the women of the Dead family, particularly Ruth Foster Dead and Milkman's sisters Magdalena and First Corinthians, who have to contend with this state of living death in the most complex ways, a product of their dual oppression through race and gender.

As Weinstein writes, the true story of *Song of Solomon* is the black male conquering isolation through love, but he notes that "The women's options seem even more pinched" and in the character of Ruth Dead "Morrison achieves perhaps her most moving portrait of abortive love" (64). Ruth Foster Dead exists in several different iterations throughout the narrative. The first nuanced portrait of Ruth comes when Macon brutally mocks her at dinner, inciting Milkman to punch his father in defense of his mother. Milkman contemplates his motivation for punching his father later, thinking

He would not pretend that it was love for his mother. She was too insubstantial, too shadowy for love. But it was her vaporishness that made her more needful of defense. She was not a maternal drudge, her mind pressed flat, her shoulders hunched under the burden of housework and care of others, brutalized by a bear of a man. Nor was she the acid-tongued shrew who defended herself with a vicious vocabulary and a fast lip. Ruth was a pale but complicated woman given to deviousness and

¹⁷ In not even replying to Milkman's question, Macon reproduces the dynamic of denial manifested by the white man working at the Freeman's Bureau. For a more in-depth discussion of how Macon often functions as a white man in the text, see Mayberry 81.

ultra-fine manners. She seemed to know a lot and understand very little. It was an interesting train of thought, and new for him. Never had he thought of his mother as a person, a separate individual, with a life apart from allowing or interfering with his own. (75)

This vision of Ruth as “shadowy” and “insubstantial” is consistent with the erasure of female bodily existence seen in *Absalom, Absalom!*. By denying his mother solid form and substance, Milkman attempts to limit his culpability in the difficult life Ruth has led. By dehumanizing and erasing her, Milkman does not have to put her humanity on par with his own, which excuses his consistent steam-rolling of her in their home. When he briefly gives her human standing and gets involved by attacking his father, Milkman thinks that he has done her a great service and performed some sort of strong masculine deed, feeling as if “Infinite possibilities and enormous responsibilities” (68) were suddenly available to him, which suggests a sort of coming of age narrative. However, Macon is shocked when he realizes that his sisters greeted his action with “hatred so fresh, so new” in their eyes that “it startled him” (68). Surprised that his sisters do not immediately accept him in this new role of protector and defender, he recognizes that “His action was his alone. It would change nothing between his parents. It would change nothing inside them” (68). Therefore, Milkman has done nothing that actually benefited his mother (and in fact may have made things worse for her), but his action, in the name of helping women, was actually about his own attempt to understand himself and his role in the family, a mode very similar to the way Henry and Quentin think about Judith.

His violent act triggers Macon's decision to tell Milkman why he so despises Ruth, warning, "if you want to be a whole man, you have to deal with the whole truth" (70). Macon presents a view of Ruth that is very different from the "shadowy" conception Milkman had had of her heretofore, but his description is colored with distance and disgust as he attempts to explain the female psyche to Milkman. The scene is reminiscent of Mr. Compson's attempts to comprehend Rosa's actions; the male inability to grant human status to women leads to an attempt to explain away their motivations as divorced from reality, and in this case, perverse. Mayberry writes that "Macon's 'frozen heat' dries the very femininity out of the female members of his family," and in attempting to induct Milkman into his breed of masculine authority, he transfers this disgust and dismissal of the feminine to his son (104). Macon tells Milkman that he married Ruth primarily because of her father's standing in the town, which helped him in his quest for wealth and status, a claim evocative of the reasons behind Sutpen's marriage to Ellen Coldfield (*Solomon* 70). The young married couple continued to live with Ruth's father, Dr. Foster, who was the most respected black man in the community (71). However, Macon is repulsed by him, an issue which comes to a head when Dr. Foster and Ruth insist that he deliver his daughter's children. Macon, relates, with disgust, how "She had her legs wide open and he was there. I know he was a doctor and doctors not supposed to be bothered by things like that, but he was a man before he was a doctor. I knew then they'd ganged up on me forever" (71). By framing Ruth's relationship with her father as potentially incestuous,

he is able to further dismiss her as contaminated and repulsive. He even worries if his daughters are the product of incest, but remembers how concerned Dr. Foster, who was a light-skinned black man, had been with the color of the girls' skin.

“And he wouldn't have worried about what skin color they had unless they were coming from me,” relates Macon; “I'm not saying that they had contact. But there's lots of things a man can do to please a woman, even if he can't fuck” (74). He further justifies his fear of an incestuous relationship when he tells Macon how, the night Dr. Foster died, he found Ruth lying next to him in bed, “Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny and she has his fingers in her mouth...and if she do that when he was dead, what'd she do when he was alive. Nothing to do but kill a woman like that” (73-4). Macon's reading of what happened that night allows him to paint Ruth as an ignorant savage, primitive and dirty. He refuses to touch her again after that night, condemning her to live in a sort of prison of marriage in his house, equitable to the half-life of social death. In transmitting this understanding of Ruth to Milkman, Macon perpetuates the denial of reason, motivation, and nuance to Ruth's life and encourages his son to view her with similar repulsion.

However, Milkman is not yet prepared to understand himself in the context of his family history, as his identity construction is still in a state of arrest. He flees the house and all it contains and stands for, and is overcome with confusion and anger for all of his family, thinking ““What the fuck did he tell me all that shit for? ...The doctor was dead. You can't do the past over again” (76), especially be-

cause this conversation triggers a memory of the tableau that begins the book: Ruth breastfeeding Milkman at an age far past societal convention. In the opening of the novel, she describes breastfeeding Milkman as a “secret indulgence” (13) that allows her to survive her otherwise bleak life with the abusive Macon. Each day, before Macon returned from work, she would call Milkman to her, and “he came reluctantly, as to a chore” for he was “too young to be dazzled by her nipples, but he was old enough to be bored by the flat taste of mother’s milk” (13). Ruth describes her fantasy of breastfeeding, feeling as if “his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold. Like the miller’s daughter - the one who sat at night in a straw-filled room, thrilled with the secret power Rumpelstiltskin has given her” (13-4). Her secret fantasy ends when they are intruded upon by Macon’s assistant and rent-collector, Freddie, who laughs at the scene, causing Ruth to jump up, “dropping her son on the floor and confirming for him what he had begun to suspect - that these afternoons were strange and wrong” (14). This incestuous contact gives Milkman (born Macon, Jr.) his nickname, and although it is not clear that Macon ever learns about it directly, he hears whispers throughout the community which reinforce his understanding of his wife as obscene. Morrison does not pass judgement on Ruth, and the text instead seems to suggest that this behavior is a product of a culture that denies women personhood and casts them as the living dead; in such a dark world, Morrison does not judge her character for clinging to whatever human contact allows her to feel alive.

However, she also doesn't shy away from the psychological impacts this abuse has on Milkman, who has long repressed the memory of that part of his life, but is triggered into remembering after his conversation about Ruth and Dr. Foster with Macon. "His mother had been portrayed not as a mother who simply adored her only son, but as an obscene child playing dirty games with whatever male was near - be it her father or her son (79). Milkman feels betrayed by the way he now has to understand his mother; not only as a separate person with a complex identity, but an obscene and maybe even abusive one at that. While the psychological trauma Milkman has to reckon with here should not be diminished, it is significant that his understanding of his mother comes only via Macon's verbal transmission of information, which presents a stark portrait and does not grant Ruth a voice as a subject. The creation of female identities through male language harkens back to *Absalom, Absalom!*, and is reminiscent of Clarke's claim that language is a male tool of producing truth, as is seen in Quentin and Shreve's portrayal of Judith and Mr. Compson's telling of Rosa (143). In *Song of Solomon*, language and telling is also associated with an abusive and colonizing whiteness, as is seen in the confusion over the naming of Not Doctor Street.¹⁸ In linking lan-

¹⁸ The black members of the community insists on calling the officially named Mains Avenue "Doctor Street" after Dr. Foster, but when an official notice comes from the white town fathers that the street "has always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street" (4) the black residents simply begin calling it Not Doctor Street. Mayberry suggests that this use of "flexibility, humor, and skill with wordplay" mark the black community's ability to subvert and challenge channels of white authority (76). In associating rigid naming with whiteness, Morrison further complicates Faulkner's association of literalness and language with masculinity. Weinstein suggests that "The not-named take the no-name as their name" (61), complicating white understandings of history and power.

guage with both masculinity and whiteness, Morrison suggests that the destruction of the feminine in this novel is inherently tied to white supremacy and the lingering abuses of a white patriarchal society (Weinstein 50).

This memory forces Milkman to entertain the idea that the past does indeed have a bearing on the present. As Faulkner famously wrote in *Requiem for a Nun*, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (73), suggesting that in Faulkner’s world, the past can never be left behind and in fact dictates the future. Quentin is trapped in this paradox of time and memory, which ultimately drives him to suicide. Milkman is more successful at navigating his reckoning with the past, because he creates space for female subjectivity, allowing for a deconstruction of the living dead that Quentin and Mr. Compson deny to their female subjects.¹⁹ Returning home one night, Milkman sees Ruth sneaking out of the house in the dark and decides to follow her. He complains, “She was a silly, selfish, queer, faintly obscene woman. Again he felt abused. Why couldn’t anybody in his whole family just be normal?” (123). After following Ruth to her father’s grave, where she goes often in the middle of the night, Milkman confronts her about the allegations Macon made against her, granting her narrative control and allowing her to define herself. She does not attempt to explain away Macon’s claims, but rather offers her own version of events, beginning with the assertion “the fact is

¹⁹ This subjectivity is arguably granted to Rosa by Faulkner himself in his use of her as a framing device within the narrative, allowing for the complication of female roles in the text, but it is not afforded to her by the male characters themselves in *Absalom, Absalom!*.

I'm a small woman. I don't mean little; I mean small, and I'm small because I was pressed small...I am not a strange woman. I am a small one" (124). This image of Ruth being compressed into almost nothing is consistent with the treatment of women in both of these texts; the men in her life, from father to husband to son, have all consistently privileged their own existences over her's, leaving only a small amount of space in the world for her. She tells Milkman that Macon actually killed her father, throwing away his medicine and refusing to get him more help (124). Whether this is true or not becomes irrelevant as it is the way that Ruth experienced the event, just as the veracity of Macon's claim of incestuous contact with Dr. Foster is irrelevant, for this is a text, as is *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which truth is entirely contingent on the teller. Ruth goes on to tell Milkman about her terrible fights with Macon, who consistently threatened to kill her (125). Ruth details how Macon moved into another room and refused to touch or even look at her for years, "Until I thought I'd really die if I had to live that way. With nobody touching me, or even looking as though they'd like to touch me...I think I was just afraid I'd die that way" (125). In framing this isolation as a state close to death, Morrison evokes both the isolation that Milkman will eventually be able to overcome through his quest for identity and Faulkner's portrait of isolation that ends in rage and death (Fulton 16).

Rather than die, Ruth goes to Pilate, who gives her something to put in Macon's food to increase his sex drive and bring him to her (125). When she is successful and ends up pregnant with Milkman, Macon begins to suspect that Pi-

late, whom he loathes, was involved and tries to force Ruth to abort the baby. Scared, Ruth once again turns to Pilate, who helps protect her and the unborn child (126). This image of black female community, which allows women to subvert and overcome male patriarchal pressures, evokes Morrison's later description of the type of community that could have saved Hagar (discussed in Chapter 1), and suggests that it is only through solidarity and community that black women can overcome white patriarchal oppression.²⁰

In Ruth's version of events, she only kneeled by her father's bed and kissed his fingers, contradicting Macon's far more explicit memory. But when Milkman confronts her about nursing him beyond childhood, she does not deny it, but only says "And I also prayed for you. Every single night and every single day. On my knees. Now you tell me, What harm did I do you on my knees?" (126). Without explaining away or justifying whatever happened in the past, Ruth is able to assert her own identity within the text with this final question, redeeming some of the loathing and revulsion that had originally been assigned to her by Macon and Milkman. Its effect on Milkman is clear, for "He could look at his father coolly now that he had sat on that train and listened to his mother's sad sad song. Her words still danced around in his head" (165). It also sets up the brief chapter in

²⁰ Abusive masculinity is again linked to whiteness in this text, as Mayberry suggests that Macon's attempts to force Ruth to abort his son are related to the novel's claim that "Everybody wants the life of a black man" (222), which conveys the violence done to the black male body in America. Mayberry proposes that Macon is trying to access the "secrets of white male dominance" by outperforming the white male task of killing his son before he is even born (82).

which Ruth is actually at the helm of the narrative, when she learns that Hagar is trying to kill Milkman. Morrison more fully describes Ruth here, writing, “Her passions were narrow but deep. Long deprived of sex, long dependent on self-manipulation, she saw her son’s imminent death as the annihilation of the last occasion she had been made love to” (134).

For the first time Ruth’s subjective thought and existence are articulated, granting her a form of personhood that the text had heretofore denied her. She is able to confront Hagar, and while the situation does not overtly change because of her actions, she is at least allowed to act. Ruth is “serene and purposeful as always when death turned his attention to someone who belonged to her, as she was when death breathed in her father’s wispy hair and blew the strands about” (134). In her confrontation with Hagar, it seems to her “that she was not looking at a person but at an impulse, a cell, a red corpuscle that neither knows nor understands why it is driven to spend its whole life in one pursuit” (137). In her dehumanization of Hagar, whom she describes as possessing “the wilderness of Southside” inside her (which also suggests an element of classism), Ruth performs much the same function of dehumanization that Macon and Milkman display towards her. Therefore, the narrative of oppression and living death is not always neatly divided along the gender binary; just as Bon can act in a feminine capacity and Macon can perform power like a white man, Ruth here performs the masculine rejection of female subjectivity and consciousness. This is further reinforced by her view of Milkman as “a beautiful toy, a respite, a distraction, a physical pleasure as she nursed him -

until Freddie...caught her at it; then he was no longer her velveteened toy” (132). Even as an adult, “Her son had never been a person to her, a separate real person. He had always been a passion...a plain on which, like the cowboys and Indians in the movies, she and her husband fought” (131-2). In much the same way as Milkman is unable to see Ruth as a complete and separate person, she sees her son in an abstract, dehumanizing manner, suggesting that this state of living dead is not just unilaterally enforced upon women, as in *Absalom, Absalom!*; rather, it plays out in nuanced and often contradictory ways along race, gender, and class lines.

However, the gendered difference between these forms of living death is clear in the fact that men are able to wake up from it. After her brief turn at the helm of the narrative and the complication of Ruth’s subjectivity, she is relegated to the back burner, ignored by the narrative once Milkman departs on his journey to Shalimar to find himself. As Mayberry says, *Song of Solomon* “encourages [the black male] impulse to step down off the communal confinement of the porch, seek his ancestral fathers, and locates his ancient properties,” (Mayberry 71) and the epigraph of the novel confirms this desire, stating “The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names” (*Solomon*); while the men may fly away and find themselves, the women are left behind, or, in the case of Hagar, killed.

The bifurcation of survival along the gender binary is even more explicitly represented by the relationship between Milkman and his sisters, Magdalena and First Corinthians. The Dead sisters, Weinstein writes, “join Ruth as figures dam-

aged indirectly and long ago by slavery itself, delivered into the world with no birthright to call their own, able to imagine selfhood only in the mirror of others' acknowledgment" (64). The girls, who spend their days making cloth roses to sell to a department store, are subject to Macon's rage just as Ruth is, and "The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices. Under the frozen heat of his glance they tripped over doorsills and dropped the salt cellar into the yolks of their poached eggs" (11). Mayberry extends this image, suggesting that "The tightly controlled but slightly veiled disgust that smothers his Dead women renders them unsure of and thus harmful to themselves. Like many battered women who doubt their femininity, they sterilize their creativity, spilling salt into their own poached and encroached on eggs" (82). However, Morrison also details that "The way he mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem was the single excitement of their days. Without the tension and drama he ignited, they might not have known what to do with themselves. In his absence his daughters bent their necks over blood-red squares of velvet and waited eagerly for any hint of him" (11). Macon's abuse breeds a Stockholm Syndrome complex of sorts in his daughters; they live only for his next cycle of abuse, a variation on the state of living death heretofore seen in the women of these novels.

First Corinthians first asserts her selfhood through her relationship with Porter. College-educated, Corinthians has some access to a self exterior to, to use Shreve's term, the "over-populated mausoleum" of her home (*Absalom* 144), but

it is suggested that her education actually hinders her from moving beyond this state of living death. "Her education had taught her how to be an enlightened mother and wife, able to contribute to the civilization - or in her case, the civilizing, of her community...High toned and high yellow, she believed what her mother was also convinced of: that was a prize for a professional man of color" (188). Yet when she reaches her forties without securing a husband, she realizes that "These men wanted wives who could manage, who were not so well accustomed to middle-class life that they had no ambition, no hunger, no hustle in them. They wanted their wives to like the climbing, the acquiring, and the work it took to maintain status once it was achieved. They wanted wives who would sacrifice themselves and appreciate the hard work and sacrifice of their husbands" (188). In short, they want women who are willing to submit to them, and Corinthians' education, while not completely successful in awakening her from the state of living death, renders her too conscious to perform the role of wife as men would have desired her to perform it. Like Judith, who exists outside the patriarchal limitations of her society, and Rosa, who does not perform her function as mother and wife, Corinthians is relegated to a subservient object position, not neatly conforming to any role allotted to her by society. When she takes a job as a maid, which she considers so far beneath her that she cannot even tell her mother what she does, she meets Henry Porter, and embarks upon the first love affair of her life at the age of 44. But when she is afraid to bring Porter home or even tell anyone in her family that he exists, and even refuses to go to his house, he threatens to leave

her, saying “I don’t want a doll baby. I want a woman. A grown-up woman that’s not scared of her daddy” (196). Hurt by his slight, Corinthians contemplates his demand; “A grown-up woman? She tried to think of some...Somehow none of them fit. She didn’t know any grown-up women. Every woman she knew was a doll baby” (196). This image of women as “doll babies” reflects the state of living death, often portrayed as an extension of adolescence, which keeps all the women she knows trapped in a state of submission.

However, like Ruth, Corinthians is allowed to wake up, however briefly, and claim an identity for herself by running to Porter, who takes her home and treats her with love and respect. As she makes her decision to return to him, Morrison writes “She was First Corinthians Dead, daughter of a wealthy property owner and the elegant Ruth Foster, granddaughter of the magnificent and worshipped Dr. Foster...and a woman who had turned heads on every desk of the *Queen Mary* and had Frenchmen salivating all over Paris” (197). This recitation of her genealogy allows Corinthians to claim a place in the family history for herself, which, as has been shown for Quentin and Milkman, is essential to an understanding of the self. Like Ruth, who fears she will die if her husband never touches her again, Corinthians says that if Porter does not take her back, “she believed she would surely die” (198). But he welcomes her and the two have sex at his home in a beautiful and emotionally potent scene, and, at least for the moment, Corinthians experiences life outside the living death she has known at home.

However, her brief foray into selfhood comes crashing down when Milkman realizes that the man she is sneaking around with is Henry Porter, a member of the paramilitary group the Seven Days. Milkman scoffs at her, saying “Foolish woman...Of all the people to pick. She was so silly. So silly, Jesus!” (211). This patronizing dismissal of Corinthians’ romantic choices denies her agency and intentionality, allowing Milkman to dehumanize his sister and therefore feel no guilt when he tells his father, who then forecloses on Porter’s home, putting him out on the street. In this action, Milkman, in collusion with Macon, perpetuates the denial of the female self by invalidating female decision making and reasoning, as was also seen in Mr. Compson’s dismissal of Judith and Rosa. However, Magdalena has her own moment of awakening when she confronts Milkman about his interference in Corinthians life, again suggesting that the state of living death can only be counteracted by black female community. Fulton argues that in allowing Magdalena to act on behalf of Corinthians, Morrison signifies on Faulkner’s theme of isolation as death, and suggests that if Caddy had had such a sister to stand with her against Quentin’s allegations she may have fared better in *The Sound and the Fury* (20). I think this may overstate the amount of power and the redemptive potential allotted to Magdalena, but the point about sisterly community is nonetheless important.

Magdalena begins, in a way, by answering one of the first comments Milkman makes about his sisters in the narrative, that “He had never been able to really distinguish them (or their roles) from his mother...all three had always

looked the same age to him” (68). Lena asserts her difference from the other two women, whom Milkman has homogenized into one caregiving entity, saying

I always liked flowers, you know. I was the one who started making artificial roses. Not Mama. Not Corinthians. me. I loved to do it. It kept me...quiet. That’s why they make those people in the asylum weave baskets and make rag rugs. It keeps them quiet. If they didn’t have the baskets they might find out what’s really wrong and...do something. Something terrible. (214)

In asserting that she was the one who began making the red roses, Magdalena claims an intentionality to her actions, the denial of which is essential to the male ability to erase female substance in these texts. In confronting Milkman with this intentionality, Magdalena also frames their home as a madhouse of Dead women, which seems like a signification on Shreve’s description of the Sutpen home as an “overpopulated mausoleum” (*Absalom* 144), and also paints the women as incapacitated, extending the motif of the living dead.

Magdalena then recounts a memory, long-forgotten by Milkman, in which she took him into the woods on the side of the road to urinate during a car trip. She collects some flowers and twigs, but when she returns to Milkman he turns and urinates on her and the flowers she holds. She plants the them in the backyard when they get home, and one of the twigs grows into a maple tree, “so I wasn’t mad about it anymore - the pee, I mean - because the tree was growing. But it’s dying now, Macon” (214).²¹ The symbol of the dying tree represents the awakening of the Dead women; for it invigorates Magdalena to stand against Milkman.

²¹ Milkman’s sisters always refer to him as Macon, his given name.

She explains her anger to him by saying, “As surely as my name is Magdalene, you are the line I will step across. I thought because that tree was alive that it was all right. But I forgot that there are all kinds of ways to pee on people” (214). Interestingly, this retaliation includes the same sort of assertion of the identity through naming that has been shown to be a necessary response to the erasure of the self by patriarchal oppression, as was seen in First Corinthians’ comment (197). Lena goes on, and her rant, the longest speech allotted to any of the Dead women in the text, seems to boil over with the pent up rage of all three women over years of erasure.

You’ve been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, and judging us: how we cook your food; how we keep your house. But now, all of a sudden, you have Corinthians’ welfare at heart and break her up from a man you don’t approve of. Who are you to approve or disapprove anybody or anything? I was breathing air in the world thirteen years before your lungs were even formed. Corinthians, twelve. You don’t know a single thing about either one of us - we made roses; that’s all you knew - but now you know what’s best for the very woman who wiped the dribble from your chin because you were too young to know how to spit. Out girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. When you slept, we were quiet; when you were hungry, we cooked; when you wanted to play, we entertained you; and when you got grown enough to know the difference between a woman and a two-toned Ford, everything in this house stopped for you. You have yet to wash your own underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. You’ve never picked up anything heavier than your own feet, or solved a problem harder than fourth- grade arithmetic. Where do you get the *right* to decide our lives? You are a sad, pitiful, stupid, selfish, hateful man. I hope your little hog’s gut stands you in good stead, and that you take good care of it, because you don’t have anything else. (215)

It is worth quoting this passage in its entirety not only because it is the longest female speech, but because it so clearly articulates the subtle but constant ways in which Milkman has erased and degraded his mother and sisters throughout his life. Additionally, it is just moments after this confrontation that Milkman decides he has to set out to track down the mysterious family treasure, initiating the coming-of-age journey that culminates in Milkman learning and embracing his family history. Therefore, women, even women who are allowed to articulate themselves and their right to personhood, are still functioning primarily in the text as triggers for male development and identity formation. Even when Magdalena speaks for herself as a subject, she still occupies an object position in Milkman's character development. Goodman asserts that the female counterpart of the male in his *bildungsroman* suggests "the possibility of androgynous wholeness, a state imaginable only in a mythic prelapsarian world of nature before a patriarchal culture gained ascendancy" (39). The female must give something to the male in order to allow him to develop into a whole man, and it seems that this gift is often, as in the case of Magdalena, a criticism or calling-out of patriarchal abuses.²² After this speech, which comes about half-way through the narrative, Magdalena and First Corinthians are never heard from again, and Ruth is mentioned only in passing. The text has allowed them to awaken, in limited ways, from their states of living death, but in the end it returns them to where they began as Milkman moves on to

²² The concept of female gift-giving will be the focus of the next chapter, analyzing the roles of Clytie, Circe, and Pilate.

manhood and self-actualization. Weinstein articulates the concerns this raises, that “something in the internal binary logic of this text understands the saved life of a black man in terms of the yielded life of a black woman” (123). While Weinstein suggests that this is a theme Morrison will further articulate and develop in later texts, the lingering legacy of *Song of Solomon* is one that mandates female submission to the male coming-of-age narrative.

IV. Conclusion

It is through the object positions of mother, aunt, and sister that the implications of female community are most fully explored in these novels. Again conjuring Morrison’s assertion that female community is the only way to overcome the violent abuses of patriarchy (*Solomon* 307), these women attempt to overcome the state of living death forced on them by their male family member’s denial of their personhood by supporting each other. While they are not always successful and these object positions still mandate suffering and sacrifice, these women are also occasionally able to overcome the limitations of their assigned object positions and assert some control over the male protagonists.

3) “Your ear is on your head, but it’s not connected to your brain” - Female

Teachers and Teaching the Feminine

I. Introduction

So far, this thesis has considered female or female-coded individuals who occupy the object positions of the murdered lover or the living dead mother, aunt, and sister. All of these individuals work in some way to trigger male development and assist in the hero’s quest for identity, but this chapter will consider the most extreme iteration of this positionality: the women who act as guides to the male protagonists and ultimately have to sacrifice their lives in a final moment of instruction. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Clytie Sutpen imparts knowledge to Quentin, and in *Song of Solomon* both Circe and Pilate teach Milkman how to live with the weight of history and find his place within the world. Clytie, Circe and Pilate impart “feminine” knowledge to their respective protagonists, and teach them how to access female ways of knowing, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, are based on intuition and feeling, not sight and sound. However, Milkman learns more completely from Circe and Pilate, and is able to break free from his condition and live fully, while Quentin has some comprehension but is ultimately doomed. The contrast between male and female ways of knowing, encapsulated in Luce Irigaray’s claim that feminine knowledge “does not privilege sight; instead, it takes each figure back to its source” (qtd. Clarke 139), suggests that the work of these three women is rooted in helping the male move back to the source, including but not necessarily limited to the natal environment. Again, race and gender

are inextricably linked, and it is very significant that all three of these teacher figures are black women, for, as Nancy Ellen Batty proposes in *Riff, Refrain, Reframe: Toni Morrison's Song of Absalom*, “the very central problem of verbal repetition itself in Faulkner seeks a solution not only in some apocalyptic aural moment *outside* of language, but, more importantly, in some apocalyptic moment *outside of* and *unavailable* to white experience” (81). The importance of existing outside language as a sort of avenue towards intuitive feminine knowledge has already been established, and Batty proposes that Faulkner explicitly links it to race as well, a theme Morrison develops further in *Song of Solomon*.

II. *Absalom, Absalom!*

Clytie Sutpen is considered one of the great mysteries of *Absalom*, the “hermeneutic knot” (Batty 84) at the center of a novel where she “is crucial to the articulation of a plot that never once articulates her” (Weinstein 53). Very little direct information is ever given to the reader about Clytie, and like Judith, she is only ever constructed through the narratives of others. For the majority of the novel, Clytie seems to occupy a position of living death similar to that of Rosa, Ellen, and Judith. The black daughter of Thomas Sutpen who lives in the house with his white children occupies an even more divisively liminal space than the other living dead women; her lack of belonging in the world is sharpened by racial exclusion. Like Judith, she watches the slave fight with interest, not with Henry’s nausea (*Absalom* 22), but her masculinization goes beyond that of Judith and she is more firmly set outside the constraints of patriarchally codified roles

for women. While Bon's blackness works to feminize him, Clytie's works to masculinize her, suggesting that in Faulkner's imagination, blackness has a transfiguring effect that renders those with even a drop of black blood Othered.

This transfiguring, or perhaps disfiguring, lens is certainly applied to Clytie in Rosa's descriptions of her to Quentin, again suggesting that even those who occupy object positions themselves can force the status of the living dead on others. When Rosa returns to Sutpen's Hundred on the afternoon Henry shoots Bon, she first encounters Clytie and feels confronted by

the Sutpen face not approaching, not swimming up out of the gloom, but already there, rocklike and firm and antedating time and house and doom and all, waiting there (oh yes, he chose well; he bettered choosing, who created in his own image the cold Cerberus of his private hell) - the face without sex or age because it had never possessed either: the same sphinx face which she had been born with, which had looked down from the loft that night beside Judith's and which she still wears now at seventy-four, looking at me with no change. (109)

Rosa sees Clytie as something other than human; "rocklike" and eternal, suggesting that Clytie existed before any of the Sutpen drama began to unfold, and perhaps even before time itself. In conceiving Clytie as eternal, Rosa also links her with hell through the invocation of Cerberus, the hellhound of Greek mythology, and these malicious mythological associations are extended in the claim that she had a "sphinx face". This connection with mythology is codified in Clytie's very name, which is in full Clytemnestra, the full significance of which will be considered later in this section. These moves dehumanize Clytie, and set her outside of

time and space, destabilizing her reality by rendering her a figure of mythic history, just as Mr. Compson destabilizes Judith and Bon.

Additionally, Rosa experiences Clytie's mere existence as antagonism.

Even though Clytie has not yet said anything, Rosa claims that she is the "something" which blocked her entrance to the house,

I was crying not to someone, something, but (trying to cry) through something, through that force, that furious yet absolutely rocklike and immobile antagonism which had stopped me - that presence, that familiar coffee-colored face, that body (the bare coffee-colored feet motionless on the bare floor...[she] seemed to elongate and project upward something - not soul, not spirit, but something rather of a profoundly attentive and distracted listening to or for something which I myself could not hear and was not intended to hear - a brooding awareness and acceptance of the inexplicable unseen inherited from an older and a purer race than mine, which created postulated and shaped in the empty air between us that which I believed I had come to find. (110)

All of this language works to situate Clytie within the realm of the living dead discussed in the previous chapter, but it also further nuances her status through her race, which Rosa suggests estranges her from reality. Clytie also seems to have some sort of access to the real that Rosa does not, as can be seen in Rosa's claim that she had an "acceptance of the inexplicable" (110) that was inherent in her blackness, which perhaps explains why Rosa feels threatened by her (among the more obvious reasons for bigotry). This tension is articulated in Batty's vision of black/white interactions in Faulkner, much of which she claims "stems from his vision of the history of the South in terms of the culpability and doom of whites, the oppression and potentially redemptive force of African-Americans, and the perforce mutual exclusivity of these destinies" (Batty 82).

Even with such different destinies Rosa and Clytie are still inextricably intertwined. After Sutpen's death, when the two live with Judith on Sutpen's Hundred. Rosa describes their living condition, telling Quentin;

we might have been not only of different races (which we were), not only of different sexes (which we were not), but of different species, speaking no language which the other understood, the very simple words with which we were forced to adjust our days to one another being even less inferential of thought or intention than the sounds which a beast and a bird might make to each other. (123-4)

Here Rosa collectively erases the humanity of all three women, reducing them to animals who live in a herd and are unable to speak the same language. Despite this imagined failure to communicate through a shared language, the three women share a connection, a bond that goes beyond the verbal and blurs the lines of the physical. They lived "*not as two white women and a negress, not as three negroes or three whites, not even as three women, but merely as three creatures*" (125).

However, "This is no egalitarian vision of the collapse of difference, for what Rosa primarily denies is the body, the site on which sexual and racial difference is inscribed as the determination of human identity" (Clarke 142), which suggests that in Rosa's denial of the physical, she is performing the (white) masculine act of denying women's access to the real through physicality, and, in denying Clytie, Rosa actually becomes "one of the boys" (Gwin, qtd. Clarke 151). However, Rosa occupies a dual position, for she too is erased, and exists with Clytie and Judith in this ephemeral space, where the women are linked by a shared access to feminine ways of knowing, which transcend the verbal and the physical. She and Clytie are

connected as if by “*a fierce rigid umbilical cord, twin sistered to the fell darkness which had produced her*” (112), and the natal imagery again grounds this kind of almost supernatural connection as inherently linked to female bodies. Rosa claims that she understood Clytie “*as though we spoke to one another free of the limitations and restrictions of speech and hearing*” (111), further indicating that the two exist in a shared state of female knowledge which transcends the literal. Additionally, as Shreve points out, Rosa’s decision to go out to Sutpen’s Hundred almost fifty years after this debacle indicates an almost supernatural access to non-verbalized knowledge, for “she not only could get up and go out there to finish up what she found she hadn’t quite completed, but she could find someone to go with her and bust into that locked house because instinct or something told her it was not finished yet” (290). Shreve supposes that it is “instinct” that tells Rosa there is some unfinished piece of the puzzle concealed within Sutpen’s Hundred, but perhaps it is something more than that, an intangible connection to Clytie and an access to unspoken, nonverbal truths.²³

Despite their shared objectification and linked access to truth, Rosa still denies Clytie the day she returns to the Sutpen manor after Bon’s death, claiming

I know only that my entire being seemed to run at blind full tilt into something monstrous and immobile, with a shocking impact too soon and too quick to be mere amazement and outrage at that black arresting and untimorous hand on my white woman’s flesh. Because there is something in the touch of flesh with flesh which abrogates, cuts sharp and straight

²³ Women in Faulkner’s novels often have access to some kind of psychic truth; see for example, *Light in August*.

across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering, which enemies as well as loves know because it makes them both. (111-12)

Rosa conceives of Clytie as a subhuman entity, and her fixation on Clytie's "*pigmentation*" as representative of the "*threatful portent of the old*" (126) suggests that Rosa is unable to see Clytie as anything other than a symbol of slavery and the fall of the Old South. Rosa denies humanity to Clytie for her very "existence and position uncover the lack of logic at the core of southern notions of segregation and racial purity and denies them universal status" (Clarke 149), a severe undermining of culturally codified truths that Rosa is unable to come to terms with. Clarke reads Rosa's denial of Clytie as a loss of "any hope of reconciling self and other, home and not home: for Rosa, for Quentin, and for the South" (Clarke 151).

While this moment is perhaps one of ultimate loss, Clytie's role within the text is not finished, as she still occupies the object position of teacher, and is crucial to the unfolding of Quentin's role in the Sutpen tragedy. Clytie's role in the novel then is one of ultimate paradox; she is essential to the novel as an overpowering symbol of the ravages of slavery and the downfall of the South, which is literally "inscribed on her body" (Clarke 149), but she is also denied humanity and voice within the text. However, she is able to carve out a narrative space for herself beyond the limitations of voice; she occupies the position of teacher, and holds the key to Quentin's understanding of the Sutpen tragedy, for, as Shreve says "you wouldn't have known what anybody was talking about if you hadn't been out there and seen Clytie" (220). Batty points to this line to suggest that

throughout the text, Quentin's ability to understand the truth is contingent on sight,²⁴ and his encounter with Clytie is "almost entirely a visual experience" (82). Rosa and Quentin drive out to Sutpen's Hundred to satisfy Rosa's desire to know why Clytie remains in the house (*Absalom* 291), and this scene again stages the delineation between male and female ways of knowing, for while Quentin focuses on the decay of the house, how he "saw completely through it a ragged segment of sky with three hot stars as if the house were of one dimension" (293), Rosa is focused on the sublime, and senses Clytie's presence: "I just know she is somewhere watching us...I can feel her" (292-3).

However, once they enter the house and encounter Clytie, Rosa's performance of power shifts to align more firmly with her whiteness than her femininity, for she becomes dependent on sight, taking a flashlight out to help her climb the stairs (*Absalom* 295). Again, Rosa's dual position as both oppressed and oppressor grants her access to female intuitive knowledge, but her denial of Clytie rooted in race limits her to the more literal male ways of knowing, as evidenced by her climbing the stairs to find Henry. In doing so, both Rosa and Quentin ignore Clytie's pleas:

He remembered how she did not say one word to him, not Who are you? or What do you want here? but merely came with a bunch of enormous old fashioned iron keys, as if she had known all the time that this hour must come and that it could not be resisted, and opened the door and stepped back a little as Miss Coldfield entered. And how she (Clytie) and Miss Coldfield said no word to one another, as if Clytie had looked once

²⁴ For an examination of the differences between Quentin and Shreve's approach to reconstructing history versus that of Rosa, see previous chapter.

at the other woman and knew that that would do no good; that it was to him, Quentin, that she turned, putting her hand on his arm and saying, "Dont let her go up there, young marster." And how maybe she looked at him and knew that would do no good either, because she turned and overtook Miss Coldfield and caught her arm and said, "Dont you go up there, Rosie" and Miss Coldfield struck the hand away and went on toward the stairs (295)

Clytie's verbal plea not only goes unrespected by Rosa and Quentin, but is completely unacknowledged, suggesting that neither of them have the ability to truly *hear* Clytie anymore; their denial of her humanity has rendered them unable to communicate with her. Rosa climbs the stairs, and Clytie then speaks one of her only lines in the novel to Quentin, saying "You go up there and make her come down. Make her go away from here. Whatever he done, me and Judith and him have paid it out" (296). Despite the fact that this sentence contains what is arguably the key to understanding Clytie's positionality and the Sutpen tragedy as a whole, Quentin does not so much as acknowledge that she has spoken. He does obey her command to climb the stairs, but Batty suggests that he would have done so anyway out of "sheer curiosity" (84) as is reflected by his statement "But I must see too now I will have to. Maybe I shall be sorry tomorrow, but I must see" (296). Like Rosa before him, Quentin denies Clytie acknowledgment, and Batty argues that "If he had listened to Clytie, or shown an interest in listening to her, Quentin might have learned something. Instead, Quentin appears to be driven by an infantile, specular impulse, the overwhelming desire to 'see' and be seen by what is hiding upstairs" (Batty 84-5). In Batty's reading "seeing" is divorced from

comprehending because it is entirely contingent on spectral pleasure, a need to see that is divorced from a desire to understand.

So scarred by his encounter with the dying Henry Sutpen,²⁵ Quentin flees the Sutpen manor with Rosa in tow. Rosa waits three months before notifying the authorities that Henry Sutpen, wanted for Bon's murder, is concealed within the house, a fact which both Quentin and Shreve find unfathomable (298). The reader is also never granted insight into why Rosa chooses to wait three months²⁶ before returning with the authorities to Sutpen's Hundred, further staging the masculine estrangement of female decision-making from reality in this text. Shreve and Quentin narrate her moment of return, but Shreve trails off in his telling when

the chimes began, ringing for one o'clock. Shreve ceased, as if he were waiting for them to cease or perhaps were even listening to them. Quentin lay still too, as if he were listening too, though he was not: he just heard them without listening as he heard Shreve without listening or answering, until they ceased, died away into the icy air delicate and faint and musical as struck glass. And he, Quentin, could see that too, through he had not been there - the ambulance with Miss Coldfield between the driver and the second man, perhaps a deputy sheriff. (299)

In the final moments of the text, Faulkner makes it clear that Quentin has not learned anything from his encounter with Clytie; she tried to make him move beyond sight and *listen* to her, but in his denial of her humanity and refusal to hear

²⁵ See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the discussion of the doubling of Henry and Quentin, the reason Quentin's vision of Henry is so disturbing.

²⁶ While Shreve claims that Rosa waited three months before returning to the house, the timeline that follows the text asserts that she only waited one month (298, 306). The text in its original form contains numerous discrepancies in genealogy and chronology, suggesting that Faulkner had multiple working drafts which were not fully integrated when the novel was published. Like everything in this novel, however, the truth is immaterial, and it is Shreve's believe that it took Rosa three months which actually matters.

Quentin instead reproduces the dynamics of Southern white patriarchy. Quentin still cannot hear, as he is only pretending to listen to both Shreve and the clock chimes, and instead his access to truth and knowledge is contingent on his need to see, even events for which “he had not been there” (299). Batty proposes that while Clytie is positioned to occupy a teaching role in the text and help Quentin transcend the limits of white/masculine ways of knowing, Quentin’s refusal to acknowledge her renders her efforts abortive.

However, Weinstein does not necessarily see Clytie’s project as fruitless, for he claims that “It is Clytie who ‘tells’ Quentin (a telling that bypasses the ceremony of shared talk, moving one-directionally from her observed black body to his observing white mind) that the entire Sutpen disaster is racially based” (53). Weinstein argues that Quentin comes to understand that Bon is black through his recognition that Clytie is the third Sutpen child, set apart by her black skin, thereby reading Clytie as the visual signifier for miscegenation which allows Quentin to recognize it in Bon. However, it is not clear that this is necessarily the case, for Quentin never makes clear how he comes to know that Bon is black, a fact that emerges in different versions of disclosure imagined by him and Shreve. Additionally, even if this is indeed how Quentin becomes aware of the fact that Bon was the product of miscegenation, it does not necessarily follow that this is a more productive moment of learning for Quentin; his knowledge is still contingent on sight, the reading of Clytie as a verbal clue, rather than a recognition of shared humanity that would have merited a verbal acknowledgment of her pres-

ence. Batty complains that Clytie's "face and skin color" are reduced to a symbol "for both the narrators in the novel and some of its critics" who read her significance as "entirely visual" (84). Batty does not name Weinstein, but it does seem that he meets her criteria for condemnation due to his limited interest in granting status to Clytie beyond the symbolic²⁷.

In the final vision of Clytie presented in the text, she has set the house on fire, burning herself and Henry alive in a final attempt to cleanse the rotting sin and failure of the Sutpen dynasty. Quentin imagines how "for a moment maybe Clytie appeared in that window from which she must have been watching the gates constantly day and night for three months - the tragic gnome's face beneath the clean headrag, against a red background of fire" (300). Again, Quentin has to visualize the moment to come to terms with it, and in describing her as a "gnome" Quentin offers one final dehumanizing descriptor. The modifier "tragic" is also significant, for it harkens back to Mr. Compson's imagining of Bon's mistress as having a face like a "tragic magnolia" (91). The repeated imagining of black female faces as "tragic" indicates a certain limitation in the ability of white male characters to conceptualize black female lives as full of nuance and agency,²⁸ suggesting that this is paradigmatic of white Southern patriarchy's understanding of black women. Considering that Quentin's fate has already been yoked to that of

²⁷ Also perhaps worth noting is that it is male critics who, in general, read Clytie as such, while female critics tend to object to this symbolic reading.

²⁸ And perhaps is also a failure on Faulkner's part to see the "tragic" as nothing but a detached strength in the face of loss.

the Old South,²⁹ it seems as if this way of knowing and understanding the world is a fixture of the past, although it is not clear that Faulkner imagines a way through this to a better South, as in the end, Quentin cannot learn to hear. However, Clytie's death still leaves the reader with a mystery, for "we never discover what it is that Clytie knows, or what motivates her to guard the Sutpen mansion so fervently that she will commit suicide and murder to prevent outside interference" (Batty 85). Clarke reads Clytie's final act, the murder-suicide, as a triumphant staging of the mythical heroine she is named for, Clytemnestra, who murders her husband when he returns home from war in retaliation for his earlier sacrifice of their daughter, musing, "Clytie may not murder Sutpen on his return, but she doesn't need to; what she represents has already effectively killed off his design" (Clarke 152). And unlike her namesake, who is then murdered in retaliation by her son, Clytie kills the son, Henry, too, "thereby vanquishing the entire Sutpen/Coldfield clan³⁰ and leaving behind only Jim Bond, the mulatto heir, to mark the final dissolution of white patriarchal authority and continuity" (Clarke 152). Clarke empowers Clytie in this reading, allowing her final act of destruction to be equitable with an awakening from the liminal status of living dead, such as that experienced by First Corinthians in *Song of Solomon* and discussed in the previous chapter.

²⁹ See Introduction.

³⁰ Clarke reads Clytie's thwarting of Rosa's efforts to remove Henry from the house as a defeat of her, even though she dies of natural causes in the course of the text (Clarke 152, *Absalom* 141).

However, many readers, like Shreve, assume that she is simply unwilling to face the outside world, and would rather kill herself along with Henry than allow him to face justice for Bon's murder, although this is no doubt a vast oversimplification.³¹ Another common response to this void within the text, according to Batty, is to read Clytie's vigil over the house as a manifestation of "not merely servile loyalty," but of "a powerful filial blood" that results in her dedication to Henry (Batty 86).³² Batty proposes that it is "this arrogant assumption" that Morrison takes up in her portrayal of Milkman's interaction with Circe in *Song of Solomon*, which challenges Quentin's refusal to recognize Clytie and "both the implications and limitations of Faulkner's own experiments with lyrical voice and a revaluation of the aural sense over the visual ones," a task she accomplishes, "by inserting the voice of her narrator or her characters into those moments in Faulkner's texts when the gaze threatens to short-circuit the verbal exchange between white- and African-Americans" (Batty 83).

III. *Song of Solomon*

Batty imagines an intertextual relationship between *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Song of Solomon* in which Faulkner's language circulates in Morrison's texts,

³¹ Interestingly, Shreve assumes that while Clytie is motivated by her desire to protect Henry from hanging for his crime, he also imagines that Rosa returns to Sutpen's Hundred because she wants to get medical treatment for the dying Henry Sutpen. While Shreve, as a Canadian, stands somewhat outside the Southern white male paradigm of understanding race and gender, it is worth considering that he instinctively assigns pure motives to the white woman, Rosa, and anarchic ones to the black woman, Clytie.

³² Judith remained in the house with Henry and Clytie until her death from yellow fever in 1884, 25 years before Clytie burns the house down, a fact that is revealed only by the timeline which follows the text (305).

and “In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison uses voice and music to disrupt the relentlessly specular impulses of white male characters such as Quentin Compson in *Absalom, Absalom!* and to resituate in the latter text the unvoiced but not unlocatable site of black desire” (89). Reading Morrison in light of these “Faulknerian refrains has the effect of exposing and unsettling our hegemonic readings of Faulkner’s texts” (Batty 89). This thematic circulation is most evident in considerations of the relationship between Clytie Sutpen and *Solomon*’s Circe. Like Clytie, Circe occupies a teaching object position, but whereas Clytie’s attempts to teach Quentin to understand non-visual avenues towards truth are abortive, Circe succeeds in teaching Milkman how to hear, granting him access to traditionally feminine ways of knowing and priming him to learn even more from Pilate. Pilate occupies a position somewhere between teacher and griot, and she helps Milkman learn to perform what Mayberry calls a “female masculinity” (71), in which masculine traits are tempered by access to and appreciation of female knowledge.

Circe has much in common with Clytie, and Batty reads Milkman’s interaction with Circe as Morrison’s interrogation of “the scopie impulses that dominate inter-racial relationships in Faulkner’s work” (84). Her emphasis on the scopie, which implies a distinct viewer who constructs the subject as Other, is one of the most important overarching themes of both these interactions. Batty sees many similarities between the two women, from their status as sentinels over decaying mansions of white wealth, to their mythologically inspired names and impossibly ancient ages (84). Batty responds to her reader’s potential, and signifi-

cant, objection to this parallel: the argument that, unlike Clytie, Circe is not her master's daughter, by pointing out "we don't know whose daughter Circe is" (Batty 89). Whether or not Circe is biologically descended from her master, Butler, is irrelevant in the consideration of the similarity between her and Clytie's positions; they are both the subjugated Other, neither slave nor not-slave, who are part of the household yet irrevocably set aside from it and whose access to the real is both instructive and terrifying to the male protagonist. The profusion of similarities suggests that Circe is indeed a signification on Faulkner's Clytie, meant to highlight the ways in which Faulkner's text threatens to "short-circuit" (Batty 83) in its understanding of black lives while presenting a male protagonist who successfully learns to access female knowledge and strength. Milkman's capacity to learn is what fundamentally sets these two novels apart in their trajectories; while Faulkner lets the Sutpen mansion burn and the Old South die along with Henry and Quentin, Milkman learns to fly, signaling hope and healing for Morrison's vision of the African-American community.

Milkman finds Circe in Danville, Pennsylvania fairly early on in his identity quest. Reverend Cooper directs him to the Butler Mansion, where Circe concealed and cared for Macon and Pilate as children after their father's murder. Milkman expects to find the house abandoned, as everyone in Danville has long since assumed that Circe has died, as she would now be over 100 years old. However, when Milkman opens the door to the Butler Mansion, he is met by a scene startlingly reminiscent of the one which Quentin stumbles upon at Sutpen's Hun-

dred. Milkman is immediately met by a repulsive odor, “a hairy animal smell, ripe, rife, suffocating” (239) that arrests his entrance into the home, evoking for the intertextual reader Quentin’s own hesitation and revulsion as he crossed the threshold into the rotting Sutpen manor. Like Quentin, Milkman is immediately drawn to the staircase, and “His eyes traveled up the stairs” (239). This image of visual data acquisition further suggests that Morrison is signifying on this scene in Faulkner’s text. Milkman climbs up to see the woman he perceives as a witch because

In a dream you climb the stairs. She grabbed him, grabbed his shoulders and pulled him right up against her and tightened her arms around him. Her head came to his chest and the feel of that hair under his chin, the dry bony hands like steel springs running his back, her floppy mouth babbling into his vest, made him dizzy, but he knew that always, always at the very instant of the pounce or the gummy embrace he would wake with a scream and an erection. Now he had only the erection. (239)

Immediately, it is worth noting that Milkman’s encounter with Circe is far more physical than Quentin’s with Clytie. Milkman’s sexual arousal aside (one of the many instances in the book in which death and decay are associated with sexual pleasure), Milkman’s attention to the physicality of Circe’s existence, from her “floppy mouth” to her “gummy embrace” is in opposition to Quentin’s inability to describe Clytie’s body beyond her race, a factor Clarke identifies as significant in the erasure of female substantive existence in *Absalom, Absalom!* (149).

However, Milkman does not just see Circe, he also has to come to terms with the paradox of her very existence. Unable to comprehend, Milkman muses, “Perhaps this woman is Circe. But Circe is dead. This woman is alive. That was

as far as he got, because although the woman was talking to him, she might in any case still be dead - as a matter of fact, she *had* to be dead” (240). The text never provides a definitive answer for the reader. Circe is by all appearances still alive, sequestered in the Butler Mansion with her dogs, but Morrison does not explain why everyone in the town would think she was dead, nor does she dwell on Circe’s seemingly inhuman longevity. Batty argues that this scene forces Milkman to “unravel the threads of ‘common sense’ that have previously comprised for him the very tapestry of Western bipolar logic. Central to this process, as Circe repeatedly tells him, is the ability to *listen*, not just to Circe’s words, but to what she is *saying*” (87). Milkman accepts this paradox in a way Quentin is never able to accept the paradox of Clytie’s existence, and as a result Milkman is able to learn how to listen from Circe, a skill that becomes integral to his development and actualization.

The divide between “listening” and “saying” are articulated in Milkman’s interrogation of Circe’s motivations for remaining in the Butler home, even after the last living family member committed suicide rather than face poverty and ruin. Milkman is disgusted and demands

‘You loved those white folks that much?’

‘Love?’ she asked. ‘Love?’

‘Well what are you taking care of their dogs for?’

‘Do you know why she killed herself? She couldn’t stand to see the place go to ruin. She couldn’t live without servants and money and what it could buy...The thought of having no help, no money - well, she couldn’t take that. She had to let everything go.’

'But she didn't let you go.' Milkman had no trouble letting his words snarl.
 'No, she didn't let me go. She killed herself.'
 'And you still loyal.'
 'You don't listen to people. Your ear is on your head, but it's not connected to your brain. I said she killed herself rather than do the work I'd been doing all my life!' Circe stood up, and the dogs did too. 'Do you hear me? She saw the work I did all her days and *died*, you hear me, *died* rather than live like me'. (247)

Circe's claim, "Your ear is on your head, but it's not connected to your brain" encapsulates the male inability to hear truth due to the limiting focus on the literal. She reiterates her message, claiming, "You don't listen to people" and demanding, "Do you hear me?" (247). These three references to voice codify the lesson Circe is trying to impart here; hearkening back to Macon's claim that "In order to be a whole man you have to know the whole truth," (70), Circe demands that Milkman learn to listen in order to progress in his journey to manhood. "In other words, Circe asks Milkman to forget 'knowledge' and listen to 'truth,' the truth of the unconscious that the dream state sometimes allows one to overhear" (Batty 88). In forcing him to recognize the nuance and subtlety of her life (the fact that she stayed on at the home out of vengeance, not loyalty, delighting in decay), Circe forces him to grant her a degree of mutual recognition of personhood heretofore not seen in the text.

It is clear that Milkman has indeed learned from Circe when, after she imparts valuable information about his family lineage to him, he prepares to return to town, saying, "I wish you'd let me help you.' 'You have. You came in here

and pretended it didn't stink and told me about Macon and my sweet little Pilate.' 'Are you sure?' 'Never surer'" (248). Not only does Milkman try to help Circe, he hears and respects her desire to stay in the house, and it is not long after he leaves Circe and heads to Shalimar that he begins to reflect on the way he has treated everyone in his life, especially the Dead women, as sub-human. As he begins a familiar rant about how he doesn't "deserve" to be treated in a certain way, he stops himself, thinking, "It sounded old. *Deserve*. Old and tired and beaten to death. *Deserve*. Now it seemed to him that he was always saying or thinking that he didn't deserve some bad luck, or some bad treatment from others" (276). This is one of the first signs that Milkman does grow in the course of this text, for never once before has he interrogated his own positionality in the world and considered the way his behavior may affect others, thinking "Apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved – from a distance, though – and given what he wanted. And in return he would be... what? Pleasant? Generous? Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness" (277). Clearly, his encounter with Circe has had an enormous effect on Milkman's understanding of his place in the world, and for the first time he is recognizing the subjectivity and personhood of the people around him, particularly the women whom he has exploited his entire life. However, even though Milkman's growth from this encounter with Circe is important and leads him to greater recognition of the humanity of the women in his life, the narrative still abandons her after this crucial moment. She enters the text solely to trigger

Milkman's next stage of development, then is quickly forgotten, just as Ruth, First Corinthians, and Magdalena are forgotten as soon as Milkman leaves on his journey to selfhood. Despite the fact that Circe is more successful than Clytie in her efforts to help Quentin learn to listen, she is still constructed as merely instrumental in this text, for she is introduced to perform a specific function and then abandoned.

The fact that Milkman's growth is symbolized by his ability to hear is made even more clear in Shalimar when he listens both to the language of the hunters and to the children playing their singing game. When he is first invited to accompany the men of Shalimar on their hunting trip, it is clear that Milkman is the outsider; "They looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers" (266). Like Macon, Milkman is read as symbolically white, in part a product of his class privilege but predominantly due to his firm belief in his own superiority. Milkman is not yet one of the men; he is still a child, in a perpetual state of arrested development. However, once the group enters the forest in the dark of the night to hunt bobcats, Milkman turns out the lamp he insisted on using, realizing that "focusing on it kept him from seeing anything else. If he was to grow accustomed to the dark, he would have to look at what it was possible to see" (273). In turning off the lamp, Milkman symbolically relinquishes his claims on male avenues of knowledge, as discussed to be located primarily in sight and the tangible, and instead tries to apply

the lessons he has learned from Circe and rely on his hearing and intuition. At first he is baffled by the way the other men communicate; he interprets the men's howls to each other and their hunting dogs as "the thin *eeee*'s of a cornet, the *unh unh unh* [of] bass chords" (278),³³ but as he allows himself to listen more closely, he realizes

It was all language. An extension of the click people made in their cheeks back home when they wanted a dog to follow them. No, it was not language; it was what there was before language. Before things were written down. Language in the time when men and animals did talk to one another, when a man could sit down with an ape and the two converse; when a tiger and a man could share the same tree, and each understood the other; when men ran *with* wolves, not from or after them. And he was hearing it in the Blue Ridge Mountains under a sweet gum tree. And if they could talk to animals, and the animals could talk to them, what didn't they know about human beings? Or the earth itself, for that matter. (278)

This is a profound moment for Milkman, for he not only listens to the men, he *hears* them, and hears beyond their words to recognize a subjectivity that he has never before come to terms with in others. Milkman is progressing in his journey to manhood because he is developing an understanding of the complexities of his fellow humans and coming to terms with the fact that he has much to learn before he can be a full man.

³³ Again, it is worth commenting on the fact that, although I refer to these ways of knowing as generically male or female, they are actually far more nuanced than that and are often more heavily predicated on race, class, and gender performance than on sex. The men are able to communicate in a language that requires a feminine capacity to listen, but the text takes pains to indicate that they are very different from Milkman. They read him as white (266), and he refers to them as both "black Neanderthals" (270) and "Suspicious. Touchy. Devious, jealous, traitorous, and evil...savages" (276). Milkman's faith in his own superiority and their distrust of him that leads them to associate him with whiteness codifies their performances of knowledge here; Milkman is linked to white patriarchy, while the men of Shalimar have a feminine intuition and interconnectedness with each other and nature that allows this type of linguistic exchange.

Milkman's strides in learning to hear are even more fully articulated the next day in Shalimar, when he listens to the children playing their game. The first time he heard them play, he dismissed it as "some meaningless rhyme" (264), as one would expect from a children's game, and Milkman pays it no mind. However, after the successful hunting mission, Milkman is more capable of learning through hearing, and this time he pays attention to the children's words. When his "scalp began to tingle" Milkman realizes that the children are actually singing the information he is looking for about his genealogy; the story of his people is embedded in their rhyme, a fact he becomes aware of through intuition, as indicated by the subconscious sensation that alerts him to the importance of the children's game. He wants to write down the entirety of the rhyme but finds he has nothing to write with. "He would just have to listen and memorize it. He closed his eyes and concentrated while the children, inexhaustible in their willingness to repeat a rhythmic, rhyming action game, performed the round over and over again. And Milkman memorized all of what they sang" (303). His lack of access to the phallic instrument of pen or pencil prevents him from writing down the children's song and thereby recording it through more traditionally accepted channels of knowledge. Instead, he must listen and memorize, imprinting the words in his memory. By truly hearing the children, Milkman is able to put together the puzzle of his ancestry that had so confounded him and he leaves the singing children feeling "as eager and happy as he had ever been in his life" (304). Circe has given

him the gift of hearing, opening new avenues towards enlightenment for Milkman.

However, Milkman's growth is still not complete, for he has to return home and take responsibility for Hagar's death before he can become a "whole man" (70). When he enters Pilate's home, he rushes towards her "ecstatic over his newfound self-knowledge" (Mayberry 113) but she breaks a bottle over his head, which Mayberry reads as Pilate's reminder to Milkman that "he is still missing the last piece of his puzzle": responsibility (Mayberry 113). Indeed, Mayberry argues that Pilate is the other crucial teacher figure in this novel, for it is from her that Milkman gets

the skill to incorporate feminine into masculine....She garnishes his masculine plate with a cornucopia of more typically feminine modes of creativity and communication, which include hospitality, intuition, sensitivity, charm, unpredictability, patience, ingenuity, subtlety, contained passion, useful knowledge, and the ability to do more than one thing at a time. (Mayberry 108)

Mayberry terms this performance "female masculinity," but never makes reference to Jack Halberstam's highly influential work on gender performance, *Female Masculinity*, despite the fact that Mayberry's work was published nine years after Halberstam's. While Halberstam's vision of female masculinity is somewhat inverted from Mayberry's,³⁴ Halberstam's claim that masculinity "becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body" (936) actively reinforces Mayberry's claims, and it is odd that Mayberry does not draw

³⁴ Halberstam focuses on what masculinity decentralized from male bodies looks like, while Mayberry considers female performance by male-bodied people.

upon his work. Regardless, Milkman's performance of female masculinity represents, to Mayberry, the disassociation of masculinity from the abuses of white patriarchy that allows her to imagine female masculinity as a balancing act between the male and female members of the community (114). Reminiscent of Morrison's narrative intervention into Hagar's death scene to plead for black female community as a response to patriarchy, this vision of strength through communal support is echoed in Morrison's answer to Bill Moyers' question about her vision for the contemporary black community; "Love. We need to love ourselves" (qtd. Mayberry 113). This image of love, both of the self and the community, is predicated on a vision of balanced gender performance, divorced from the implications of whiteness, as envisioned in Mayberry's reading of Milkman's "female masculinity".

Throughout the novel, Pilate has taught Milkman lessons on flexibility and nuance, hoping to teach him how to temper his masculinity with the feminine, a task spurred on by Circe (Mayberry 109). Pilate's history of migration and wandering, as well as her non-traditional three women home structure, and (perhaps most significantly) her lack of a belly button all mark her as Other, set outside the confines of traditional expectations for women and women's bodies in the patriarchy. This refusal to play by the rules of the white man's game is what allows Pilate to be a teacher to Milkman, and she inspires him to find the answers to his genealogy for himself. However, like Circe and her other fellow females, Pilate still occupies an object position within the text. Her life is packaged as a lesson, a

source text of sorts for Milkman in his own mission to live fully, and she triggers various stages of his development before eventually dying in his stead, becoming, like her granddaughter Hagar, another victim of Milkman's identity quest.

Her objectification is staged, for example, in the scene in which Pilate comes down to the jail to bail out Milkman and Guitar and performs the "mammy" stereotype for the cops, making herself small and speaking in a strong, seemingly uneducated, Southern dialect (207). Pilate's manipulation works and she is able to convince the white police officers to let the boys go, and the next morning Milkman is overwhelmed by "something like shame" which "stuck to his skin" (209). Never much concerned with considering the implications of what other people do for him, or even recognizing that they do it, Milkman is unable to comprehend that what he actually feels is guilt. It was for him that Pilate "shuffled into the police station and did a little number for the cops – opening herself up wide for their amusement, their pity, their scorn, their mockery, their disbelief, their meanness, their whimsy, their annoyance, their power, their anger, their boredom – whatever would be useful to her and to himself" (210). Although he does not fully understand it at the time, this incident teaches Milkman to recognize and respect the sacrifices that others, mainly the women in his family, make for him, and triggers his departure to Danville where his identity quest begins. Pilate is crucial to Milkman's formation of a sense of self, one that is contingent on his ability to "transform into strengths the infirmities passed on to him by all his male influences" (Mayberry 103).

Pilate is also essential in Milkman learning to respect women. When he returns home from Shalimar to tell Pilate all that he has learned about their family, namely that the bones she has been carrying around with her since childhood are actually the bones of her father, he expects to be greeted warmly and is shocked when she breaks a bottle over his head, knocking him out (331). When he awakens, he realizes another one of the essential lessons Pilate has been attempting to communicate to him throughout the book: “For a long time now he knew that anything could appear to be something else, and probably was” (331-2). Milkman has learned to doubt the sense he once prized above all others, the masculine reliance on literal sight. From Pilate, Milkman has learned to question what he sees and instead focus on what he can hear and feel. Pilate returns to Shalimar with Milkman to bury her father’s bones, but before they leave Not Doctor Street, she gives him a box of Hagar’s hair, which he takes with him (334).³⁵ This act of taking on Hagar’s hair, the feature she claimed Milkman would never love, symbolizes Milkman’s recognition of his role in Hagar’s death and his development of a sense of responsibility for the damage he has done. By carrying Hagar’s hair, Milkman takes his place within his ancestry and finally becomes a full man with “a life to give” (Mayberry 113).

If Milkman’s journey to finding himself is almost over, Pilate’s capacity to give is not, and ultimately the text requires that she sacrifice her life. Mayberry

³⁵ In carrying around the box of Hagar’s hair, Milkman also performs the role of Pilate, who had previously carried around her own memorial to the dead, the bones she believed belonged to the murdered white man.

reads Pilate's death at the (accidental) hand of Guitar as a symbol of the violence begot by violence, but asserts that Pilate "never truly dies just as she is never really born" (113). While this reading is functional, it limits Pilate's significance to the symbolic, for in claiming that Pilate was never truly born, Mayberry denies that she was ever truly a person. The flippant dismissal of Pilate's death by Mayberry reinforces the way women's lives function in the text; they are only ever symbolic and disposable in the name of teaching the man how to live more fully. Milkman responds to her death in much the same way; holding her as she dies, he realizes "Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly. 'There must be another one like you,' he whispered to her. 'There's got to be at least one more woman like you'" (336). Milkman's plea validates Pilate and his love and admiration for her, but it also reduces and homogenizes her, suggesting that he will just need to search for another woman to occupy her position. Morrison points to this as a moment of growth, for by the end of the text "the person he is willing to die for is a woman" (Critical 400) but he does not, in fact, do so; instead another woman dies so that Milkman may learn to fly.

The death scene is hurried, a mere two pages, and it ends with Milkman leaping off the ravine, jumping to Guitar. Morrison writes "it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it" (337). While there are a few critics who interpret this moment as Milkman's death, others believe that he does indeed fly. The outcome of the jump is irrelevant, for the

arc of the narrative is about Milkman's journey to manhood, not his (potential) death. Weinstein offers a more nuanced reading of the implications of this final scene than Mayberry, considering that

Not only are Corinthians and Magdalena virtually undeveloped in this text of the son, but Milkman's triumphant recovery of Solomon is ringed round with female suffering and exclusion. How, for example, are we to respond to Hagar's sudden death, to Pilate's smiling subordination to Milkman at the end (accompanying him to her death), and to Ruth Dead's continued exile from the text? How, further, should we read the text's sexual offer of Sweet as Milkman's earned (and remunerated) male reward? And, finally, what are we to make of the closing fraternal embrace - 'My main man' (337), Guitar murmurs as he moves toward Milkman - an embrace paid for by a certain number of dead and disowned black woman. (123)

Weinstein's vision of the "closing fraternal embrace" is indicative of this text's implications for women as a whole. Pilate is just one of many women who die in the service of leading to this moment of masculine communion, reinforcing the persistent objectification of women as male character development triggers in this text. However, Morrison's own reading of her text falls more in line with that of Mayberry. She claims "Pilate is larger than life and never really dies in that sense. She was not born anyway - she gave birth to herself. So the question of her birth and death is irrelevant" (Critical Perspectives 403). However, Morrison also concedes that Pilate had to die at Guitar's hand in order "to show us how violent violence is" and "some character that we care about had to be killed to demonstrate that" (Critical Perspectives 403). These two readings seem to work in opposition to each other, and the end impression is that, in looking for someone to kill off, Morrison struck upon Pilate, which she justified by denying that she had ever re-

ally been a person. This rather haphazard impression of the book's plotting leaves the reader somewhere between the points staked by Mayberry and by Weinstein, leaving the full implications of Pilate's death somewhat ambiguous.

However we read Pilate's death, the fact remains that the text does not allow its female characters to experience the identity arc and leaves them to occupy subservient object positions in service of the male journey. Mayberry cites Marianne Hirsch's concern that the text "does not offer a way to 'share the son's knowledge with the daughter'" (qtd. 114), but ultimately she concludes that the novel does not have to do everything; after all, Morrison herself stated that "I chose the man to make that journey because I thought he had more to learn that a woman would have" (Critical Perspectives 410). Mayberry does not object to the way women are used in the text, because she thinks that the ultimate message is one that "allows boys and girls to fly in different but mutually supportive ways," under the banner of "female masculinity" (115). These are all valid claims that nuance the sacrifice of women in this text, suggesting that *Song of Solomon* is less intrinsically tied to female destruction than *Absalom, Absalom!*. However, it is impossible to ignore, as Weinstein says, the fact that "something in the internal binary logic of this text understands the saved life of a black man in terms of the yielded life of a black woman" (123).

IV. Conclusion

The differences in the characters who occupy the object position of teacher is perhaps the locus point where the these two novels most visibly depart in trajec-

tory. Quentin refuses to recognize Clytie and therefore cannot effectively learn the female ways of knowing which may allow him to break out of the past, but Milkman is able to incorporate the teachings of Circe and Pilate in order to secure a sense of self. These differences not only reflect a complicated web of race and gender power dynamics, but point to the discrete trajectories of Faulkner and Morrison's work. While Morrison pilots Milkman to success and growth, Faulkner leaves Quentin and Henry to rot along with the Sutpen mansion. Despite Milkman's growth and recognition of Circe and Pilate, they are still relegated to an object position as Circe is used and discarded by the narrative and Pilate is sacrificed like her granddaughter Hagar before her.

Conclusion: “So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts?” - Female Ghosts and the Future of Faulkner and Morrison

This thesis has sought to put *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Song of Solomon* into conversation in order to better understand the way race and gender performance interact with the construction of subject-object relationships. Faulkner and Morrison both cast female and female coded characters in roles subservient to the male protagonist, who is allowed to embark on a journey to selfhood while the women are made into “ghosts,” to use Mr. Compson’s term (*Absalom* 7). These various object positions, from lover to mother/aunt/sister to teacher, all cost women their lives, usually figuratively, as women are consigned to a state of living death, but also often quite literally, as in the case of Bon, Hagar, and Pilate.

These object positions are intrinsically related to performances of race and gender, which function as unstable constructs in both novels. This slippage is consistent with the confusing and often contradictory way race and gender function in society, but is also a mark of the complexity of both of these novels. The subject-object relationship is not reproduced unilaterally from male to female, as women of different races and classes often inflict this subjugation upon each other through performances of masculinity and whiteness. The complex instability of race and gender performance is crucial to the structure of both novels and suggests that each may gain something by being read in light of the other. Reading Faulkner through Morrison creates room for a complication of Faulkner’s ability to craft the subjectivity and intricacies of black experiences, as he is never quite

able to escape the limits of his imagination and give vocal power to his black characters. Reading Faulkner against Morrison, therefore, draws the reader to the places where, to use Batty's term, Faulkner's imagination "threatens to short-circuit" (83). Reading Morrison against Faulkner, we gain a more intricate and complicated portrait of the relationship between gender and race performance, particularly in performances of white hegemonic power and masculine authority. Additionally, Morrison has expressed interest in the brilliant structuring of *Absalom, Absalom!*, which forces the reader "to hunt for a drop of black blood that means everything and nothing. The insanity of racism. So the structure is the argument. . . it is the structure of the book, and you are there hunting this black thing that is nowhere to be found and yet makes all the difference" (Morrison Paris Review). Therefore, we can gain a deeper understanding of the narrative function of *Song of Solomon*'s structure by considering Faulkner's "structure as argument" approach in *Absalom, Absalom!*.

Despite the extensive amounts that have been written about Faulkner and Morrison, both as individual writers and in conjunction with each other, very little exists that directly compares these two texts. However, as this thesis has hopefully shown, there is a rich conversation to be heard between *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Song of Solomon*, especially if we read both texts as playing off the *bildungsroman* genre (Morrison perhaps more playfully than Faulkner). This reading, while ostensibly considering the identity construction sought by the male hero, actually allows us to shift the focus of criticism to women's narratives and lives, even in

texts that do not prioritize them. This decision to center women's lives works against a legion of criticism that ignores women's experiences, especially in relation to race and class, and attempts to respect Morrison's plea for autonomy in the way black women's writing is read.

Indeed, it is also clear that while there are abundant similarities between the texts that make reading them together both relevant and interesting, they also serve to highlight the differences and individuality of each writer. As Duvall writes "Morrison is undoubtedly right - she is not *like* Faulkner. William Faulkner's textuality, however, considered as intertextual possibility, becomes one frame among many that can provide insights into the polyvalent and multicultural textuality of America's most recent Nobel Laureate" (15). As Duvall says, this intertextual reading allows for a deeper understanding of both texts, it also casts the inherent differences of the novels, and the writers themselves, into sharp relief. One of the most significant points of departure is the trajectory of each narrative, and the fate of the male protagonists themselves, despite their shared identity quest. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin and Henry's deaths are indicative of Faulkner's vision of the decaying South, crushed under the weight of the past, as indicated by Shreve's final speech in the novel. He tells Quentin

We dont live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves (or have I got it backward and was it your folks that are free and the niggers that lost?) and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? something you live and breathe in like air? a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? a kind of entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never for-

giving General Sherman, so that forever more as long as your children's children produce children you wont be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett's charge at Manassas? (289)

This final, apocalyptic understanding of the South as coated in self-loathing and blame contains a clear sense of the sort of world Faulkner leaves for his protagonists, and Batty suggests that "Much of the repetition in Faulkner...stems from his vision of the history of the South in terms of the culpability and doom of whites, the oppression and potentially redemptive force of African-Americans, and the perforce mutual exclusivity of these destinies" (82). In contrast, Milkman's flight and successful journey suggest that, as Guitar's line "Can't I love what I criticize?" (223) conveys, Morrison seeks to offer guidance and criticism to a community she fundamentally loves. That said, some critics do indeed interpret Milkman's jump as a suicide mission; after all he is leaping into the ravine, moments after his grandmother's death at the hand of his best friend. I do not find this reading particularly compelling as it undermines the very fiber of the novel, which Morrison herself has described as a meditation on what it costs black men to survive in America, a theme that seems negated by this reading (*Critical Perspectives* 402). Additionally, considering that we learn that Solomon himself flies away from Shalimar, and given Morrison's stated interest in the magic inherent in traditional African myths of black masculinity (Mayberry 71), it is not at all unreasonable to, like Milkman, take a leap of faith and assume that he does indeed fly.

Interestingly, many of the issues I am concerned with in this thesis, specifically related to the way bodies are coded through constructs of race and gender and their use by those in power, are tackled in subsequent works by these authors. Faulkner followed *Absalom, Absalom!* with *Go Down, Moses*, which Weinstein contends further develops the theme of “a Southern history [Faulkner] can neither repudiate nor accept” but this time centers black experiences in the work (55). Additionally, the accusations of treating female lives as disposable and as vehicles for male development leveled against Morrison are very much addressed in her later works, especially *Tar Baby*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz*. Indeed, the disturbing implications of these novels, the destruction of the feminine in the name of masculine development, are odd considering the overall thrust of the careers of both authors. Faulkner’s women “are so disruptive in the text” that a reading based on stereotypes of Southern womanhood is impossible; his female characters are always pushing back against the limitations of societal convention (Roberts xi). Indeed, Faulkner has claimed that *The Sound and the Fury*, is primarily the “tragedy of two lost women: Caddy and her daughter” (Faulkner Paris Review). He goes on to praise the black woman at the core of the novel, Dilsey, calling her “one of my own favorite characters, because she is brave, courageous, generous, gentle, and honest. She’s much more brave and honest and generous than me” (Faulkner Paris Review). Both comments suggest that Faulkner not only prioritizes female characters (even in texts where they do not have narrative control), but sees them as the most worthy parts of his work. Morrison, of course, has centered female expe-

riences in almost all of her novels other than *Song of Solomon* and has discussed how important portrayals of female friendship and community are (Morrison Paris Review). Indeed, she specifically set aside this primary interest for *Song of Solomon*, for which she chose a male protagonist because she thought a man had “more to learn” than a woman would about responsibility and selfhood in a community (Critical Perspectives 410). Therefore, the destruction of the feminine and the construction of subject-object relationships seems less a product of these authors’ understandings of the value of women’s lives and more a reflection of something inherently woven into the fabric of American dialogues on race and gender. After all, the continuity of themes produced by Faulkner and Morrison, despite their vastly different backgrounds and attitudes, suggests some sort of cultural trend that transcends the boundaries of these two texts. Weinstein articulates this continuity, suggesting that we can read both texts as products of an America built on “an abuse wrought into the entire patriarchal paradigm for assigning racial and gender roles” (50). This abusive infrastructure then permeates American culture, reflected in literature which mandates the forced objectification of the marginalized.

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