

SUICIDE AND SOUTHERN GHOSTS:  
THE LOCATION OF  
SELF-VIOLENCE

by

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## ABSTRACT

Whether or not they have resisted the categorization, many southern authors have produced works marked by unique depictions of grotesque violence. Critics have often investigated this theme through a regional lens, exploring it as a link between the fictions of various southern writers. Missing from this wealth of scholarship, however, is an analysis of portrayals of *self*-violence—self-harm and, particularly, suicide—within these texts. This thesis endeavors, therefore, to account for the commonality of self-violent acts in fictional southern landscapes, from Yoknapatawpha to Farr’s Gin.

First treating the example most widely discussed in scholarship, Quentin Compson in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, it proposes that his suicide be removed from its usual vacuum and read alongside more opaque acts of similar self-violence in both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*. The second section examines John Singer’s suicide in Carson McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, which critics have commented upon mostly in relationship to its effect on the other characters in the novel, as an act of autonomy that leaves a permanent mark on the town and facilitates the story’s unsettling conclusion. Finally, the third section analyzes Eudora Welty’s short story “Clytie” as a microcosm of Welty’s personal South, a fictional landscape haunted by Clytie Farr’s inability to conform to social norms and her ultimate death. In all of these texts, self-violent characters represent apparitional projections of authorial conflict—ghosts, haunted in life by unique awareness of the South’s constrictions and doomed after death to serve as tombstone-like reminders of this reality to both the other characters and the works’ broader readerships.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my dad, who hoarded every scrap of silly writing I'd ever produced in full confidence it would all be worth great money one day; to my mom, who allowed me on countless occasions to talk her ear off; and to my friends, who provided me with joy and laughter when I needed it most. Most importantly, every bit of my work on this project has been for the very real, non-ghostly Quentin Compsons whose legacies have been read, re-read, and misread throughout time. Be at peace.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### *The Location of Self-Violence*

Acts of self-violence and suicide populate the texts of many southern authors, serving as landmarks of geographical and cultural ruin. Whether in William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, in Carson McCullers's Georgia town, or in Eudora Welty's Farr's Gin, characters that commit suicide ultimately live beyond their own peril to haunt the characters and spaces around them; they possess unique, ghostly presences that linger. Marked by abnormal self-awareness, these characters usually find themselves disturbed by a profound emptiness that accompanies cultural, social, or intellectual divergence. As the often-faceless masses surrounding them ignore or overlook their turmoil, they remain mostly silent. But, through their self-violence, they enable themselves to finally speak. The symbolic scars of self-violence mark these southern texts like ghostly signposts; here, they read, are bodies doomed to be haunted in life and to haunt after death.

No character is better known for such haunting than Faulkner's Quentin Compson. For many critics, his final walk around the Harvard campus and subsequent suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* represent not only the pinnacle of Faulkner's career but also the pinnacle of southern literature itself. This tragic act leaves its mark on both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, two of Faulkner's most influential works, and it unavoidably colors a great wealth of scholarship. But Quentin does not stand alone; as Susan V. Donaldson and Anne Goodwyn Jones point out, he represents a whole "host of haunted southern bodies, black and white, male and female" ("Rethinking the South" 3). These bodies, some overlooked more than others in

scholarship, uniquely haunt both their fictional habitats and their broader readerships; joined in chorus, they tell the ultimate southern ghost story.

Quentin stands out among this group not because his story is any different than those of the others, but because it is the most quantifiable. The ramifications of his suicide are evident in both his fictional and symbolic legacies; Quentin leaves behind a family very much haunted by his death, a young girl doomed to live by his namesake, and a story that he did not want to tell in the first place written metatextually into the pages *Absalom*. Haunted by the understanding that he is but a cog in the wheel of a larger narrative of which he has no control, Quentin turns eventually to suicide not just as a method of escape but as a method of agency—and it is precisely this motivation that echoes itself in the ghostly bodies of many other characters of southern literature.

Aware in a way that others are not of the cultural landscape that surrounds them, these characters are haunted by the looming narrative of “southernness” of which they fear they cannot step outside. This understanding comes to them in a variety of ways—some encapsulated in a single moment and others revealed gradually—, but it always leads to some form of self-violence. Whether these characters purposefully commit suicide, inflict pain upon themselves, or knowingly allow harm to befall them, their ethos is always a desire for intellectual, emotional, and physical agency. Regional borders and binaries constrict them to a singular space, physical and mental, from which they desperately want to flee. Thus, they make pilgrimages out of the confines of their environments in search of a metaphysical escape: to Harvard, to Memphis, to the attic. Ultimately, however, they find that the cultural narrative of the South holds them in a vice grip, and that whatever small form of agency they have used as a release in the past is but a vacuum.

Haunted in life, these characters are also doomed to haunt in death. Their acts of self-infliction remain a ghostly presence over the characters, landscapes, and texts they leave behind. For Quentin, this presence is obvious. His legacy drives the young girl of his namesake to the empty declaration that “I hate this house. I’m going to run away” (*Sound* 71); it haunts Quentin’s mother as she visits his grave, disbelieving that her son cannot hurt her anymore (11); and it lives on through the story of Thomas Sutpen—the suffocating narrative that Quentin so desperately wants to escape but cannot, because in the South it is “something you live and breathe in like air” (*Absalom* 289). But in other characters from Faulkner’s fiction, and in characters from the fiction of other southern authors, too, resides this same haunted legacy. Gail Hightower’s wife in Faulkner’s *Light in August* dies under mysterious circumstances, and rumors circulate afterward that she jumped rather than fell from her Memphis hotel room window; the story in *Absalom* of Rosa Coldfield’s father, who starves himself in the attic of his home, actually preoccupies Quentin’s mind in the days leading up to his own self-violence in *Sound*; Carson McCullers’s John Singer shoots himself at the end of *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter*, shocking the other characters that have used him as a sounding board for their own dreams of personal agency; and Eudora Welty’s Clytie Farr drowns in her own reflection in the short story “Clytie,” throwing her body into the rubble of her family’s ruin.

In all of these cases, the fictional community bears the mark of these haunted bodies. The conflict that drives the characters to self-violence is always the same internal battle against the external force of narrative, coupled with a lack of understanding from the characters surrounding them. But, faced with the brutality of these self-violent acts, the communities are plagued—though fleetingly—with belated recognition. The bodies that were once haunted in life now haunt after death, as each fictional landscape bears the ghostly footprints of their self-violence. The death of Hightower’s wife leaves a permanent scar on his reputation; Mr. Coldfield’s death

crucially propels Rosa to move to Sutpen's Hundred and can be seen as an influence in Quentin's ultimate decision to commit suicide; Singer's death facilitates a mass disturbance in the town's public consciousness that awakens the other characters to their own failures; Clytie's death sends a dismal message to the townspeople who have always avoided trying to understand her; and, of course, Quentin's death strikes unrest in the Compson family and produces a legacy of disruption through his sister's illegitimate daughter and namesake.

Set apart by their unique ability to feel and recognize the burdensome pressure of the South—its past, its presence, its culture, its narrative—, these self-violent characters represent in their respective works moments in which authorial voice rings the clearest; messengers to both their fictional communities and to the broader readership, they facilitate through their suicides moments of intervention in the text. Whether through the physical marker of Quentin's gravesite, the lingering gossip about Hightower's wife, or the bizarre image of Clytie's legs hanging out of the barrel she drowns in, these characters imprint their ghostly presences on the landscapes of these texts. They communicate, both to the fictional and the real South, the same message: to understand one's positionality within the broader system is to recognize a lack of individual agency, and to decide to either fixate on this knowledge or fall back into a false sense of complacency is, ultimately, to die unto oneself.

## 2. WILLIAM FAULKNER

### *“Shutting the door upon the ticking”:* Iterations of Suicide in Faulkner’s Fiction

Aside from Quentin Compson’s infamous drowning in *The Sound and the Fury*, suicide appears at first glance to color only the periphery of Faulkner’s fictional landscapes. Many of his main characters are marked by a unique sense of fatalism—trapping Joe Christmas in cyclical patterns of violence “as though he had set out and made his plans to passively commit suicide” in *Light in August* (443), for example, or leading Charles Bon to accept and encourage his own murder as an inevitability in *Absalom, Absalom!*—, but the explicit act of suicide is largely absent from even his most morbid stories. When it appears, it usually inhabits an exterior space; it is recounted, often indirectly, by other characters and tends to disappear as the plot unravels. Most notably among these moments, for example, are the death of Gail Hightower’s wife in *Light* and the death of Rosa Coldfield’s father in *Absalom*, both of which receive little treatment in the text as a whole.

In *Light*, Hightower’s wife features mostly in the beginning of the novel, when the story is focused primarily on characterizing Hightower himself. Her fall from a Memphis hotel window is mentioned as part of Jefferson’s collective past. The rumors that encircle both Hightower’s scandalous departure from the ministry and his subsequent refusal to leave Jefferson after his disgrace are among the widely disputed controversies considered foundational to *Light*’s cultural landscape, but his wife’s supposed suicide merely serves to bolster notions of his general ineptitude, as she herself remains nameless throughout the novel. Additionally, Faulkner leaves the reader with no certainty about what actually happens to her, only establishing that the

whispered possibility of suicide partially colors the townspeople's backlash against Hightower himself. By the end of the novel, the scandal of her death—now not only far removed geographically from the town center, but also temporally from the present moment—is all but forgotten. While Hightower persists in his refusal to be driven out by the townspeople, stubbornly remaining present in the novel, his wife—and her rumored suicide—largely disappears, save for one final appearance in Hightower's psyche.

Goodhue Coldfield's death in *Absalom* is a little more explicit than that of Hightower's wife in both its depiction and its influence. Though told only through the jumbled recollection of his daughter Rosa's narration, it is unquestionably an act of suicide, and it at least partially affects the trajectory of the broader story. To avoid the sight of "his native land in the throes of repelling an invading army" (*Absalom* 47) during the Civil War, Mr. Coldfield locks himself away in an attic, eventually starving himself. His death enables Rosa to move to Sutpen's Hundred, thus setting the broader story in motion. Still, though, the narrators in closest proximity to the suicide—Mr. Compson, only a generation removed and firsthand witness to the brunt of the town's gossip, and Rosa herself—mostly gloss over the subject. If it were not for Quentin, the narrator furthest removed from the time frame in which Mr. Coldfield lived, and the only one who ponders the suicide toward the end of the novel, the story would likely vanish from the text entirely.

Faulkner presents both of these suicides (or possible suicide, in the case of Hightower's wife) indirectly—by a character's word of mouth or memory—and at a distance—whether it be geographically or temporally. When examined against a backdrop of the fatalism characteristic of his fiction, this detachment might seem incidental; Faulkner's works feature a whole cast of characters that succumb to death with various degrees of willingness, from Christmas and Bon to Hightower's wife and Mr. Coldfield. But in light of his explicit depiction of Quentin's suicide in

*The Sound and the Fury*, the penultimate moment of tragedy in which the moving pieces of Faulkner's convoluted storyline seem to briefly still, these other suicides are brought into sharper focus as subtle iterations of the same story. The direct attention that Faulkner devotes to Quentin's death illustrates not, as some scholarship on the subject seems to suggest, a deep dive into the psyche of a unique character, but rather a more direct depiction of a theme already present in Faulkner's fiction. An examination of Quentin's suicide alongside the suicides of Hightower's wife and Mr. Coldfield, moreover, reveals that these acts of self-violence represent metatextual moments of authorial expression in all three texts, bringing suicide to light as a foundational element of Faulkner's fictional landscape.

Quentin, as the successor of his father's generational past and the surrogate inheritor of Rosa's generational past, is in many ways the embodied connector of Yoknapatawpha's pasts, presents, and futures. Inhabiting the worlds of both *Absalom* and *Sound*, he at least partially exists in a liminal space of intertwined histories. As Philip Weinstein describes, he "appears as a moment-by-moment involuntary recorder of others' voices, a sentient receptacle wounded by the shards of their utterances: the site on which the cacophony of the larger culture registers" (85). Not only has he been chosen as the repository for Rosa's story, and thus the legend of Thomas Sutpen, as Weinstein goes on to suggest, but he has also been tasked with the responsibility of carrying that past forth: "So maybe you will enter the literary profession as so many Southern gentlemen and gentlewomen too are doing now," Rosa tells him at the beginning of *Absalom*, "and maybe some day you will remember this and write about it" (5). To realize Rosa's design, Quentin must receive the story of the past she tells him, understand it in the present, and transcribe it for the future.

The burden that this expectation places on Quentin's shoulders, and his subsequent struggle to accept and meet it, have been well noted in scholarship. As Nathaniel A. Miller

summarizes, “Quentin’s problem as a Southerner is that he is neither a new man nor an old one” (39). In *Absalom*, his primary role is that of a vessel through which the characters around him—Rosa, Quentin’s father—attempt to preserve the past. This positionality, moreover, renders him incapable of telling his own story, or living in his own temporal moment. “Wait, I tell you!” Quentin interrupts as his Harvard roommate Shreve garrulously takes over the narration of Sutpen’s story. “I am telling” (*Absalom* 222). This moment arrives at the end of the novel, when Quentin is presumably trying to carry out a crucial step in Rosa’s design: making sense of the story she has told him and communicating it to the Northern “outsider,” in Shreve. Following his outburst is an internal monologue in which Quentin reveals the depth of his turmoil: “*Am I going to have to hear it all again he thought I am going to have to hear it all over again I am already hearing it all over again I am listening to it all over again I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever*” (222). His fear is one that he has grappled with throughout the novel: that the story of Sutpen—the story of the South’s collective past—is one that he will never escape.

This perceived inescapability, and the struggle to gain control of a personal narrative under the weight of a collective one, is also present in the brief glimpse into the life of Hightower’s wife in *Light*. The first mention of her at the beginning of the novel is extraordinarily indirect:

...Or a stranger happening along the quiet and remote and unpaved and littleused street...would mention the sign to some acquaintance in the town. “Oh yes,” the friend would say. “Hightower. He lives there by himself. He come here as minister of the Presbyterian church, but his wife went bad on him. She would slip off to Memphis now and then and have a good time. About twenty-five years ago, that was, right after he come here. Some folks claimed he knew about it. That he couldn’t or wouldn’t satisfy her

himself and that he knew what she was doing. Then one Saturday night she got killed, in a house or something in Memphis. Papers full of it. (*Light* 59)

Here, Hightower's wife is buried under multiple layers of distortion. Firstly, she is merely being mentioned as a supporting detail in the story of Hightower's disgrace. Secondly, the teller of that story is an unnamed inhabitant of the town, circulating rumors that he has no doubt heard secondhand for the benefit of a stranger. Thirdly, this scene takes place entirely in Byron Bunch's imagination, as he considers what people might say about Hightower as they read his sign on the street. In this way, Hightower's wife, much like Quentin, functions as a blank canvas onto which the townspeople can cast a collective narrative and overwrite her own. When Byron thinks of the town's first impressions of her, in fact, he describes her as "a small, quietlooking girl who at first the town thought just had nothing to say for herself" (62). Presumably, then, she bears the burden of this collective narrative before her death, too.

As Quentin contends with the same perceived inescapability in *Absalom*, and as he desperately attempts to tell his story, he arrives at a crucial moment of understanding that suggest Mr. Coldfield, too, shares this burden. Shreve asks a seemingly innocuous question: "Mr. Coldfield: what was that?" (*Absalom* 208), and, though Quentin tries to respond with the information that Shreve actually wants—how Mr. Coldfield became involved in Sutpen's scheme—, he ends up postulating about his suicide. It was Mr. Coldfield's conscience, Quentin says, that drove him to self-violence: "his conscience and the land, the country which had created his conscience...which could do nothing but decline" (209). In this moment, Quentin at last finds himself approaching some sort of interpretation, or, at the very least, a definitive conclusion to this story that he has feared will have no end. Working himself up to a long-awaited moment of clarity, he begins to wax poetic about Mr. Compson's suicide. "So he chose the only gesture he could think of to impress his disapproval on those who should outlive the fighting and so

participate in the remorse—,” he starts, only to be interrupted (not for the first time) by Shreve. “That’s fine,” he says. “But Sutpen. The design. Get on, now” (209). And it is here, in Quentin’s brief response (“Yes. The design”) that he begins to accept his defeat (209). He recognizes that Mr. Compson hated the South—its story, its past, its presence—but realized that the very land he hated is what created him. It was impossible to fight what was, by definition, a part of him. And it was that understanding, Quentin surmises, that drove Mr. Coldfield to make what he saw, and what Quentin sees, as the only choice possible: to physically enact the death that had already been made inescapable for him.

This moment of understanding, and Shreve’s quick dismissal of it, seems to reinforce Quentin’s perception of his own futile positionality as a mirror of that of Mr. Compson. Though he continues to ruminate on the story of Sutpen, this seemingly minor disruption reiterates itself in Quentin’s later, more widely acknowledged self-reflection (“I am telling”) and highlights Mr. Compson’s suicide as a crucial influence in Quentin’s disturbed ethos (*Absalom* 303). Thus, the infamous dialogue that ends *Absalom*—Quentin’s insistence that he does not hate the South—can be read not only as a final effort to deny the similarity between Mr. Compson’s positionality and his own, but also as a representation of the inner conflict that propels Quentin to leave his dorm room at Harvard and drown himself in *Sound*.

Faulkner indeed fleshes out this personal turmoil as a major focus in *Sound*. The structure of the novel imitates *Absalom* in the jumbled nature of its temporality, and Quentin is just as dislodged in the story’s narrative. Heather Fox aptly compares his positioning to that of a buzzard, “continually circling the present with his memories of the past” (65). Quentin flees to Harvard, desperately trying to gain control of his own narrative—to understand the story of Sutpen and the South’s past and to disconnect it from his own present and future. Moreover, in *Sound*, Faulkner highlights the way in which time exacerbates and engorges this desperation. In

the scenes leading up to Quentin's suicide, the existential ramblings of his mind periodically give way to brief acknowledgements of his broken watch, which continues to tick despite its fragmentation. He fixates on this image, clearly latching onto it as a symbolic mirror for his own positionality. So when he takes the watch to a shop to be fixed, he sees in all the other watches there a representation of the reality he has been trying to escape since learning of Rosa's story in *Absalom*. Taking his watch back from the shop owner and telling him emptily that he will bring it back later, Quentin notes that he can no longer hear its constant ticking above the noise of all the other watches. As he leaves, he considers what these watches represent in the allegory of his own positionality:

I went out, shutting the door upon the ticking. I looked back into the window. He was watching me across the barrier. There were about a dozen watches in the window, a dozen different hours and each with the same assertive and contradictory assurance that mine had, without any hands at all. Contradicting one another. I could hear time, ticking away inside my pocket, even though nobody could see it, even though it could tell nothing if anyone could.

And so I told myself to take that one. Because Father said clocks slay time. He said time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life. The hands were extended, slightly off the horizontal at a faint angle, like a gull tilting into the wind. Holding all I used to be sorry about like the new moon holding water, niggers say. The jeweller was working again, bent over his bench, the tube tunnelled into his face. His hair was parted in the center. The part ran up into the bald spot, like a drained marsh in December. (85)

Trying to close the door on the persistent reminder that his present—and future—are fading away with the ticking of the clock, Quentin looks back into the shop window; as always, he finds

himself incapable of choosing ignorance in favor of existentialism. He sees in the window the source of his despair: the reality that, although he can see the stifling nature of the Southern landscape and past, and although he understands that his family and those who surround him cannot, any attempts to forge his own path and communicate his perception to anyone else are futile. His story, ultimately, “could tell nothing” even if anyone would listen to him telling it. Moreover, this realization drives Quentin to the image of a clock stopping as a means of agency and action. Only in this stoppage, he seems to think, can he escape the realization that atoning for or disconnecting himself from the collective past of the South is impossible. Calling back to the beginning of the chapter, when he suggests that only in his waking hours is he “in time again” (*Sound* 76), this moment illustrates a driving force that propels Quentin toward the act of suicide. His mind jumps seamlessly from the image of watches to the image of water—both in metaphor and in the physical picture of the shop owner’s bald spot—, as if to confirm the connection between these realizations and the decision to drown himself.

Quentin’s attempt to escape to Harvard, then, ultimately brings him to the contrary understanding that such an attempt will always fail. This physical movement and subsequent revelation echoes the actions of both Hightower’s wife in *Light* and Mr. Coldfield in *Absalom*. The aforementioned conscientious motives that Quentin ponders drive Mr. Coldfield to lock himself in the attic of his house, presumably in one final attempt to enact agency by means of an escape inward. But, just as Quentin realizes at Harvard, he discovers in that endeavor the impossibility of fleeing the collective narrative of the Southern past, and thus he starves himself. In *Light*, Hightower’s wife, having all but disappeared from the view of the townspeople as her husband spends the majority of his time feverishly preaching at the pulpit, gradually begins taking trips out of town. She escapes, as it is later revealed, to Memphis and marries another man under a false name. And it is there, physically and psychologically removed from the life that has

stifled her, that she dies, having “jumped or fallen from a hotel window in Memphis” (*Light* 67). Like Quentin and Mr. Coldfield, perhaps, she faces in the throes of her escape the reality of its futility.

Because of the way that Faulkner intertwines the timelines of the Compsons’ lives in *Sound*, Quentin’s death looms large over the entire story; even as he lives, the act of suicide that he will ultimately commit lingers. This ghostly presence is evident from the very beginning of the novel, when Quentin’s mother visits his gravesite. “I’d feel safer if you would [come],” she tells her son Jason, who responds with a callous “Safe from what. Father and Quentin cant hurt you” (*Sound* 11). Her fear seems to lack a tangible object—and thus is deemed unfounded—, but moments later she explains it further. “It’s a judgment on me,” she says. “But I’ll be gone too, soon” (12). Through Caroline Compson, Faulkner is able to articulate in this early scene the profound significance of Quentin’s death in the context of the larger story. The act of suicide leaves its mark on both the physical and psychological landscape of the novel, flagging this gravesite as a space that enables the characters to acknowledge realities otherwise avoided. Caroline’s fear of inescapability, in relation to both familial or cultural legacy (“It’s a judgment on me”) and time itself (“I’ll be gone too, soon”), is the very fear that consumes Quentin while he is still alive. Fox attributes this ghostly presence to Quentin’s own foreknowledge of his decision to kill himself, calling his resulting inner conflict a “death before dying” (65). Such a description echoes the introductory portrait of Quentin painted at the beginning of *Absalom*: “...His very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts” (7). The unique marriage between life and death, past and future, that permeates Quentin’s character and projects outward like an unseemly aura is present in both *Absalom* and *Sound*. He is marked by death before death, and haunted in life before haunting after life.

This unique ghostliness also imprints itself upon both *Light* and *Sound* through Hightower's wife and Mr. Coldfield, albeit more subtly. Hightower's wife moves about as if she is dead while she is still living, with a "frozen" (63) face and a lack of companionship; the townspeople struggle to communicate with her on any substantial level, and her periodic absences from the church even invite the gossip that Hightower "forgot that he ever had a wife" (62). After death, though public memory of her fades as *Light* unfolds, she looms like a specter over Hightower's reputation. Forced to recall his first impressions of her at the end of the novel, Hightower admits that he "did not see her at all" (479), casting an imaginary face over her real one in service of his own expectations. In *Absalom*, Mr. Coldfield, too, lacks interpersonal connections, described as a "queer silent man whose only companion and friend seems to have been his conscience" (47). He is already relegated to inexistence even as he lives, peering through the blinds of his shuttered home and locked away from the outside world, only to be seen in passing by neighbors. In the attic, he shrivels away like Schrodinger's cat, both dead and alive to public consciousness. But his suicide leaves its ghostly mark on Jefferson, imparting its haunted memory upon Rosa and causing her to make the move to Sutpen's Hundred that alters the trajectory of the story.

Ultimately, Quentin's acknowledgement of and fleeting fixation on Mr. Coldfield in *Absalom* illuminates Faulkner's own investment in these acts of self-violence and the connection between them; if Quentin does indeed represent a "literary vehicle for Faulkner's soul searching" (Dobbs 368), or the closest stand-in for authorial voice, as many critics have suggested, then Faulkner himself points back to Mr. Coldfield as a source of influence. "Obviously misplaced" (N. Miller 41) both in Mississippi and at Harvard, Quentin's seemingly unique dislodgement actually echoes that of Hightower's wife and Mr. Coldfield. Hightower's wife, stifled by her life in Jefferson, escapes to Memphis and ultimately dies there—an act that repeats itself in

Quentin's journey to Harvard. Mr. Coldfield, unable to physically leave his position, flees to the confines of an attic that turns out to be incapable of blocking out the reality of the outside world. Just as Hightower's wife and Quentin face the inescapability of their dislodgement in Memphis and Harvard, so Mr. Coldfield reaches the end of his rope in this new space.

All three of these characters influence the landscapes of their respective novels with their suicides, serving as ghostly reminders to the characters left behind of the inescapability of their positions. After all, it is no accident that in each text, the image of these self-violent characters is one of the last that Faulkner draws upon. Quentin's consideration of Mr. Coldfield's suicide, glossed over by Shreve but persisting in Quentin's psyche nonetheless, leaves its mark on *Absalom* and gestures ominously toward the turmoil of *Sound*; Quentin's suicide punctuates *Sound* through the legacy of Caddy Compson's daughter Quentin, who, having escaped the house toward the end of the novel, causes a panic that compels Mrs. Compson to search for a suicide note, declaring, "I knew the minute they named her Quentin this would happen" (283); and Hightower's wife, perhaps the least present of all three characters, finally rises to the forefront of Hightower's memory at *Light*'s end, forcing him to consider her death as a failed attempt to escape. His recollection, in light of the way in which these stories of self-violence have played out in ritualistic similarity throughout Faulkner's fiction, is perhaps the most direct point of entry for authorial voice, even more so than Quentin's narratives in *Absalom* and *Sound*:

Then one night he saw her, looked at her... When he found out at last what she meant by escape from her present life, he felt no surprise. He was too innocent. "Escape?" he said. "Escape from what?" "This!" she said. He saw her face for the first time as a living face, as a mask before desire and hatred: wrung, blind, headlong with passion. Not stupid: just blind, reckless, desperate. "All of it! All! All!" (480)

In Hightower's retrospective consideration of his wife's temperament, he tellingly imagines her as a ghostly figure desperate for an escape that the rest of the world cannot quite understand. It is in this image, moreover—the image of a specter haunted by the lonely understanding of its own entrapment—that Faulkner's voice rings clearest. If Hightower's wife, Mr. Coldfield, Quentin, and Faulkner himself all possess a visionary understanding of their own ghostly positionalities, then these suicides represent moments of intervention in which the rest of the South must face, even fleetingly, the same reality (which it otherwise refuses to see): that it is temporally, physically, and psychologically “stuck,” as it were, in the Southern past.

### 3. CARSON MCCULLERS

#### *Dismantling the “center hub”: The Ghost of Disillusionment in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

Having claimed Faulkner as one of her influences (Saxton 104), Carson McCullers echoes foundational elements of his work by writing characters in crises of identity in order to explore the intricacies and contradictions of everyday life in the South. In her debut novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers traces the sometimes mundane and other times profound convergences in the lives of a whole host of characters that share little in common but the small Georgia town in which they live. As if pulled by a tenuous string of hope, each of these characters find themselves seeking the company of a local “deaf-mute,” John Singer, amidst the stifling loneliness of their everyday lives. It is only when they are in his presence, in the sacred space of his “inside room” (McCullers 353), that they feel they can fully express themselves. Singer is at once a vacuum into which these characters pour themselves when they enter this space and a source of peace that allows them to function when they leave.

But Singer, too, relies upon an interpersonal connection as the salve to his own loneliness. Often he makes the trek from the town to the mental institution to see his friend Antonapoulos, presumably the only person in his life who also has a hearing condition and speaks via sign language. Antonapoulos effectively provides the same blank slate for Singer that Singer does for the others; prone to bouts of antisocialism and behavioral deviancy, he gives little in return to Singer as a companion besides the pretense of listening and understanding. Yet Singer, like the rest of the characters, channels all of his hope into this one source, using Antonapoulos as a void and emotional springboard. Like “spokes of a wheel [that] lead to the

center hub” (McCullers 211), McCullers’s characters connect to each other and the outside world through Singer, unaware that he possesses his own outlet. Ultimately, however, he loses that outlet, and the wheel is dismantled. After unexpectedly learning that his friend has died, Singer returns to his inner room and shoots himself in the head. And it is here, in this moment of violence and disruption, that the characters finally lose sight of the hope upon which they have been building throughout the novel.

Much of the scholarship on *Hunter* has suggested that Singer’s suicide acts as a rupture in the self-reflective fantasies of McCullers’s other characters; it “astounds” them, “waking them from their illusion of existential release” (Lenviel 117). Without Singer acting as a mirror through which they can define themselves, these characters are left to face the harsh reality of their own misrepresentation to the outside world. Thus, his suicide ultimately thrusts hopelessness upon them, abandoning them to cope with the futility of their previous attempts at escapism. But this generally accepted interpretation leaves much to be investigated in the way of understanding the act of Singer’s suicide itself. Though there is little doubt that *Hunter* as a whole takes on the project of examining loneliness and the failures of intimacy in a culture of oppression and social ineptitude, McCullers makes a particular statement with Singer’s death that transcends the other characters’ existentialisms. Moreover, there is something to be said for the fact that the entirety of the story hinges on the trajectory of one character’s self-awareness and understanding—that it is through this violent act of self-harm that the novel finds its bitter resolution.

Some scholars have suggested that the driving force behind Singer’s suicide—and, consequently, the thrust of the novel—is a kind of illicit and secretive desire that he feels for Antonapoulos. As Benjamin Saxton says, “A powerful form of silent desire culminating in violence—suicide—appears in the relationship between Singer and Antonapoulos” (107). This

interpretation identifies the source of differentiation between Singer and McCullers's other characters as sexual and social suppression, thereby reading his suicide as an escape from normative cultural forces. Along similar lines, Jennifer Murray offers the explanation that "whereas Singer's whole being is invested in his imaginary construction of a perfect Antonapoulos, whose happiness is Singer's principal source of satisfaction, the others are not really concerned with Singer's happiness" (112). This distinction, she suggests, is the factor that propels Singer into suicide. While both he and the other characters depend upon a single outlet for their fantasies of meaning, Singer is the only one who actually sees and cares about his companion as a human being. In the death of Singer, the other characters lose their outlet. In the death of Antonapoulos, Singer loses not only this outlet, but also his loved one.

Such arguments necessitate, of course, a particular reading of the novel's ending: ultimately, while Singer commits suicide because his attachment to Antonapoulos is such that he cannot bear his death, the other characters resolve in one way or another to keep up their search for meaning with or without Singer as their outlet. Many critics read the McCullers's conclusion in such a positive light, looking to "the sense of community, visible in the desires of the characters to love and understand one another" (Lenviel 118) for a more hopeful way forward in the novel's final pages. But this interpretation fails to account fully for the characters' returns to their existential crises, dropping the thread of the work's thematic insistence that, as Elizabeth Steeby writes it, "there is no lasting or absolute sanctuary for those who challenge pervasive norms" (129). Doctor Copeland, the black doctor who has over the course of the novel come to form deeper relationships with his family and the community because of the way in which his perception of Singer has enabled him to fantasize about post-racial connection, returns in the end to the stubborn belief system that isolated him in the first place (McCullers 336). Jake Blount, the town drunk who has always tempered his unease about living in such a confining region by

ranting to Singer about the importance of travel and foreign experience, resolves counter-intuitively after his death to remain in the South (350). Mick Kelly, the 14-year-old girl who has consistently used Singer's "inside room" as a safe space where she can make tangible her aspirations of becoming a musician, now finds herself stuck in a job at the local store and diluting herself into believing that playing the piano every Sunday will be enough to satisfy her (354).

As Claire Lenviel aptly points out, each of the characters that have previously depended upon Singer now turns toward a different method of coping with the same problem. Any hopefulness in their outlooks, then, must be looked upon with suspicion (119), as they find themselves cyclically trapped by the powerlessness they experienced at the story's beginning. Even Murray, despite her more positive understanding of the novel's ending, admits that any resolution in these characters' storylines is at the very least marked by ambivalence (113). It is this ambivalence, moreover, that suggests an alternative reading not only of Singer's suicide, but also of its broader implications in the text. In reading Singer as a kind of visionary oracle, the inhabitants of McCullers's community relegate him to a ghostly form—one that exists only as a distorted mirror through which they can imagine a false reflection of individual purpose and meaning. What they fail to see, however, is that Singer himself seeks a similar disillusionment through his friend Antonapoulos. When this source of complacency is ripped away from him, I argue, Singer actually fulfills the oracular expectations of the other characters by realizing the falsity of his self-identified reality. Rather than succumb to a life marked by the impossibility of fulfillment or autonomy, haunted by the very landscape, climate, and confines of the town, he enacts upon his body one final exertion of self-control and individualism: a bullet through his head.

Through Singer's suicide, McCullers suggests that the revelation that drove him to this self-violence—his fleeting glimpse into the unseemly reality of small-town southern life—is exactly what eludes her other characters and dooms them at the end of the novel to false hopefulness about their futures. In the end, the surviving characters in *Hunter* remain trapped both literally in the South and figuratively in the southern narrative of homogeneity. Singer's death haunts them, and it does so because such a violent exertion of autonomy that they should be able to understand confounds them. In the following reading of the novel, I want to suggest that this ghostly mystery—this fundamental lack of self-awareness on the part of a small Georgia town—is both the “heart” of *Hunter* and the foundational characteristic of McCullers's broader perception of the South.

From the outset, McCullers grounds her text with an introduction to Singer, identifying him immediately as a unique and foundational figure. “In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together” (McCullers 3), the first line proclaims. These “mutes”—Singer and Antonapoulos—engage in a companionship that McCullers immediately identifies as a rarity against the backdrop of a town so destitute for connection. Their routine is filled with mundane consistency—walking to and from work, cooking dinner in their shared kitchen, playing chess—, but the novelty of each day lies in their unity. Though time in such a sleepy and lonesome town might have passed slowly for its typical inhabitants, the ten years that Singer has spent with Antonapoulos since moving to the town have been filled with quiet contentment.

But there is something ominous about this contentment from the very beginning—something inextricably tied to the geography and the climate. McCullers wastes no time in associating the landscape of the town with the same stifling emptiness that stands as a main feature in every other character's story. While the winters are “changeable” (McCullers 6), the summers are consistent in their oppressive heat, and much of the population is condemned to a

life of low-profit factory work. “Often in the faces along the streets there was the desperate look of hunger and loneliness,” she writes. Yet, standing out among the faceless masses, “the two mutes were not lonely at all” (McCullers 6). These descriptions are steeped, as Murray points out, in language reminiscent of a fairytale (108), causing the supposedly deep connection between these two characters to feel almost dream-like in its unreality. Singer finds solace in the fact that both he and Antonapoulos do not use their mouths to speak, and yet he is “always talking” (McCullers 4), eagerly telling him every detail of his day. Singer talks to his friend, McCullers clarifies, despite the fact that he rarely ever speaks back to him. Antonapoulos’s presence alone is apparently enough to quell any loneliness that he might encounter. “Singer never knew just how much his friend understood of all the things he told him,” she says. “But it did not matter” (5). For Singer, Antonapoulos is an outlet—a refractor through which he can imagine hope and excitement outside of the morosely static town in which he lives.

So it is no surprise, then, that when Antonapoulos begins to disrupt the town’s cyclical rhythms by causing public disturbances of varying offense, Singer feels unmoored. Suddenly, awareness strikes him: “In all the years before it had seemed to Singer that there was something very subtle and wise in this smile of his friend. He had never known just how much Antonapoulos understood and what he was thinking. Now in the big Greek’s expression Singer thought that he could detect something sly and joking” (McCullers 8). During his ten years of quiet contentment, Singer has never been bothered by Antonapoulos’s unresponsiveness; but now that “a change had come” (7) onto his companion, he must reevaluate the very relationship that has tethered him to that contentment in the first place. He is deeply disturbed by such a development, and Antonapoulos appears to him now as almost sinister and inhuman in his unrecognizability.

To make matters worse, just as Singer starts to confront this change, he learns that Antonapoulos's cousin plans to send his sick relative to the mental institution 200 miles out of town. Once he leaves, Singer must face the town alone for the first time, and slowly his inner turmoil begins to ebb into dull acceptance. The haunting thought of Antonapoulos's strangeness fades, and McCullers suggests this process of forgetting is tied up in the very climate of the town itself:

Each evening the mute walked alone for hours in the street. Sometimes the nights were cold with the sharp, wet winds of March and it would be raining heavily. But to him this did not matter. His gait was agitated and he always kept his hands stuffed tight into the pockets of his trousers. Then as the weeks passed the days grew warm and languorous. His agitation gave way gradually to exhaustion and there was a look about him of deep calm. In his face there came to be a brooding peace that is seen most often in the faces of the very sorrowful or the very wise. But still he wandered through the streets of the town, always silent and alone. (12-13)

Gradually, the narrative under which Singer has lived in peace for many years has slipped away from him. With each blow—first Antonapoulos's streaks of disobedience and now his sudden departure—Singer has lost more and more control of that mythical contentment he possessed at the start of the novel. But now, bending to the warmth of the climate, he somehow finds it again. A kind of contradictory calm washes over him, and he settles into the sleepy rhythms of the town as though falling under a spell.

McCullers writes the narrative of Singer's strange disillusionment and re-illusionment into the very first section of the novel, supplying it as groundwork for the rest of the plot. Such an introduction cannot be overlooked as the events of the story unfold; like a lingering omen, the tenuous foundation of Singer's contentment threatens to dismantle his spoke-and-wheel

relationship with the other characters at any moment. As they sink further into their fantasies of autonomy and meaning, he faces the slow degradation of his own complacency. These contrasting trajectories account for the foundational tension of the novel. The other characters are left in the dark when it comes to Singer's personal life, and in fact this lack of awareness contributes to their perception of him as a blank slate onto which they can transcribe their own identities. He becomes a sort of unresponsive oracle for these characters, allowing them to engage in conversation and counseling with themselves.

But this image of Singer is of course shrouded in unreality, just as foreboding as his own false complacency. McCullers describes the interactions between Singer and the other characters as almost ghostly encounters. Portia says that when she first saw him, she "felt" (McCullers 51) something that made her believe he was peaceful. Mick notes a simultaneous eeriness and excitement in the fact that no one ever knows exactly what he is thinking (53). Jake is unable to put the image of Singer's face out of his mind (61), having been haunted by the hypnotic color of his eyes (69). Doctor Copeland notes that being in his presence is different than being in the presence of other men like him (84), and when he pictures Singer, he is filled with an unexplainable peace (90).

But perhaps Blount is the most telling when he says outright that Singer "did not seem quite human" (McCullers 25). For all these characters, he has no discernable existence outside of the sphere of their personal interactions with him or outside of their mythical perceptions; beyond his steady presence during their visits to his room, he might as well be a ghost. Moreover, their collective perception of Singer hinges upon the idea that to converse with him is to partake in a visionary experience. At different moments, he is extraordinary (179), a man of great wisdom (135) and "true" knowledge (195), a leader (157) and teacher (243), a sorcerer (94), and even God (119). As McCullers writes in one of Singer's own sections, "Each man

described the mute as he wished him to be” (223). This magical and surreal quality that the characters ascribe to him, of course, is undercut by his tangible and formative trips to see Antonapoulos. Little do they know that he, too, must placate his discontentment by seeking the presence of his own mythically wise companion. It is this oversight, moreover, that builds the novel’s foundational tension and eventually culminates in Singer’s final journey to visit Antonapoulos. If indeed he uses his trips to the asylum as periodic refreshments of illusionary autonomy, this last escape could not be more timely for Singer; his false contentment is on the verge of being shattered, as he begins to notice that “the faces crowded in on him out of the darkness so that he felt smothered” (320). As he takes the train out of town, the dream-like quality of the landscape that McCullers associates with his self-delusion begins to fizzle into reality before him:

The summer evening came slowly. The sun sank down behind a ragged line of trees in the distance and the sky paled. The twilight was languid and soft. There was a white full moon, and low purple clouds lay over the horizon. The earth, the trees, the unpainted rural dwellings darkened slowly. At intervals mild summer lightning quivered in the air. Singer watched all of this intently until at last the night had come, and his own face was reflected in the glass before him. (322)

As the “languid and soft” sky transforms into sharp bursts of lightning amidst a backdrop of total darkness, Singer finally sees his true reflection. In this moment, the only obstacle preventing him from complete disillusionment is the hope of talking to Antonapoulos—the thrust of forward motion that feels like autonomy and purpose.

So when Singer arrives at the hospital to discover that Antonapoulos has died, it takes little time for him to recognize the falsity of this autonomy. He approaches other signers inside a pool room and tries to revive his contentment by communicating with them, but his attempt is

futile: “He told his own name and the name of the town where he lived. After that he could think of nothing else to tell about himself” (McCullers 325). Singer loses himself in this failure, realizing that his self-image has been wrapped up in an ordinary life without an individualist purpose. He sees, as “the unrefracted brilliance of the sun, the humid heat, oppressed him” (326), that he lacks control over his own narrative. It is this lack of control, moreover, that brings the meaning of the suicide into sharper focus. In distinguishing Singer from the other characters via this fatal act of self-violence, McCullers suggests it is the mark of visionary revelation—a final attempt at autonomy and individualism by someone who has awoken from the monotonous lull of false purpose. Throughout the novel, Singer is surrounded by a variety of characters that use him as an outlet for their discontentment in lieu of facing the futility of their aspirations directly. When they find that Singer has killed himself, initially these characters react in ways that are similar to Singer’s own actions after finding out Antonapolous has died: they feel unmoored by their sudden existential crises, having been cut off from the source of their false comfort.

Their hopelessness might suggest a similar outcome of self-violence—and, indeed, Mick “hit[s] herself with her fists” (McCullers 352) after discovering Singer’s body—, but ultimately these characters resolve to continue on with their lives. Mick, in particular, transcends this moment of self-harm once she determines that there is “nothing to be mad at” and “nobody to take it out on” (354). Each of McCullers’s characters at the end of the novel falls into a kind of resolution, returning to the rhythms of everyday life as a means of coping and moving forward. But this solution is not, as some critics have argued, hopeful or promising; rather, it is a resignation to a life of confinement—in a dead-end job, in a loveless marriage, in a stubborn ideology, in the physical borders of the South, and in the unifying illusion of individualism that McCullers identifies as the “heart” of this Georgia town.

In a rather explicit statement of this message, McCullers starts and finishes her novel with a surrealist illustration of the southern landscape and its mystical spell upon its inhabitants. Whereas *Hunter* begins its narrative with Singer's perspective, introducing the reader to his disillusionment as a forewarning of his ultimate disillusionment, it ends with that of Biff Brannon—a character who resolutely maintains distance from the other central characters throughout the story. While he watches his community flock to Singer for fulfillment and purpose, Biff simultaneously scoffs and marvels at the oddity of the spectacle. Since he is a self-proclaimed outsider without the relationship to Singer that the other characters have, the suicide affects him differently. He sees it more clearly, even if what he sees puzzles him. When Biff reflects on the events of the story, he pronounces them to be a “riddle” (McCullers 358)—one that he admits constantly bothers him. Even Biff, the supposed outsider, finds himself just as frustrated and unsatisfied with Singer's suicide as the others. He succumbs to the very obsession of which he claims throughout the novel not to be victim, because “there was something not natural about it all—something like an ugly joke” (358). In this way, McCullers leaves no character untouched by the ramifications of Singer's self-violence, and again points to the act as a pivotal and defining moment for the town and the novel itself.

But what is perhaps most significant about McCullers's closing section—and the image with which I would like to end this chapter—is Biff's haunting final scene. Late at night, while ruminating about the oddity of Singer's suicide and the community's reaction to it, he has a striking revelation:

Then suddenly he felt a quickening in him. His heart turned and he leaned his back against the counter for support. For in a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valor. Of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labor and of those who—one word—love. His soul expanded.

But for a moment only. For in him he felt a warning, a shaft of terror. Between the two worlds he was suspended. He saw that he was looking at his own face in the counter glass before him. Sweat glistened on his temples and his face was contorted. One eye was opened wider than the other. The left eye delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error, and ruin. And he was suspended between radiance and darkness. Between bitter irony and faith. Sharply he turned away. (McCullers 358-59)

For a fleeting moment, Biff sees a future filled with purpose, individualism, and autonomy through the act of love. Perhaps the meaning of the story, he seems to consider, is that there is no hope without genuine connection. But it is only when he catches a glimpse of his own reflection, just as Singer did on the train, that he understands the same reality that Singer then faced: the “bitter irony” of his own self-delusion.

In the end, when confronted with the same revelation, Biff makes a different choice than Singer does: he turns away. Like the other characters, he falls back under the town’s placating spell, sinking once again into false complacency. He returns to the rhythms that he knows best, “compos[ing] himself [to] soberly await the morning sun” (McCullers 359). And thus the ghostly memory of Singer and his death will haunt him, as McCullers suggests it will all of *Hunter*’s main characters, as an uncanny reminder of a reality that he refuses to face.

#### 4. EUDORA WELTY

*“Hung apart like a pair of tongs”*: *Markers of Haunted Southern Landscape in “Clytie”*

Unlike Carson McCullers, who considered her work to be part of a broader literary heritage, Eudora Welty often distanced herself from blanket categorizations into the Southern Gothic tradition (“Making a Spectacle” 567). Even so, the juxtaposition of the profound and the mundane in much of her fiction is difficult to ignore in its resemblance to the fiction of her southern counterparts. Welty’s early stories, in particular, compress intense moments of inner conflict and existential crises within banal depictions of everyday routines, producing a similar grotesque quality that makes itself apparent in McCullers’ works. Peter Schmidt has identified a through-current of authorial turmoil in *A Curtain of Green* (1941), Welty’s first collection of short stories, in which she indeed struggles to come to terms with her Southern Gothic heritage (10). This anxiety is manifested, he says, in “descriptions of violent activity packed into hidden, claustrophobic spaces” (4) and in narrative voice that resists empathizing with the plights of its protagonists (11).

This interpretation would suggest, then, that Welty’s self-insertion as narrator and subsequent distancing from heroic readings of her protagonists’ rebellions sends mixed signals to the reader about her own relationship with contextual social norms. Schmidt goes on to say that in her later stories, Welty comes to terms with the idea of disrupting the established order, and thus inflicts less narrative ambivalence and textual punishment on these insurgent characters (11). But in this analysis I would like to focus on Schmidt’s former claim, examining it through

the specific lens of one story—“Clytie”—, whose troubling resolution leaves its foundational conflict “thoroughly unresolved” (27).

“Clytie” follows a day in the life of young Clytie Farr, who has been left to cope with her family’s apparent financial and social ruin alongside her reclusive siblings while her father remains bedridden from paralysis. The old house in which they live takes on a life of its own as it entraps them, mimicking the Farris’ ruin in its dilapidation and seemingly lulling them into antisocialism. Clytie is the only member of her family who maintains some semblance of contact with the outside world, running through the town as she looks into the faces of those surrounding her. But the townspeople, associating Clytie with the disrepute of her siblings and father, assume that her fate will be the same as theirs; they dismiss her oddities as proof that her “wits were all leaving her...the way her sister’s had left her” (Welty 159). Ultimately, Clytie’s closest encounter with a face, like Quentin’s final journey across campus and Singer’s last trip to visit Antanopolous, ends in an act of suicide; when she sees her reflection in a rain barrel, she submerges her head and drowns herself, having presumably found the face for which she was searching.

Critics have often identified this concluding scene as central to the text’s meaning, and their broader interpretations of “Clytie” commonly anchor themselves in readings of the moment in which she sees the face reflected in the rain barrel. These readings arise from the obvious deduction, of course, that the face Clytie sees is her own, but their variance lies in the deeper implications of this recognition. As Don James McLaughlin notes, the story is marked by a certain ambiguity that ultimately manifests itself in her suicide; critics find themselves investigating “what face [Clytie] is searching for, why the face haunts her, and why she drowns herself by the story’s end” (54). Conclusions to such inquiries have varied from arguments that Clytie’s search is for selfhood, and that her suicide is caused by the horrifying realization that her

identity is not compatible with the norms established by her family (Cohoon 48), to claims that the face she seeks is one of a dream-self, and her death is a result of the epiphany that such an idealized future is unattainable in her current circumstances (Schmidt 28).

My own reading of Clytie's suicide most closely reflects that of McLaughlin, who summarizes that "failing to construct identity via her own mirrored reflection, Clytie relies instead on imitation, incapable of comprehending herself as an autonomous subject" (55). Like Singer, who recognizes his reflection in the train window as a glimpse of the reality he has been trying to avoid, Clytie sees her face in the rain barrel and has the sudden existential realization that she lacks agency. Her runs about the town amount to desperate attempts to locate her own individualism among the mass of faces that she struggles to discern from one another, and it is not until she sees the ambiguity of her own reflection that she understands these endeavors have been futile.

In the following analysis, I attempt not only to solidify this argument by examining the textual support for such a reading, but also to expand it by locating the source of Clytie's crisis in the social and physical landscape of the South. I posit that the central problematic of the story—the underlying question that Welty tries to ask through this early piece of writing—is the tension and ultimate choice that must be made between consent to illusionary heterogeneity and the existential understanding of the inescapability of homogeneity. Returning to Schmidt's proposed framework, I want to suggest an alternative reading that, instead of upending his dichotomy of narrator and protagonist, reverses Welty's role in this construction by identifying the narrative voice as an abstract representation of the southern landscape. In this way, the dismal conclusion of the story—Clytie's suicide—can be seen not as unresolved conflict, but as an authorial statement of rebellion against the established order that further connects Welty's literary footprint to those of Faulkner and McCullers.

Like *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, “Clytie” introduces its central problematic with descriptors of the physical setting and the atmosphere of the town. “It was late afternoon, with heavy silver clouds which looked bigger and wider than cotton fields,” it begins, “and presently it began to rain” (Welty 158). Already, Welty identifies the source of what will become an insurmountable obstacle for the main character of her story. As common signifiers of imaginative dreams and aspirations, the silver linings of these clouds appear optimistically expansive. They stretch beyond the simplicity of their environment—in this case, the cotton fields of the rural South. But the rain, Welty warns, ultimately breaks through: “Big round drops fell, still in the sunlight, on the hot tin sheds, and stained the white false fronts of the row of stores in the little town of Farr’s Gin” (158). Like the illusion of the clouds’ grandeur, the purity of the white storefronts is but a false image of perfection. Ultimately, Welty suggests, both will be stained by the rain.

As the scene unfolds, so does the rhythmic nature of the town’s routine. The birds settle into their formation of “little pockets” (Welty 158), while the dogs lie down for the day. The people move en masse to the post office in what seems to be a compulsive reaction to the rain, and a boy kicks his mule into a slow and steady step, setting the story in motion. The ordinary and almost unconscious nature of all these actions is contrasted immediately by Clytie’s introduction to the story, as she stands in the road while everyone else seeks shelter from the rain. From the start, this juxtaposition marks her as a source of divergence from the narrative order. If the story has been entirely dedicated to illustrating the ways in which the landscape, the town, and the inhabitants move in tandem via commonplace daily routine, then Clytie quite literally stands in opposition to the established norms by remaining alone in the downpour.

But despite the peculiarity of her actions, Clytie, too, participates in her own ritual of normalcy—one that simply runs counter to the narrative. Like clockwork, the townspeople can

expect her to run into the street every Saturday, looking into the various faces she encounters. As McCullers does with Singer in *Hunter*, Welty immediately identifies in Clytie's routine a sense of foreboding. If the ominous nature of Singer's contentment lies in his inability (or refusal) to speak, and thus his inability to be heard, then the troublesome aspect of Clytie's rhythms is the same: "It used to be that she ran about on some pretext or other, and for a while she made soft-voiced explanations that nobody could hear...But now Clytie came for nothing. She came every day, and no one spoke to her any more" (Welty 159). In both *Hunter* and "Clytie," the central issue from the beginning is this lack of reciprocal human connection. Like Quentin in *Absalom*, Singer and Clytie find that, though they may try to speak, there is no one who can hear or understand them. Painting this image of a voice echoing into a vacuum, Welty establishes early on both Clytie's divergence from established order of the town and the unstable nature of that divergence.

Further entrenching this shaky foundation, the narrative then transitions from a portrait of the town to a portrait of the Farr family home. Inside the house, everything is unmoving; the curtains are "still as tree trunks," the atmosphere is "airless," and the Hermes cast is but "one of the immovable relics of the house" (Welty 161). But, perhaps most significantly, the ruined Farr home has a unique suffocating quality to it that encloses its inhabitants, cutting them off from the outside: "Every window was closed, and every shade was down, though behind them the rain could still be heard" (161). Again, the patter of rain serves as a disillusioning symbol, suggesting that all in the Farr house is not as immobile and solitary as it may seem.

Indeed, the next scene reveals that Clytie herself is responsible for the crack in the Farr family façade. Like the single shaft of light that illuminates a portion of the dark house (Welty 160), she is able to imagine and engage with the world outside. Standing before the open door of the stove, Clytie again loses herself in the dream-like trance that enraptured her as she was

looking into the faces on the street at the beginning of the story. And it is here that Welty makes clear the source of Clytie's divergence—the foundation of the hopefulness that sets her apart from the immobility of her family and the routine of the town:

She knew now to look slowly and carefully at a face; she was convinced that it was impossible to see it all at once—The first thing she discovered about a face was always that she had never seen it before. When she began to look at people's actual countenances there was no more familiarity in the world for her. The most profound, the most moving sight in the whole world must be a face. (162-63)

The “dream” (162) that enraptures Clytie when she runs about the town is one of heterogeneity and individualism. By observing the distinct faces among the mass of townspeople, who might appear to act in unison according to established norms, she is able to imagine their autonomy. Like Quentin and Singer, Clytie possesses a visionary quality that affords her a more pervasive viewpoint than that of the rest of the town.

As the narrative continues, Clytie grapples with this perspective alongside the discordant reality of her daily life. As Schmidt says, “...Clytie hopes to recover a vision she once had of a self she might become, but her dreaming is continually interrupted by the demands that Octavia and the rest of her family place upon her” (28). The rain stops falling, and she must go through the motions of interacting with her reclusive and illusioned family members. Like the house itself, the Farris represent a broader narrative of post-Civil War southern ruin. But if Clytie represents an aversion to such association in her ability to see beyond this narrative, she still finds herself vulnerable to slippages. For instance, in her attempt to imitate the old “commanding voice” (Welty 171) of her sister Octavia, an exercise in making tangible an imagined route of escape from the norms of self-expression, she struggles to articulate her own identity. Though she sees the possibility of individualism in the faces of the townspeople, she has not yet grasped

how her personal agency might fit within the bounds of the Farr household or the broader southern landscape.

On Clytie's final journey outside her bedroom door, she encounters Mr. Bobo, the barber who has come to shave her father's beard. Longing for some form of human contact—which she perhaps believes will provide her with the answers for which she has been searching—, she reaches out and touches his face. It is in this moment that Clytie is confronted with an experience that she will later be unable to shake: “For an instant afterward, she stood looking at him inquiringly, and he stood like a statue, like the statue of Hermes” (Welty 176). Horrified, she has the sudden epiphany that Mr. Bobo, even with a face of such complexity and distinctiveness, is as immovable as the cast of Hermes. She recoils, “pale as a ghost” (176), marking the instant that Clytie's idealized vision of individualism and autonomy is shattered with the image of a haunted being.

As Schmidt points out, Clytie's instinctive reaction following this revelation is to revert to the performative norms with which she has spent the entire story wrestling, if only as a means of evading the truth: “When her sister orders her to shave her father, for the first time in the story Clytie acts like a servant with relief, not regret—as if by acting the part well enough she will escape having to think about what has just happened” (29). But such a tactic does not last, as she obediently walks through the open door of the house and peers into the rain inside the barrel—the physical signifier that has, until this point, always represented the possibility of autonomy—and at last sees her own reflection. Clytie recognizes this face as the one “she had been looking for, and from which she had been separated,” and consequently she “leaned closer, as she had leaned down to touch the face of the barber” (Welty 177). Here, in this self-examination, she faces her last vestige of hope. She will see in this reflection either the face of individualism and agency—her guiding dream—or, like that of Mr. Bobo, the face of homogeneity and lack of

autonomy. What peers back at Clytie, ultimately, is “a wavering, inscrutable face” with a mouth “old and closed from any speech” (177). She recoils in horror, because she now fully grasps both the inescapability of her circumstances and the futility of her own attempts at self-expression. And thus, she does “the only thing she could think of to do” (178) when faced with such a dismal truth: she dunks her head in the water and drowns herself.

This act of self-violence unravels in a chronology similar to those of Quentin and Singer in *Absalom* and *Hunter*, respectively. As a divergent and perhaps pervasive character who is read by her community as strange or even mad, Clytie is stuck in the middle of two opposing realities: that of an insider, who must conform to the town’s rhythms or submit to the reclusive fate of her family, and that of an outsider, who possesses the agency and vision to imagine an individualistic self-expression beyond the borders of the southern order. Like Quentin’s walk through the Harvard campus and Singer’s walk through town, Clytie’s walk to the rain barrel is set in motion by a haunted encounter with reality and finished by an acknowledgement of that reality. The moment she sees the homogeneity in Mr. Bobo’s face is the moment she recognizes herself as but a ghost, haunted by the understanding that she will forever be trapped in the space between the insider and the outsider. Like Quentin, who finds that physically stepping beyond the borders of the South is still not enough to escape the southern narrative, and like Singer, who learns that he is just as dependent upon illusions of identity as are those who surround him, Clytie discovers in Mr. Bobo’s face and later confirms in her own that her dream of individualism and autonomy—her imagined escape beyond the boundaries of the South—is unattainable. Her self-violence, then, can be traced to the same root that brings Quentin and Singer to similar acts: having faced the truth of her position, Clytie, rather than succumbing to a life of either self-delusion or discontentment, chooses to enact the only form of agency and individualism she sees possible.

Amidst debates over the meaning of this choice, moreover, many critics miss the fact that the story does not end with Clytie's suicide. Rather, Welty leaves her readers with an image that has been underappreciated in the context of the larger narrative: Clytie's legs, "hung apart like a pair of tongs" (178) for Old Lethy to discover. Debates surrounding this striking image have largely viewed it as intratextual symbolism, marking "[Clytie's] inability to take root and thrive within her family and community" (Cohoon 51) or "a life sunk into the 'featureless depth' of the inscrutable abyss of darkness and despair" (Chouard 248). These readings, then, give such a conclusion no further credence than as a re-representation of Clytie's suicide—Welty's final clarification on the meaning of her story.

But these interpretations undervalue the fact that Clytie's death does not have the last word, literally or symbolically. The concluding action of the story, instead of Clytie's tumble into the rain barrel, is actually the discovery of her body. The stark image of her legs, moreover, constitutes a marker of communication—one that is no doubt haunting in its effect—to Old Lethy, the Farr family's old nursemaid. As Jenn Williamson aptly notes, it is significant that Old Lethy is the one to find Clytie in the rain barrel (753). But the importance of this particular detail lies not just in the fact that Old Lethy, despite Octavia's consistent refusal to allow her entrance into the Farr home since Clytie's father has fallen ill, "occasionally comes to the back door of the house, providing a physical reminder of both the family's historical past and their former social status" (Williamson 753), but also in the fact that Old Lethy now represents the lone connection between the Farr family and the rest of the town. Physically and figuratively relegated to an outsider status, she is the only figure in the story that ventures near enough to the Farr home to be able to find Clytie. Moreover, her position beyond the walls of the house gives her the unique ability to not only witness this message of self-violence, but also presumably to transmit it to the outside world.

It is here that I want to suggest that Welty positions herself not, as Schmidt proposes, with the increasingly detached narrator, but with Clytie herself. If the story up until this point has been told from the abstract perspective of the town's landscape, first by inscribing the central conflict into the natural rhythms of the weather and the people, and then by observing Clytie's gradual undoing in terms of her physical setting, then this last scene represents Welty's translational intervention. Like a haunting reminder, Clytie's legs serve as a marker of the disillusionment that led to this act of self-violence—a ghostly communication from Clytie to Old Lethy, from Welty to the reader, from reality to the deluded South. Remain under the false illusion of autonomy and individualism, Welty seems to say, but understand that the truth—represented in characters like Clytie, Quentin, and Singer—will continue to haunt.

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