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## Back to the Country: America's White Working Class in Literature and Culture

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Back to the Country: America's White Working Class in Literature and Culture

A Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Multidisciplinary Studies of Bard College

By

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## INTRODUCTION

A few days ago I was having a conversation with a friend about his hometown in North Carolina. I asked him if the folks he knew from there--the ones who were born and raised there--were more proud to be American or Southern. He told me that locals back home consider themselves to be “real” Americans while the rest of the country (particularly the North) is considered un-American. Southerners, at least in this anecdotal story, define themselves through a process of negation. By this I mean that these individuals define themselves by what they “are not”. This contemporary understanding of what it is to be a Southerner has firm roots in the history of the United States; to complicate things, often the creation of a negative identity is linked less to a region and more to race and class.

The American South is a particular place, for a long portion of its history after the Civil War it remained largely impoverished, neglected, and forgotten. Poor whites and free African Americans constituted much of the region’s population and became in competition for the scarce goods, resources, and jobs of the area. The victorious North saw a massive explosion in industry, concentrating much of the nation’s wealth in the hands of a few Northern industrial titans. Wealth inequality as a product of burgeoning capitalism created poor whites across the nation; the South lacked the developed industry of the North, making it a particularly impoverished area.

Poor whites were exploited for their labor yet privileged because of their race. Feeling both defeated and dignified, the hardship and exploitation felt by these people after the Civil War gave way to several forms of identity negation. These could be the pride of being a Southerner against the Northern aggressor, the eugenic feeling of superiority over black populations, the pride of being an honest farmer against unscrupulous industrialists, or the fleeting belief in

traditional Christianity in a seemingly secularizing nation. Poor whites found themselves at odds with the processes of change and felt alienated in the modern world.

This project will explore the identity of working class whites after the defeat of the Confederacy and the failures of Reconstruction during the early twentieth century. The first chapter will explore William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and its relationship to Southern mythology and regionalism. This chapter will argue that Faulkner's writing in "A Rose for Emily" reflects on the developing Southern regionalism of the 1920s and 1930s. The second chapter will look at Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio and the character of Jesse Bentley to explore the relationships between the evangelical Christian tradition, industrial farming, and modernity. I will argue that the splintering of fundamentalists from the Christian evangelical tradition reflects a cultural departure from the Jeffersonian tradition of small scale farming in America. These historical processes are discussed through Anderson's portrayal of Jesse Bentley. The third chapter discusses Flannery O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger" in relation to segregation and the formation of a "racial self". This chapter will argue that in "The Artificial Nigger" Flannery O'Connor attempts to challenge and subvert perceptions of race in the South. The analysis of O'Connor will also pay close attention to the author's limitations of portraying African Americans in her story. These three stories were chosen because of the characters' strong symbolic representations of the cultural phenomena of their times. In summation, this project will argue that these literary figures define themselves through processes of negation and that the identities explored in these works constitute fragments of the American white working class identity.

## CHAPTER I: THE MYTH OF A LOST CAUSE

*“Sitting alone, sad, all alone,  
Sitting in my cell all alone;  
Thinking of those good times gone by me,  
Knowing that I once had a home.”  
-Dock Boggs, “New Prisoner’s Song”*



*“The Ego-Centrics” Clarence John Laughlin, 1940*

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The American South has been forgotten, remembered, and misremembered throughout its tumultuous history. Today many recognize its deep conservative values, the flying of Confederate flags above many of its government buildings, and its violent history of human exploitation and oppression. It has been a place observed and written extensively about by scholars, authors, artists and reporters sometimes with confusion and disdain or other times with deep romanticization and admiration. It is central to the American folkloric tradition and is shrouded in mythology and fascination. The dead trees coated in Spanish moss standing upon the Louisiana bayou move like ghosts in the wind, and make one recall the less beautiful specters of Southern history. It is hard not to envision the present South without feeling the phantoms of its past lingering within its plains.

William Faulkner explores a vision of the haunted South in his short story “A Rose for Emily.” Like much of his other work, Faulkner uses his characters to symbolize and portray

something deeper within Southern life, often relating to the defeat of the South in the Civil War and failures of Reconstruction. Faulkner uses his writing to explore Southern life and tragedy. In this essay I will dissect “A Rose for Emily” and its relation to Southern history and mythology, using Stephen Foster’s “My Old Kentucky Home” as an example of a rosy envisionment of the South to compare and contrast it to Faulkner’s more Gothic style. I will argue that Faulkner’s fragmented portrayal of the South in “A Rose for Emily” uses symbolic characterization in the form of the people of Jefferson to reflect upon the uneasiness, nostalgia, and sense of death felt by Southerners after the fall of the Confederacy and the development of Southern regionalist identity during the 1920s and 1930s. This new identity--represented by Faulkner through a mistrust of Northerners and an attempt to protect Southern wealth by the community of Jefferson--is reflected in Faulkner’s writing and contributions to Southern mythology manifested here in “A Rose for Emily.” This portrayal by Faulkner utilizes the character of Emily Grierson as a deeply alienated individual and the people she interacts with to express the convictions brought on by Southern defeat in the Civil War.

### **The Emergence of Southern Regionalism**

The twentieth century brought rapid change to the South. The sense of shame haunts all of Southern mythology, which of course has firm roots in the region’s history. The explosion of the Civil War birthed a strongly developed regionalist identity which remained strongly allied with the Confederacy. After the turn of the century, the South began to re-emerge into the American political scene; for the first time since the Civil War Southern leaders reached positions of national influence (best exemplified by the Wilson and the later Roosevelt



administrations).<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, the South began to transform into a more pluralistic and diverse society (though it maintained violence in new forms towards newly freed African American populations), perhaps offering an escape from the perpetual economic and cultural poverty felt since the fall of the Confederacy and the failures of Reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century the ex-Confederacy found itself developing a new sense of regional identity after long years of hardship and defeat.

William Faulkner wrote exhaustively about his homeland and charted a “regional rediscovery” that traced the transition of life in the South during his development as a writer in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>3</sup> In his work there is a development of the fictional Yoknapatawpha county and the town of Jefferson, the setting for much of his writing including “A Rose for Emily.” The fictionalized setting of Faulkner’s work comes from his keen observations of his home and the human condition--an ongoing play without an end.<sup>4</sup> These observations gave the author both “substance and pain” and one can see this internal conflict over his home play out in his work.<sup>5</sup> During his early career as a writer in which “A Rose for Emily” (1930) was conceived, America was devastated by the rise and crash of the stock market in 1929, sending the country into the Great Depression. Faulkner did not use his career to write about this economic disaster, though much of his work acknowledges the long history of poverty in the South predating the Depression.<sup>6</sup> This time of economic hardship, newly felt in the North and historically

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<sup>1</sup> George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South*, ed. Wendell Holmes Stephenson and E. Merton Coulter, vol. 10, *A History of the South* (n.p.: Louisiana State University, 1967), ix.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, ix

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 650

<sup>4</sup> Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History* (New York: Oxford University, 1993), 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 184

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 227

commonplace in the South, provided a catalyst of inspiration for Faulkner's mythological realizations of the South.

### **The Mythological South**

In his essay "Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History" George B. Tindall first dissects the idea of mythology and then places his understanding of how myths function within the context of the South. He defines "social myths" as mental pictures or generalizations that are meant to portray what people (ought to) think of themselves or how others think of them.<sup>7</sup> Tindall warns of the dangers in myths, arguing that when they are used to influence perceived reality people tend to omit facts not included in their mental picture.<sup>8</sup> This acknowledgement of the mythological obstruction of history coupled with differing Southern mythologies at large is the focus of Tindall's essay. The inherent duality of Northern and Southern understandings of this mythological tradition are central to this study. Tindall focuses in the plantation myth to highlight this duality, "Gentle old marster became the arrogant, haughty, imperious potentate, the very embodiment of sin, the central target of the antislavery attack," first presenting a rosy (Southern/pro-slavery) vision and then a rethought (Northern/abolitionist) vision.<sup>9</sup> Tindall also mentions the "legitimate heirs of the plantation myth," recalling "coquettish belles," "happy darkies," "Po' white trash," and a slew of other Southern caricatures.<sup>10</sup> Tindall observes both

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<sup>7</sup> George B. Tindall, "Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History," 1963, in *The Idea of the South*, ed. Frank E. Vandiver (n.p.: The University of Chicago, 1964), 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

geographic and chronological differences in this mythology, making the catalogue of Southern mythology seem endless.

Paul M. Gaston makes an important (though admittedly vague) distinction between the Old South and the New South in his book The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking. The mythology of the Old South, according to Gaston, was a romantized symbol of the plantation lifestyle, while the vision of the New South was, at least in the minds of journalists Henry W. Grady and Richard H. Edmonds, meant to embody a future prosperity in the region based on racial peace, reconciliation of sectional differences, and a restructured economic and social order based on industry, science, and diversified agriculture (all of which would supposedly lead to the South's prosperity within the reunited nation).<sup>11</sup> The understandings of when these periods occurred (if the New South has ever truly been realized in this idealized state), as acknowledged by the author, is generally contested. The evident fact of the matter is that after the period of Reconstruction the South was left poor, despised, ridiculed, defeated and pitied.<sup>12</sup> The idealization of a New South assuaged the defeated Southerner after the fall of the Confederacy, while the romanticization of the Old South holds onto a glorified past.

The Northern region of the United States also participated in the production of Southern mythology. The music of northerner Stephen Foster comes to mind, with his composition "My Old Kentucky Home" reminiscing of the old of plantation life:

"The sun shines bright in the old Kentucky home,  
'Tis summer, the darkies are gay,  
The corn top's ripe and the meadows in the bloom,  
While the birds make music all the day [...]  
Weep no more, my lady,

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<sup>11</sup> Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

Oh! weep no more to-day!  
 We will sing one song for the old Kentucky Home,  
 For the old Kentucky Home far away.”<sup>13</sup>

Foster’s composition, written several years before the fall of the Confederacy, nostalgically looks back upon the “old” Kentucky home and the plantation days of the past. Foster himself was a Northerner who painted romanticized portraits of the South with his minstrel compositions.<sup>14</sup> Within “My Old Kentucky Home” and other Foster compositions listeners hear a joyous, rosy composition of the South that seems to glorify the old plantation lifestyle. Southern Gothic writers, such as William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, and Carson McCullers, to name a few, distort these rosy portraits of the South with grotesque images and instances. In the writing of Faulkner specifically, one feels a darker, more weighted vision of the South that consistently gives the reader a sense that something is looming over them, for example the lost wealth of the Compson family in The Sound and the Fury, or the failure of the Sutpen dynasty in Absalom, Absalom!. Despite obvious stylistic differences, the work of both Stephen Foster and William Faulkner allude to a past prosperity in the antebellum South. Unlike Foster, Faulkner’s realization of the South in “A Rose for Emily” deals with the lost plantation lifestyle in graphic morbidity.

### **Faulkner and the Complex Myth of the South**

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Collins Foster, *My Old Kentucky Home* (New York: Pond, Firth & Co., 1853), 2-3, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihis.200187239/>.

<sup>14</sup> For further reading on Northern contributions to Southern mythology, see: Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords, "The Northern Origins of Southern Mythology," *The Journal of Southern History* 43, no. 4 (November 1977): 569-570, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2207006>

In Faulkner there is both an admiration and disdain for Southern history, for Faulkner finds himself between tradition and anti-tradition when dealing with his homeland. "A Rose for Emily" can be approached from many angles<sup>15</sup> and, like much of Faulkner's writing, plays into Southern Gothic mythology. Generally, critics tend to discuss the overarching structure of the narrative (and the omniscient narrator) that encompasses the story, as well as the tropes of Southern historiography/mythology that Faulkner weaves into the text.<sup>16</sup> These critics also tend to elaborate and disagree on why Emily killed Homer and tend to focus less on what the murder means in the context of Faulkner's South. The disjointed nature of the narrative structure is somewhat congruent with historiographic mythology of Southern memory in itself and can be viewed as a broad realization of this mythology. Like most other critiques of "A Rose for Emily" work, this analysis will pay attention to the overall narrative structure, however, individual sections of the text will be more closely examined than by other critics to provide a somewhat deeper reading into the relationships between the characters and how they represent the loss of Southern wealth and a mistrust of Northerners.

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<sup>15</sup> For example, Jack Scherting takes a Freudian approach to the story, arguing that Emily has an Oedipus complex (a complex discussed more in depth within Chapter II of this project) that leads her to kill and keep her lover Homer's rotting corpse in the upstairs of her home. See: Jack Scherting, "Emily Grierson's Oedipus Complex: Motif, Motive, and Meaning in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 17, no. 4 (Fall 1980): 400, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=95ded788-14da-4513-b877-998ec32a92d6%40sessionmgr4007&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=7134648&db=aph>.

<sup>16</sup> See essays: Ruth Sullivan, "The Narrator in 'A Rose for Emily,'" *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 1, no. 3 (September 1971): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30224976>., Floyd C. Watkins, "The Structure of 'A Rose for Emily,'" *Modern Language Notes* 69, no. 7 (November 1954): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3039622>, and John L. Skinner, "'A Rose for Emily': Against Interpretation," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 15, no. 1 (Winter 1985): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225110>.

Originally published by Forum magazine in April, 1930, Faulkner tells the story of Emily Grierson's life and death in "A Rose for Emily."<sup>17</sup> The forward to the issue of this magazine gives insight as to who was the magazine's intended audience: "Are you, a white American, in your daily behavior influenced by your Negro fellow American? [...] The Forum is edited for one person [...] the potential builder of ideas"<sup>18</sup> making it clear that the intended audience is for literate white men who are interested in limited debate on culture. The issue also includes an article written by Carl Jung titled "Your Indian and Negroid Behavior" which is a crude attempt by the popular psychologist to explain behavioral differences between white Americans and Europeans because of the presence of African Americans in the United States, further emphasizing the limitations of the magazine's attempts to provoke debate.<sup>19</sup> Early critics of Faulkner (not cited above) in the 1930s--around the time of the story's publication--seem overly preoccupied with the darkness and morbidity of Faulkner's work to fully dissect his symbolic allusions to Southern history and mythology.<sup>20</sup> While the Hicks and Thompson critiques of Faulkner's work tend to focus on his much longer and arguably more horrific work Sanctuary, it is important to recognize that reception of Faulkner's writing around this time was based mostly in discussing its violent and horrific qualities. This, coupled with crude attempts to define "Americanness" is the context in which Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" was published.

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<sup>17</sup> *Forum*, April 1930, 233-239,

<https://search.proquest.com/americanperiodicals/pagemap/90851488/pageview/2ED1A0734ACD4A44PQ/1?t:lb=t&accountid=31516>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 193

<sup>20</sup> See as examples: Granville Hicks, "The Past and Future of William Faulkner," *The Bookman; a Review of Books and Life (1895-1933)* 74, no. 1 (September 1931): American Periodicals Series Online. Also: Alan Reynolds Thompson, "The Cult of Cruelty," *The Bookman; a Review of Books and Life (1895-1933)* 74, no. 5 (January/February 1932): 477-488.

Before dissecting “A Rose for Emily” it is important to pay attention to Faulkner’s own understanding of the story which he briefly outlined in a lecture at a conference in Virginia.<sup>21</sup> In the discussion, Faulkner is asked what inspired him to write “A Rose for Emily,” to which he replied:

“[The story] was another sad and tragic manifestation of man’s condition in which he dreams and hopes, in which he is in conflict with himself or with his environment or with others [...] that was simply another manifestation of man’s injustice to man, of the poor tragic human being struggling with its own heart, with others, with its environment, for the simple things which all humans want.”<sup>22</sup>

Faulkner, like many artists, is hesitant to go into detail about what his characters symbolize. He instead gives a vague description of the story that does not directly suggest his understanding of the story in relation to Southern culture and history. The story of Emily Grierson is a story of struggling; of her inability to fully mature, to find love, and finally to find any place within the community, which expects her to find all of these things (and herself) through a man. Emily is constantly struggling to find a place within her community without her father and the community expects her to marry a Southern man to gain their acceptance. She is in constant conflict with her environment, whether it be her father, her community, or the new generation of her town.

The story both begins and ends with the death of the protagonist Emily Grierson. The introduction of death or collapse is a recurrent theme in Faulkner’s writing--in As I Lay Dying it is the death of Addie Burden, in Absalom, Absalom! it is the collapse of the Sutpen dynasty.

Faulkner’s characters are often haunted by some lingering sense of loss; a feeling that is

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<sup>21</sup> William Faulkner, *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958*, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, 1977), 184-185.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 185

reflective of the times which Faulkner wrote about the South. When Emily dies the narrator describes her as a “fallen monument”; when she was alive she was considered “a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town.”<sup>23</sup> Her house, which was once clean, had become “an eyesore among eyesores” upon her death.<sup>24</sup> Faulkner opens his story with these symbolic references to the South, beckoning the reader to seek deeper meaning within his character from the moment the story is opened.

After describing the death of Emily the narrator begins to travel back into his memory of Emily’s life. The chronology of this recounting is disjointed like much of Faulkner’s other work, something Paul A. Harris calls “a kind of sculpting in time with words.”<sup>25</sup> The chronology of this story forces the reader to reevaluate their understanding of the story’s central character, Emily, as the story progresses. The climax of the story, which is also partially included in the exposition, comes when the people of Jefferson involved with Emily decide to enter the barricaded upstairs room of the home, which is discovered to have contained the dead body of her lover Homer for over 40 years.<sup>26</sup>

Prior to this discovery, the reader is sympathetic for Emily, whose father dies and never allowed her to date or marry while he was alive. Emily becomes a pathological recluse, the only person with whom she interacts throughout most of her later life is an African American servant named Tobe. Emily meets the death of her father in denial, claiming that her father was not

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<sup>23</sup> William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily," in *Selected Short Stories of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1970), 49-50.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 49

<sup>25</sup> Paul A. Harris, "In Search of Dead Time: Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily'," *KronoScope* 7, no. 2 (2007): 171, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=eeff402e-c7b6-4dfe-8b20-c6dc9ce9868a%40sessionmgr4007>.

<sup>26</sup> Echoes of rural alienation taking morbid form still exist today. For example one can look to the film “Texas Chainsaw Massacre” to see a fictionalized example of this morbidity taking shape. Serial killer Ed Gein, the inspiration of “Texas Chainsaw Massacre”, shows the horrors of alienation take actual form.



actually dead.<sup>27</sup> No one in the town thought of her as crazy then, because, according to the narrator: “We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling onto that which had robbed her, as people will.”<sup>28</sup> Faulkner uses the father to symbolize the dead Old South, acknowledging the violence that riddles its history. The young men symbolize the fruits of industry, education, and all other prospects of altering the traditional plantation lifestyle that are symbolically driven away in the romanticized Old Southern way of life.<sup>29</sup> With all of these prospects being restricted from her life, Emily clings to the only man she knows. Her father, the symbol of a lost lifestyle, is the only thing that Emily, the symbolic bearer of post-Reconstruction limbo, has left. Emily’s father represents the plurality of Southern mythologies laid to rest while simultaneously existing in the consciousness of Southerners.

Emily is left alone to deal with the death of her father until she meets Homer Barron, an amicable contractor from the North. Homer arrives to Jefferson the summer after the death of Emily’s father and is described as having a natural magnetism.<sup>30</sup> Many in the town question Emily’s affection towards him; older members of the community attribute their romance to

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<sup>27</sup> Faulkner, "A Rose," 54.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 54

<sup>29</sup> This may be a nod at Southern sentiments toward Northern Reconstruction by Faulkner. In The New South Creed Gaston discusses first the superiority complex built around the Southern lifestyle before the Civil War. This heightened regionalism, or perhaps Southern nationalism, was faced with a sobering reality after the defeat and prolonged economic hardships that followed the war. Gaston says that the South was “in the process of winning the peace despite defeat in the war”. The South had aimed at expelling “Yankee” influence after the Union occupation of the territory and felt that self-reconstruction could not begin until the “alien” Reconstruction had ended. The reading of the young men being driven away by Emily’s father is enhanced by this history of the South driving away exterior influence despite its defeat. For further reading see the previously cited: Gaston, *The New South*, 20-41.

<sup>30</sup> Faulkner, "A Rose," 55.

Emily's *noblesse oblige*.<sup>31</sup> The people of the town disapprove of Emily's relationship with the "Yankee," ladies of the town say that their relationship was "a disgrace to the town and a bad example for young people," eventually culminating in an intervention on the behalf the community of Jefferson:

"The men did not want to interfere, but at last the ladies forced the Baptist minister--Miss Emily's people were Episcopal--to call upon her. He would never divulge what happened during that interview, but he refused to go back again. The next Sunday [Emily and Homer] drove about the streets, and the following day that minister's wife wrote to Miss Emily's relations in Alabama."<sup>32</sup>

The women of Jefferson County become so bothered by the relationship formed between Emily and Homer that they seek specialized spiritual and familial guidance to convince Emily to end her relationship with Homer. After his death, the community takes the place of Emily's father in a charged regionalist (in opposition to a Northerner courting a wealthy member of their Southern community) attempt to end the relationship between Emily and the perceived carpetbagger Homer.

Here again there are symbolic gestures towards Southern mythology and history played out within the people of Jefferson county surfacing within Faulkner's work. The town sees Homer, the Northern laborer, as inadequate for Emily's courtship due to his class and regional heritage because Emily is the last human embodiment of her father's Southern wealth. The community sees the relationship as Emily throwing her heritage away to a low class Northerner, reflective of the burgeoning Southern regionalism felt by Faulkner and other Southerners of his

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 55

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 57

time.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps Emily's erratic behaviors throughout the book can be attributed to her sense of alienation, a topic of study in David M. Potter's essay "The Roots of American Alienation."

### **The Alienation of Emily Grierson**

"The Roots of American Alienation" is sweeping in its scope, but nonetheless has pertinent analyses that can be related to Faulkner's writing and perhaps Southern history in its entirety. The essay is divided into parts, where Potter first discusses the effect then secondly causality within the context of American alienation. Notably, Potter places much of the blame on urbanization and the rise of the "machine economy" for what he understands to be the leading factor in the development of American alienation.<sup>34</sup> The casualties categorized as such by Potter will be more closely analyzed in the second chapter of this project, but for now this analysis will focus on "A Rose for Emily" within the scope of Potter's described effects of causality and how these are reflected as such within Faulkner's text.

Potter claims that humans form their own identities as persons through their communities (what Potter says sociologists call "reference groups") recognize them as being, and that the refusal or confusion of this identity by the reference group produces a sense of loneliness, of being lost, of being "profoundly unsure of [one's] identity."<sup>35</sup> Potter's idea of individual identity formation is thus indebted to the community that one exists within. Potter describes an "obsessive effort" that individuals may make if their identity is confused and may surrender

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<sup>33</sup> The South during the 1920s and 1930s was developing a new sense of regionalism charted by Southern writers like Faulkner. For more information see: Tindall, *The Emergence*, 650.

<sup>34</sup> David M. Potter, "The Roots of American Alienation," in *History and American Society: Essays of David M. Potter*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Oxford University, 1973), 322.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 307

themselves to “some seemingly greater cause” outside of themselves if this quest proves to be too burdensome.<sup>36</sup> The isolation that comes from either searching for a real identity due to its loss or a substitution for an identity through a greater cause is how Potter defines alienation.

In Western society, this alienation can come as early as adolescence, a point in an individual’s life where a child can no longer look to their parents to tell them who they are, but is instead challenged to discover their identity by themselves.<sup>37</sup> Potter claims that alienation is the “indicated penalty” for failing to meet this challenge. Emily Grierson fits into this framework precariously, because she never truly leaves adolescence until her father dies due to her inability to form relationships as a result of her father’s intense sheltering. Emily seeks to form her own identity after her father’s death, first being unable to accept her father’s death and then forming a relationship with Homer. Emily desperately sought “the recognition of her dignity” from Jefferson, a communal recognition based solely in her ability to form a relationship with a man.<sup>38</sup>

The community, as discussed earlier, disapproves of Emily’s involvement with the Northerner and attempts to end the relationship first by having the town minister over and then by having her distant relatives come visit. After these persuasions for Emily to end the relationship, Homer leaves Jefferson when his contract expires, only to return to the house and mysteriously is never seen in the town again. After these events Emily’s complete seclusion begins--shutting herself in her house for months, trying to open a china painting class in her home only for the community to outgrow it, and again shutting herself in, this time for good:

“[T]hat quality of her father which had thwarted her woman’s life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die [...] then the newer generation became

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 307

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 308

<sup>38</sup> Faulkner, "A Rose," 55.

the backbone and spirit of the town, and the painting pupils grew up and fell away and did not send their children to her.”<sup>39</sup>

Emily dies alienated from the community because of their rejection of her attempts to formulate her own identity outside of her prolonged adolescence. In a final effort to involve herself in the community, Emily seeks interaction through china painting, which also eventually dies out as the community moves through generations. Thus, Emily passes never fully able to escape the ghosts of her father and her Southern roots.

In conclusion, Emily Grierson dies after keeping the corpse of her dead lover in her attic for 40 years without ever being able to establish herself within her community. Her father, who can be read as the lingering ghost of the Confederacy, unwaveringly shelters his daughter until his death. Once her father passes, Emily swoons a young laborer from the North named Homer, whose relationship with Emily is rejected by the community. The community of Jefferson is proudly Southern, and stubbornly refuses to let one of their wealthy heiresses be married to a carpetbagger. This causes Emily to act psychotically and leads to her complete inability to interact with people around her and fully participate the community. Emily’s last efforts to establish herself as a painter in the community eventually become thwarted through the coming of a new generation. Faulkner’s vision of the South in this story, unlike Stephen Foster’s, is dark and riddled with alienation and deeply disturbing behavior. Instead of solely focusing on rosy visions of the Old South, Faulkner forces the reader to confront both the Old and New South as one, and effectively shows the pluralism of Southern history in one character’s miserable life and the town of Jefferson’s persistence in negating Northern influence symbolized in Homer Barron.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 58-59

## CHAPTER II: NEARER THE CROSS

*“And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” - Genesis 1:28*



*“The Solidity of Shadows” Clarence John Laughlin, 1953*

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The modernizing world has had, and continues to have, deep psychological impacts on America’s white working class. Middle America no longer toils over the land with their hands in the dirt, but rather with their hands on the controls of plows that make working the land faster and more efficient. At the end of the twentieth century, the Jeffersonian vision of a pastoral America based in small scale (family) farming began to wither away at the hands of railways, factories, and burgeoning American cities. Paul Thompson argues in “The Philosophy of Farming in America” that by the turn of the century agricultural politics became defined by those who supported corporate interests opposing those who supported family farmers.<sup>40</sup> Thompson continues, saying farmers in the post-slavery American agricultural economy felt that they were being cheated in this new economy, with more benefits and services being channeled into cities to help the urban working class. By the 1920s, progressives sought to promote the idea that

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<sup>40</sup>Paul B. Thompson, "The Philosophy of Farming in America," in *The Agrarian Vision: Sustainability and Environmental Ethics* (n.p.: University of Kentucky, 2010), 48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jcqjc.6>.

agriculture was another sector of industrialism and the Jeffersonian vision of small scale family farms became a shield for large industrial farms from government regulation.<sup>41</sup>

The modernization of the rural farming white man's labor is essential to understanding his disaffection, anger and sense of alienation. Christian traditions still inform and guide country folk no matter how quickly and drastically the world around them seems to change. As the state began to shift resources and recognition onto urban spaces, farmers abandoned small scale farming in America in favor of industrial farming. The days of Jeffersonianism and the metaphor of farmers being "the chosen people of God" became a romantic idealization of the past--an echo within the previously discussed mythology of the South.<sup>42</sup> Jefferson's vision of America acknowledged farmers as the pervasive majority and God's chosen people of the Democratic Republic of America. Those who worked the land as farmers were the majority of early America, but as the economy began to shift towards industrialism and urbanization, the Jeffersonian vision began to erode.

The South fought against this shift in economy through the Civil War, for the South rejected "the transition from an agrarian economy founded on slavery to an industrial economy in which the Negro was free."<sup>43</sup> While this chapter will not focus on race relations (that will be the focus of the next chapter) it is important to note that the shift in the agrarian economy also altered the social fabric of America. Industrialism was changing the nation, eroding values that were once seen as foundational, such as the Jeffersonian vision and the institution of slavery. These shifts evoked strong religious convictions amongst rural working class whites, because the

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 48-49

<sup>42</sup>Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New Haven, CT: Yale Law School, 2008), 19, accessed November 30, 2017, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/jeffvir.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/jeffvir.asp).

<sup>43</sup>Sister Rosemarie, H. V. M., "Southern Neuroticism-Effect on Industrialization," *The American Catholic Sociological Review* 21, no. 4 (Winter 1960): 311, accessed October 3, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3709531>.

people who were once metaphorically proclaimed by a Founding Father to be “God’s chosen people” were now forced to adapt to a modernizing America whose economic prosperity was centered in the burgeoning industrial cities of the North.

Exploring the religious convictions of the white working class unearths how Christianity has interacted with an industrializing America. There is an observance of eroding small scale family farms idealized by Jefferson in favor of large, regulated industrial farms that provided raw goods to the North in an efficient way. The evangelical Christian tradition in America found itself at odds with industrialization and modernization, yet Christian values continued to guide and inform industrial agrarian lifestyles. Jesse Bentley, the main character of the “Godliness” sequence in Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio, shows the author’s understanding of how industrialization, rural areas, and religiosity interact and show their ability to adapt to modern America and how this historically played out with the rise of Christian fundamentalism. In summation, I will argue that the splintering of fundamentalists from America’s Christian evangelical tradition as a result of modernity shows an erosion of the agrarian Jeffersonian vision and that Sherwood Anderson’s ideas of the “grotesque” and his character Jesse Bentley aim to critique Christian fundamentalism.

### **The Idea of the Grotesque and the Evangelical Tradition**

In an essay which takes up, in part, Sherwood Anderson’s concept of the “grotesque” scholar James Schevill encapsulates an overarching concept of what he calls the “American



Grotesque.”<sup>44</sup> He states that the American Grotesque can be defined by two different themes. First, he claims that the splintering of the American evangelical tradition (meaning the establishment of Christian fundamentalism in America) through attempts to “conquer the west, tame the land, subdue and eliminate the Indians” has allowed Americans to distort the Christian doctrine and shape it to fit these goals. Schevill goes beyond industrialization and touches upon American “progress,” the embedded feeling of Manifest Destiny within the American psyche that Americans tap into to reshape Christianity.

Mark Noll takes further steps to define the evangelical tradition and its unique Americanness in his book America’s God. Noll distinguishes evangelical theology from European theological traditions, saying this new vision of Christianity in America focused on the physical world created by God as being “understandable, progressing, and malleable” rather than “mysterious, inimical, and fixed.”<sup>45</sup> Noll cites historian David W. Bebbington in defining four characteristics of evangelicalism: “Biblicism (or reliance on the Bible as ultimate religious authority), conversionism (or reliance on the new birth), activism (or energetic, individualistic engagement in personal and social duties), and crucicentrism (or focus on Christ’s redeeming work as the heart of true religion).”<sup>46</sup> Noll’s work defines the early characteristics and foundations of evangelicalism in relation to European Christianity as well as intellectual trends during the development of evangelicalism as a distinguished school of Christian thought.

Noll’s work in America’s God stops in history at Abraham Lincoln and does not wholly extend itself into an analysis of evangelicalism after the turn of the century. George Marsden’s

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<sup>44</sup> James Schevill, "Notes on the Grotesque: Anderson, Brecht, and Williams," *Twentieth Century Literature* 23, no. 2 (May 1977): 231, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/441342>.

<sup>45</sup> Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford, 2002), 4.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

Fundamentalism and American Culture discusses the later splintering of the evangelical tradition mentioned by Schevill. Marsden's book focuses on defining the Christian fundamentalist tradition in America and its roots in the evangelical tradition. According to Marsden, Christian fundamentalists in America were loosely united evangelicals who in the twentieth century aligned themselves against both theological and cultural modernity.<sup>47</sup> While Marsden is sure to state that not all evangelicals became fundamentalists with the rise of modernity<sup>48</sup> the influence of fundamentalism on American culture cannot be understated, for it sought to counter modern cultural phenomena. Fundamentalism can thus be defined as a regressive cultural movement that sought to return to a past cultural context of Christian understanding.

James Schevill claims the American Grotesque is "the goal of individual, materialistic success." He sees a shift from the nineteenth to twentieth century in which independence, a strong held American value, became increasingly equated with abundance. Abundance, as Schevill understands it, is an urban/technological goal that began to be put above independence, with "official lip service" given to the idea of individual independence among the population, despite an increasingly distorted relationship between the individual and the community due to abundance and technology.

Shevill's focus on the American grotesque is related to the loss of a localized agrarian America that Jefferson envisioned. The abundance sought by Americans at the turn of the century runs counter to the vision of small scale family farms. Instead of independence meaning small localities centered around the family, Schevill's analysis shows that independence began to mean the more one has the freer one is. Instead of maintaining a sense of freedom qualitatively

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<sup>47</sup> George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2006), 4.

<sup>48</sup> George Marsden, "Evangelicals, History, and Modernity," in *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 94.

through being self-sufficient, Americans began to see their freedom as something that was measured quantitatively. Schevill states: “Abundance, the goal of technological, urban society, was put ahead of independence” implying that this new sense of independence measured quantitatively was a goal of the technological, industrial society and not the agrarian, Jeffersonian society.<sup>49</sup> The unchecked drive for success measured materially partially explains the splintering of the evangelical tradition that Schevill describes, yet does not wholly encapsulate the sentiments of fundamentalists in the early twentieth century, who were not as opposed to materialism but to modernity. Marsden and Noll define the evangelical and later fundamentalist traditions but neither link these traditions to the decline of small scale agriculture in America. These scholars assist in this analysis through defining and tracing American Christian traditions but do not expressly address the Jeffersonian tradition and its relation to Christian evangelicalism/fundamentalism. Sherwood Anderson’s defining of the grotesque more subtly critiques fundamentalists and their desire to return to a strict reading of the Bible.

Anderson opens his book Winesburg, Ohio with a brief introduction called “The Book of the Grotesques” wherein the author defines his own sense of the grotesque. This chapter is the introduction to a series of interconnected short stories that provide an omniscient lens through which the reader views the characters within the stories. Anderson outlines his idea of grotesque:

“[I]n the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts [...] [t]here was the truth of virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty, of thrift and of profligacy, of carelessness and abandon [...] the moment one of the people took

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<sup>49</sup>Shevill, "Notes on the Grotesque," 231.

one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.”<sup>50</sup>

Anderson sees the grotesque as a warped perception of a higher, somehow intrinsic truth. Once an individual latches onto a truth and tries to make it their own, the truth loses its merit as the truth and becomes grotesque. Anderson’s idea of the grotesque is, at least partially, a critique of Christian fundamentalism, which was gaining prominence during Anderson’s publication of Winesburg, Ohio. Christian Fundamentalism, as discussed earlier, is a school of thought that seeks a return to a “greater” past understanding of the Bible that is divorced from modernity. The “vague thoughts” of these archaic principles become adopted by these new believers and are applied to the modern world; in essence, Anderson suggests these truths become grotesque within modern culture.

Through reading Anderson and the historical context of this work the interaction of industrialism and Christianity should be seen as a positive feedback loop. As industrialization began to pound through the veins of America, the Evangelical traditionalists in America were forced to interact with new modes of production. The shift from an agrarian economy to an industrial economy threatened to subvert, or at least reshape this tradition. Anderson’s story suggests that industrialism found a rhetorical partner in Christianity by revisioning the command of God to subdue and tame the land in the book of Genesis. Industrialism produced a repackaging of Christianity in order to equate abundance with success and this rethought, post-agrarian Christianity justified industrialism, hence closing the circle of the positive feedback loop. Through all of this, Jeffersonianism was rhetorically bolstered by Americans because of the cult of the Founding Fathers but was in actuality lost. While this analysis may seem crude and

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<sup>50</sup> Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 23-24.

brief, Sherwood Anderson expands upon this interaction between Christianity and industrialization in his character Jesse Bentley.

### **Jesse Bentley and Industrializing Christianity**

Jesse Bentley is a small town farmer in Winesburg, Ohio who holds strong religious convictions. His brothers were all killed in the Civil War and at the age of twenty-two Jesse returns home from religious school to take over the family farm.<sup>51</sup> This is Anderson first approach to describing the death of the Jeffersonian vision of the pastoral. The deaths of Jesse's brothers symbolize the death of the localized agrarian way of life in America in favor of the modern, technological lifestyle. Bentley takes over the farm after their deaths, which would carry the legacy of small family farms in America. However, as the story progresses, Anderson gives a twisted psychological portrait of Jesse that shows his character's desire not to carry any sort of localized tradition, but to measure his successes quantitatively by creating an industrialized farm.

Jesse is laughed at by the town of Winesburg for trying to single-handedly take on the farm that his father and brothers had run, for he "was small and very slender and womanish of body."<sup>52</sup> Compared to his father and brother, Jesse was the "odd sheep" of the family, with a smaller build and a twitch in his left eye that surfaces in climactic moments in the story.<sup>54</sup> These

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<sup>51</sup>Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 66.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 70

<sup>53</sup>John O'Neill discusses this passage, suggesting that the town's mocking of Jesse is attributed to their resistance to change, or renewal. Jesse, for the town, is "dandified" and is the only survivor in the Bentley family in the ruinous area of post-Civil War Ohio. See John O'Neill, "Anderson Writ Large: 'Godliness' in Winesburg, Ohio," *Twentieth Century Literature* 67, no. 83 (February 1977): 72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/440938>.

<sup>54</sup>Rosemary M. Laughlin, "Godliness and the American Dream in Winesburg, Ohio," *Twentieth Century Literature* 13, no. 2 (July 1967): 98-99, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/440750>.

physical anomalies feed a sense of insecurity in Jesse. His sense of physical smallness makes him want to prove that he is just as capable of running the farm as his brothers and father; he is driven by his insecurities to feel larger. The smallness felt by Bentley shows Anderson's clever awareness of this shift in a desire for abundance and a deterioration of small localized farms in America.

Jesse indirectly kills his wife, a "delicate" urbanite named Katherine, by forcing her to work the land harder than she was able to handle.<sup>55</sup> The significance of his wife being "delicate" and from a city highlights an important relationship between the rural farmer and the urbanite. Jesse, despite his physical limitations, wants to make his farm highly productive. In having Jesse move back from a city with an urban wife in tow, Anderson symbolically alludes to a dichotomy between urban and rural Americans. Jesse's sense of smallness is not only derived from his physical self but also from his physical surroundings in Winesburg, which is just another small town among many other towns in America. His wife, on the other hand, is an urbanite, whose home is a more well-known place than Bentley's in early 20th century America. Bentley's wife is from "somewhere", a destination, whereas Bentley himself is from "nowhere", a remote community. Here, the industrial city becomes the focus of the American vision and the small farmer loses the limelight. Bentley works his wife hard: "For a year everyday she worked from sunrise until late at night and then after giving birth to a child she died"; unintentionally proving in some twisted way the superiority of Jeffersonian vision of farming being dominant in America.<sup>56</sup>

The nowness, or futuristic qualities of urban spaces unearths a sensation of smallness in Bentley that makes him feel as though he had been born in the wrong era: "[Jesse] was a man

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<sup>55</sup>Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 67.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 67

born out of his time and place and for this he suffered and made others suffer. Never did he succeed in getting what he wanted out of life and he did not know what he wanted.”<sup>57</sup> Bentley has this sense that if he were born in the past, an age which he only understands through his religiosity, he would somehow have a better life. Bentley’s sense of a lost past comes from his fundamentalist desire to implement a past ordering of society, with Christianity being central, as evidenced by his thoughts that “God had deserted the world [...] [Fate had] not let him live in a simpler and sweeter time.”<sup>58</sup> The sense of death looms in the tone of this passage; that is the death of old ways of life. Jesse feels insecure in the modern era, and latches onto the past for a sense of security, regretting that he could not live in those “simpler, sweeter” times.<sup>59</sup>

The portrayal of Bentley as a Christian fundamentalist appears to be at odds with his adoption of industrial farming practices. Anderson portrays Bentley as a fundamentalist, evidenced by his thoughts of “the men of Old Testament days who had owned lands and herds [...] God had come down out of the skies and talked to these men” and that “[Jesse] wanted God to notice him also.”<sup>60</sup> Anderson puts Jesse’s romanticization of a past world at odds with his desire to cultivate the land with machinery. Fundamentalism, as discussed earlier, found itself at odds with cultural and theological modernity. In the case of Bentley, one sees a crude and perhaps inaccurate portrayal of this dichotomy, for he adopts theological fundamentalism as well as technological modernism. It seems paradoxical that a Christian fundamentalist such as Bentley would want to utilize modernity to prove his worth to God. Historically, Christian fundamentalists firmly pivoted themselves against modernity, of which industrial agricultural practices are inherently linked. The paradox lies within the fact that Jesse, a man who longs for

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 67

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 80

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 80

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 69

the days of the past, would adopt industrial practices to prove his worth within his religious convictions that are fervently anti-modern. Anderson gives the reader a character who feels that if he can fix himself a farm that is highly productive, efficient, and modern God will recognize him as exceptional because he would have been able to fulfill his role as a chosen servant. Jesse is trying to reach back to earlier traditions for inspiration, including the founding of America and the vision of the New World.

Early white colonists came to America without much else besides their religious convictions. Upon arriving to the New World, they sought to utilize their faith to structure their society. Cultivating the land and obtaining material prosperity seemed possible for more people in the boundless landscape of the New World. This fell in line with informal tenants of Calvinism, that “material prosperity [was] the sign of divine favor.”<sup>61</sup> Rosemary Laughlin argues that the early settlers, in being reformists of the churches of the old world, saw themselves as having reached some higher plane of purity and that the boundlessness of the New World as analogous to some God-given Providence. This vision, she argues, is in line with Bentley's vision of himself and his farm. The difference is Bentley sees himself as Godly before the tiller even broke the soil.

Jesse cared not as much about formal Christianity but more about an acknowledgement from a divine patriarch. In situating himself within the tradition of his agricultural heritage, Jesse desires a sense of limitlessness both on a material and spiritual level. The two are equated by Bentley, who finds material and spiritual success to be analogous. Therefore, Jesse's vision of Christianity and of God are based in this sense of real, tangible limitlessness. With the physical advent of industrialization/mechanization, Bentley was able to make his farm produce in greater

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<sup>61</sup>Laughlin, "Godliness and the American," 100.



quantities than God fearing farmers before him could have imagined. This feeling of the limitless was actually justified by machinery and the end of small family farming, the Jeffersonian vision. Yet it also helps bolster the sense of spiritual limitlessness, since the two are equated by Bentley, suggested by the limitless bounty of his farm and “something else”: “He wanted to make the farm produce as no farm in his state had ever produced before, and then he wanted something else.”<sup>62</sup> In order to further analyze this religious limitlessness and situate Bentley within it, one can turn to the writing of psychologist William James.

### **Jesse Bentley’s God**

In Varieties of Religious Experience William James mentions the “ordinary religious believer, who follows the conventional observances of his country” and states that this individual has allowed “his religion to be made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit.”<sup>63</sup> James, the father of pragmatism, does not try to communicate an ultimate analysis of human history through an evolutionary exploration of religious history like Sigmund Freud attempts to do in Civilization and its Discontents; James instead makes observations of religion based in more immediate history. James cites George Fox and the Quakers as his example, claiming that Fox normalized “pathological” behavior in his religious practices, and that this normalization occurs with the human tendency to categorize objects.<sup>64</sup> This normalized categorization allows religious leaders such as Fox to engender and sustain religious sentiment in individuals and create or extend

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<sup>62</sup> Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 68.

<sup>63</sup> William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1916), 6.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

religious traditions. The more immediate understanding of religious tradition by James extends to the evangelical tradition in America and the rise of fundamentalism. Through the story of Jesse Bentley, a refashioning of the evangelical tradition to explain and justify the material limitlessness sought by Bentley and the death of the small scale Jeffersonian farm is explored by Anderson.

Sherwood Anderson comments on religion as social tradition through Bentley. As previously mentioned, Jesse inherits a farm at a young age and sees this as an opportunity to prove to God that he is a “chosen servant”.<sup>65</sup> He wants to make his farm a “city upon a hill”<sup>66</sup> and thinks that if he is productive enough on the farm then God will recognize him as a chosen servant; he could gain divine approval. Jesse adopts industrial farming techniques trying to fulfil his duty to God by “replenish[ing] the earth, and subdu[ing] it,” making production on his farm seem limitless.<sup>67</sup> Jesse sees utilizing industrial techniques as part of the process for fulfilling his servitude and the call of God:

“[Jesse], like all men of his time, had been touched by the deep influences that were at work in the country during those years when modern industrialism was being born. He began to buy machines that would permit him to do the work of the farms [...] he sometimes thought that if he were a younger man he would give up farming altogether and start a factory.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 70.

<sup>66</sup>See John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," address, 1630, Hanover Historical Texts Collection, accessed October 2, 2017, <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>.

<sup>67</sup>Genesis 1:28 (King James Version)

<sup>68</sup>Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, 81.

Here it is seen that Jesse views industrialism as a rapid and efficient means of achieving his servitude, his purpose in life. Anderson sees the interplay between machinery and Christianity as a developing social tradition.

Anderson discusses the paradox of the devout Christian wholeheartedly adopting industrialism and seeing it in a positive light:

“The beginning of the most materialistic age in the history of the world, when wars would be fought without patriotism, when men would forget God and only pay attention to moral standards, when the will to power would replace the will to serve and beauty would be well-nigh forgotten in the terrible headlong rush of mankind toward the acquiring of possessions.”<sup>69</sup>

Anderson describes a discrepancy he sees between Christianity and industrialism and uses Bentley as a symbol for this understanding. Bentley adopts Christianity, which alludes to the pastoral world, and sees it as his mission to fulfil God’s call for man to cultivate the Earth. Bentley views using industrial farming techniques in order to increase production as a more efficient way to please God, whereas Anderson sees the use of these techniques as inherently contradictory to Jesse’s fundamentalist views.

This one of the few times in the work that the reader gets a glimpse of Anderson’s sociological perspective--a chance to see beyond and through Winesburg as an allegorical setting. Anderson focuses on writing Winesburg, particularly in this section, as a place which symbolizes the greater movements affecting American society as a whole. The American Midwest during the time of Winesburg, Ohio was decimated; it was a place of defeated evangelical farmers. John O'Neill says of the farmers’ belief in God:

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 81

“The harshness of life in the middle west just after the Civil War revived and kept alive an unlovely creed, a Calvinism long since judged too unyielding and graceless for the new commercial sections of Boston, but grimly satisfying for those who found the earth as uncompromising as the Hebrews' God.”<sup>70</sup>

Farmers living in the post-Civil War Middle West saw themselves as part of God's vision for America. Perhaps the struggle to move past the defeat of the agrarian economy was understood as God's test of faith (similar to the tests of Job). The loss of local agrarianism, the destruction of Jeffersonianism, would provide a possible paradise of an afterlife, of a rebirth if these individuals held steadfast in their beliefs. This rebirth manifested itself in the adoption of industrial farming practices, for the agrarian lifestyle did not fully die, but like Christianity, had to be reshaped to suit the times. Jefferson's vision of a localized agrarian America was defeated in the Civil War, but the people of that old tradition held steadfast in their belief in God and a new chance despite the economic and cultural shifts within America.

Therefore, with the advent of industrial farming practices, Bentley removes himself from the Jeffersonian vision yet understands himself to be a chosen servant of God despite his desire to transcend small scale farming. He is effectively able to reshape his vision of Christianity to be in line with limitlessness while simultaneously taking part in destroying the Jeffersonian tradition that was passed down to him by his father and brothers. His Christian ideology alludes to his surrounding world, as does his vision of himself as a farmer who is chosen by God. Yet Jesse is an industrialist and must reconcile his old ways with changing times. The flexibility and illusory nature of Christianity as ideology is explored by Anderson through his creation of Bentley. Jesse, and people like him, fashion themselves as the chosen people of God for their laboring of the

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<sup>70</sup>O'Neill, "Anderson Writ," 72.

land. Jesse's view of himself as a chosen servant of God leads him to commit several deranged acts which speak to the overall nature of the white working class of the time.

Jesse has a religiously inspired cathartic moment while his wife Katherine is in labor. He leaves his wife in his house and while standing in a field recalls the story of David and Goliath, and fears that all other farmers in Ohio who own land are "Philistines and enemies of God."<sup>71</sup> He fears that one of the "enemies" will vanquish him in his struggle to be recognized by God. This leads him to frantically run through the hills crying to God to send him a son named David that will protect his land from the Philistines. After this scene that Katherine gives birth to a daughter named Louise. Once Louise is grown she eventually gives birth to a son named David Hardy. Jesse, David's grandfather, still sees his grandson as a message and protector from God. In searching for a divine sign, Jesse ends up terrifying David and showing just how far he will go to gain recognition from God.

In one scene, Jesse takes his grandson out into the woods by a stream and begins to pray loudly for God to give him a miracle. This fanaticism terrifies the young David, who feels "he was in the presence not only of his grandfather but of someone else, someone who might hurt him, someone who was not kindly but dangerous and brutal."<sup>72</sup> Jesse screams to the heavens, demanding that God give him a sign in his grandson David, who is to protect Jesse from the other Ohio farmers. The climax of "Godliness" begins when Jesse plans to build a fire in the woods and sacrifice a lamb in the presence of David to put the lamb's blood on David's head.<sup>73</sup> David again is terrified of his fanatical grandfather, and as Jesse approaches David and the lamb

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 73

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 85

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 100

with a knife David runs away into the woods. David then hits Jesse in the head with a rock, for he feared that Jesse planned to sacrifice both him and the lamb to God.

David is terrified of Jesse because of his pathological, unrelenting drive to make God show his divine approval of Jesse and all that he had done with his life as a farmer. He becomes so obsessed with gaining this divine approval that he plans to sacrifice a lamb, an ancient act of tribute to God, and makes his grandson fear for his life. Jesse's pathological nature speaks to a larger phenomenon amongst the white working class of the time. For farmers such as Bentley the reconciliation of Christianity and modernity proved to be difficult. This led to a sharp disconnect between reality and belief. Bentley shows that this disconnect can often turn fanatical and violent, and that in situating themselves in the modern world with old beliefs, white farmers like Jesse will take extreme measures to not get lost in the aforementioned anonymity of being in a rural space during industrialism. With the economy shifting away from agriculture, violence and fear were unearthed in rural folk, for their lifestyle seemed to be mechanically disappearing.

In conclusion, Jesse Bentley exposes the destruction of Jeffersonianism through the adoption of industrial farming practices. Anderson uses Bentley as an allegorical character representing the rapidly modernizing America and the reshaping of Christianity to fit new means of production and definitions of success in America in a cultural analysis of the time. The shift to equating success with abundance highlights an important shift in American values in the advent of industrialization. The idea of the limitless became both religious and physical. In this sense, man could create his own divine Providence on Earth with the help of new machinery. Jesse Bentley characterizes exactly this, for he makes himself his own God by way of producing more and more, by engendering a sense that he could create the limitless. Jesse's search for divine approval through the birth of his grandson David represents the fear among rural folk in America

that their lifestyle was disappearing at the hands of industry. The violent acts and pathological desire to be recognized highlight an important and dark facet of the rural white man of modernity, and will be the focus of the next chapter.

### CHAPTER III: THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY

*“...there are continually turning up in life moral and rational people, sages, and lovers of humanity, who make it their goal for life to live as morally and rationally as possible, to be, so to speak, a light to their neighbors, simply in order to show them that it is really possible to live morally and rationally in this world. And so what? We all know that those very people sooner or later toward the end of their lives have been false to themselves, playing some trick, often a most indecent one.” - Fyodor Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground*



*“The Masks Grow to Us” Clarence John Laughlin, 1947*

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White religious zealots such as Jesse Bentley maintained cultural hegemony over African Americans through the rapidly industrializing phases of the twentieth century. In Bentley’s case agriculture in America was dealing with violent shifts in its processes of production. As agriculture turned to technology and modernity, new, humanless hands of steel began to tear at the land at an unprecedented rate. The end of chattel slavery also transformed the modes of agricultural production in America. These modern processes of agricultural production not only redefined ideas of Christianity (discussed in the previous chapter) but also gave way to new forms of social dominance.

The collapse of slavery in the mid to late nineteenth century and the efforts of Reconstruction attempted to reconfigure the social order of American society. The Thirteenth,



Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution were an effort to put the newly freed slaves on equal ground with the rest of the American population. Working class whites were now in competition with the newly freed black populations of America and this transition was riddled with violence. African Americans faced new forms of oppression, exemplified through the Jim Crow laws of the South. These new systems of oppression were highly controversial and eventually were contested by whites and blacks alike in the 1950s-60s during the Civil Rights Movement.

This social reconstruction revealed a racial self-awareness to of American citizens, for in the new post slavery economy African Americans held social capital not previously granted to slaves. The collection of this capital revealed new power structures embalmed in white supremacy that maintained a difference in social mobility between African Americans and whites.<sup>74</sup> This chapter will discuss American segregation through an analysis of Flannery O'Connor's short story "The Artificial Nigger". O'Connor's story reflects on these new, post-slavery social realities through exploring how race is artificially constructed. Close reading of the story provides deep insight into O'Connor's understanding of racial artificiality and how this is exposed in Southern culture. The two main characters of the story, Mr. Head and his grandson Nelson, confront their own self conceptions of racial superiority throughout the story and highlight the racial contradictions within their perceived selves. In this chapter I will argue that Flannery O'Connor's short story "The Artificial Nigger" describes the artificial racial self that her characters are forced to confront and thus attempts to subvert, or at least complicate, the understanding of race during her time. I will also dissect how artificially created notions

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<sup>74</sup> Discussed by historian Grace Hale. See her work: Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1998),

encapsulated within racial epithets function to enforce racial superiority by referencing the ideas of James Baldwin and W.E.B. Du Bois.

### **Flannery O'Connor and the Culture of Segregation**

At first glance it seems Flannery O'Connor wrote her short story "The Artificial Nigger" with an intention to make the reader deal with the piece by its inflammatory title before arriving to a discussion of its themes. O'Connor attempts to shock the reader before they read the first sentence and makes the reader wonder if they will be stepping into a modern "Lost Cause" piece of literature that nostalgically reflects on the Old Southern ways of life. One soon begins to realize that O'Connor did not design the story to positively depict the South with her grotesque characters. However, O'Connor also did not use her work to directly reject any ways of life in the South; the story functions rhetorically rather than didactically.<sup>75</sup> By this, I mean that this story is not polemical in nature but still has a strong, commanding voice that urges the reader to seek deeper meaning within the pages through sensational rather than didactical scenes. As scholar W.F. Monroe says of the story, O'Connor aims to "engage us in an experiential process, especially if it is a moving or unsettling one."<sup>76</sup> O'Connor capitalizes on sensation to engage the reader with her understanding of the South.

O'Connor familiarizes the reader with the two main characters Mr. Head and Nelson before their adventure into Atlanta begins. Aside from blatant bigotry, the author wants the reader to be mistrustful of the characters in subtle ways. In the second paragraph of the story, Mr.

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<sup>75</sup> W. F. Monroe, "Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Icon: 'The Artificial Nigger,'" *South Central Review* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3189463>.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 64

Head gets out of bed and thinks to himself that through his years of experience that he now has a “calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young,” followed by the subtle remark “[t]his, at least, had been his own experience.”<sup>77</sup> This small passage communicates to the reader that through his old age Mr. Head has thought himself to possess some sort of wisdom he is going to be able to share with younger generations. O’Connor’s tone seems to communicate a self-righteousness in Mr. Head and the early presence of this passage immediately creates mistrust between the reader and the old man.

The story then introduces Nelson, the grandson of Mr. Head, who is eager to take his first trip into Atlanta (though he insists that it is his second trip because he was born in the city). Nelson seems eager to challenge his grandfather, who holds his old “wisdom” over his grandson’s head: “‘If you ain’t been [to the city] in fifteen years, how you know you’ll be able to find your way about?’ Nelson had asked. ‘How you know it hasn’t changed some?’”<sup>78</sup> Despite his young age Nelson is portrayed with an air of independence, he “was a child who was never satisfied until he had given an impudent answer” as O’Connor writes in the same series of passages. Both characters seem to symbolize characteristics of Southern society, that is stubbornness and self-righteousness (though poor and ignorant) as well as the flame of youth willing to challenge and question these old ways, despite any inexperience. The two characters perhaps symbolize how the South sees itself (as both character descriptions are hinged on self-perceptions of superiority) with the later occurrences in the work exposing the artificiality of these self-perceptions.

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<sup>77</sup> Flannery O’Connor, *The Artificial Nigger*, 1955, in *The Complete Stories of Flannery O’Connor* (n.p.: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1972), 249.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 250

“The Artificial Nigger” takes the reader on a journey through O’Connor’s conception of the South, depicting Mr. Head and Nelson traveling from the countryside into the city of Atlanta. O’Connor sets the tone for the journey by placing Mr. Head as the guide through the journey, describing him as “Vergil summoned in the middle of the night to go to Dante” and with his intention to teach Nelson that he has no cause for pride because of his urban birth, that the city is not in fact great, that he is not as smart as he thinks he is, and that after all of this he will be content to stay at home in the countryside.<sup>79</sup> Nelson is eager to return to the place of his birth to which his grandfather quickly responds: “You may not like [the city] one bit [...] It’ll be full of niggers” a line that pins Mr. Head as a racist early on in the story.<sup>80</sup> It becomes apparent that the supposedly hellish journey that the two are about to take is going to involve their interactions with the racial makeup of the city, compared to the all-white countryside that they call home. It also becomes apparent that the author is utilizing blackness only to show the reader something about her white characters. The grotesque nature of the characters surfaces in this passage, and the reader becomes even more mistrustful of the pair. Racism is something that Mr. Head is teaching Nelson, and their experiences reflect on their inability to humanize African Americans in the city. O’Connor wants the reader to quickly recognize Mr. Head’s bigotry as part of the story’s sequence to highlight his grotesqueness.

Nelson encounters an African American for the first time on the train and at this point the reader is able to more clearly recognize Mr. Head’s attempts to instill his bigotry into his grandson. On the train, a “huge, coffee colored man” clad in a suit and precious jewelry walks through the aisle past Nelson and his grandfather. Mr. Head asks his grandson “What was that?” to which Nelson replies “A man [...] a fat man [...] an old man” until finally Mr. Head says to

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 250-251

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 252

him “That was a nigger.”<sup>81</sup> Mr. Head exposes his desire to fill his grandson’s mind with his ignorant perceptions of race. Nelson’s innocence leads him to guess anything but the man’s race but Mr. Head points Nelson to the man’s race as his difference from the two of them. O’Connor uses this scene, this experience, not to didactically dismiss racism but rather to display how racism generationally perpetuates itself through experiences. This signifies the author’s understanding of the artificiality of racism. The lack of immediate racial identification on Nelson’s behalf exposes this artificiality; he does not think about the man on racial terms until he is taught to do so.

While Mr. Head can instill in his grandson with racial ideas of inferiority, the segregated dining car of the train complicates the place of the two main characters within the socioeconomic structure of the New South. The two cannot afford to eat in the dining train car,<sup>82</sup> but are nonetheless able to reaffirm their sense of racial superiority by seeing the same African American man mentioned earlier eating behind a “saffron-colored curtain.”<sup>83</sup> The other non-whites in the “elegant” dining car are two women with the man in the segregated section and the waiters who are serving passengers. This is the first encounter Nelson has with segregated spaces, leaving him with the impression that African Americans are “people who serve whites or inhabit spaces whose separateness and difference are clearly, visibly marked.”<sup>84</sup> This also exposes to the reader that conceptions of racial superiority trump socioeconomic inferiority, and that despite their class status Mr. Head and Nelson can artificially put themselves above those in the segregated section because of their whiteness.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 255

<sup>82</sup> O’Connor confirms their socioeconomic status as poor whites clearly in the introduction of the story when describing Mr. Head turning off his alarm clock that sat on an overturned bucket next to his bed on page 249.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 256

<sup>84</sup>Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 131.

Grace Hale situates “The Artificial Nigger” within the context of segregation in the South at large in her book Making Whiteness. When discussing the dining car scene, Hale extends her literary analysis to a historical/sociological exploration of how segregated spaces more clearly affirmed fraught ideas of racial inferiority due partially to the condition of the spaces themselves. Spaces marked “Colored,” according to Hale, were kept in much poorer condition and lacked routine maintenance or inferior service than those marked “White.” These racially “specialized” spaces created an artificial environment meant to uphold beliefs of African American racial inferiority held by Southern whites. Segregated spaces with clear distinctions of quality attempted to make ideas of racial superiority/inferiority tangible. For whites, the bedraggled spaces limited to blacks seemed to affirm the racial hierarchy, the decrepit spaces marked “colored” became synonymous with the bodies of African Americans. The inferior conditions of the physical spaces became equated with the black body; the spaces were unkempt and thus so were the persons inhabiting them in the eyes of the passive white observer. Inversely, for African Americans, artificially constructed inferiority was systematically thrust into the body and mind of the inhabitants of “colored” spaces through the objectively superior quality of spaces maintained for whites.

Hale cites W.E.B. Du Bois’ description of buying train tickets in the “colored” line to support her discussion of the conditions of segregated spaces. In Darkwater: Voices From within the Veil, Du Bois describes a scene in which blacks are underserved and often cheated into paying higher prices for their tickets when trying to perform the simple act of travel.<sup>8586</sup> This order enforces white ideas of superiority over blacks and also handicaps African Americans in

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 132

<sup>86</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (Project Gutenberg, 2005), accessed March 1, 2018, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15210/15210-h/15210-h.htm>.

the economy and social strata of American culture. Just prior to this scene in the book, Du Bois recalls a conversation he had with one of his white friends. His friend accuses him of being “too sensitive” to which Du Bois replies “I admit, I am—sensitive. I am artificial. I cringe or am bumptious or immobile. I am intellectually dishonest, art-blind, and I lack humor.”<sup>87</sup> Du Bois’ sense of artificiality is dependent exactly on his immobility. He describes how he cannot enter science, literature, employment, a university, or any other institution because of his race. All of this is forced, put on, artificial. Du Bois is not able to enter any of these fields not because he is not qualified, a criminal, a madman, or anything else generally detested in society. Instead, his race becomes something artificially used and imposed on him by others to prohibit him from mobilizing and succeeding. His artificial racial self, something given rather than chosen, prohibits him from integrating into a segregated society. The train, one of the few places that withers at his immobility is unkempt, underserved, and downright miserable.

Thus segregated spaces simultaneously mobilize and immobilize. The mobilization involves the corralling of black bodies into racially specific spaces with legal consequences for not following these norms. The immobilization lies within the lack of social mobility that segregated spaces maintain. The unkempt and unequal confines act as a way to convince African Americans that they are meant to live as the second class of America, creating a psychological barrier (“the veil,” a concept developed by DuBois to be discussed later) that maintains white hegemony that is impenetrable within the confines of segregated space. The immobility of segregated space is both artificial and genuine. The train is an unusual case, since its basic function is to physically move bodies from one area to another. The decrepit state of the “colored” train car described by Du Bois as being caked in dirt and generally dank makes the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid

black passenger not want to travel again, as Du Bois describes in a scene: “‘No,’ said the little lady in the corner (she looked like an ivory cameo and her dress flowed on her like a caress), ‘we don't travel much.’”<sup>88</sup> The segregated car is intentionally kept in poor condition to artificially cripple African Americans from achieving physical mobility within society.

The role of workers within the segregated economy of the train complicates the placement of black bodies within these racially specialized spaces. In the same dining car scene of “The Artificial Nigger” Mr. Head and Nelson are confronted by a waiter when they first enter the car who, along with his two other coworkers, are African American.<sup>89</sup> These three servers are not forced behind the saffron curtain like the large man observed by Nelson and Mr. Head earlier. Instead, they are able to pass through the artificial color boundaries of the dining car, but only through their placement within the car’s social hierarchy as servers. The waiters are only able to enter white spaces under the condition that their place was not as equals but as workers, meant to serve the patrons of the car. The allocation of blacks within white spaces under the condition that they are meant to serve enforces the master/slave hierarchy of the Old South in a new, subtle fashion.

The creation of segregated spaces thus allows whites to affirm old southern values of white supremacy by making inadequate spaces for blacks to perform the same actions in the economy or social structure. It attempted to psychologically implant a sense of inferiority in the minds of African Americans by equating their place and their bodies with spaces deemed inadequate for white inhabitants. In the increasingly industrialized South the culture of segregation flourished and, as portrayed by O’Connor, the railway was a space that clearly displayed this. These spaces were maintained despite a growing African American middle class

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid

<sup>89</sup> O’Connor, *The Artificial*, in *The Complete*, 356.



in the South, as symbolized by the large rich man observed by Mr. Head and Nelson. Class signifiers were no longer strictly tied to race, as Hale observes “many whites found it difficult to imagine African Americans as anything other than poor and uneducated.”<sup>90</sup> The railway system thus highlighted class and racial difference, with it the attire of various classes becoming visible marks of class difference. The segregated railcar allowed even poor whites such as Mr. Head and Nelson to affirm some sense of superiority over even middle class or wealthy African Americans, for their lower economic status still did not play a role in defining a social inferiority in them due to the system of racial segregation. To fully dissect how segregation works to affirm inferiority that crosses class lines, one must explore more deeply how whites in America came to create the artificial figure of the “nigger” or “negro” and how this figure has functioned to enforce racial inferiority beyond the segregation of space. This artificially constructed figure is a subject closely analyzed by the writer James Baldwin. Through analyzing Baldwin there is more direct insight as to how these constructed figures function to sustain white supremacy.

### **The Construction of Difference and Inferiority**

James Baldwin expresses his opinion on how racial epithets function in American society during a 1969 documented conversation that took place in the United Kingdom released in film as “Baldwin’s Nigger.”<sup>91</sup> When asked by a man why Baldwin uses the term “negro” to refer to African Americans (the man argues that “negro” is not a country) Baldwin is quick to point out that it was not a term coined by him or any other person the term was used to refer to, it was an

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<sup>90</sup>Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 129.

<sup>91</sup>James Baldwin, narr., *Baldwin's Nigger*, directed by Horace Ové, 1969, accessed February 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zkWshZRM-M>.

externalized epithet given to African Americans by whites. The implications of racial epithets are part of their historical and cultural context, Baldwin argues, which explains why he mentions the changes in racial epithets from his grandmother's time to his time. The cultural implications of racial epithets are impossible to divorce from their cultural context and often derive their power from that context. When Mr. Head tells Nelson that the man he saw was a "nigger" he is not only identifying the man as black but as a man who Mr. Head views as beneath him despite any economic or social capital that man may have.

In a letter to his nephew, James Baldwin writes a loving piece of guidance that reflects deeply on the formulation of black identity by whites. Baldwin says early in the letter: "You can only be destroyed by believing that you are really what the white world calls a *nigger*."<sup>92</sup> Baldwin continues, saying that his grandson is expected by white society to "make peace with mediocrity" and argues that the "details and symbols of [his] life have been deliberately constructed to make [him] believe what white people say about [him]."<sup>93</sup> Baldwin here addresses the disparity of racialized spaces and how they are designed to implant a sense of inferiority in his nephew.<sup>94</sup>

The physical spaces within "The Artificial Nigger" portray Baldwin's arguments once Mr. Head and Nelson enter the city of Atlanta. Once exiting the train and arriving to the city, Mr. Head and Nelson walk around and eventually find themselves lost within the urban landscape.

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<sup>92</sup> James Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," in *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963), 18.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22

<sup>94</sup> This letter was not written about the Jim Crow South, the place of the dining car explored by Mr. Head and Nelson, but of Harlem, New York. While the North lacked formal legislation calling for the segregation of spaces it nonetheless had racially segregated neighborhoods thus also having racially segregated social spheres embedded within its urban spaces. Despite the geographic and literal differences of this, Baldwin still clearly articulates how black identity has been created and enforced by white society in his letter.

They being walking in circles and eventually find themselves in an African American neighborhood within the city. The buildings they begin to see in this section of the city are not as well taken care of as the white part of the city. O'Connor describes their arrival into this part of the city:

“The houses they were passing now were all unpainted and the wood in them looked rotten; the street between was narrower. Nelson saw a colored man. Then another. Then another. ‘Niggers live in these houses’ he observed. ‘Well come on and we’ll go somewheres else,’ Mr. Head said. ‘We didn’t come to look at niggers.’”<sup>95</sup>

The spaces inhabited by African Americans in the story are inferior to the white spaces within the city that Nelson and Mr. Head first encounter upon their arrival. The inferior construction and maintenance of these spaces allow Mr. Head’s teachings of racial inferiority to become justified through these decrepit representations of buildings.

These racialized spaces are not destinations for white tourists, and are kept from being so. The unsightly conditions of the neighborhood, with its rotting, unpainted houses immediately allow Mr. Head and Nelson to define themselves against the neighborhood while they find themselves within it. This *construction* creates an artificial sense of superiority for the white characters. The places they racially identify with are not in such poor condition, their own identity becomes linked to the physical spaces they are familiar with. Their experiences within the neighborhood do not entirely display these initial sentiments of superiority that they feel upon their initial arrival into the segregated section of the city. O'Connor deconstructs these

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<sup>95</sup> O'Connor, *The Artificial*, in *The Complete*, 260.

superiority complexes and reveals the fear, fascination, and confusion that both characters have towards African Americans.

### **Fear, Fascination, and Confusion**

As the two characters stumble through the African American part of the city, making sure to not interact with any of the inhabitants, they become increasingly more afraid and lost: “Nelson was afraid of the colored men and he didn’t want to be laughed at by the colored children.”<sup>96</sup> Here a more nuanced portrait of Nelson’s psychology is given through his exposure to African Americans. O’Connor again only uses the black characters mentioned here to complicate her white characters. The racial superiority felt and taught early in the story begins to shatter as the characters slowly trudge deeper into the unfamiliar territory of Atlanta’s segregated neighborhoods. Their felt superiority begins to dwindle as they no longer have superior knowledge of their surroundings. Their fear lies in the realization that the black inhabitants of the neighborhood, who they have conceived as inferior to them, are their only way to find themselves out of the city and back to the country.

Eventually, after prolonged internal struggle Nelson approaches a woman sitting on her porch and asks her for directions. She begins to make fun of him, but he is mesmerized by her speaking with him:

“...he was too paralyzed to even scowl. He stood drinking in every detail of her [...] He suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her and then he wanted to feel her breath on his face. He wanted to look down and

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 261

down into her eyes while she held him tighter and tighter [...] He felt as if he were reeling down through a pitch-black tunnel.”<sup>97</sup>

This interaction is meant to show some sort of mystical awe that Nelson feels when he confronts the African American woman. She is simply making fun of him nervously asking for directions, but for him the interaction is supposed to symbolize a spiritual yearning for the maternal, as well as displaying potentially sexual undertones. It also unearths a feeling of dependence in Nelson previously unseen in the story. Nelson tries to show his brevity in traveling to the city for the first time and this brevity is finally deconstructed in this passage.

This passage also shows a failing on the part of Flannery O’Connor. The first black character that Nelson interacts with is only used symbolically to show the salvation of the white character. Nelson is given a wide range of emotions in such a brief passage, and seems afraid, confused, and embarrassed in the face of the woman. The woman only serves as an emblem of Nelson’s range of emotionality. Claire Kahane dissects O’Connor’s use of African Americans and links it to the Southern literary trope of using black characters for “redemptive humility” through universalizing the particular suffering of African Americans in her work and extending it to her white characters.<sup>98</sup> In this particular story, it seems that the frantic “suffering” of Nelson from being lost in the city is halted, for a brief moment, by his memorization with the woman sitting on her porch. Nelson is caught in a trance-like state, fixated on the woman and her blackness. O’Connor uses the woman’s blackness as a vehicle to communicate Nelson’s underlying dependence on adults, despite his efforts to seem independent. The woman’s blackness serves only this purpose that is portraying humility in O’Connor’s white character. The

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 262

<sup>98</sup> Claire Kahane, "The Artificial Niggers," *The Massachusetts Review* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 184, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25088837>.

author constructs her own idea of blackness and then uses that creation of a “racial self” to serve her white characters.

### **Blackness and the Racial Self**

The overarching creation of black identity by white society, mostly explicitly shown through racial epithets, seems not as much to serve blacks as it is to serve whites. As James Baldwin argues, the fight against accepting imposed racial identities threatens whiteness. Labels or identities given to race groups categorize them within the cultural context of society by defining what one group is and what another “is not.”<sup>99</sup> The process of forming an identity through negation must involve the lampooning of another group to sustain itself; in the American case this more often than not involves the oppression of African Americans or other minority groups.<sup>100</sup> The minstrel show is a key example of how the white working class was able to solidify its identity through the lampooning of black culture. Eric Lott’s Love and Theft discusses the social scene of a minstrel show and how it allowed various groups of lower class European descent to gather and identify themselves through finding common entertainment in minstrel performances. Those observing the spectacle were able to align themselves more clearly through the show as “not black.” While it is true that the African American existence in America is inherently different than the white (for the entrance of blacks into America came as a “bill of sale” in Baldwin’s words) the cultural context of America binds them despite sometimes

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<sup>99</sup> Baldwin throws a wrench in this, saying “No white American is sure he is white,” pointing to the long history of race mixing in America that often goes unacknowledged by those defining themselves as “white.”

<sup>100</sup> For further reading, see: Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University, 2013).

desperate efforts of negation and distinction. These power structures psychologically impact the individual's self-perception, as Baldwin says: "The most subtle effect of oppression is what it does to what you think about yourself."<sup>101</sup><sup>102</sup>

W.E.B. Du Bois' book The Souls of Black Folk discusses the formulation of African American identity and how it interacts with the sense of self. He explores a concept that he calls "double-consciousness," describing it as:

"The Negro is a second-sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, --an American, a Negro."<sup>103</sup>

The concept of double-consciousness explains a torn self and a gap in identity. One can never see oneself as a whole; the identity is split into two parts. These split pieces are felt within the body of a single individual. Oppressive power structures have created this psychological split, for to see oneself as one is not a practical way to survive.

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<sup>101</sup> Baldwin, *Baldwin's Nigger*.

<sup>102</sup> Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man provides a long, fictionalized account of a nameless narrator who is perpetually having his own identity utilized for the causes of others. When joining the Brotherhood, a group that references the communist party in America, the white members of the group attempt to symbolically utilize the narrator's blackness for their own ideology. One of the members tells the narrator that he could be "the new Booker T. Washington." The brotherhood becomes obsessed with disciplining the narrator's worldview around their ideology, labeling any "missteps" as having a "lack of training." The Brotherhood is effectively trying to reshape the narrator's worldview and how he perceives himself. This new perception, if implemented according to their ideas, will change how the narrator views himself as a black man within the overarching struggle for equality based on the Brotherhood ideology. The members of the Brotherhood are attempting to remodel the narrator's blackness, and despite its seemingly good intentions, relies on the same power structures of discriminatory epithets.

<sup>103</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet, 1995), 45.

Emmanuel C. Eze discusses double-consciousness as being aware of both oneself and one's "racial self".<sup>104</sup> According to Eze, the idea of a racial self is a Euro-American creation and was used to first justify the enslavement of Africans. The post-slavery racialized African American is thus "is expected to define an appropriate subjectivity - a subjectivity we could, accordingly, refer to as a Racial Self."<sup>105</sup> This analysis brings to light a contradiction within the previous discussion of Baldwin and the formulation of racial epithets/categories by white society, and highlights an important fact of double-consciousness. The formulation of racial identity is an entirely Euro-American phenomenon, something that was forced onto African slaves, creating the social category of an *African* slave. This is not something that the enslaved came up with themselves, it was a title enforced by slave masters. The post-slavery world asks African American populations to simultaneously define themselves as a *race* while having already historically formulated what the functions of different races ought to be. This double split of having to both define oneself and situate it within the societal understanding of oneself as part of a whole does not give space for a creation of self-identity--it creates what Du Bois calls "the veil".

The two protagonists in "The Artificial Nigger" are confronted by the veil in the African American neighborhood that manifests in their shattered sense of superiority which was based entirely on their perceived racial selves. The characters fail to recognize the "twoness" described by Du Bois in his idea of double consciousness in the inhabitants of the segregated part of town, which further instills them with fear. Eventually, the two find themselves out of the African American neighborhood and enter another, seemingly affluent white part of town with brick

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<sup>104</sup> Emmanuel C. Eze, "On Double Consciousness," *Callaloo* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 886, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41243197>.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 886



buildings and empty cars parked along the streets.<sup>106</sup> The physical landscape and marked improvement in the upkeep of the white neighborhood constructed by O'Connor again points to the artificiality of segregation and how it functions to affirm given conceptions of the racial self. Yet Mr. Head and Nelson do not find safety within the brick walls of the white neighborhood and encounter their first real dilemma in the white neighborhood. In an attempt to trick Nelson and totally unearth his dependent nature, Mr. Head decides to hide while his grandson naps on the street, so when he wakes up he will have to fully confront his false sense of impudence. Nelson wakes up and begins to sprint down the streets, knocking down and injuring a woman carrying her groceries. The woman screams for the police and Mr. Head denies knowing his grandson to save himself from any trouble with the law. He and Nelson leave the scene, with Nelson holding a furious grudge towards his grandfather for denying their relationship.

Their unwelcome visit to this white part of Atlanta further crushes Mr. Head's self-righteousness. In finally feeling a sense of comfort amongst people his own race, he is immediately thrown into an actual crisis, unlike the existential one that he felt in the segregated part of the city. Instead of coming to assist his grandson, Mr. Head shows himself to be a coward in the face of any true danger. Nelson is finally able to see his grandfather's cowardice and is forced to reckon with it while trying to return home, but the idea of home for him also becomes destroyed: "Home was nothing to him."<sup>107</sup> The pair stumble through the city, trying to find the train station when they are confronted by a statue that restores their communication and trust.

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<sup>106</sup> O'Connor, *The Artificial*, in *The Complete*, 263.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 268

In the final scene of the story, Nelson and his grandfather are confronted with a plaster minstrel statue of an African American eating a watermelon.<sup>108</sup> O'Connor describes their approach to the figure:

“They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were face with some great mystery, some monument to another’s victory that had brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy.”<sup>109</sup>

Here the reader sees how Mr. Head and Nelson are envisioned by O'Connor as representatives of the South. When confronted by the statue, both peer into a window of the past and see the face of Southern history. Only through this physically artificial statue are Mr. Head and Nelson able to find salvation in at the end of their hellish journey into the vast cityscape, because the statue is the only thing that affirms how they view African Americans.

Yet again the reader sees the shortcomings of O'Connor’s portrayal of African Americans in her story. The characters look at the statue with the same fascination and misunderstanding as they do the real African Americans earlier in the story. Mr. Head says, after they both gaze at the statue and feel some sense of mercy: ““They ain’t got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one.””<sup>110</sup> For the two characters in the story, black people function symbolically for their own self recognition with an omittance of any deeper racialized understanding. African Americans function only to serve the white protagonists as mirrors of the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 268

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 269

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 269

past signifying some understanding of suffering and thus leading to salvation.<sup>111</sup> The statue, much like the woman Nelson speaks with earlier in the story on a porch, function only as “psychological projections” or “tools of theology.”<sup>112</sup> The African Americans represented in this story are, in essence, given only artificial representation and are never fully realized as individuals rather than manifestations of some latent side of either Mr. Head or Nelson’s humanity.

In conclusion, Flannery O’Connor’s short story “The Artificial Nigger” attempts to portray the artificiality of racial superiority within the New South. The story is in dialogue with a larger understanding of the artificiality of race and how this is used to enforce feelings of superiority on racial grounds in America. The conceptualization of a racial self is reflective of the new power structures within American society that are rooted in the old system of chattel slavery. Through exploring writers/scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois and James Baldwin one can begin to unpack the imposition of racial identity on African Americans and assess pieces of literature such as “The Artificial Nigger” with this lens. There are also shortcomings within Flannery O’Connor’s writing of race in her story and her inability to have black characters in the piece that function beyond symbols of Mr. Head and Nelson’s salvation. While her narrative of going back to the country subverts racial superiority within the context of a segregated society, O’Connor is still unable to fully humanize her black characters.

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<sup>111</sup> Nicholas Crawford, "An Africanist Impasse: Race, Return, and Revelation in the Short Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," *South Atlantic Review* 68, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 9, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3201718>.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

## CONCLUSION

The white working class in America has expressed its convictions and formulated its identity through processes of negation--whether it be regional, religious, or racial. Southerners were able to reestablish their sense of regional superiority after the Civil War through both glorifying the Old South in mythology and holding out for the success of the New South. The splintering of fundamentalists from the Christian evangelical tradition expresses a deep disdain for modernity; fundamentalism defines itself through opposition to these forces. Racial identity within this group is also largely centered on defining whiteness in contrast to blackness and creates artificial barriers that seek to immobilize otherness. Working class whites as an exploited group oppose their exploiters; at the same time, their racial privilege allows them to be hostile and violent towards their “competitors.”

The overriding sense of alienation felt by this group, as expressed by William Faulkner in his character Emily Grierson, still haunts many poor whites today. Largely reflected in the current opioid crisis, poor whites still find themselves at odds with the world around them and long for the United States to return to days past. Many still fly Confederate flags, oppose the removal of Confederate statues, and scowl at out of town license plates. Rising globalism has further introduced new layers of unfamiliarity to poor whites, demanding that people “speak English” and electing politicians who are in favor of banning Muslims from the United States.

The modes of conviction explored within this project exist in more subtle and mutated forms today. Segregation has transformed into the modern prison system and the biological governance and oppression of black bodies is reflected in the United States’ mass incarceration rates. Racial control in America as explored in the writing of Flannery O’Connor is reflected through this. African Americans are still demonized in the media and by politicians (must we

remember Hillary Clinton coined the term “super-predator”). Through demonizing African Americans poor whites are able to define themselves in opposition to this “criminality”. Complexes of racial superiority have also expanded to oppress Muslims, Mexicans, and other minority groups viewed as either a threat or potential competition. Christian fundamentalists also still exist in new forms today still opposing more contemporary forms of cultural modernity. Most notably, the Westboro Baptist Church and its standing history of prejudice reflects the continuation of the fundamentalist tradition. This group notoriously defines itself by what it “is not” through its inflammatory hate speech directed at the LGBT community, Catholics, abortion clinics, Jews, Muslims, and a slew of groups and institutions considered to be “other.” Perhaps the longest standing conviction explored in this project is the mythological and/or glorified past, most notably expressed in the 2016 Donald Trump campaign and his subsequent presidency.

Poor whites are a large portion of the Donald Trump voter base; “Make America Great Again” recalls lost days of glory much like the Southern mythologies discussed in the first chapter of this project. Trump and his supporters imagine an America of former glory while ignoring the dark history of this romanticization. America’s former status of being haunts this group in the contemporary world where tech giants, global culture, and the mass media infiltrate and change the American culture that was once known and loved. Poor whites find themselves at odds not only with the government, foreigners, urbanites, and the media alike, but also with their heritage. The systematic exploitation of this class has been passed down through generations and has continually made this group feel out of place in the modern era. It is an existential heirloom that poor whites have borne for generations--an inheritance much like the bigotry passed from Mr. Head to Nelson. At the heart of the matter there is an unceasing urge to return back home to the country.

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