

POMPA: Publications of the Mississippi Philological
Association

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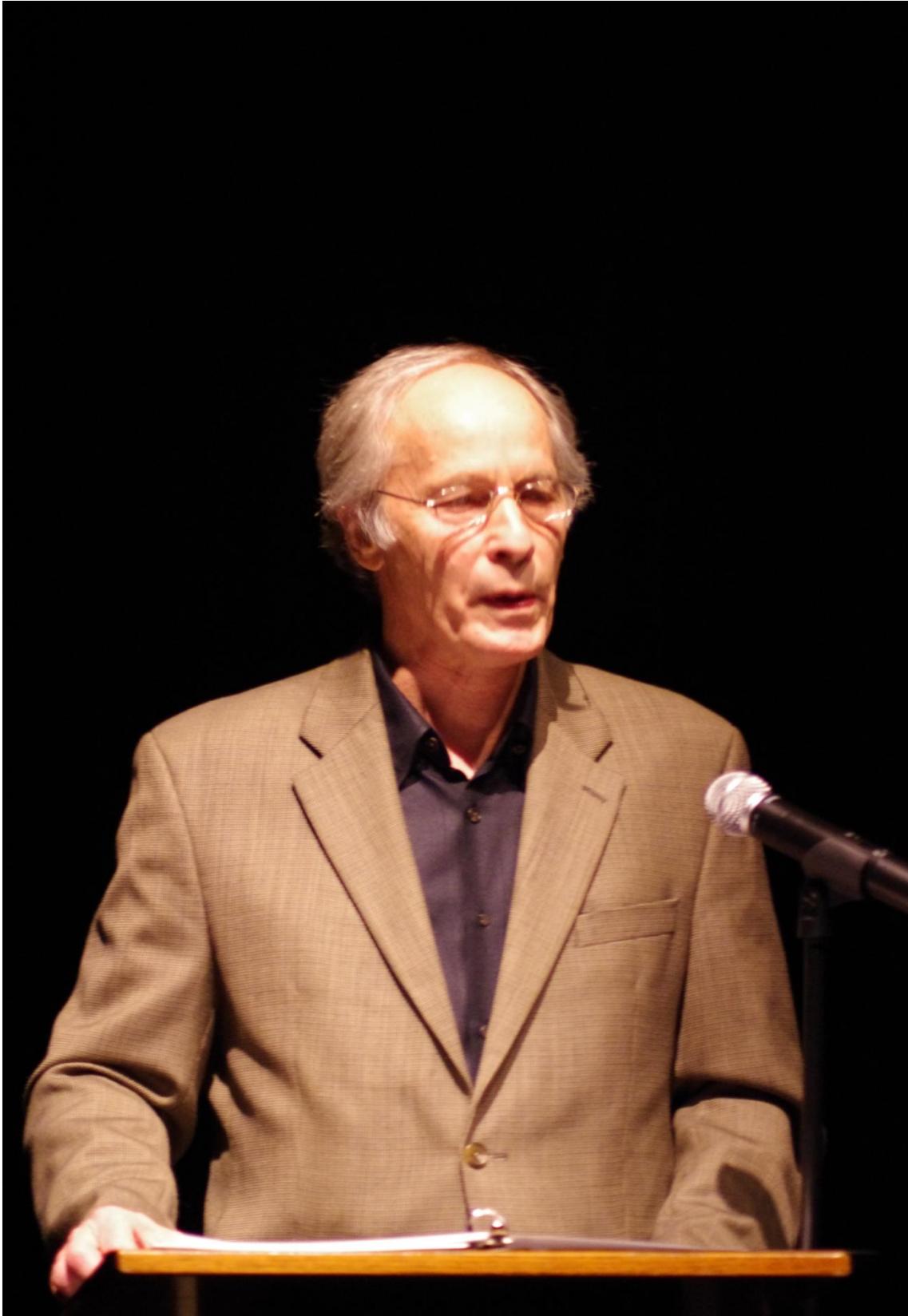
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POMPA: Publications of the Mississippi Philological Association

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Richard Ford reading from *Canada* at the Delta State conference

Editor's Page

This year, August 12th, 2012, Professor Noel Polk died. That is the most significant news related to POMPA; he has been one of the best of us for a long time. It is a stunning, terrible loss.

He was, besides being a major Southern literature scholar, probably both the best Faulkner scholar and the best Welty scholar as well as a powerful voice for Mississippi and to Mississippi to do the right things. He did terrific work—as a critic, textual scholar and an editor—that those of us in Southern literature will be relying upon and wrestling with for quite some time.

He made a good impression on me when I first met him at a Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha conference, while I was at the University of South Carolina working on a PhD with a Faulkner dissertation. I was proud to be pursuing that course as Butterworth, Hamblin, McHaney, and Arnold had at Carolina, and though I knew his stature when I met him, but he proved to be instantly disarming and kind, and he never changed. So when I was among the hordes of friends at his memorial service, I was hardly surprised. Besides being brilliant, he exhibited a steady good-humored graciousness and integrity that all professors should probably strive for but cannot reach.

I found out at some point that both Noel Polk and Ben Fisher had been editors of POMPA for some period (and both have variously contributed to its founding, hosted its meetings, and guided it along). They did so out of sheer nobility. Both have an overwhelming publishing history and stood to gain nothing by deigning to help a state philological association, but they both did so because fostering and mentoring beginning scholarship and literary work within the state is an unselfish, idealistic gift from two such heavyweights, and because their hearts were truly in the right place. Other editors—Susan Allen Ford, Bill Spencer, Carolyn Elkins, Rex Stamper, have also produced admirable work. My own involvement began partially with the recognition of all this and the awareness that if those scholars were not too big to do what they had done for MPA, I *certainly* was not. I am grateful for the chance. Noel was supportive in my efforts, as always, and although MPA clearly owes him a great deal, I perhaps owe him the most. And he became a friend, and I will miss him.

To the conference itself. Delta State University has long been a mainstay of the conference. Jim Tomek and the university did an outstanding job of hosting the conference, as they often have before. In a conspicuous coup, they brought in Richard Ford to speak and to read from his upcoming novel, *Canada*. Ford's presentation had star quality, with a glimpse into an impressive novel. I wish I could share something from it with you, but Ford promised an interview and then never responded again to any attempt to communicate.

Lori Watkins Fulton will host next year's conference at William Carey University. Unless something has been changed, we will follow that with the next conference at Mississippi State University. One of the privileges that comes with the editorship of *POMPA* is a membership to the Council of Editors of Learned Journals, and with that its e-mail newsgroup. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* carries enough horrific news about the decline of academia that worse news would hardly seem necessary, but perhaps you have missed noticing that the Washington State University closed Emerson Quarterly and ESQ this year, or that the University of Missouri planned to close its press. In the last few weeks, the University of Missouri, besieged by letters from scholars (CELJ began a campaign), relented. Nevertheless, journals are in crisis—especially the authoritative, peer-reviewed, paper publications that used to represent the top of the field in shorter critical texts. Harvard declined to pay (out of its incredible resources) for scientific journals this year. Jobs in the humanities have diminished in literary studies so that there are fewer tenure-seeking assistant professors producing such work, too. *POMPA* has survived unscathed up 'til now despite the two ice storms on the day of the conference, the tribulations of Mississippi after Katrina, and the ebbing tide under academic scholarship in general. But *POMPA* cannot be immune forever. We have gone to digital this year and apparently survived. Readers will find provocative and insightful work in here.

I agreed to carry on temporarily as editor, but the journal has this year embraced the digital format, and we are seeking a new editor. That may insinuate some uncertainty into the situation. So I have temporarily lowered some barriers to publishing in POMPA, while raising some others. I made one change in the middle of a stream. This was also the transition year to our own homepage. The format for POMPA followed an MLA Handbook imprimatur to make all notes endnotes; no one really liked that, and for the last essay in this volume, I abandoned it, hoping that it will henceforth go back to footnotes. This year, I took on three editorial assistants of promise, and the submissions were vetted first by them. So we all also owe thanks to Seth Dawson, Troy White, and Jill Balaski McCarty. MPA has a charming constituency, and it has been my privilege to work with you in producing the journal these last five years. I will now abscond and pursue my own work for a while, but as I go, again, I thank you for the privilege.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editors's Page

Poetry: "Too Normal to Notice" C. Leigh McInnis, Jackson State University

Fiction: "Dr. Seuss Had No Children" R. Peter Malik, Alcorn State University

Poetry: Joe Amoako, Delaware State University

Fiction: "Top Story," C. Leigh McInnis, Jackson State University

Essay: "The Sacred Hunter in the Mysticism of St. Teresa of Avila, Melvin S. Arrington, Jr., University of Mississippi

Essay: "British Crime Fiction and the Critique of (Post) Modern Society: Naturalism in Barbara Vine's *A Fatal Inversion*" Debbie Davis, University of West Alabama

Poetry: "Lumpy Bed," C. Leigh McInnis, Jackson State University

Essay: Reading Through Idolatry: Desacralizing "Christmas" and Making it Holy: "Orphans in Oscar Hijuelos's *Mr. Ives Christmas*, and Richard Ford's 'Creche' via a Dickens Carol," James Tomek, Delta State University

Poetry: "Listen, New Bosses," Joe Amoako, Delaware State University

Essay: "Of Course, the Writer Crusades: The Influence of the KJV Parables on the Early Short Fiction of Eudora Welty." Allison Chesnutt, William Carey University

Poetry: "Reflective Disquiet," Yvonne Tomek, Delta State University

Poetry: "Vases Full of Irises," Yvonne Tomek, Delta State University

Fiction: "Last of the Unreconstructed Southerners," Dorothy Shawhan, Delta State University

Essay: "The Show Must Go On": Money and Death in William Faulkner's *Pylon*, Caroline Miles, Texas Pan-American University



POETRY

C. Leigh McInnis

Jackson State University

“You know, son, there have been seven black people
killed by black people since James Anderson’s murder,
and no one has marched for them.”

“Too Normal to Notice” (For Black Victims not on CNN)

Even Mississippians complain about July heat,
and Minnesotans wage battle to keep frostbite from their feet.
People in Seattle become annoyed at their soaked raisin fingers
while sunbaked California bodies dream of just one snow-flaked Christmas.
And though New Yorkers accept smog as a symbol of civilization,
their frozen fury at second-hand smoke snowballs into Civil Rights initiative.

But native sons killing black boys is as noticeable
as clean air strolling through the lungs.

For many, cutting the weekly grass is akin to regular root canal
while doing the dishes requires an inspirational speaker.
Painting the trim on the house is the monotony of the annual physical
and putting gas in the ride stirs a three-hour conversation about terrorism.
The process of having the oil changed is an hour-long enema,
and washing clothes might as well be climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.

But iced souls killing no names in the street is merely
the Saturday sound of the washing machine.

Students treat homework like speed bumps on the party interstate,
and teachers run from slow learners like lepers in the grocery store.
Principals treat paperwork like Martian residue,
and counselors can’t believe the slow boy’s mama wants a consultation about college.
Bad grades turn parents into vampires and werewolves
even while continuing to allow Sponge Bob to babysit their children.

But killer kings can erase unknown variables from the blackboard of our minds
as easily as ignored and quickly forgotten lecture notes.

Black death written with White hands
ignites the same fire as wiping one’s self with the family photo of Jesus,
but Black death drawn by Black hands
is merely the annoyance of leaving the seat down or sprinkling it.

A wet seat may create a shower of words,
but a soiled picture of Jesus will inflame a revolution.

Yet, Jody Starks cutting Tea Cake over five dollars in a crap game inspires
the community like red, white, and blue peace promises soothe sand-colored men.

Millions plug in to cable for their favorite fix of plastic reality
like lifetime smokers sucking on oxygen tanks.
Making sure that one's Facebook status is current carries more weight than the feather light
chores of checking one's blood pressure, getting a job, or purchasing pampers and similac.
And following one's favorite star on Twitter is more sacred
than the fishermen that decided to follow that Nazarene
while waves of people wait twelve hours in line to purchase iPhones and Air Jordans
like they are giving blood for disaster victims or electing the next president.

But rust-colored Taliaferros killing midnight Burghardts
will start a community fire as quickly as wet matches and moldy charcoal.

Getting groceries is the same as hunting big game in Africa
while bad service at Popeye's deserves its own blog.
Cut somebody off in traffic, and they will cut you in half.
Wait too long at a green light, and car horns become Freedom songs.
A neighbor's uncut grass is cause for a community protest march,
and somebody got twenty-one items in the line for twenty items or less, well,
illuminate the Bat-signal for Martin, Malcolm, Huey, and the National Guard

But howlin' wolves killing muddy beatniks is merely
the inconvenience of driving around dead dogs in the street.

...on the flip side:

Niggers killing niggers is as noticeable as carbon dioxide floating in the room,
as botulin and ricin floating through the bloodstream
as HIV to a horny man
as shaking unclean hands
as California floating slowly out to sea
as procrastination to a bad grade
as termites before the collapse

Fiction
Peter Malik,
Alcorn State University

Dr. Seuss Had No Children

Don Fleck looked up from Seat 31C on Delta Flight 1057 from Dallas to Los Angeles on August 22, 2013 with a sentence ringing through his consciousness that he had just read in the in-flight magazine. In an article about the creator of the Dr. Seuss books, the author admitted that he had never had children. “You’ll have them, I’ll entertain them,” the author was quoted as saying.

Balding, potbellied and only 40, Fleck was nevertheless head of the largest polling organization in the United States, bigger than Lou Harris even. This little fact about Dr. Seuss only confirmed what Fleck had suspected was the Next Big Trend in the United States: childlessness as a lifestyle choice. He and his wife Terri had been grappling with the issue; Terri was 39 and her clock was ticking. Fleck wondered what Dr. Seuss knew that he didn’t.

He had been reading studies on the cost of having a child and raising it to maturity: about \$200,000 without a college education these days. Fleck thought about his own upbringing without money, how his mother had often told him after three martinis: “If I had to do it all over again, I would have never had children.” It still haunted him after all of these years. He himself had numerous allergies growing up which the doctors attributed to his mother smoking during pregnancy.

Such a risk, a baby, such a risk, Fleck thought, moving around in his seat in an unsuccessful effort to stretch his legs. They could be brain damaged, blind, deformed, insane. And if they’re normal, they could be burned in a fire, run over or hit by lightning. If they’re

slow, God knows what would happen to them. And if they're good in school, think of the extra expense: ballet, riding lessons, maybe a summer in Europe.

When they make it to high school, it's four years of Guadalcanal. Girls don't make cheerleader, have acne, bad dates and tears. Boys get cut from varsity, have acne and start smoking. If they go to college, they write home for money. If they don't go to college, they wind up selling cars somewhere.

As the plane began its descent, Fleck decided to take a poll and only ask a single question: If you had to do it all over again, would you have children?

In a month, the results were in. The preliminary polls in San Diego had over 70 percent of those sampled saying that, yes, they would not have had any children again. Fleck went nationwide a month later and the same percentage held up. It turned out that there were a lot of Don Flecks out there.

The Associated Press picked up the story and ran it under headlines like "New Study Indicates Child Rearing Unsatisfying" or "Parents Wouldn't Do It Over Again, New Poll Says."

It quickly became The Topic. The morning shows did whole days on it, the afternoon talk shows had child and adult psychologists on (an audience member or two weepingly admitted that hated their children), and the late night talk show hosts used it for bad jokes ("So did you see this new poll about parents not wanting children? Boy, I bet they're glad their parents didn't think that!")

Even the President of the United States read the poll results and in his heart agreed. His children had never really amounted to much, and his wife had never shown much interest in them. He was nearly 80 years old himself. But he wondered what the consequences would be for the country: Ultra low birth rate—lower welfare costs, lower upkeep for roads, bridges, and city

streets, and lower costs for government overall. Balance the budget maybe. More prosperous people consume more, and a stable economy results. Life, liberty, pursuit of happiness. Doesn't say anything about having kids.

The most violent reaction came from the Fundamentalists. They called radio talk shows, wrote letters to newspapers and even tried to picket Fleck's offices. Their ministers preached to the converted for hours on the Satanic idea of childlessness. "Be fruitful and multiply" was quoted endlessly in places like Tupelo, Mississippi and Decorah, Iowa.

The year after the report appeared, the birth rate actually went up. But by the year 2020, the birth rate had noticeably decreased. The middle class had taken the news to heart. Retirement at 50 with all of the comforts or a child? The answer became simpler and simpler.

The tide turned for good in 2025 when a congressman from Michigan proposed the Childless Incentive Plan which became known from the inner city of Los Angeles to the Appalachian hills as CLIP. Its passage allowed permanent sterilization for any couple in exchange for a middle-class income for the rest of their lives. In essence, being sterilized was a little like hitting the lottery. Participants were allowed to move into government-owned homes and condominiums left over from the last banking crisis.

The program didn't work right away. Early recipients had a tendency to spend the \$7,000 monthly income on drugs, liquor or food for relatives not yet enrolled. CLIP also changed the housing patterns in cities all over the country. Bankrupt oceanfront condominium complexes in Southern California became crowded with poor black and white families from places like Alabama and Utah. Scenes from *The Beverly Hillbillies* became literal reality. The term "Malibu ghetto" came into existence. To remedy the problem, the Clippers (as they came to be called) were gradually relocated to reservations located in various Western states.

Don and Terri Fleck remained childless by choice. Don lived to be 110 years old as most of his contemporaries did. Numerous studies were published indicating that being childless led to long life (less stress, divorce and bankruptcy). Fleck lived to see childlessness as a lifestyle choice become the dominant social issue of his generation, the last generation to live in the United States of America. He was credited in his obituaries as “the man who started the final American revolution.”

Social changes rapidly took place. As the birth rate dropped, schools began to shut down and millions of Mexicans were allowed to emigrate to deliver newspapers and sack groceries. In another decade, colleges began to close in great numbers, and still more Mexicans emigrated to care for the millions of old Americans.

Mexican-Mexicans (as they came to be called) became the most potent political force in the country, and a new organization, the Mexican Youth, began to rampage through the streets of cities like Tampa and Scottsdale, bullying and robbing the old Americans. In time, the elections laws were rewritten to allow Mexican-Mexicans to vote and hold office.

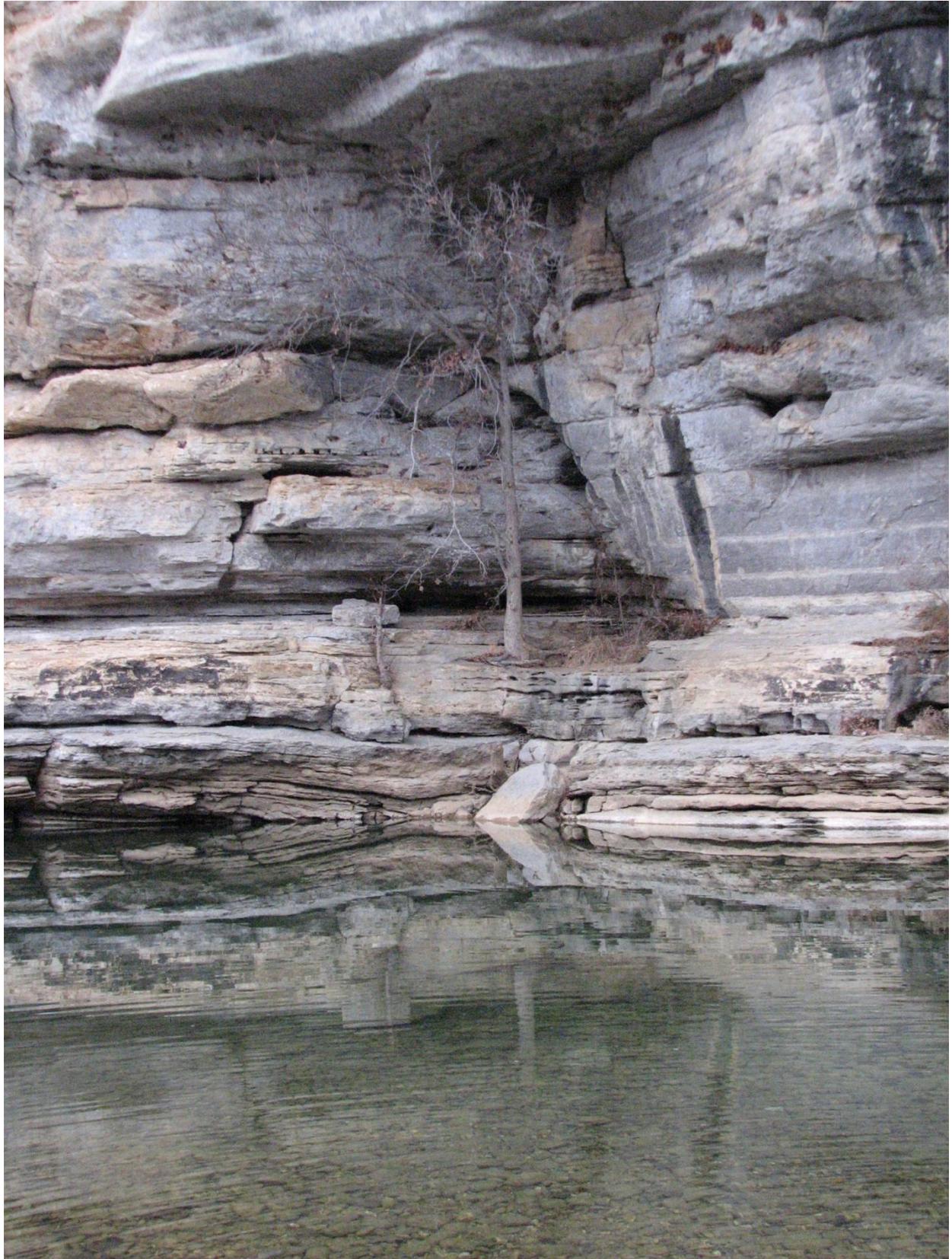
By 2085, Mexican-Mexicans constituted a majority in Congress and a man named Juan Alvarez was elected President of the United States seven years later. In the year 2099, the United States allowed itself to be annexed in its entirety to Mexico. All remaining native-born Americans of Caucasian, African or Asian descent were allowed to stay but prohibited by law from voting or having children.

By 2170, schoolchildren all over Mexico were required to memorize the biography of Don Fleck, the liberator of U.M. (Upper Mexico) and how wily “Senor Don,” being a most patriotic Mexican, had conceived the idea of conquering the U.M. without a fight by

popularizing the idea of a negative birth rate to effect a peaceful coup d'etat of the richest, most powerful people on earth.

On Fleck Day (August 22, a date known by tradition as the day Senor Don got his idea for the revolution), much celebration was made. Wreaths were laid at Fleck's tomb just outside Dallas, the new capital of Upper Mexico.

And Fleck's famous catchphrase (now thought to be a clever code) became a proverb among citizens in every part of Mexico, from Maine to Acapulco, from Seattle to Mazatlán. It was printed every day on the masthead of *The New Mexican Times*. On Fleck Day, vintage biplanes from the early 20th century spelled it out in white smoke over Manhattan: Dr. Seuss Had No Children.



Poetry
Joe F. Amoako
Delaware State University

Acrostic: Essence of Language

L

Love will forever flourish through language
Long time ago was language born with love
Longevity and affection are the essence of language

A

Ages shall come
Ages shall go
Ageless shall language remain

N

News have been spreading with civility
News will be spreading with vivacity
News will spread but through the agility of language

G

Generosity thrives with the presence of language
Genealogies have thrived through language
Generations will survive through language

U

Unity ceases with the absence of language
Unification comes with the presence of language
Unity and unification are the essence of language

A

Among the angels in heaven
Among the devils in hell
Amidst them is the serenity of language

G

Go from the North to the South
Go from the East to the West
Golden language is the passport to creativity

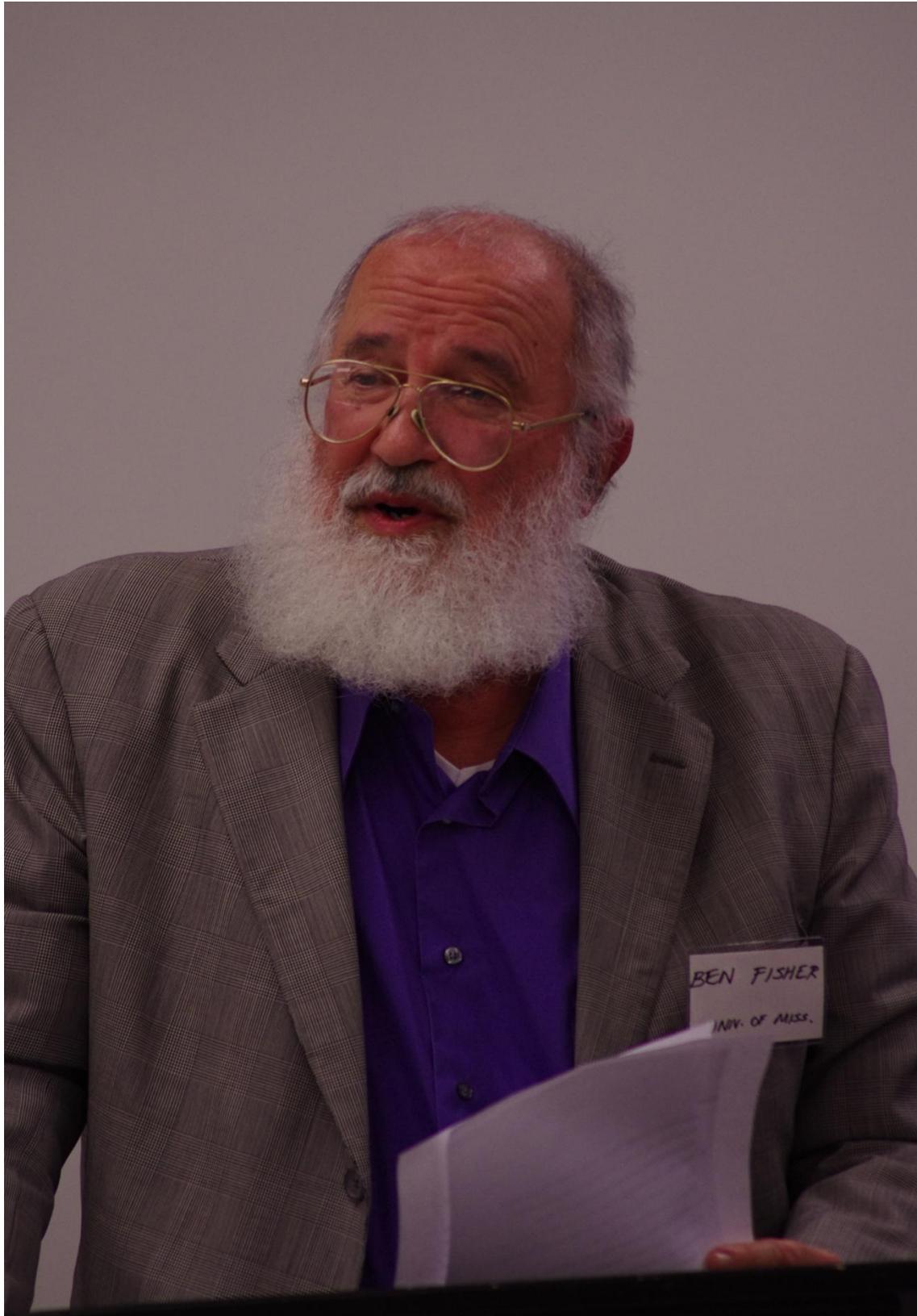
E

Earth is full of love for language
Early was language born
Eternally shall language reign

Arrival of the Twilight

The dawn gives way to the morning
The dusk gives way to the warning
The dawn light brings the sunlight
The dusk light brings the dark night

The twilight is arriving
Darkness will be following
Following darkness is the night time
And night time brings sleeping time



Ben Fisher reads an essay on early American Gothic literature.

Essay
C. Leigh McInnis
Jackson State University

“Top Story” from *Scripts: Sketches and Tales of Urban Mississippi*

SCENE I

The sun is a master clock that never needs to be wound or set. We are flowers that open to its slightest kiss, reaching to it like roots in soil. In each of us is a piece of the sun, embedded like diamonds in the darkest caves. That is why like bees we are drawn to it. No matter the temperature or the circumstances in our lives, the sun is always the first element of the day that we realize when we venture outside. It is the warm hands of something bigger than us that glazes our cheeks and slowly cascades down our chins, until it engulfs us. It is at this moment when we feel the veins of life flowing through us. Every time the sun touches our bodies, it is attempting to reconvene with itself, that piece of itself that is locked inside of us. Every morning is a big bang that starts the engine of us. So we stand there, if just for a moment, bathing in the sun, letting that small, flickering flame inside of us become torched by its origin, fueling us with life. When we separate ourselves from it, we invite death’s decay. In filling our pockets with the coins of civilization, we neglect our appointment with Nature.

There is a slight breeze that seems to fill the atmosphere with energy. The stream of its consciousness is broken by sky scrapers, smoke from the bowels of buses, and digital waves calling and faxing information tirelessly. Nature is calling, but our ears can only hear the ring of urbanization echoing in its heartbeat of profits. From a stuffed gray suit room, birds appear as admiral creatures of freedom, as their spring tunes seep through the window like syrup falling on hot pancakes. It is here that Christopher’s soul escapes through the serene whispers of the birds. It lifts him from his cracking shell and shows him the rainbow possibilities of living. Yet his metaphysical is inside, trapped in the concrete container of lawyering. It is a wrought-iron cage of defining and redefining boundaries. Law, for Christopher, is about what one cannot do. This constant concreteness is exhaled and etched in time by the pointed accuracy of rigid frozen words and clothing that fades into the dull background of the chalky language. “Tick!” echoes the seconds of the big rounded clock, hanging above the heads of the staff. The clock having colonized the sun is, for Christopher, the flapping flag that announces, “Time is money, and money is why we are here.” *Look at it.* Christopher thinks to himself. *It’s mocking me! It’s mocking us!* Time is no longer a measurement. Time is God, and the gathering of money measures the value of our existence. “Tick!” Vibrating and pounding against his chest sledgehammer style, reminding him of the lack of life in this room, possibilities wilt like flowers under the heat of money—he defiantly checks the watch on his wrist, which is ten minutes faster than the father watch on the wall—and the father watch continues to have its way with him. Life, with the master time keeper, is dangling in the balance while he sits as a rat strangled in a trap, the words of his bosses assaulting his ears with the algebraic conciseness of money, time, management, and profit. It’s a word problem that causes him to wish that he were tied to the track intersection of the two trains leaving at different times, which are destined to meet for the purposes of making more money. “Tick!” The father is an usher, removing the daylight from

Christopher's life, moving him toward nothingness. Christopher's anger is that he lets time do this.

"If no one has any questions..." words that ring like Christopher's own hallelujah chorus. Christopher abruptly wakes from his inner escape, as his eyes conduct an archeological exploration of the others in the room, almost begging and pleading out loud, *Dear God! No one has any questions!* And just as his inner most anxiety thrust him from his seat, ending the meeting himself, the sounds of "That is all" fill the air, gently falling upon his ear, wrapping and soothing him like Ben Gay to worn joints. Without almost any good-byes, Christopher throws his assignments into his personal folder and is out of the conference room, down the hall, out the back door, and into his car before he is able to exhale that final breath of poisonous capitalism, purging his soul, promising himself to never take this stuff home with him. Working at a law firm is just a part-time job to help with school. For Christopher, it means no more than unloading trucks at a toy store or bagging groceries. *Paper or plastic? Domestic or criminal?—it's all the same,* sighs Christopher. As usual, before he can start his car, his eyes examine the employee parking lot. There he sits in his green, 1970, Chrysler Newport in the midst of 94s, 95s and 96s. It is times like this when Christopher realizes the price of time, freedom, and spiritual reward. An artist has to reconcile himself to the rewards of the spirit, and can never second guess his decisions about not chasing after the physical glory. As long as he rolls in a '70 Chrysler Newport, he is just another insignificant brother. *Oh well,* he thinks, *insignificance has some rewards. There is no monthly note to pay for insignificance.*

After his daily reunion with reconciliation, Christopher starts his car and is ready to exist in his world. *It still runs.* He begins his seasonal debate of fixing the air conditioner in his car or going *o-natural*. After concluding that he only gets really hot when he has to stop at red lights, considering the cost of fixing the air conditioner, he decides that "o-natural" is the way to go. Usually, Christopher is rushing directly to class or to his work study job at the university—but not today. Today is a very special day for Christopher. It is a day to which he looks forward every year. As he speeds toward his destination, he finds himself chuckling aloud. Christopher realizes that it is best to laugh at his uniqueness and quirks rather than to find it bitter that others laugh at him. It saves time, cutting out the middle man and the insecurity. Besides, today is a day for total escapism, a national holiday, as far as Christopher is concerned. No classes for the rest of the day and the yearly release of the new Prince CD. As he drives toward the "wreka stow," Christopher finds his excitement is bubbling from him like shaken soda pop. Speeding along the interstate, he disappears into the highway.

SCENE II

Blackburn Middle School is the well-painted portrait of irony. It is a vessel of hope draped in an atmosphere of decay and dismay. The sun seems to shine only on it, burning a hole for air through the bleak clouds that hang over the rest of the area. Sitting on the corner of Pearl and Dalton, Blackburn, with its underpaid overworked staff, continuously produces flowers from concrete, seeds that reach from beneath the depths of Dante's Inferno, hoping for one mere ray of sunshine to cause their budding into violets and roses. Natasha is one of those flowers. Every evening at three-thirty, she begins her long journey home through a path of broken bottles, beer cans, crack valves, pushers and prostitutes. Yet the rotten fish smell of the ghetto fails to

perfume her essence. She is the budding cinnamon hope for this humanity of shrapnel. Today's walk will be especially long. There is a pot of gold at the end of today's journey, and her anticipation seems to add more steps to her walk. It is the day her mama gets paid. It is the day that she receives her monthly allowance of twenty-five dollars, give or take a couple, depending on the number of school days in the month. It is the day that she buys her escapism. Her mother gives her the money for lunch but allows Natasha to spend it on her heart's desire. Yet, once gone, she will not receive any more money until the end of the month. It is her mother's way of teaching her responsibility, the value of money, and the basic necessities of life. For Natasha, school lunch does not qualify as a basic necessity. Music and literature, these are the necessities of life. With them she can both please, ease, and expand her mind. She can know worlds that exist far beyond her Washington Addition neighborhood. Music and literature keep a young girl safe in her apartment, while the outside world spins inward on itself like a carnivorous black hole. Today is that day to expand and balance that world with some literary equilibrium.

In her new okra dress with pearl trimming that her mother made for her last week, her excitement is an electrical current running like a wild horse up and down her spine, and she can barely sit still in her sixth period class. Her dancing and darting eyes keep a constant watch on the stoic clock deadbolted to the wall which governs her freedom and hangs above the teacher like an omnipotent shadow, reaffirming the teacher's authority. The second hand seems to be moving backward, and Natasha cannot take another minute. Math is her best subject. But when you have all A's, what is your worst subject? Yet, there is no deep love in Natasha for school; it is just something to do, a tool to get to where she needs to be. At least this is how she reconciles herself to it. Her mother is a maid. Every night she shows Natasha the scabs, burns, and bruises on her hands, elbows, and knees. Every night she places Natasha's soft, cotton hands in her hands that feel of gravel and slavery. "My hands used to feel soft like yours." She tells Natasha, "But, I didn't go to college." Nightly, Natasha has to clean the house. It is a reminder of where she could end if she does not finish college. "These days, a college degree is like a high school diploma used to be. Now, you got to have a graduate degree to make your own schedule and paycheck. Time, baby, time is the greatest gift that you can give yourself. 'Cause see, time is what you use to make money. If you ain't got no degree, you ain't got no time. When you don't have a degree, your time is at other people's disposal." These words vibrate in Natasha's head whenever her mother has to work twelve hour shifts or work on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Her mother works so much that holidays are merely copper earrings that have lost their luster. The only holiday left in Natasha's life is the end of the month, "Allowance Day." This is the day that she can feed the stomach of her mind, free the kite of her soul, and celebrate the flowers of her being.

In school Natasha narrowly escapes being an odd duck. In the 'Dition, hope is a lottery ticket sealed in a Publisher's Clearinghouse envelope that the mailman put in somebody else's box. Children who get good grades are displaying hope for a better life. But far too many of their peers have had the hope clawed out them like little molested virgins. Their minds have been impregnated with the seeds of self-aversion and self-quandary. By fourth grade, they are walking shells of children whom teachers pass along because, "They ain't gon' be nuthing noway." But Natasha has an inner quality, self-esteem. Self-esteem is like air in a balloon, the more you have, the higher you will fly. Natasha hovers over the other fallen flowers like an angel at a funeral. She seems royally above the decay. Her mother has equipped her with inner

peace, which comes from knowing that the only real fame is the love of God. The embodiment of brilliance, the other children admire her like morning violets opening to the sweet kisses of the sun. They admire her because she is a leader, not a follower. She is an outsider who has chosen to be an outsider. She will be voted most likely to succeed in high school. Her eyes seem set in stone on a larger prize than ghetto continuity. Yet, her gaze is not a look that goes through her classmates. Her mother did not raise an ant that works alone. It is a look that endears others to look with her. And even at this age, it is firm and unwavering.

Three o'clock. "Yes!" With only a word or two to her classmates, she meets Jamonica at the exit doors. Jamonica is a grade behind but a year in age ahead of Natasha. They live in the same direction and walk home together after school. But this is not why they are friends. Many wonder why Natasha and Jamonica are such close friends. Natasha does not go for any foolishness when it comes to school, boys, drugs, and fighting. Jamonica is just the opposite. She is rarely in school for an entire month. She is a regular arm bracelet of the drug boys and already has a baby. Ironically, Jamonica was a better student than Natasha. When they were in elementary together, Jamonica had the highest grades at Isabel Elementary. Now, that seems so long ago. All babies are cute, even black ones. But when they grow older, babies in the 'Dition become just an extra mouth. By the time Jamonica arrives in middle school, she is just another mouth in a long line of mouths to feed. She used to come over to Natasha's house and study with her. Now, at fifteen, Jamonica has four younger brothers and sisters and a baby of her own for which to care. Natasha's and Jamonica's mothers were close neighbors until Jamonica's mother traded their friendship for back alley candy. Now the only time that Natasha and Jamonica spend together is their walks from school, which grow farther and farther apart with Jamonica's frequent lapses from school.

As they reach their fork in the road, Natasha and Jamonica head their separate ways. Walking toward home and away from Jamonica, Natasha turns to take a last look at Jamonica. She sees Jamonica getting into a car with her latest boyfriend. This time she is with somebody younger. He is only nineteen. Jamonica's overdeveloped body and underdeveloped mind cause her to be pulled into an almost irreversible tornado of childhood, motherhood, welfarehood, addictionhood, criminalhood, and death, leaving her child to the same cycle. Feeling a momentary lapse of ice-cold pity, Natasha shrugs it off with a notion of staying focused. As she approaches her house, she notices that her mother is home early.

"Glory be!" Natasha thinks and breaks into a full sprint, frantically unlocking the door. "Hey, mama!" Natasha explodes, excited and out of breath.

Calmly, her mother replies, not turning around to see Natasha's excited face from which she can feel the glow on her back, "Hey, Natasha." Slowly, her mother turns and asks, "So, how was school?"

How was school!?! Natasha thinks to herself. She cannot believe that her mother is wasting such precious minutes with such unnecessary chit-chat. School was as it always is, a chore, nothing more. Struggling to stay calm, "It was fine mama." Hesitating, but pushing forward, "So, you home early, huh? Does...that...mean...that...you...have...something...to...do?"

Still calm, "No, baby. What would give you that impression?"

Natasha, thinking to herself, *Okay mama, stop trippin'.* *You know what today is.* Holding her excitement, Natasha speaks, "I was just wondering, if you didn't have anything to do and if you paid all of the bills, could we go on down to the record store and then to the book

store before they close.”

Her mother, slowly turning away from Natasha and back toward the kitchen, enjoying this little game, “Well, I guess we can...But first, how are your grades?” Becoming slightly irritated, Natasha thinks to herself,

More stupid questions. My grades are like they have been for the past seven years, excellent.

Her mother interjects, “What’s that Natasha?”

Worried, Natasha thinks to herself, *Was I talking out loud?* Frantically, she searches her mind for the appropriate words, “My grades are fine mama. I have all A’s. Remember, you went to the PTA meeting just last week.”

With a stone look, her mother responds, “Don’t get smart with me child.” Natasha’s heart stops in mid-beat. Then a cat-like grin from ear to ear covers her mother’s face, “Come on chile, fo’ you burst.” As they gather their things and head out the door, her mother asks, “So, what book you buying today?”

Proudly, Natasha responds, “This year I’ve read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *A Raison in the Sun*. I think I’m going to buy *Jubilee*.”

“Oh, that’s a fine book, baby,” her mother replies.

“Mama,” Natasha starts curiously, “How come you won’t let me buy *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*?”

“I just do not think that you are ready for that one, yet,” the mother responds.

“But you’ve already talked to me about sex,” Natasha adds.

“I’ve talked to you about sex, not sexuality,” her mother adds.

“What’s the difference?” Natasha inquires.

“About ten years,” the mother quips, and they get into the car and head to the stores.

SCENE III

The Washington Addition Neighborhood, affectionately and fearfully known as “The ‘Dition” or “Dodge City,” is also bumping on this spring day. “Crack City,” it is not even summer, and the smells of crack and prostitution combine as burning buckets of tarred asphalt and sour panties that engulfs the neighborhood for blocks. As the sun heats the air, a rainbow of dissolution blankets the area in a multi-colored umbrella of hopelessness. It is the ghetto’s green house effect, suffocating its citizens into submission or ambiguity. In the heat, the shallow outline of vague individuals merge like melting clay into the silhouette of the mass. The sound of cars zooming and radios blasting over the top of the sundry voices of anger and pain: crying babies, males and females being inhuman to each other, and somebody sexing somebody for some momentary relief. No one hears the quiet sighs of the elder statesmen who have populated this neighborhood since its apex and lived through its demise, because their doctor and lawyer children moved out to North Jackson. Their pleas rise like faint smoke to an uninterested sky and fall back to the broken earth like forgotten autumn leaves in the middle of July. Now all that is left are the elderly, the mislocated, the transients, and the criminals. More pushers than the Capitol City has policemen, and very few policemen have clean underwear. On a Saturday night, dealers do their time by reservation. It is called, “prison population control.”

Like the coming of the night but with a much louder sound system, rolling down the main drag drag of the ‘Dition is a pearl black Jaguar with silver hubcaps and black wall tires that

glisten like onyx diamonds. The whole car glows like black sunshine. In it is the 'Dition LP connection. An all female posse, the leader modeled her crew after this myth she once heard about a female gangster from New York who beat the city gangsters out their money and then headed South. The females in that Jaguar fit like finely crafted accessories that come as limited options, for they are as perfectly sculptured as the ride. They will make a brother give up a month's pay and his next of kin to be with them. From midnight black to sunshine yellow, from caramel candy coded to fire-engine red, hot and lustful, bubbling under a cool surface, these are the females that could cause the fall and the redemption of man. Take the term female and all of its Eve, Nefertiti, Helen of Troy, Jezebel, Janie, Sapphire, and Shug Avery connotations at its widest use, because their attitudes are just as funky as their bodies. Underneath every seat, tucked in every bra, and under one petite miniskirt is enough fire power to control a nice part of town. Guns cling to their bodies like natural anatomy. As they are roaring down the street, they pass two women who look at them with sun drenched heartache. The first woman says to the second, "That was you, wasn't it?"

The second woman responds dejectedly, "That was me."

The first woman adds, "I guess our young sisters ain't goin' to be hit on and played like our mothers and aunts."

The second woman responds, "You know D.D., no matter how much we dress like men, or act like men, or curse like men, or even fuck like men, it still doesn't erase the pain of being a woman. The sad thing and what they don't understand is that the power of being a woman is what conquers most men—not acting like a man."

The first woman asks, "When will they realize this?"

The second woman closes, "It depends on how deep the river of pain runs and how muddy their waters have been made with the pollution of phallus."

On the center back seat of the Jaguar wearing jet black shades is Li'l Poni. She was so taken with the myth of Poni of New York that she took Poni's name as hers. With one eye on her watch and the other eye on the driver, a soft sandpaper voice lingers like vanilla flavor to the front of the car, "Hurry up. You are going to make me late."

Her Caramel Coded driver speaks, "Bitch please, you better use that finger and chill the fuck out! Hell that damn stow ain't going nowhere." Li'l Poni's beeper goes off. The caramel coded driver continues, "You need to answer your beeper anyway."

The voice from the backseat continues with the temperature of her tone dropping to a cold communication. "First of all," ice chips of emotion falling from her words, "your job is not the calculation of my destination. Your job is to get me there. Secondly, unlike you, the rest of us have dicks at the house, so you can keep your satisfaction secrets to yourself." The females in the car explode with laughter.

From the passenger side of the front seat, the Midnight Beauty speaks, "Girl hurry up and get this bitch to the store quick, fast, and in a hurry, 'cause she 'bout to worry the shit out of me..."

"Hey!" from the driver side of the backseat, Ms. Strawberry interrupts, "Shit! I can't hear my song on the radio!"

All of the females speaking as one resound, "Shut the fuck up then." Laughter explodes from all. Out the corner of her eye, the Caramel Coded driver spots a couple of wanna bes posing to be chosen, so she rolls right up. Noticing what her driver is doing, Li'l Poni mumbles to herself, "Damn girl, not now."

The Caramel Coded driver shouts to the brothers at the corner, "Hey, hey baby, damn, you look good. I sure would like to give you a ride." The brothers slowly break their expressionless faces but maintain their level of frozen unconcern to keep from looking impressed or embarrassed. One of them strolls to the car. The Caramel Coded driver continues when the young male arrives at the side of the car. "Like I said, I *would* like to give you a ride, but my trunk is full."

"Oh Girl!" screams the young Strawberry Ms. from the back seat, "You a fool!"

The young male does not take too kindly to being disrespected by some "freak ass hoe." So, he lunges to smack her. Before he can get his hand fully extended, the Caramel Coded driver has a blade at his throat, gently caressing the side of his neck with her sharpened end, and the Midnight Beauty has found a .357 from somewhere, because she is not wearing enough to conceal a weapon that large. The Strawberry Ms. has peeped and covered the males still on the corner with a steady aim of her metal piece that looks molded to her hand. With her shades still on, having not moved an inch from her position in the back seat, the steady but declining temperature in her voice flows like silk snow, Li'l Poni speaks, "Better be sure." The young males glance back and forth at each other in a nervous, surprised motion, and, in their hesitation, Poni states in a tone to freeze water, "Boy, if y'all don't get the fuck back, y'all gon' be the top story on WLBT tonight!" This female can yell with a whisper. The males back away from the car, and the Jaguar slowly pulls away. The Caramel Coded driver attempts to yell something as they pull away, but she is interrupted by Li'l Poni's "Shut up."

The Caramel Coded driver replies, "Damn girl, what's wrong with you?"

Li'l Poni answers, "For starters you have made me later than a muthafucker. And I have told you time and time again not to fuck around with these sorry ass niggas in this hood. Girl, these niggas don't care about shit. They shootin' each other over pussy, crack, and pennies. And I ain't about to become no dead piece of pussy over no pussyass bullshit. I'm planning to draw a pension from my shit. It's stupid shit like you just pulled that gets people killed for nuthing."

SCENE IV

At approximately four fifteen, Li'l Poni and her girls roll up to the record shop. The parking lot is over flowing with cars. Li'l Poni, seeing all of the cars in the lot exclaims, "See, damit, fuckin' wit y'all!" I bet it's all sold out."

"Girl!" The Midnight Beauty exclaims, "Don't nobody want no Prince record. Not anybody in this neighborhood."

"You better hope for y'all sake that is true," Li'l Poni adds as she jumps out the car and heads hurriedly toward the door. The five females, who remain strikingly stunning even in the crowd, looking like black magnolias in a bed of plastic flowers, move steadily through the mob almost pushing people out their way. The men of the crowd almost come to a standstill as their eyes fall upon and become glued to the five beauties.

"Nigga, you better put your eyes back over here!" a young female exclaims, catching her man watching Li'l Poni and the others going toward the store.

By this time, Christopher has already arrived at the shop and is in a state of panic as he sees the parking lot full of people. His worst fears come to mind, "What if they are sold out?" With no time to waste, Christopher parks across the street and makes a mad dash toward the

store. He arrives at the top of the stairs at the same time as Li'l Poni and her crew. He attempts to decide if he is going to allow them to enter first or just push right through. In his mind, he decides, "Hey, they may want the CD." For Christopher, it is every man or woman for himself or herself. He reaches for the door, and Li'l Poni looks over her shades and flashes Christopher a blistering look with her flaming brown eyes. "Oh no ma'am," Christopher explains, "I was just going to get the door for you."

The Caramel Coded driver states, "Well, get the door and get the fuck out of the way."

As the usual cat laughter rings out, the young Strawberry female adds, "What a geek." While the five young ladies move into the store, Christopher moves in after them. Li'l Poni, Christopher, and the rest of the mob, consisting of about twenty-five African Americans and two white kids, move toward the back of the store where the new releases are placed with a promotional poster above them. Christopher and the others move their eyes along the poster toward the spot, which holds the new CDs. Their eyes fall upon a sight that no music lover can bare on the first day of release, "SOLD OUT!" Christopher can actually hear his heart hit bottom, echoing through his entire body, as it plunges like an anvil into his stomach.

"Yes ma'am, you and your boyfriend have just bought the last copy of *Emancipation*," the cashier states as he hands the change to the high school aged white couple. The rest of the customers stand in disbelief as they helplessly watch the last CD go out the door.

One young brother in the crowd yells, "What a couple of white kids know about Prince anyway?"

"We know enough to get to the store before he sells out," the nervous white teen proclaims, his voice cracking as he rushes to his car.

"Northpark!" yells Christopher. "They always order a surplus of new material. If I hurry, I can get there."

"They don't have any either. That's why those white kids were over here," the cashier informs Christopher.

"Is the record that hot?" asks Christopher.

"Not really. We just didn't order that many because we didn't think that it would sell. It's been years since Prince, I mean the Artist, has had a mega-hit". Noticing the horror on Christopher's face, the cashier continues, "But, we special ordered some more earlier today and should get them in a couple of days. If you want to pay now, we can hold one for you." With a sigh of relief, Christopher quickly hands the cashier the money before he changes his mind. A line forms behind Christopher, headed by Li'l Poni and her crew.

"Thank God," the Caramel Coded driver sighs, "This bitch would have been on her period for two weeks if we couldn't get that damn CD."

After paying for the CDs, the crowd begins to head out of the door and down the steps, leading to the parking lot. As unannounced as a summer rain, firecracker explosions ring out, shattering the serene silence. The sounds of semi-automatic guns and black rain fill the air. It is almost rhythmic, the manner in which gun fire, bouncing shells, broken windows, screaming bystanders, and trampling feet blend into a symphony of "Drive-by Number 545" in G flat major with an E in the bass. "Shit!" Li'l Poni proclaims to herself, as she reaches in her bag and pulls out her gat. Christopher is seeking a hiding place. The repetitious sound of gun fire fills the air as a stream of industrial-modern consciousness. After finding a car behind which to hide, Li'l Poni tries to see if she can tell what is happening. Like a moral boomerang, she realizes that it is the young brothers from the corner whom she and her girls ran into earlier. They begin to return

fire at the young brothers who are parked across the street. Smoke, flying bullets, and chaos continue to fill the parking lot. The sounds of the bullets bouncing off the cars, breaking windows, and streaking over head drive the crowd into a frenzy. In the midst of the screams and gunshots, a child has been left in the middle of the parking lot—a small, frail, girl in a green and white dress. Christopher notices that the little girl is directly in the line of fire between Li'l Poni and the brothers across the street, like Bambi on a river bank caught between a lioness and an alligator. He makes a dash for the little girl, but, just before he arrives at her spot, she falls over into his arms. A single scream ejaculates and is heard above the noise, piercing the heart of the day. "My baby!" her mother screams. Shots continue to be fired, and Christopher goes down. From a distance, the rising siren of a police car is heard. Hearing the police car about to arrive, the young brothers jump in their cars and slip away. Li'l Poni and her crew fire a few more shots in the direction of the leaving cars, only hitting the sides and bursting a few side and rear windows. Li'l Poni and her crew then hop into their car and disappear onto the interstate.

As soon as it had begun, it is over. All that is left is the sun. It is shining a blinding bright glow, which hovers above the parking lot. The people in the crowd begin to notice how hot it is. They notice their sweat stained clothes, smelling of the incident. The sun is a flashlight. In this moment, there are no secrets. The parking lot feels like an oven, as the sun intensifies the stench of the moment. Christopher and the little girl lie baptized in their own blood, lightly glazed by the sun. In a high pitched moan, the little girl's mother calls her name, hoping she will arise, "Natasha! Natasha baby, get up! Natasha baby, please get up.... You got to get up baby. You ain't got your records baby. Baby, get up. We still got to go and get your book. Natasha! Natasha! Natasha!... You can get any book you want baby. It's Okay, baby. It's Okay. Mamma right here, baby. Get up baby! Natasha! Natasha! Natasha!" The silence of the moment is broken only by cries and sobs of the crowd. As the police arrive, they begin to question the crowd. Shortly thereafter, the television cameras arrive. Christopher and Natasha are the ten o'clock "Top Story" of the night.



J. B. Potts discusses the thread of *Logos* in Don DeLillo's fiction.

ESSAY
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British Crime Fiction and the Critique of (Post) Modern Society:

Naturalism in Barbara Vine's *A Fatal Inversion*

The novels of suspense by British author Ruth Rendell and her nom de plume Barbara Vine are critically acclaimed for their subversion of the generic mystery formula in which a broken social order is restored by a brilliant detective. In Vine's novels, as in many of Rendell's non-Inspector Wexford series, there is no super sleuth capable of restoring social or moral order, precisely because the social and psychological conflicts that lead to the crimes remain unresolved.

Critics have contemplated the differences within the Rendell/Vine canon. Margaret Russett, for example, notes of Vine's authorial persona "the elimination of the detective and the substitution of a first person narrator who participates more intimately in the mystery she unfolds" (145). For Russett, Vine's more "intuitive approach is further identified with a web of female relations who find their correlatives in the plots of the novels" (145). Susan Rowland also addresses the first person female point of view in the Vine novels, noting "a sublime mystification of motherhood, tinged with terror at the murderous impulses engendered by its passions" (116). While these observations are perceptive of Vine's first novel *A Dark Adapted Eye* and her third novel *House of Stairs*, they do not apply to Vine's second novel *A Fatal Inversion*, which is narrated in the third person omniscient, filtered through the points of view of the three male principles as they grapple with the events of the past.

In *A Fatal Inversion*, the bodies of a young woman and infant are found in 1986, buried on a property occupied a decade earlier by the college aged Adam Verne-Smith and a small

cadre of misfits, who presently must confront the repressed realities and consequences of their actions that summer ten years ago. With Vine moving deftly between the past and present, the “truth” is slowly unraveled, exposing the merciless and inhibitive forces that threaten the individual until crime seems the only means of maintaining the illusion of a unified self.

According to crime fiction scholar Julian Symonds, *A Fatal Inversion* possesses “the most brilliantly ironic ending of any crime story known” (294), and indeed, irony is key to understanding the central concerns of this and many of Vine’s novels. Of the Rendell/Vine series, Peter Huhn accurately observes that the “characters are all helplessly caught in their stories” and “irony, which stresses the uncontrollablness (sic) of action, is pervasive” (48), flaws in Huhn’s estimate, which produce a “lack [of] authorial consciousness. Inside the novel [he argues] no one controls the stories” (48). However, what Huhn considers a flaw, I see as the authorial perspective of the principle antagonist of *A Fatal Inversion*—the fatalistic, ironic consciousness of Naturalism that constructs and controls the identities of Vine’s characters, preventing them from maintaining a sense of individual agency. While Rowland reads in Vine a quest for a “utopian social order . . . characterized by social progressiveness and . . . hope for future reform,” I see a much darker world view that precludes the restoration of any order—utopian or other—and provokes criminal behavior in otherwise “normal” individuals as their identity is constructed, compelled, and ultimately threatened by vast forces beyond their control.

For clarification, my definition of Naturalism denotes a philosophical position which holds that social conditions, heredity, environment, and even one’s character prove to be inescapable forces in shaping human identity. Influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution, Naturalistic works explore the formidable external and internal forces influencing the actions of its subjects and often include sordid, if not criminal, subject matter mixed with a pervasive

pessimism that exposes the harshness of life. *A Fatal Inversion* manifests many of these characteristics in the story's two plot lines, but Vine also includes a relentless karmic retribution for the crimes of the past—hardly a Naturalist theme. Nonetheless, *Nemesis*—cast in the guise of human conscience, fear, and guilt—insidiously pursues Adam and his fellows for ten years, demanding justice for the woman and infant so callously disposed of and then failed by the system. Ironically, even though the guilty get away with the crimes when the wrong man is charged and the case is closed, the past nonetheless consumes the present and defines the future of the players involved.

The construction of identity based on class, culture, and gender assumptions plays a pivotal role in the tragedy, set in 1976. The community of college aged kids at Wyvis Hall represents a microcosm of a larger British counter-culture and diasporan community rebelling in various ways against conformity in a claim for autonomy. All characters are trying to establish a unique identity, eschewing social restraints and parental expectations in favor of self-fashioning; however, circumstances keep interfering. Ironically, this universal teenage urge to construct and defend one's individuality is the motivation behind the Wyvis murder, perpetrated to prevent other crimes from becoming public. Being branded a criminal would both define and destroy the futures of the young players, and a life sentence in prison was an option no one was prepared to face.

Adam Verne Smith, of "minor gentry," represents the white socially privileged hierarchy of the British class system. Fate drops Wyvis Hall into Adam's lap, thanks to his great uncle's posthumous nose-thumbing at Adam's ingratiating and class-conscious father, whom all had assumed would inherit. Later, Adam grimly reflects that if his father had inherited, then the crimes would never have been committed, a recurrent motif in Vine's novels that underscores

her Naturalistic tendencies. In fact, Adam was not the least bit interested in owning the property and planned to sell it immediately, to his father's bafflement and disdain. As he later laments, "There were so many ifs and conditions, so many other eventualities that easily might have happened [to keep him from Wyvis] . . . but things had not gone that way" (58). Simply curious about his legacy and its financial worth, Adam asks his best friend Rufus, another representative of patriarchal imperatives, to drive him to Wyvis, and upon viewing the expansive manor house and grounds, the two determine to spend the summer there instead of travelling to Greece as planned. Selling the contents of the house would support their drinking and revelry, they surmised, and soon the concept of Ecalpemos (the inversion of Someplace) evolved.

The third male character, Shiva, is driven to the Wyvis Hall commune by economic necessity. Shiva is of Indian descent but westernized in his sensibilities, having been raised in postcolonial London by his Anglophile father who never bothered to introduce his son to the Bhagavad-Gita. A product of imperialism, Shiva desires acceptance as an equal from his white male counterparts to unify his hybrid identity. Fatefully, he is repeatedly ignored and treated condescendingly by his white housemates from whom he constantly seeks approval, even to the point of involving himself in the crimes. Adam and Rufus's ingrained colonialist prejudices against Shiva are revealed in Adam's repeated references to Shiva as "the Indian" and by his and Rufus's failure to remember Shiva's surname once the bodies are discovered, and self-preservation becomes their only concern. Shiva recalls his tortured relationship with his Anglo compatriots: "Their indifference, their treating him as of no account, caused him a pain he thought he had long gotten over" (107). Pondering his situation, Shiva finds it "curious" that in most stories and books he has read, "someone who had brought about another person's death recovered from it immediately, was just the same afterward as before, [and] was affected if at all

only by the fear of discovery. The reality was very different” (107). Having failed to repress either his role in the fall of Ecalpemos or his guilt, Shiva senses “a gentle nemesis . . . in pursuit of him, its approach slow and lightfooted, but as sure as that of a breeze” (106).

Women were also at Wyvis Hall that summer, and as the narrator notes, their intrusion, especially Zosie’s, “changed everything” (129). Vivien, an orphaned but mystic hippie chick seeking a communal life at Wyvis Hall, is guided by the principle values of peace and love until fate threw her in with Adam and Rufus by way of Shiva. Vivien plays a new-aged Angel in the House, who assumes responsibility for all the cleaning, cooking, nurturing, and moral reasoning with which her gender is identified. She seeks a “real community of dedicated people, all with ideas similar to hers, people that she might teach and who might teach her something” (105). Membership in such a society would validate and complete Vivien’s sense of self and purpose. For all of the energy and structure she brings to the commune, her noble inclinations ironically betray her in the end. The second female Zosie is a beautiful child-woman, a waif, whom Adam perceives variously as “a piece of property which. . . if unclaimed within a fixed period, falls to the owner of the manor” (85) and “a kind of precociously vicious child whore” (161) whose presence undermines the original intentions of the commune. By a chance encounter, Rufus picks up Zosie on the side of the road one night as he is returning to Wyvis from the village pub. Though Zosie confesses she just escaped from the “looney bin,” Rufus nonetheless trades sex with her in the back of his van for a place to stay at the Hall. When Rufus inevitably tires of her, Zosie is passed on to Adam, the lord of the manor, who becomes sexually obsessed with his new acquisition to the point of defying all other members of the small commune to preserve his own warped delusions, even after she steals valuable merchandise from the village shops and “accidentally” kidnaps two children. Claiming she is “just a person,” Zosie admits to having no

direction in life, and the Wyvis Hall commune seems the panacea to her problems: “I’d quite like to live here, forever, in this house, and just never do anything ever . . . What I will do is marry a rich man and maybe he’ll buy this house . . . for me” (139). Thus Zosie nurtures fantasies that seem well beyond her reach—status, children, security, and love—especially when we consider her pathetic and tortured past.

All of these characters have been constructed by their heritage, their parent’s expectations, their biological desires, and their youth and milieu, but mostly by their need to be liberated from the confines of oppressive social identity. Yet even as the group establishes its inverted bohemian social structure, including sundrenched days drinking wine and smoking hash, the forces of circumstance, chance, and character gather unaware to compel these characters toward the tragedy of a youthful folly. Shiva, perhaps because he is most marginalized by the others, is the only character with any vague sense of the situational irony: with each character envisioning Wyvis Hall as his or her private Garden of Eden, Shiva “can’t shake the feeling” that this particular Eden is not “a haven to live in and enjoy but . . . a paradise to be expelled from. It was almost as if a necessary condition of being in this place were the commission of some frightful sin or crime that must result in expulsion from it” (65). His premonition could not have been more on target.

The inevitable expulsion from Wyvis, when the survivors vowed never to see or speak to each other again, marks the psychological fall of each character. As the one actually guilty of murder, Adam is the main character and narrative focus. Each step he has taken since 1976 has proven an ironic inversion of his youthful construction of self. To various degrees, depending on the circumstances, he has repressed the memories of his past, successfully juggling his internal conflicts with the roles of upper-middleclass businessman, husband, and father; however, self-

knowledge lurks below the surface, nagging him long before the bodies are found: “The things that had happened at Ecalpemos, Adam resisted thinking about. He dreamed of them, he could not expect to expel them from his unconscious mind and they also came back to him by association, but he never allowed himself to dwell on them” (6). Having the most to lose, Adam confesses in his darkest hours that he “would have felt most comfortable if he knew [his co-conspirators] were all dead” (6), a sinister desire shared by both Rufus and Shiva. In the present moment of the narrative, however, the process of reassembling the past combined with a profound fear of losing his daughter if he is arrested overwhelm him: “The fact was that he was terribly tired. To break into an area of memory that has been deliberately buried and turfed over for a decade was an exhausting process. It was his own thoughts that had worn him out, this once buried thing that now obsessed him” (110). As the difficulty of his situation becomes despairingly clear, Adam wonders, “Was his whole life affected by what had happened at Ecalpemos?”(52). The question is doubtlessly rhetorical; the obvious response is yes.

Being the owner of Wyvis at the time of the deaths, Adam knows he will be contacted by the authorities. The fear that consumes Adam at this time is described in terms of the furies, those vengeful operatives of Fate awakened by his own tormented psyche. In spite of his achievements, Adam laments, “Nemesis had still come down like a wolf on the fold” (50). The toll his guilt has taken and his subsequent psychological fragmentation is revealed as he desperately tries to prevent his wife from noticing his slow mental and physical decay, brought on by sleepless nights and worry as more evidence is introduced and the police pay him several disturbing visits. His fear and guilt manifests itself in his obsessive focus on his daughter Abigail, whom he irrationally fears will suffer crib death, a fear we come to comprehend all too clearly. His wife Anne, who is oblivious to his past at Ecaplemos, thinks Adam is losing his

mind and blames his obsessive behavior on his “neurotic self-absorption” (109), an apt analysis. To Anne’s frustration, he spends most nights hovering over the baby to make sure she does not die. Reflecting on the tragedy of Ecalpemos and his present peril, Adam is struck by the absoluteness of Oscar Wilde’s contention that “our past is what we are. We cannot rid ourselves of it” (30).

While neither Rufus nor Shiva is responsible for the deaths of the two victims, both are guilty of participating in the conflicts leading up to the crimes and obstructing justice by covering the crimes, all in the name of reactionary self-preservation, an intrinsic desire to hide the truth and control the outcome of events. Nonetheless, they too have felt the wrath of *Nemesis* both prior to and certainly following the discovery of the bodies as their narratives expose. On the surface, Rufus seems unscathed by the past as he lives the high-life he had mapped out for himself since before that fateful summer at Ecaplemos. With a beautiful and intelligent wife, upscale addresses on Wimpole Street and in Mill Hill, and a thriving gynecological career (the height of irony considering the circumstances), Rufus seems to have risen above the pathological debilitations suffered by Adam, receiving the news of the discovery with nonchalance and immediate assumptions of survival: “Rufus was a disciplined man. He had not gotten where he was by the age of thirty-three by giving way to pointless speculation and neurotic inner inquiry” (23). Rufus is adept at repressing the truth except when, locked in his room, he “subject[s] himself to his own personal therapy . . . expressing to those bare walls . . . the crawling distastes and shames, the self-disgust, the shrinking from light and the fear which seemed sometimes to beat with frenzied wings against the bars in his brain” (23). Yes, even the unflappable Rufus is tormented by the furies although he convinces himself that his former friends “would be more discomposed than he” about the discovery of the bodies (26). Rufus’s unsuccessful attempts at

deflection and delusion are revealed in his increasing addictions to cigarettes and alcohol, vodka specifically, which he hides all over the house to fool his wife (and himself) about the extent of his drinking problem. Because he is unable to confide in his wife, who is increasingly irritated by Rufus's alienation following the reports of the crimes, he, like Adam, has turned inward to confront his conscience with the argument that necessity compels his actions, both then and now: "If [my involvement in the crimes] comes to light . . . I will lose my practice and my reputation and everything that I have and could look forward to, if not my liberty. It would be bad enough if I were a GP . . . or an ear, nose, and throat man, but I'm a *gynecologist*, and it is the bones of a young woman and baby that have been found there" (35). Rufus's primary concern has always been for himself only and to that self he remains true. Witnessing the murder, Rufus's survivalist mentality kicks in even as Adam pleads for his help: "I'll tell you whose side I'm on. Rufus's. And that goes for always" (216).

Following his expulsion from Eden, Shiva is not as fortunate as his Anglo compatriots and partners in crime, a crime in which he misguidedly participates to demonstrate his displaced loyalty to the Anglo hierarchy. Hospitalized for a year after suffering a complete physical and mental breakdown, Shiva never achieved the medical degree or pharmacology certificate his father had expected because he could not repress the past as easily as Adam and Rufus. As an Indian, he continues to be the victim of repeated hate crimes, mostly by people who believe he is Pakistani. Tellingly, Shiva erroneously credits his victimization to the consequences of his decisions at Wyvis. Living in near poverty, Shiva's only blessing in life comes from his Anglo wife Lili, who ritually and faithfully follows Shiva's abandoned Hinduism. Their personal integrity and spiritual bond have created a relationship built on mutual trust, including a responsibility to confide everything to each other with impunity. Shiva is driven to disclose the

truth to Lily, who is horrified and physically sickened by what she learns. Their increasing alienation, her ability to forgive but not forget, confirms Shiva's observation that "the gathering forces were just starting the work of retribution" (242). In a grimly ironic twist, Shiva loses his conflict with fate, not by his role in the Wyvis crimes but by virtue of postcolonial prejudices and assumptions by which his identity had been defined.

As Adam considers his life at the end of the novel, he acutely recognizes, "All roads lead back to Ecalpemos" (125), that universal if naïve dream of youth seeking the inversion of an oppressive social order in defense of self. However, Adam found in Ecalpemos not a safe haven or utopia but a place where "life in all its most awful aspects had attacked them and they could not fight it off" (207). As a novel of suspense, Vine's *A Fatal Inversion* exposes how criminal acts are often motivated, not by warped pathology, but by the forces of naturalism—fate, economics, class, race, gender, and personal desires—powerful obstacles in conflict with the individual's primal imperatives. As Adam ultimately concedes, "he was overwhelmed and conquered by his instinct for self-preservation" (244-245). All of us are embattled by forces that inhibit the construction of an autonomous self; however, not all of us lose our souls in the fight. The criminals in *A Fatal Inversion* are not innately depraved, just kids who in a desperate act of self-preservation commit and cover a horrible crime. However, a price must be paid. Even though Adam and Rufus escape the criminal justice system, they cannot escape the furies of their own conscience. Using crime, especially murder, as a metaphor of the depths to which the individual might descend in his or her attempt to preserve the sanctity of the self, Vine exposes a harsh world governed by happenstance where, as Thomas Hardy observes, "Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain, / And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan" ("Hap").

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ESSAY

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The Sacred Hunter in the Mysticism of St. Teresa of Avila

In the first half of the sixteenth century Spanish literature entered into its Golden Age. This era, influenced by Humanist ideas and Renaissance ideals, witnessed the flowering of chivalric, pastoral, and picaresque novels, the emergence of a national theater, and the enhancement of lyric poetry through the introduction of Italian verse forms. However, by the second half of that century the literary currents had begun to flow in a different direction as Spain, the bastion of Catholic orthodoxy, turned inward in response to the advances of the Protestant Reformation.

This inner-directed aesthetic also yielded spectacular cultural achievements, one notable example of which was the literature of mysticism. When one thinks of the great Spanish mystics, several names immediately come to mind—St. Ignatius of Loyola, Luis de León, Luis de Granada, and St. John of the Cross—but none is more appealing to modern sensibilities than the woman who was born Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada, sometimes referred to as Teresa de Jesús, who is best known by the name Saint Teresa of Avila.

Teresa was born in the walled city of Avila in Old Castile in 1515. She joined the Carmelites at age twenty-one and led a bold, active life, founding convents and spearheading major reforms within the Carmelite order. Her strong personality, charm, sense of humor, and natural beauty endeared her to those in positions of authority, including the Spanish monarch, Philip II, who greatly admired her and protected her from persecution by the Spanish Inquisition. Teresa's prose masterpieces on the mystical experience, *Interior Castle*, *The Way of Perfection*, and her autobiography are lively, spontaneous accounts written in down-to-earth language that

convey an intense yearning for union with God. Today, more than four centuries after her death in 1582, her writings are still readily available in numerous editions. They are considered among the classics of Western spirituality.¹ Less known but equally compelling is her poetry, which also deals with her desire to become one with Christ. Of these poems the brief but moving "Let Nothing Trouble You" is perhaps the best known:

Let nothing trouble you;
let nothing frighten you;
all will pass;
God does not change.
Patience
conquers all.
He who has God
lacks nothing.
Only God suffices.²

In another poem, "I Live by Not Living in Myself," she makes the paradoxical statement that her earthly existence is a form of death.

I live by not living in myself,
and in this way I have hope,
for I'm dying because I do not die.

After dying of love,
I live outside of myself,
because I live in the Lord,
Who loved me for Himself.
When I gave Him my heart,
I marked it with these words:
I'm dying because I do not die.

This divine prison of love

in which I now live
has made God my captive
and has freed my heart;
and it causes in me such passion
seeing God as my prisoner
that I'm dying because I do not die.

Oh, how long this life is,
how harsh this exile,
this jail, these bars
where my soul is lodged!
Just waiting to be released
causes me such sharp pain
that I'm dying because I do not die.

Oh, what a bitter life
if one rejoices not in the Lord!
For if love is sweet,
prolonged hoping for it is not.
Take from me, oh God, this burden,
heavier than steel,
for I'm dying because I do not die.

I live solely with the confidence
that I am going to die,
because it is by dying
that my hope gives me assurance.
Death by which one reaches life,
be not late, for I await you,
for I'm dying because I do not die.
Look how strong love is.

Life, be not a nuisance;
see that in order to gain life
you only have to lose it.
Come now sweet death,
let dying come quickly,
for I'm dying because I do not die.

That higher form of life,
which is the one true life,
cannot be enjoyed
until this life ends.
Death, be not disdainful of me;
live first by dying,
for I'm dying because I do not die.

Life, what can I give you,
to my God, who lives in me,
if it be not to lose you
that I may deserve to win you?
I want to reach you by dying,
for I so love my Beloved,
that I'm dying because I do not die.

For Teresa, this life is an exile, and her body is a prison. The prison metaphor also appears in her autobiography, where she refers to “the prison of this life” (201) and “the imprisonment into which we are led by our bodies and the misery of this life” (205).³ Although these notions were commonplace in the fifteenth-century courtly tradition, the “Beloved” referenced here is not a handsome young man of the court, but rather Christ her Lord. Teresa’s longing to be united with Him following her physical death clearly echoes Paul’s dictum that

“dying is gain” and his desire “to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Philippians 1:21, 23). In her autobiography Teresa describes her state during the moment of ecstasy, at which point it seems that the “death wish” will be granted: “. . . the soul becomes conscious that it is fainting almost completely away, in a kind of swoon, with an exceeding great and sweet delight. It gradually ceases to breathe and all its bodily strength begins to fail it: it cannot even move its hands without great pain; its eyes involuntarily close, or, if they remain open, they can hardly see” (177).

As Linda Belau has so aptly points out, “mystics use language to represent paradoxically that which cannot be represented. Since God exists beyond the parameters of the human (or finite) realm, the mystic’s language is necessarily inadequate to express his or her divine encounters” (95). Human language also fails at another level because there are no verbal means to explain what a mystical embrace is like to someone who has not experienced it personally. Nevertheless, the mystics make an attempt to capture the essence of their intimate encounters with God by employing various rhetorical devices. Teresa’s prose and poetry and the writings of her Carmelite co-laborer, St. John of the Cross (1542-91), especially his “Dark Night of the Soul,” draw on the erotic vocabulary of the *Song of Solomon* (*Song of Songs*) to depict spiritual rapture as a physical union of lovers. Because they recognized that uninitiated readers would have great difficulty understanding what took place during the moment the soul achieved oneness with the divine, mystic writers elected to explain this supernatural phenomenon with the metaphor of carnal relations, in other words, sex, since that was a concept most readers could grasp without needing much explanation. Teresa was well versed in “the tradition of idealized human love as expressed in the courtly love tradition of the sentimental romance and in books of chivalry” (Cammarata 222). Her readers were also familiar with those literary traditions, so the

use of the erotic to explain the sacred would not have seemed as shocking in the sixteenth century as it might be for some modern-day readers. Some define a mystic as someone who has “fallen in love with God.”⁴ If this is true, “the conventions of human love and the language of sexuality can then make sense as a mystical language of suggestion to concretize the human relation with God” (Cammarata 222).

One of St. Teresa’s most effective metaphors for communicating what happens during these raptures is that of the hunt or chase, in which the Sacred Hunter, the Divine Archer, pursues His love and wounds her with an arrow. Once captured, she surrenders and the mystical union with Christ is consummated. The image of the chase is a timeless and universal literary motif that has always been charged with sexual and/or spiritual significance. Classical mythology provides some of the earliest illustrations, as in the story of Apollo’s pursuit of Daphne and the tale of how Hades kidnapped Persephone and carried her off to the Underworld, as well as numerous stories of satyrs chasing nymphs. Modern literature provides one of the best examples of the Sacred Hunter in “The Hound of Heaven” by the late nineteenth-century English poet Francis Thompson. In this famous poem God continuously searches for the fleeing soul just as the hound relentlessly tracks its prey.

In her examination of the allegorical connection between hunting and courtship in *The Perilous Hunt*, Edith Randam Rogers asserts that the use of hunting terminology in reference to the pursuit of a girl, “originally a learned conceit,” at some point passed into the everyday language of the people throughout Europe and eventually appeared in traditional poetry, especially ballads (15, 17). Teresa, who in her youth had been an avid reader of popular literature, clearly would have been familiar with this metaphor, as evident in those poems in which she adapts love songs of folk origin, converting their secular themes to religious ones in

the so-called “a lo divino” manner. In “I Gave of Myself, I Surrendered All” she combines the hunting motif with a refrain that echoes the *Song of Solomon* 2:16 (“My beloved is mine and I am his”):

I gave of myself, I surrendered all,
and thus, I am transformed,
for my Beloved is mine
and I am my Beloved’s.

When the sweet hunter
shot me and left me fallen,
my soul surrendered
in the arms of love.
And gaining new life,
I am transformed,
for my Beloved is mine
and I am my Beloved’s.

He pierced me with an arrow
poisoned with love,
and my soul was made
one with its Creator.
Since surrendering myself to God,
I have no other love,
for my Beloved is mine
and I am my Beloved’s.

Similarly, in *Interior Castle* Teresa describes how her soul was “delectably wounded” (135).⁵ She goes on to note that “when He that has wounded it draws out the arrow, the bowels seem to come with it, so deeply does it feel this love” (136). Likewise, in her autobiography

Teresa elaborates on the kinship between the pain and spiritual ecstasy resulting from her wounds:

It pleased the Lord that I should sometimes see the following vision. I would see beside me, on my left side, an angel in bodily form—a type of vision which I am not in the habit of seeing except very rarely . . . He was not tall, but short, and very beautiful, his face so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest types of angel who seem to be all afire . . . In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body has a share in it—Indeed, a great share. So sweet are the colloquies of love which pass between the soul and God that if anyone thinks that I am lying I beseech God, in His goodness, to give him the same experience. (*Life* 274-75)

Baroque art enthusiasts will recognize these depictions of divine rapture, often referred to as St. Teresa's transverberation, as the inspiration for Italian sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini's immortal work, "The Ecstasy of St. Teresa."



Bernini – Ecstasy of St. Teresa

What jumps out at the viewer is the overt sexual nature of this graphic image in which the multiple stabbings connote sexual penetration. As Fulton J. Sheen observes, “we always speak of arrows and darts of love—something that wounds” (*The Moral Universe* 55). In St. Teresa’s accounts, these wounds produced by the Sacred Hunter’s weapon lead to ecstasy.

St. Teresa was not the first woman mystic to use hunting imagery to represent the mystical encounter with God. Mechthild of Magdeburg (1212-99) and Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) also envisioned God as the hunter in pursuit of the soul, inverting the usual dynamic of the spiritual quest in which the soul sets out in search of God. According to Mechthild, God spoke to her saying: “I chased you, for in this was my pleasure . . . I captured you, for this was my desire; I bound you, and I rejoice in your bonds; I have wounded you, that you may be united with me” (Goldstein 52). Julian’s depiction of the ecstasy of mystical union was even more graphic: “And we shall endlessly be all had in God . . . Him verily seeing and fully feeling, Him spiritually hearing and Him delectably smelling and sweetly swallowing” (Goldstein 56). According to Niles Goldstein these two versions of the hunt and its aftermath inevitably resulted in a sweet surrender: “We must make ourselves vulnerable . . . we must lose ourselves and allow God to ravage us, like a wild but caring lover” (56).

Thus, in Christianity God, the hunter, pursues the soul. Sheen identifies this point as a distinguishing feature of religion in the West: “The difference in the God-man relationship between Eastern religions and Christianity is that in the East, man moves toward God; in Christianity, God moves first toward man” (*World’s First Love* 145). Despite this distinction, the Sacred Hunter also appears in Eastern mysticism, as witnessed by the following stanzas from the Hindu tradition. Here, the imagery is remarkably similar to that found in St. Teresa’s texts:

He grabbed me
lest I go astray.
Wax before an unspent fire,
mind melted,
body trembled.
I bowed, I wept,
danced, cried aloud,

I sang, and I praised him.
Unyielding, as they say,
as an elephant's jaw
or a woman's grasp,
was love's unrelenting
seizure.

Love pierced me
like a nail
driven into a green tree.

Overflowing, I tossed
like a sea,
heart growing tender,
body shivering,
while the world called me Demon!
and laughed at me,
I left shame behind,
took as an ornament
the mockery of the local folk.
Unswerving, I lost my cleverness
in the bewilderment of ecstasy. (*Hymns for the Drowning* 118-19)

In these stanzas, as in St. Teresa's writings, erotic vocabulary and chase/capture imagery are on display, and once again the encounter ends in sexual congress. This should come as no surprise because, as Sheen has noted, "all love craves unity, the supplying of the lack of the self at the store of the other" (*World's First Love* 159). And so, for the mystic the goal is to overcome the incompleteness of the human condition, its fallen state, which has resulted in the creature being separated from its Creator. In order to do this the soul must re-gain the original state of harmony

and oneness with God by re-forging the link that was broken by Adam's sin, which the word "religion" suggests (from *re* and *ligare*—to re-tie, to bind up again). And in this, God takes the initiative and becomes the hunter, as He did in Genesis 3:8-9, when He moved about through the garden and called out to sinful Adam, who was hiding among the trees.

This chase/capture dynamic involves an inherent tension, one which Sheen eloquently summarizes in the following passage: "If love were merely a quest or a romance, it would be incomplete; on the other hand, if it were only a capture and an attainment, it would cease to rise. Only in heaven can there be combined perfectly the joy of the chase and the thrill of the capture; for once having attained God, we will have captured something so Infinitely Beautiful it will take an eternity of chase to sound the depths" (*Crisis in Christendom* 43).⁶ This is the type of scenario St. Teresa is implying when she refers to those brief periods of rapture in her life. If heaven signifies a state of being perfectly linked to the Beloved, then her moments of ecstasy are but shadowy reflections of the permanent state of wedded bliss in the afterlife that she so greatly desires.

One of the parables Jesus uses to explain what the kingdom of God is like is that of the wedding feast recorded in Matthew 22:1-14. This story, like the Old Testament banquet imagery in Isaiah 25:6-10a, depicts in a symbolic way the last stages of salvation history and points to the spiritual marriage of Christ (the bridegroom) and the soul (the bride), which takes place in the seventh mansion or dwelling place in St. Teresa's *Interior Castle*. At this culminating moment when the marriage is consummated the soul finally enters into total union with Christ, emblematic of the mystical marriage of Christ and His Church at the end of history. This is the spiritual endgame of the mystics, to be united with the Beloved for all eternity. For Teresa, the Beloved is the Sacred Hunter, love personified, who calls, seeks, chases, captures, and ravishes

the object of His desires. Each time she is “delectably wounded” she experiences a little bit of heaven on earth, a fleeting foretaste of the everlasting joy that she so fervently hopes to attain. In this context her paradoxical statement “I’m dying because I do not die” makes perfect sense.

Notes

¹ Teresa was canonized in 1622 and declared a Doctor of the Church in 1970.

² All translations of St. Teresa's poems included in this study are mine. The original Spanish texts are available at the following websites:

<http://www.ciudadseva.com/textos/poesia/esp/avila/stda.htm>

<http://www.los-poetas.com/g/tere1.htm>

³ The title of the original Spanish text is *Libro de su vida*.

⁴ This statement by G. C. Rawlinson is quoted by Peers in his *Studies of the Spanish Mystics*.
Vol. 1. p. xv.

⁵ The title of the original Spanish text is *Las moradas*, also known in some editions as *El castillo interior*.

⁶ Some two decades later Sheen succinctly restated his view that the tension between chase and capture will be resolved only in eternity, where both can be enjoyed simultaneously: "When your love leads you back to God, then you will capture something infinitely ecstatic, and it will take an eternity of chase to discover its meaning" (*Your Life Is Worth Living* 276).

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POETRY

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Lumpy Bed

Like knowing where the rocks in the water are,
I learned to get a good-night's sleep
because I could avoid the lumps in my mattress
since it was my cesspool stained palms that
placed them there in tic-tac-toe arrangement.

Yet, after enough suns and moons fade into tides of bumpy years,
even a concrete back can be eroded by a lumpy mattress,
or is it that the persistent waterfall of bad decisions
have become a wrecking ball demolishing my steel will?
How many times taking the side roads do I have to step in shit
to change my path to the candy lady?

The rocks in the water are still there but cataracts of
selfishness and anxiety cause my feet to miss their mark.
When a red bird is sitting on a bamboo branch
is that moment the only picture in the frame of his mind—
or does he have anxiety about what the other birds think?
Can a bird's belly be burning with insecurity?
If man's bent is always toward evil, why was he
made the zookeeper over animals devoid of
ulterior motive?

I'm sick and tired of pissing on my own mattress,
but I'm too addicted to soda to stop swallowing syrup before sleep.
I guess Fannie Lou never figured a future of fractured fools like me.

Is Sir Nose DeVoid of Funk the First Hater
or just a man who knows who he is?

The paint pilling off the back of the house
makes it difficult to enjoy the fruits of a freshly cut lawn.

If Adam and Eve could not find satisfying work
can the path really be brighter for a molested child who like all
broken organisms fails to wash his hands before slapping five with you?

Depression is the smell of burnt food
that lingers long after the food has be trashed.

I thank Jehovah for the blessings because it was me
who wiped my behind with the wrong paper

I know where the dents in the mattress are
where I masturbated too long over fiery temptations
and then spilled empty juice devoid of seeds
to cover the brown patches in my back lawn.

I am afraid of B-Boys in wife beaters, but
I hate the sight of bleached skin too much to dial 911
so I learn to put grape jelly on my dysfunction and
treat it like a delicacy

I am here again—a planet in orbit that eventually returns
to where his gravitational pull is the strongest
because failures innately swim to the low watermark.



Movie poster on Gran Via, Madrid.

ESSAY

James Tomek

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Reading Through Idolatry: Desacralizing “Christmas” and Making it Holy: Orphans in Oscar Hijuelos’s *Mr. Ives Christmas* Richard Ford’s “Crèche” via a Dickens Carol

“Christmas” breaks down to “Christ” and “Mass.” In the Mass, *Ite Missa Est*, at the end, tells the faithful that they are “sent” to practice virtues that they have just “rehearsed” in the Eucharistic Word and Meal ceremony. What about Christ? Is Christ sent to us or are the believers sent out to put Christ in the world? The Eucharist Mass has both meanings, but I like the meaning of where the faithful imitate Mary by putting Christ in the world. Theologically, Mary is the first disciple of Christ. Every Sunday is a Christmas and the Sunday ceremony “repetition” (which is the French word for rehearsal) is necessary to remind disciples of the mission of putting Christ in the world. Can we define more clearly “putting Christ in the world and expand the meaning of Christmas to a practice of deep reading? Oscar Hujuelos’s novel *Mr Ives’ Christmas* is about an “orphan” whose life is recounted in Christmases. He succeeds in the New York advertising world, while struggling to accept his son’s murder. In this paper, I will read the novel from a narrative theologian’s point of view and intertext its Christmas insight with a more secular version of Christmas in Richard Ford’s “Crèche” about a woman, Faith, who, during a Christmas skiing vacation, decides to raise her two nieces. Desacralizing Christmas, from Hijuelos’s novel to Ford’s short story, will elevate the true holiness of the two works and help us see how reading can help us transcend to religious values and virtues that the idolatry of traditional religion prevents.

The Mundane Christmas Story and the Sacred Story of the Orphan

The field of narrative theology, in general, tries to arrive at meaning of God through narrative: both in the stories told in different cultures, but more important how “story,” in general, tells us what our beliefs are.¹ Stephen Crites contends that the formal quality of experience (the apprehension of actions) is narrative while the style of action is musical (the process of how we experience our stories (65-6). Narrative is inchoate and it is how we organize our life experiences (69). Memory orders past stories and then new stories, or aspects of old stories, are added on (73-4). There are mundane stories that are part of our culture and sacred stories which are deeper. Mundane stories are the ones told in our culture, including scripture stories. (70-1). Mundane is used in its “worldly” sense and is not negative. Sacred stories are deeper and have to be “felt” or lived. Crites does not give good examples of sacred stories because he says they are difficult to put in words. They are not “things” like monuments. They are lived. We dwell in sacred stories (70). Mundane stories create object consciousness and subject it to critical scrutiny while sacred stories shape consciousness. He does mention that every sacred story is a “creation” story, a story that creates a world of consciousness with the self directed towards it, but according to his theory, the self cannot articulate why very well (71). Our individual stories sometimes cross with mundane and sacred stories forming symbolic systems of meaning for us (81). We constantly interpret these stories to evaluate ethical conduct (83). Crites notes that in modernity and post-modernity, there are two tendencies that dry out the narrative flow: abstraction where we pull all the movement and concrete reality from the story, and contraction where we just focus on one element and contract it out of the story (85). With the story dried up of a narrative flow, there becomes no ethical authority -- no way to establish any rationale for actions. The new sacred story, according to Crites, may be “revolution” where we

question our current stories and opt for a change (87). The Christmas mundane story, in my reading, may lead to the sacred story of the “orphan.”

Narrative time is a more transcendent form of time requiring reading and viewing a story from many angles. Our parents are our first teachers. Orphans have a tougher time. The French poet Stephane Mallarmé sees Hamlet as the ultimate tragedy -- the orphan in search of his father. (Fowlie 268-272). For Mallarmé, everything in the world has to end in a “book.” The poet’s role is to “explain” all the difficult “stories.” For the “book” to last, it has to make it to the stage where the audience will preserve its truth. We go to the theater or the classroom or the story book to search for our “father” -- the one who can teach and maybe reconcile the tension of our adolescent ideals in life confronted with the adult difficulties of existence (Mallarmé 117-120). We need to advance to an adult telling of Christmas.

The Hijuelos Christmas Story

In Hijuelos’s *Mr Ives’ Christmas*, Christmas is the backdrop of every major event in Ives’ life. The narrator always refers to him as “Ives,” but others refer to him as Eddie or Pop. Is the narrator letting us in on an intimate story? Ives is a “story” that we follow from 1922 to 1997, though not in strict chronological order. In the prologue, the narrator tells us that Ives had always looked forward to Christmas until his son Robert was murdered on Christmas Eve in 1967 (3). Ives himself is dropped off at St. Stephen’s Foundling Home on a Christmas (15). His adoptive father picks him up on Christmas (18). Later, as a successful illustrator, Ives meets his future wife Annie on Christmas Eve and they share an intense moment witnessing a woman falling to her death (37). Ives has a mystical experience of euphoria and goodness while Christmas shopping (100-102) and then his son is murdered on that very Christmas Eve (13). He retires from his job as an illustrator during Christmas in 1982 (185), the same day a precious original

Dickens' signed *Pickwick Papers* is robbed from his apartment, and it is on a Christmas in 1997 that he seems to reconcile himself with his son's death.

Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*

Ives, an advertising illustrator, has heirlooms -- first class editions of *A Christmas Carol*, *A Child's History of England* and signed copies of *Oliver Twist* and *The Pickwick Papers* (52), which are stolen during his grieving years. His wife Annie teaches Dickens to insensitive high school students who especially disappoint her when they, many orphans themselves or without good parents, fail to respond to *A Christmas Carol* (119).

Then, later in his life, he is rejuvenated in England when, in a hotel, he sees the same edition of *The Pickwick Papers* that had been stolen. This particular book was not a Dickens' signed copy, but there was an 1867 inscription in it from a husband wishing his wife a merry Christmas for Christmases to come. The innkeeper gives Ives the book (235). The "valuable" Dickens' signed book does not compare in sensitive value to the "ordinary" living signed book. Ives then starts to accept his son's death and is able to renew his life. Dickens' world is full of mistreated children and orphans who manage to grow up. In *A Christmas Carol*, the miser Scrooge is reformed on Christmas Eve as spirits or dreams take him back to his childhood where he lost his innocence. The Dickens' Christmas spirit is one of generosity that enables the protagonist to help orphans find their Christmases. The dream motif and flashbacks are the major narrative form that drives Hijuelos's novel -- a definite retelling of the Scrooge story.

Dreams and Flashbacks -- the Host and Feelings of Piety and Sadness

In the first sentence, we see a man in his late twenties in an advertising agency on Madison Avenue who is looking forward to the holiday season, Christmas shopping, visiting Saint Patrick's and dreaming of how he attended Mass with his adoptive parents, noticing how

moved his father was during the service with the chants and especially the raising of the host where he seemed on the verge of tears (3). The “host” raising at Mass, the moment the bread becomes consecrated into the body of Christ, is a special moment at Mass and sometimes considered the major moment. Mallarmé considers the Consecration, where the faithful believe that the bread and wine become Christ’s Body and Blood, along with the Communion, where all the believers share this food, as the two major parts of the Mass. Readers will flash back and forward around this moment in the *Hijuelos* novel. We learn that Ives could not stop mourning his son from 1967 to 1997. He dreams about his son, who was preparing to be a priest, raising the host. Earlier Annie, his wife, is seduced by the way Ives looked at the raising of the host -- so reverent. She is jealous (45-6). His adoptive father had taught him how to pray and be reverent at the Consecration (19). Ives would teach his son Robert (73). When he and Annie met, they were attracted by each other’s looks of “sadness (31-32).” When he meets his friend Luis Ramirez, there is a glow of sadness in each others’ eyes that becomes their first connection. Ramirez is working his way through school waiting tables at the Biltmore Hotel. His son Pablo will marry Ives’ daughter Caroline. The two families’ connection is fueled by the “Spanish” looking Ives who, as a foundling, never knew his birth parents. Luis will be the godfather of Robert who came into the world in 1950 with, of course, a look of sadness in his eyes. Caroline also feels these sadnesses. Ives never feels this compassion when he tries, or is advised to try to forgive his son’s murderer, a 14 yr old Hispanic youth. At first the boy Gomez is too arrogant about killing the “rich white boy” (133). Ives desperately tries to lose his pain by forgiving Gomez. His obsession tears at his marriage. The “sadness” compassion is not quite there.

Flashbacks to Robert’s vocation as a priest point to looks of piety. At a Sunday excursion to Lake Sebago, Robert, at six years old, imagines God’s spirit as a vaporous goodness inside

peoples' beings (92). All these looks of sadness have to be feelings of compassion that only sensitive people have. Annie, the teacher, groups students into sensitive and insensitive. Most of her students and most of her family fall into the insensitive category -- lacking piety.

Levinas's Piety in the Face of the Other: Going from Host to Being a Hostage

These looks of sadness are what Immanuel Levinas calls "the face of the other" where our right "to be" is given over to the "other." "Thou shalt not kill" is the primary commandment of Levinas's reading of the Jewish *Torah* and *Talmud*. The overall feel for this surrender of self is the definition of piety -- a total compassion for the "other." Levinas calls this situation of ceding our place for the other as that of a "hostage" (Vocation 105-113) Total compassion is substituting ourselves in place of the other. The host becomes the hostage -- the meaning of the consecration.

Luis's wife Carmen dies of cancer that tears at him. He has "visits" from Carmen after her death and Luis compares them to Christ's return for forty days after his crucifixion (231-3). Robert appears to Ives in a dream at age forty-three, telling him to loosen up and let go (238). These appearances are part of the necessary death to ascension time, 40 days in the gospels, but an unmeasured "lengthy" time in real life, that allows us to accept the death of loved ones and send them away.

Sacred Story to Holy Story

The mundane stories of Ives being a foundling and then giving "birth" to other children add to the mundane story of Christmas in Western Culture. This Christmas story fills the characters with the good will of charity to be parents of incoming children. To Levinas, "sacred" has to do with idolatry and naming God. If we have "God" in front of us, we will no doubt do the right thing. "Holy" has to do with getting outside our egos and reaching to the other. The "holy"

story consists in giving children a crib to sleep in with parents to teach. We are all Mallarmé's orphans looking for our father. The virtue of reading these sacred to holy stories is patience in searching for a narrative order -- a complex chronological one -- and also looking for other examples or intertexts to get at the real holy, non sacred or non idol meaning. Richard Ford's "Crèche" gets at the real meaning of Mass and Christmas.

"Crèche:" Richard Ford's Sacred Story of Christmas

In Richard Ford's "sacred-holy" story of Christmas -- his "Christmas Carol" -- there is no "crèche," except the story itself. In this story, Faith, a Hollywood motion picture lawyer, aged thirty-seven, is taking her mother Esther and her two nieces Jane, eight years old, and Marjorie, six, along with their father Roger, a high school guidance counselor, but a jerk of sorts, to a North Michigan ski resort for the Christmas holidays (111). During this short story holiday, readers can see a composite picture of Faith's life and her family in eleven short beats -- a Christmas Carol indeed (Dickens would call them 'staves):

1. In the car going to the ski resort, Roger jokingly compares an atomic plant to a rocket ship while Faith and Esther teach the children about atomic energy and its dangers. The girls' mother Daisy is in rehab, while her recent lover Vince is a guest of the Ohio Prison System (111-113). Jane and Marjorie are essentially orphans.
2. Faith's love life is reviewed as she wants children, but it has not happened. Her current lover Jack, a 46 year old East coast stock trader, has a former lover who keeps writing letters to Faith about Jack's sexual preferences (116). Faith is searching for answers.
3. At the ski resort, readers learn about Daisy and Vince and the "resort" package (116-17).
4. At the condo, Esther, Faith's mother, thinks about taking the girls to Europe while Roger, outside, teaches the girls to ski (117-18). He looks like an ok daddy. Esther is cool.

5. The “narrative theology” Christmas story scene -- Faith makes a Christmas tree out of a fake rubber tree plant since it is the girls’ first Christmas away from home and tells the girls of a former Christmas when she, Daisy and her parents cut down a real tree. The tree was too big for the house and there was a fight with the tree being tossed out on the yard (122-123). We readers learn the real story -- that Faith’s mother bought an alternate tree from a civic club while the father went to a bar, but Faith tells the girls a happy ending of how they lit up the cut down tree in the yard for all the neighbors to see (122-24). Christmases turn out wonderfully if you use your imagination (124). Good parents put good stories in the world.
6. A short chapter where Greta, Jack’s former lover, tells Faith that Jack does not like fellatio (124). The real world is never absent in Ford’s narrations.
7. Esther takes the kids out while Faith and Roger do the buffet and Roger makes a pass (127-8). No real Eucharist here. She offers to raise the children, but also imagines Daisy and Roger killed in an auto-accident -- a complex sin-saint act.
8. Back at the condo preparing for her ski ride, Faith thinks about her bossy father, an expert in women who are not his wife, and who had pressured her to be a lawyer, while she calls Jack and leaves a message summarizing the day editing the message to include a plea for him to call (130-31).
9. Skiing down a beginners’ lighted slope in the night, she thinks about how her sister Daisy had been violated all her life (131-2) and then at a rest-stop, which looks like a lean-to or a manger, she is surprised by Roger whose attempted rape is foiled by approaching skiers. Roger is careful to say “it’s f-----ing cold all while trying to rape her (133-35) -- absurd courtesy. This is not a Christmas manger.

10. Back at the condo she locks Roger out and prepares a nice Christmas for the girls. She imagines a true “crèche” scene that includes giving her nieces a new bed to sleep in (136-137). She puts the star on the “rubber plant tree that her mother had finished decorating and calls Marjorie a Christmas present claiming this Christmas as hers (138). Outside there is a hockey game between youths and the scene resembles Bruegel’s *The Return of the Hunters* that was hanging in their condo. In the painting, not described in the story, hunters and dogs are returning to their village that sits in the valley with a lake and skaters. Are Faith and her mother hunters of lost children returning “home” from their hunt? The sacred-holy Christmas story is about Faith, who, in need of a parent, becomes one herself.

11. In the final segment, Faith shares her mother’s bed in the condo thinking that she will make things “normal” the next day, including inquiring about any sexual abuses with the children. “Christmas takes care of its own” (140) ends the story with a background sound of the Christmas carol “Away in the Manger.”

In Hijuelos’s *Christmas*, the background is Catholic as Ives acquires a deeper meaning of Christmas than the naïve youth picture of presents and fun with family. The true Christ sending for him becomes reconciliation as he can see his son as an image of the all forgiving compassionate Christ celebrated at Mass. At the last Christmas Mass in 1997 he is able to send his son Robert on his way as he accepts Robert’s death and is ready to collect all the real meanings in Robert’s life. Luis’s dream is similar and helps explain Ives.’ His wife Carmen stays “forty days” and prepares him to live with her memory. Narrative build-up takes a certain time. Ives’s’ devotion to the “host” is really his sensitivity to the evils in the world. Piety or

compassion exists when it is practiced. Ives transfers his sensitivity to real people and really “Christmases” his family and friends.

Ford’s “manger scene” is an aunt setting up a home for two nieces in need of a parent. Faith is a model of what parents have to do. Ives and his children and friends give homes to foundlings. The “sacred-holy story” of Christmas is about helping orphans and teaching them to read the meaning of Christmas. The Christmas story is about setting up manger scenes that are more like Faith’s story than Roger’s materialistic “feeding” at the ski manger. Orphans need histories – real lives.

As a concluding thought on revelation of the divine, Hans Urs Von Balthasar proposes an “analogy of being” where humans can “move up” to the divine through this life. The mother’s smile to her baby is the divine moment where the reciprocated smiles replicate a divine space. Karl Barth thinks that this “metaphor” or analogy is too boastful, saying that humans can move up to the divine by themselves. He proposes an “analogy of faith” where one raises oneself to the transcendent level by believing in goodness while maintaining humility (Balthasar102-118). Reading *Ives* through Ford’s “Faith,” we arrive at transcendence by providing a home for orphan students and readers. Ives’ adoration of the “host” at Mass is an adoration of his Jesus being a hostage for his loved ones. Ford’s Faith becomes a hostage for her nieces -- giving up a lot of her life for two others. Ford’s “Crèche” or manger scene is a slight “revolution” of the Christmas story whose model parent is the kind of host I can learn to love. Reading new Christmas stories reveals new ways to put new mangers in the world. New stories are needed. Keeping God’s name out of these stories allows us to act in a Godly manner.

Away in the manger, no crib for a bed...

NOTES

1. Narrative theology is a wide field that fits several categories. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, in their collection of essays, *Why Narrative?*, explore facets of this field. In their Introduction, they define narrative theology, as not just dealing with stories, but also with how the conception of stories adds to telling us who we are. Alasdair MacIntyre adds that it is through narrative that readers can discern virtues.

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ESSAY

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The Delta Catfish Pond: An Environmental Reading of Steve

Yarbrough's *The Oxygen Man*

Lawrence Buell has since 1995 synthesized and elaborated theories and approaches in his work on ecocriticism. His compelling trilogy—including *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), and *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005)—provides useful updating and models for interpreting writings that examine human and environmental interrelationships. Buell's work provides another lens for reading, for one example, the narratives of Steve Yarbrough. As the title of his 1999 novel suggests, *The Oxygen Man* concerns the elements of air and water. The first page begins with Ned Rose standing beside a Delta catfish pond, which like Thoreau's Walden Pond will function as microcosm and metaphor for the ecosystem. Though a farm owner will pay the oxygen man to keep the postmodern pond clean and safe for commercial profit, people otherwise neglect and abuse the public waterways and contaminate the air without realizing they are fouling their own supplies.

Yarbrough's descriptions and development of his fictional settings suggest compatibility with environmental criticism such as Buell's. In *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell titles one chapter "Place" and includes discussion, among other subjects, of Thoreau's Walden Pond (276-79). Then, in the second chapter of *Writing for an Endangered World*, Buell focuses his attention on "The Place of Place" in more recent environmental literature. As he explores the "comeback" of the concept at the end of the twentieth century, Buell considers the importance of

social and geographical aspects as well as “elemental forces” in defining “place” (60). Reviewers and commentaries usually note Steve Yarbrough’s settings and/or “sense of place.”¹ His approach belongs to what Lawrence Buell calls the “second wave” (*Future* 20, 22) of environmental writing—i.e., a sense of place neither pastoral nor sentimental, but one that registers the emotions, problems, and threats linked, as Buell concludes in a specific application, to “places of lived experience worthy of care” (*Future* 76). Buell has pointed out too the need for “an awakened place-awareness that is also mindful of its limitations and respectful that place molds us as well as vice versa” (*Environmental* 253). In most of Yarbrough’s stories so far and in this first novel, events center on and around the author’s hometown of Indianola in Sunflower County in northwest Mississippi, the area that in the 1930s attracted sociologists John Dollard and Hortense Powdermaker to room and board there and to investigate for their now classic studies. In *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937), Dollard used the name Southern Town to protect the informants’ identities; and in her study, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South* (1939), Powdermaker called the town Cottonville. Yarbrough’s early stories and first novel often seem to bring aspects of Southern Town and Cottonville forward into the 1990s.

In subsequent novels, from *Invisible Spirits* (2001) to *Safe from the Neighbors* (2010), Yarbrough moves his town from Indianola toward Cleveland, Mississippi, and names it Loring after infamous Confederate General William Wing Loring.² When asked to comment on why he had made the shift to Loring, Yarbrough explained that he had eventually found Indianola “too confining.” If he described “a particular store on a particular street,” people expected him then to follow the layout of the actual town though he needed to modify details for his story. He said that he also wanted to describe changes that had not occurred in his hometown, such as the integration of the public schools (Telephone interview). Yarbrough’s narratives combine the

geographical, natural, and social aspects included in Buell's updated definition of "place" in literature.

An author's taking into account the natural elements outdoors also suggests environmental consciousness. Buell begins his early "rough checklist" of characteristics of "environmentally oriented work" with the idea that "*human history is implicated in natural history*" (*Environmental* 7). In Yarbrough's work, people's attitudes toward the natural history of the geographical setting often provide useful keys to understanding his characters. Whether in Indianola or in Loring, they sometimes cannot escape the elements of their place and location. For instance, in the short story "House of Health," a lone woman farmer invests in catfish ponds in an effort to "outsmart" the elements, only to watch the stock start swimming off when flood waters rise above her ponds' levees (*Mississippi* 2, 9). In *The Oxygen Man*, an alcoholic housepainter explains why he goes on the road to find painting jobs rather than staying in the Delta to raise cotton: "There's too much about farming that's beyond a man's control," he says—"there's places you can go where the elements can't find you" (184). Ironically, an "elemental force" called a tornado kills Billy Rose over in Arkansas. His daughter Daisy, on the other hand, responds more positively to the elements and can experience a sense of the flow and nurturing of nature.

Yarbrough also portrays the relationship of the social classes to the environment. Matthew Guinn discusses the "social order" in *The Oxygen Man* (584-86), and Thomas Dasher examines the major figures and their social and economic relationships (93-103). The characters include Mack Bell, sadistic bully and landowner (of five or six thousand acres), and his battered wife; Russell Gautreaux, the town banker, his abused wife, and their bookish son; the black farm workers wanting better wages, Larry Singer, Booger, and Q. C.; lounge owner and humanitarian,

Beer Smith; the drunken house painter, Billy Rose, and his promiscuous wife, Vonnie, and their children Ned and Daisy. The story focuses on the experiences of the brother and sister, during high school and twenty-four years later in 1996. Daze bartends at the Beer Smith Lounge frequented by workers from the Southern Prime catfish processing plant; her brother Ned tends Mack Bell's catfish ponds, sometimes around the clock.

Like Thoreau in *Walden*, Yarbrough provides statistics and history of the pond as he describes seasonal changes. *Oxygen Man* explains that along with many other cotton farmers in the 1970s, Mack Bell's father saw the need to "diversify" as costs and labor problems increased and as consumers chose polyester over cotton (201). Yarbrough describes the digging of the ponds in detail: In 1973, the year Ned graduated from high school, he and black farmhands drove the John Deere tractors used to excavate the fish ponds from otherwise unproductive land—"four three-and-a-half acre rectangles that would be connected by crisscrossing levees." The workers had "dirt buckets mounted on drawbars of the tractors" and dumped the dirt in piles later used to build the levees between the ponds (202-03). By 1996 Mack Bell owns sixteen ponds. Each contains "about seventy thousand catfish, weighing a pound apiece" and selling "for sixty cents a pound" (10).

In *Oxygen Man*, commercial farmers provide an improved working model of a healthy pond system with methods and models for the upkeep and integrity of larger areas of water and air. Fighting "a few million mosquitoes" and watching for water moccasins, Ned checks on each pond every night and hooks up and turns on aerators if oxygen readings indicate problems because, as he observes, "You could lose a pond in half an hour if the oxygen level dropped too low" (120). Though Ned Rose suffers from a tormented personal life, he can boast about his work—"I've never lost a pond," he says (6). Besides maintaining oxygen levels, he also has to

deal with predators. When cormorants fly over, they can zoom down, land in a shallow part of the pond, and then stand catching “the slithering fish” to swallow whole. After holding back because of endangered species laws, Ned uses his rifle to shoot one of the large birds dead and scare off the rest of the flight (148-49). In addition, upkeep requires that the catfish farmer has to “drain the ponds from time to time to rid them of algae and water-borne diseases” (202).

When Yarbrough transfers scenes from the catfish pond to Lake Fergusson, the descriptions indicate that no oxygen man has kept watch at the recreational spot in Greenville. The reader’s first view of the lake condenses a series of problems besetting this larger body of water:

In the moonlight Lake Fergusson looked like a big oil slick. And the truth was that folks sometimes dumped dirty motor oil into the lake, along with various other kinds of garbage. The lake which emptied into the Mississippi about six miles south of [Greenville], was also full of snakes and weirdly shaped fish whose ancestors had matured on DDT. A few alligators still remained from the time when the governor had ordered two hundred baby ones set free in the lake in an effort to preserve the species. And there were bones in the lake, bones from bodies that had been dumped there (30).

Later in the narrative, Yarbrough adds data about the water before it reaches the lake: “this muddy water that had flowed down from the mountains and over the Great Plains, this water that smelled of catfish and sulfur dust and DDT, of diesel and decay and Des Moines” (216). To Ned, the lake “stinks of fish” but it also stinks of chemicals, “like a formaldehyde smell” (233). His sister compares the “peculiar odor” to “rotten mulberries” (213). Teeming with

snakes, the smelly polluted lake becomes the degraded scene for the death of the banker's son and the further degradation of the two high school football players in the boat with him.

On several occasions, when the characters in the novel are compared to fish or described as living in water, Yarbrough expands the water imagery to make the Delta itself a pond, a lake, swamp, or sea. These comparisons develop what Buell finds in other writers' works as a comprehension of human "embeddedness" in nature (*Future* 8, 104, 108). First, Yarbrough repeatedly calls attention to the Delta's ubiquitous waters. The text informs readers that "The Delta had once been an inland sea" (117). Heavy rains can turn the Delta back into a sea, and characters recall the big floods. Beer Smith tells stories of the 1927 flood that "left the whole Delta under twelve feet of water" (32-33). During the rains of 1973, the Roses' house sat like "an island" in the middle of inundated fields (165). Though once a primordial sea, the Delta in the nineteenth century, according to Beer Smith, looked like a swamp. He says, "By rights, water ought to be all over the Delta. You know there wasn't much solid land here a hundred years ago." He recounts to Daze how during the Civil War General Grant could not sneak up on Vicksburg by marching through the Mississippi Delta because Grant feared "his soldiers would mutiny if he tried it. Wasn't nothing here but swamps and snakes and mosquitoes" (135). Yarbrough's informative Introduction to a book of photographs taken in the Delta includes echoes of passages about water in *The Oxygen Man*; and he observes that Deltans are "hyper-aware of their physical surroundings," especially the "constant presence of moisture in their lives" (7).

As he emphasizes the presence of water, the author examines characters' responses to it. Ned Rose, for example, "felt like he was living in a lake or a pond that

was sustaining itself but getting smaller and smaller” (117). In high school, he sees himself and his family living “in a fishbowl” (218). Ned’s sister Daze also registers sensations of living in water. As she swims in Lake Fergusson, for instance, she thinks of herself as “something transparent and light like a porous form that liquid could just pour through” (216). Furthermore, she pictures the sunlight as water after she finally rediscovers love at age forty: “Now light was everywhere. . . . It was daylight, nothing more, but this morning it possessed the qualities of a liquid” (249). At one point, she agrees that “without water you couldn’t be anything. Without water you’d be nothing at all” (193).

The human inhabitants of this former inland sea and swamp also benefit from healthy water and oxygen levels. Yarbrough mentions the need for breath and breathing repeatedly. For instance, at a very dark moment in his life, Ned thinks, “For some folks, everything in between the beginning and the end was just a fight for breath, just one long struggle to suck in air or water or food” (104). Ned feels as if “he shouldn’t breathe” (203), while Mack Bell after being choked seems to experience “his deepest need, the need to breathe” (219). Near the conclusion, when talking with Larry beside a pond, Ned thinks other people should stand here too, “their feet firmly on the ground, their lungs sucking in that blessed fresh air. That was the natural order of things” (266). The town banker complains, on the other hand, of how “breathing gets your lungs dirty” and how “the water we drink poisons us” (113). Polluting the air even more, the inebriated farmers drinking beer under the pecan tree think nothing of spraying the group every few minutes with mosquito fog (36). Part of a description of an autumn of “red and gold and yellow” foliage includes a sour note about the “brisk and cool” air—it stinks. Fall smells

“like the defoliant that farmers had sprayed on their crops,” a chemical, that “smells like garlic” (71)

In the end, the oxygen man cannot prevent catastrophe; and the carefully maintained and monitored ecosystem of the catfish pond cannot withstand the introduction of two gallons of concentrated Toxaphene, leaving Mack Bell with around “fifty thousand dollars’ worth of dead stock” (161). The mystery concerns not who sabotaged the pond, but who would have access to a banned insecticide used to spray cotton. According to Eco-USA, the Environmental Protection Agency banned the hazardous poison for “most uses” in 1982, and for “all uses” in the U.S. in 1990 (“Toxaphene”), six years before the chemical mixture ruins Mack Bell’s fish pond. Toxaphene, dangerous to all species from fish to human, contaminates the air, water, and soil.

The novel’s final scenes suggest that even the comparatively safe and monitored ecosystem of the catfish pond cannot withstand the damaging neglect and abuse of the larger natural system. As Buell has emphasized when quoting them, environmental authors guide readers “to rediscover human beings as natural entities” with “the desire or need to breathe, eat, drink, etc. which humans share with animals and plants” (*Future* 90)—or, as Steve Yarbrough suggests, which humans share with fish in a pond.

Notes

¹ The town of Loring first appears in a story titled “The Rest of Her Life,” in the 1998 collection titled *Veneer* (96, 99, and 122). In Yarbrough’s second novel, *Visible Spirits*, the action occurs in the town of Loring, though Yarbrough uses an incident in the history of Indianola as the basis of the narrative. In the same novel, a character explains the origin of the fictional town’s name (171).

² For example, Dasher’s essay on *Oxygen Man* appears in a section designated “A Sense of Place” (89).

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Poetry
Joe Amoako
Delaware State

Listen, New Bosses

Let me turn to apostrophe
To find out if I'll obtain philosophy or prophesy
What is your philosophy
And what is your prophesy
How do we achieve your philosophy
And how do we fulfill your prophesy
Are we going to run the marathon like Pheidipedes
Or are we going to run the marathon like the tortoise
Every man has his Ides of March
Hence don't forget your Brutus
Around will be your Mark Anthony
And of course there will be your Cleopatra
Beware of the wolf in a sheep's skin
And be patient of the sheep in a wolf's skin

Some will play the game of argumentum ad populum
They will sing the master's voice
They will tell you what you want to hear
Others will play the game of argumentum ad hominem
They will attack the master's person
They will not tell you what you want to hear
The protagonist's foil brings the contrast in him
And the protagonist's alter ego is his mirror image
Who is your foil
And who is your alter ego
One head does not make a council
But many cooks spoil the soup
Who will be the heads
And who will be the cooks



ESSAY

Allison Chesnutt

William Carey University

Of Course the Writer Crusades: The Influence of the KJV Parables on the Early Short Fiction of Eudora Welty

Southern authors come from a culture rich in the stories and sounds of the King James Bible, and Eudora Welty understood the power of that cultural influence. In an interview with John Jones, published in *Mississippi Writers Talking* (1982) Welty acknowledges that she “loved to read” the Bible: “The King James version stays with you forever, rings and rings in your ears” (Jones 13-14). Later in her autobiographical work *One Writer’s Beginnings* (1984) Welty reiterates her appreciation of the King James Version of the Bible: “I had found a love of sitting and reading the Bible for myself and looking up things in it. How many of us, the South’s writers-to-be of my generation, were blessed in one way or another, if not blessed alike, in not having gone deprived of the King James Version of the Bible. Its cadence entered into our ears and our memories for good”(34). Syntax and rhythm may be the biblical elements Welty consciously identifies, but for me, the biblical influence Welty incorporates most frequently, especially in the stories of *A Curtain of Green* (1941), is the model of New Testament parables.

Many critics—including Dan Otto Via, John Dominic Crossan, Mary Ann Tolbert and Sally TeSelle among others—have semi-codified parable form. A parable typically is a story told in the past tense, usually through a third person narrator; it uses specific, historically accurate settings and incorporates themes having universal application; it introduces a character or characters who engage another character or characters in seemingly unavoidable conflict; it refutes one (or more) of the basic assumptions (myths) by which a class of people or a nationality reconcile and order its environment; and it concludes ambiguously. In function, the

parable by nature poses a question—whether implied or direct—which the audience must answer: the open ending requires the reader’s response. The parable acts as a verbal Rorschach test in that it measures how receptive the audience is to a new and intrinsically negative perception. Like parable, Welty’s stories, as J. A. Bryant observes, “can best be described as a trap for those who would cast stones” (9).

Generally, the New Testament and Southern cultures share similar characteristics: agrarian economies, a theocentric understanding of history, feelings of persecution and guilt, subjugation through military defeat, and a perpetuation of ritual, all of which are addressed through parable. Where the scriptural parables refer to Pharisees, rulers, lepers, maidens, virgins, servants, prodigal sons, widows, and housewives, Welty’s collection involves businessmen, murderers, nightclub singers, Campfire girls, and suicides, in addition to Pharisees’ wives, social lepers, mentally challenged maidens, indentured servants, prodigal daughters, gardening widows and desperate housewives. The New Testament parables clearly parallel the historically accurate settings of their time; in “Place in Fiction,” (1979) Welty identifies her stories as “bound up in the local, the ‘real,’ the present, the ordinary day-to-day of human experience” (117). The New Testament parables use past tense verbs; of the seventeen stories in Welty’s collection only two, “Why I Live at the P.O.” and “Old Mr. Marblehall” use present tense.

Finally, both the biblical parables and Welty’s stories overturn one or more myths in a process invoking a social version of Rudolph Bultman’s theory of demythification. Numerous literary critics have thoroughly documented the influence of Greek and Roman myths upon Welty’s fiction. This paper is not concerned with allusions to classical mythology. Of importance are elements of mythology, which Joseph Campbell identifies in *The Masks of God*:

Creative Mythology (1976), that is, “the secular mythology of men and women living for this world . . . pursuing earthly, human and humane . . . purposes, and supported in their spiritual tasks . . . by the natural grace of individual endowment and the worldly virtue of loyalty in love. “In this form, myth “supports[s] the current world social order” and creates “various national, racial, religious or class mythologies,” which by a “system of sentiments” unites every member of a group”(478). Northrop Fry in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982) also shares that perspective: “A mythology rooted in a specific society transmits a heritage of shared allusion and verbal experience in time, and so mythology helps to create a cultural history” (34). Perhaps Shirley Lowery, in her work *Familiar Mysteries: The Truth in Myth* (1982), best explains the myths in parables and Welty’s stories. She says that apprehending mythic “patterns of personal behavior” assists the audience in dealing with “childhood, maturity, old age” and in “moving gracefully from one stage to the next.” The perpetuation of racial and ethnic prejudices held by “deeply religious American Southerners” provides an instance of how “myths still perform social functions” (3-12). Lastly, both the Bible parables and Welty’s stories use open-ended questions. The parables and her short stories raise questions which cannot be unequivocally answered, but in the process of reaching that impasse, the reader often discovers beliefs that had previously only been vague assumptions.

A Curtain of Green begins with “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies.” Three town matriarchs of Victory, Mississippi, have appointed themselves guardians of simple-minded Lily after her father tried to kill her. They think they have removed the local threat of sexual misconduct by placing the Victory boys “on their honor.” They make sure the entire town knows Lily is not responsible for financial transactions and are incensed that the stranger taking tickets at the traveling tent show charges her for admission. Now, however, they have decided they can no

longer oversee her concerns not because Lily is mentally challenged, but because she euphemistically “has gotten so very mature for her age” (5). The women arrange for Lily’s admission to the “Ellisville Institute for the Feeble Minded.” As if to confirm their suspicions, Lily arrives and announces that she is engaged to a xylophone player whom she met at the traveling tent show. Horrified that Lily, after all their machinations, has been “had,” the women hustle her to the train station. As she prepares to board the train, the xylophone player appears. In typical parable form, the story ends with the townspeople divided as to whether or not Lily actually boarded the train.

One issue addressed in this story concerns the role of the community in caring for the less fortunate in an era before intervening government social programs. Mrs. Carson, wife of the Baptist pastor, indignantly lists the benefits their care has afforded Lily: their Christian intervention has sheltered Lily from reality and, in return, they expect Lily’s behavior to reaffirm their impeccable good influence, even though they have no formal legal standing.

Another social issue concerns the rights of the mentally challenged to function within the confines of “normal” expectations. Strangers allow Lily to interact with the world without imposed preconceptions—buying tickets, sitting chaperone-less yet behaving well in public, having a love interest. Is Lily capable of more than the townspeople fathom, or are strangers taking advantage of Lily’s handicap? Does Lily have the civil liberty to choose her own destiny, or must she travel to Ellisville State School? And if Lily should be pregnant, as the women fear, what of that? Such questions illustrate the open ending of the parable.

The other stories in the collection follow a similar pattern. In “A Piece of News,” which shows what life may have been like should Lily have married, slow-witted Ruby Fisher reads a discarded newspaper and discovers that Mrs. Ruby Fisher was shot in the leg by her husband this

week. She knows she is fine, but the printed word clearly says she is not. Her husband explains that the newspaper originated in Tennessee, but the damage is done. That line *de-mythifies* Ruby's boundaries of self, place, and truth: she is not unique, there is a "beyond" (even if it is Tennessee), and newspapers are not gospel.

A beauty salon where females freely confess the intimacies and limitations of matrimony in much the same way males unload to their neighborhood bartenders provides the setting for "Petrified Man." Pregnant Mrs. Fletcher says that she is "tempted not to have this" child (37). Mrs. Montjoy's husband can't make his wife behave (48). Mrs. Pike confesses she and her husband met eight months ago in a rumble seat and "were on the way to the altar inside of a half an hour" (45). All these situations contradict the "Cinderella Myth"—that the female will be rescued by a male offering marriage and live happily ever after. The question is, happy according to whom? Will Mrs. Fletcher carry her baby to term? Does Mr. Montjoy regain his footing? Can a marriage license put the brakes on a fast woman?

In "The Key," a deaf-mute couple seeks normalcy by traveling to Niagara Falls, a popular honeymoon destination where, by leaning into the safety railing surrounding the falls, they will "hear" for the first time in their silent lives. Their myth equates a physical locus with inherent happiness or with a transforming power stronger than the sum of all past experiences, as if the human potential for happiness at all lies outside oneself. Their trip begins in normal anonymity. While waiting for the train no one notices them until they sign to each other, and then a "shallow pity" gives way to discomfort, then anger, then derisive mocking as they miss the last calls for the train to Niagara. In parable form, Welty's story never establishes whether the couple eventually makes their destination and receives the gift of pseudo hearing or if, having obtained that goal, their lives noticeably change.

“Keela, The Outcast Indian Maiden” questions the myth that all labor has dignity. Keela is really Lee Roy, a small crippled Negro man rather than an Indian maid, who has supported his family by appearing in a carnival side show where he would bite off the head off a live chicken and then eat the heart. A spectator reports the sideshow to the authorities. They release Lee Roy from the dehumanizing circumstances in which he works, but at the same time remove from him his only steady source of income.

In “Why I Live at the P. O.” Sister is incensed that her prodigal baby sister Stella-Rondo has returned home with a baby but, alas, no husband. After enduring days of the family mollycoddling the new arrivals, Sister takes her few possessions and moves into the post office where she works. Thus, the dutiful daughter becomes the prodigal. Again, following parable form, the story ends with the townspeople divided in their attitudes toward Sister and her actions.

Economic circumstances have forced Jason and Sara Morton into tenant farming their own land. A whistle signals bitter cold, and they use whatever available, even stripping themselves, to protect the crops from freezing. Is the earth for man, or is man for the earth? Which is more valuable, tomato plants or humans? These questions and others are posited in “The Whistle,” another parable about the dignity of work.

In “The Hitchhikers,” Harris transports two hitchhiking tramps, buys them dinner and asks the motel owner if they can sleep on the porch (rather than a bed: they have fleas). After preparing the reader for the feel good ending of the Good Samaritan parable, Welty’s story dissolves into chaos. While Harris is inside the hotel, one of the hitchhikers tries to steal Harris’ car. After one hitchhiker wounds the other, the hospital will not treat the indigent patient, and he dies. The police arrest the other man, and unable to put him in jail because a white cannot share a jail cell with a Negro, place him in one of the motel rooms. In essence, murder has “upgraded”

his accommodations. What determines when life merits the cost and effort needed for continuance? Is race a crime equal to or worse than murder? Does charity toward one guarantee gratitude and gracious behavior from the recipient?

At one time, Clytie Farr's family wielded the greatest wealth and power in their eponymously named town. Now the population has dwindled to one hundred fifty persons, and the family's fortune mirrors that decay. The Farrants, however, maintain the aloof demeanor and superior attitude of wealth even though each family member exhibits mental illness. The father barely survived a stroke; brother Gerald is an alcoholic; Octavia, a paranoid; Harold, a suicide. Clytie, even though in early stages of Alzheimer's, is the most functional, yet even she Ophelia-like drowns herself. Had the community ceased its artificial deference and ignored the Farr's self-imposed isolation, would the Farr family be in such shambles? Does the right to privacy include the right to self-destruct? Will Clytie's demise effect any change?

"Old Mr. Marblehall" examines the deceptive nature of outward appearance. Natchez hosts "pilgrimage." In the interest of tourism, blacks and whites alike embrace antebellum stereotypes of dress, diction, and class, while the old-moneyed families open their ancestral homes to strangers who would ordinarily be shown the back door. This is the world of town patriarch Mr. Marblehall, who at sixty started two separate families. With one, he lives in the Marblehall mansion; with the other, as Mr. Bird, he lives in a shotgun house. The townspeople, unaware of his dual existence and its reflection of their own brief-yet-annual duplicitous lifestyle, simply wonder, "what did he want to marry for" (184)?

"Flowers for Marjorie" raises additional questions about appearance and place. Howard "was one of the shy, the sandy-haired—one of those who would always have preferred waiting to one side" (192), an unemployed milquetoast who even fails at flirting. Having moved from the

close community of Mississippi to the anonymity and isolation of New York City, Howard and his pregnant wife Marjorie are so destitute that he goes hungry so that she and the baby can eat. How surprising, then, that this meek man plunges a knife deep into his wife's chest and leaves while she exsanguinates. When Howard confesses his deed to a nearby policeman, the cop treats him more like a frightened child than a family annihilator. What transforms a nondescript man with hope into a murderer? That question underscores the parable nature of the story.

Consummate gardener Mrs. Larkin in "A Curtain of Green" conscientiously maintains vegetation in her orderly yard. Despite her care, she watches as a chinaberry tree falls, crushing her husband to death in his car. Who is at fault for his death? Nature, in executing Mrs. Larkin's husband, must now offer retribution. As Mrs. Larkin searches for an answer, she realizes, "against that which was inexhaustible, there was no defense" (218). In a land of hurricanes, tornadoes, and lightning strikes, how does anyone retaliate against acts of God?

In order to achieve merit badges, Campfire Girl Marian must visit an old lady in a nursing home. The whitewashed exterior of the home belies the interior, a virtually decaying warehouse of equally decaying occupants. The whole scenario frightens Marian who runs out. The parable asks for whom then is "A Visit of Charity" charitable: for those who have lost the last vestiges of privacy, property and personhood, or for the girl who has glimpsed what the future holds for those who have outlived their living?

R. J. Bowman personifies the modern success story in which technological luxury and financial gain reduce everything to dollar amounts. He uses cash to gain prestige, achieve popularity, buy affection and offset illness. When his car slips off the road, he offers to pay a stranger to help him retrieve his car, but Sonny tells him, "We don't take money for such" (247). Bowman cannot understand his refusal. By Bowman's standards, Sonny and his wife live in

poverty-- meager food, tattered clothes, no electricity, so that they must "borry fire" (247). As the modern man confronts a natural man, he must reassess his sense of economy. Kindness has no price tag. Who, then, really lives in poverty? This is one question posed by "Death of the Traveling Salesman."

Another story of colliding worlds is the frame for "Powerhouse" the bandleader of an all Negro jazz combo. Although playing a white dance gig, they must walk in the rain to Negrotown for their break during intermission. The people in Negrotown treat them with rock star status. This is the common dizzying experience—nearly invisible in one setting and nearly deified in another --how can both be true? Powerhouse tells the waitress that his wife is dead. "It must be the real truth," she says after he offers to show her the telegram as proof. In keeping with parable, Powerhouse answers, "Truth is something worse . . . It's something hasn't come to me, but I ain't saying it won't. And when it does, then want me to tell you" (270)?

The last story in the collection is perhaps the best known of all Welty's stories. In "A Worn Path," Phoenix Jackson's grandson has swallowed lye and regularly needs his medicine refilled. For at least two years, Phoenix regularly walks from the edges of the Natchez Trace into town to get the refill. Regardless of the obstacles she encounters—the strangers who interrupt her or treat her poorly, the things which could frighten her from her goals, her own mental and physical frailties, her lack of education or finances -- she feels victorious in her purpose. Then the nurse asks Phoenix the question on many readers' minds: "Tell us quickly about your grandson... He isn't dead, is he" (287)? Of course, the child's mortality as a matter of "fact" is immaterial. The question of mortality acts as a catalyst by which the reader reaches an individual conclusion and says more about the reader than it does about any character in the story.

In her essay, "Words into Fiction," (1965) Welty writes that the purpose of a story is to make "its own impression upon the reader, so that he feels that some design in life . . . has just been discovered there. . . . This form that emerges . . . may do the greatest thing that fiction does: it may move you" (144). Welty's stories in *A Curtain of Green* go beyond emotion and intellect, by moving her Southern peers, consciously or no, to reach a conclusion. She does so by incorporating common beliefs, stereotypes, and situations particular and close to the heart of Southern American society. Whether they concern the physically or mentally handicapped, age or youth, wealth or poverty, her stories portray these stereotypes in ways that disprove their seeming truths. By incorporating the form and function of the KJV parables, Welty provides readers with the opportunity to face their own feelings and actions and to understand better what they mean.

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POETRY

Yvonne Tomek

Delta State University

Reflective Disquiet

Splice evenly the irises
And see how fragments enter
The parts of the day, your life in
Chronology, from the eyes of a friend,
To this purple rain, scratching
In long drainage from
The clouds.

Splice the crossways
Of memories, reflecting upon
Each path, even unto the garage
Door that converges from the
Moving sidewalk.

Are those vases,
Full of irises, violet pens
That open your windows in
Passing?

Splice this blue watch,
This vigil, and feel those
Atoms spinning in exotic and
Ordinary time –

Unseen like old,
Forgotten pennies in
A world of tactile stuff—

Hard muscle of Poetry
That nudges and saves us
With its own rules of
The world.

POETRY
Yvonne Tomek
Delta State University

Vases Full of Irises

If I could awaken
Each day in a foreign city,
I would see how all eyes are open
And passersby share a common
Soul, under blue skies
In a different air far
From home.

There, it would seem,
That clusters of people are like
Bright vases, full of irises, that nod
In the breeze, silent offerings
For my senses.

In a silent acknowledgement,
Surrounded by traffic and noise,

This light instant of
Morning, when first I step
Down from the curb and onto
The road.

POETRY
Yvonne Tomek
Delta State University

GIFT

for Jacob

The river glides in silence –

Mississippi near us that you have
Yet to see. It is time that runs
Alongside us

And lands of wilderness where you were
Born and we now share. Not because you
Are my own I love you,

But that a power of grace forms us in union
Like a wooden top I bring you from my journey I
Hope will light your childhood days—

Little top, bright red and solid, engraved by
Craftsmen to enrapture children, as I delight
In pleasing you in love that embarks
Non-ending.

Will you still love me

As we grow older, in centrifugal
Forces of river and toy through
Motions of galaxies

Spinning with stars?



Jerry Ward, reading at the Jackson State conference (relating to his book on Richard Wright).



Poets Yvonne Tomek (reading), Joe Amoako, Michael Spikes, and C. Leigh McInnis, at the Jackson State conference.

FICTION

Dorothy Shawhan

Delta State University

Last of the Un-Reconstructed Southerners

Grace could smell snakes. This was just one of the ways she was in tune with the natural world, or was a little odd, or even a little off depending on your point of view. Some in the town who knew of her special gift thought it odd that she didn't smell the one who slept in her bed for 25 years, but no snake could sneak up on her now, and as far as she was concerned, that was a definite advantage. Not that she disliked snakes, the kind that crawled on their bellies, but she didn't want anything sneaking up on her, especially now that she was the only one left in the huge old house in rural Mississippi, five miles out from Bolivar Landing. The only person left, that is, though there were six cats (two inside and four out) and three dogs, all outside dogs. One had to maintain standards at home at least, especially now that the bottom rung had got on top and was running everything, or trying and failing rather. And the bottom rung would like nothing better than to knock her in the head and steal her blind she was sure. Against that eventuality she had her daddy's old deer rifle and a big German shepherd named Adolph who would go for a juggler with the least encouragement.

"Why don't you sell this white elephant?" Wayne had asked for the thousandth time as he threw his shirts in his duffle bag right after he announced he was leaving her.

A small woman, Grace was crumpled at the foot of the canopy bed, left breathless by the weight of Wayne's 'I'm leaving.' She loved Wayne. They had been married for 25 years, and she had loved him for every minute of it. Since their first date for the junior prom, she had never stopped loving him. She was of the landed, he of the working class, but that didn't matter to her, though it had somewhat to her parents.

"Don't drive your ducks to a bad pond," they had advised her when she first brought Wayne home for dinner. But he was so good looking and charming and had the clearest, bluest eyes God ever gave a human being that they soon withdrew their criticism and threw the biggest wedding the county had seen in a long time.

"I can't live in the past anymore, Grace," Wayne said, wrenching his sport coat off a hanger and stuffing it into the bag. "I can't breathe in this house. Can't you see we're trapped in the 1850's? Can't you see what a racist you are? You'd be perfectly at home with a bunch of slaves to polish your silver, wax your floors, cook your meals. Well that life's over, Baby, and you better get used to it."

Grace was too stunned to say a word in reply. She closed her eyes and gasped for air as Wayne stormed down the stairs and slammed the front door behind him for the last time.

Racist? The word kept echoing through her head. By no stretch of the imagination could Grace think of herself as racist. She wouldn't mistreat a black person for anything in the world, or ever use the n-word in any situation. She was realistic is all. It's true that growing up in the fifties, she would never have believed that her county would have a majority black board of supervisors, or indeed any black supervisors at all. And a mayor? Incredible. Well he has at least been indicted. As for President, that was beyond her wildest imaginings, but at least he's half white. And the local blacks who aren't in public office are running around in earrings and tattoos with their britches at half mast, beating each other up to the tune of loud rap music. A person has to face the facts.

Grace lay in that position until the next morning, aroused from her stupor by the hungry meowing of Earl in her left ear. That cat saved her life she later believed. She stumbled to her feet, and though almost too stiff to walk, she made her way down the long upstairs hall, down the winding staircase, through the front hall and to the kitchen.

She went to the pantry for the cat food, mixed the canned with the dry for both the outside and indoor cats, and served them up breakfast. Only when she opened the refrigerator and saw the lunch she had packed for Wayne the night before, did she fully realize that he was gone. The tears came then and along with them a painful contemplation of *why*?

Of all the arguments they had had through the years, race seemed the one on which they had spent the least time, and so it seemed strange that he would charge her with that in his parting words. Racism? Didn't Wayne agree with her that separate but equal was a pretty good plan? Don't people and snakes and birds and insects and all animals prefer their own kind? From her observations they certainly do. What's so wrong about that?

Most of their fights had been over money, or the lack thereof, and her insistence on staying in the old home place, though they couldn't afford to maintain it. Now that her mother and father were dead and the land lost except for where the house stood, the house was three times bigger than she and Wayne needed or could afford on his salary as a car salesman. But the house was her history and seemed to her, her very life, and so how could she simply move away?

Maybe Wayne left her because she rather be outdoors in her garden than socializing, and Wayne was very sociable. She did not choose to think that Wayne, who was out and about the community every day, now had different ideas about a lot of things than she did. Maybe it was because she couldn't have children, and Wayne loved children. But weren't they of the age now to be past that old grief?

None of these reasons seemed enough to drive a man from his home. They had lived rather happily with those arguments after all, or so she thought. By the end of the day, she had convinced herself that he would soon come home. He was just going through something is all, some mid-life thing that would pass. They had been through too much together for him just to walk away. The deaths of all four of their parents, the mid-night agony of the miscarriage, the verdict of no children ever, the loss of the last piece of land to pay the taxes. When he came through that door again, she would welcome him back with his favorite chicken and dumplings and never mention the pain he had caused.

But the next word she had from Wayne came from his lawyer, Junior Brown. He drove up in his old, dusty Mercedes while she was pulling weeds from the rose garden at the side of the house. He sat in his car while Adolph did a mad dance, barking and jumping at the car window. Grace straightened up and watched with some amusement while Junior sat there shouting "down boy" to her dog. Finally he saw Grace and called, "Grace, call this damn dog off so I can get out of the car." She did, but if she had known Junior's business, she might have just let Adolph maul him good.

"I guess you know why I'm here, Grace," Junior said, climbing out of his car after she had Adolph chained to the rose garden's iron fence. Junior was a chubby, red-faced man who had been in their graduating class and was more successful than anyone could have predicted.

"No, I'm afraid I don't, Junior. I hope there's no trouble with the taxes."

"Wayne hasn't talked to you?"

"What about?" she said, thinking it was no business of Junior Brown's when she had talked to her husband, or not.

“Let’s sit down on the porch,” Junior said, climbing the steps holding a yellow legal pad and settling into one of the cane-bottomed rocking chairs on the wide front porch. Grace followed him and perched on the edge of a chair, her feet scarcely touching the ground.

“Sure is pretty out here,” Junior said. “I’ve always loved the way the cedar trees line that driveway all the way to the road.”

“Yes,” Grace said.

Junior cleared his throat and took a pen from the pocket of his shirt. “Grace, I’m not going to beat around the bush. You must know Wayne wants a divorce.”

Grace looked off down the lane and thought that she would need another load of gravel brought in before winter. And is that a wasp nest at the top of that column? And how did that Bermuda grass get such a stand in the monkey grass? And why was everything so still and quiet? Time passed.

“Grace...?” Junior said at last, clearing his throat again uneasily. “He’ll provide what he can for you, but it can’t be much on his salary. But you could sell this place and all those antiques in there for a fortune. Be set for life. Get you a little place on the coast and start over. You’re sitting on a gold mine, girl.”

Grace stood up then. “Is that all?”

“Don’t you want to know the grounds, or the terms? Are you in agreement? Who is your lawyer?”

“Excuse me, Junior, but I have work to do.” She walked in the house, then, and shut the double front doors behind her. She heard no more about a divorce until the papers came in the mail for her signature, and she threw them in the trash. She thought as long as she didn’t sign, Wayne would return home when he came to his senses. After all, most of his clothes still hung in their closet. Meanwhile she went on about her life, gardening, patching the house as best she could, playing the square grand piano in the evening, reading from her father’s library, novels set in a tranquil, less troubled past. She cancelled the subscription to the newspaper, the weekly *Tocsin Times*.

Several times she had tried to call Wayne’s cell phone number, but he never answered. She knew he could see their home number, but she thought he must be busy with a customer or else asleep. Twice she had gone into town and parked across the street from Canon Cars hoping for a glimpse of him, but he never came out of the building, and when gas skyrocketed to \$5 a gallon, she parked the car for all but dire necessities.

Each month a small check came through the mail from Wayne, and along with the little bit she drew from one of her father’s early investments, she was able to get by. If anything went wrong with the car, though, or one of the animals, then she didn’t know what. She had foregone college to marry Wayne and really didn’t know how she could earn any money.

In September a hurricane slammed into the Gulf Coast and brought high winds clear on up to Grace’s place and knocked over one of the venerable oak trees in the front yard but fortunately missed the house. She called Wayne’s Uncle Clyde, who sold firewood, to come and get it.

Clyde was going after one of the big limbs with his chain saw and grumbling about the scarcity of help these days. “Where is all them ole niggers at?” he asked Grace, who was taking off the smaller limbs with a hand saw. “Used to be lots of ‘em standing around in town, waiting for somebody to hire them. Now you don’t see a one.”

“I guess they’re holding office or else in jail,” Grace said, while at the same time congratulating herself because she would never use that word.. Wayne should look in his own family if he wanted to see racism.

“Or helling around town in them souped-up jalopies,” Clyde said, “Soon run over you as not, or rather, in fact.” He hit a reluctant limb a vicious blow.

Suddenly Grace smelled a snake, close, not a moccasin or a cottonmouth or an ordinary garter snake judging from the smell. She was afraid it was a rattlesnake, rare in those parts but not unheard of. She turned her head slowly looking through the upended tree’s roots and branches and the tall grass. Then she spotted it, a small rattler poised to strike Clyde’s calf.

“Clyde,” she yelled, “snake to your left.” Clyde wheeled around just in time to divide the snake half–in- two mid-strike.

“Damnation,” Clyde said, wiping snake blood from the blade of his chain saw. “If it ain’t one damn thing it’s another. Why you reckon that varmint had it in for me?”

“Here’s the reason,” Grace said, poking around the roots of the toppled tree. She uncovered a nest of snake eggs that had been upset as the tree fell and poured the eggs into her garden bucket.

“I hope you’re going to burn them things. That’s about 20 rattlers worth you got in that bucket.”

“No, I’m going to watch them. Feel this egg; it’s just like leather.” She held out one of the eggs to Clyde.

“I ain’t touching that damn thing,” Clyde said, drawing away. “You’re taking a interest in nature too far. Did you smell that snake? Wayne always said you could do that. Said you could tell the difference in them just by the smell. Who taught you that?”

“Nobody taught me. Live close enough to nature and you learn things.” Then in an effort to be casual, she said, “Seen Wayne lately?”

“Hell, no I ain’t seen him,” Clyde said, firing up the chain saw again. “Don’t aim to neither.”

“Oh? He was always crazy about you and Aunt Ethel.”

“Since he left you and took up with that nigger woman, me and Ethel got no use for him.” Clyde lit into the trunk of the tree.

“What?” Grace felt like she was about to faint. She sat down on the ground suddenly, turning the snake eggs over in her lap.

Clyde, oblivious, kept sawing away at the trunk. “His daddy is without any doubt tossing in his grave this minute. I’m just proud he didn’t live to see it is all I can say.” In a few minutes Clyde stopped to let the saw cool off and noticed that Grace was sitting on the ground, her head in her lap of snake eggs. “Lord God, Grace,” he said, rushing around the tree and touching her elbow. “What’s the matter?”

Grace raised her head, her pride gone, and said, “Who did you say Wayne was...?”

“You didn’t know it? The whole town does. That black woman he works with at Canon. Young, good-looking. She’s pregnant too so they say.”

“I had no idea.” Clyde might as well have put that chain saw straight into her heart. Grace began to put the snake eggs one by one back into the bucket.

“Now listen to me, Grace. You’re lucky to be rid of white trash like Wayne. I hate to say it because he’s my blood kin, but it’s the truth. Just hold your head up and go on. Nobody blames you. If I was you, I’d sell this old barn of a house and move off somewhere.”

“Thank you, Clyde. I’m going in now.” Clyde helped her to her feet, and Grace walked as slowly and as bent as a woman twice her age up the brick walk, across the porch, and in through the double doors, still carrying the bucket of snake eggs.

“Don’t take them snake eggs up in the house, Grace!” But Grace was closing the door behind her, and Clyde was left watching and scratching his head. “I’ll by God never understand women if I live to be a hundred,” he said to himself as he cranked up the chain saw.

From then on Grace retreated more and more into herself, the house, and the few remaining acres that she could call her own. She first decided that Wayne had taken up with that woman just for spite, just to humiliate Grace before God and her ancestors, to say nothing of the town. Why does he hate me so? she wondered. Because she was born into privilege? Because she was of a higher social class than he? But no, it was not possible for Wayne to hate her, she who had sacrificed everything for him. So the problem must be the black woman. She had seduced him somehow. Voodoo perhaps? On one of her few forays into town, she went by the county library and picked up two books on voodoo. She regretted the library stop almost immediately, however, because the librarian, Mable Meriweather, asked her in that tone people use for those dying of cancer, “Grace, how are you? I think about you so often.”

“Oh, I’m just fine.” Grace said with a cheerful smile. “Busy as I can be. So much to see about around the place this time of year.”

Mable nodded. “You know once a month several women from our high school class get together for lunch. I wish you would join us.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have time for that, Mable, but thanks anyway.” Then she grabbed her books and bolted.

In one of her darker moments she even considered hatching out those rattler eggs and planting several in the woman’s car. The trouble with that plan, though, was that she didn’t know if the woman even had a car, and if she put them in Wayne’s truck, they might strike Wayne. She didn’t want Wayne dead; she wanted Wayne back. She also wanted to know something about the other woman, what exactly was the competition?

Had she not cancelled her newspaper subscription and unplugged her television for good, Grace might have seen LaKeisha Morris in the Canon Car ads. She was indeed black but comely like the Rose of Sharon, a fact that would not have made Grace feel any better.

She read in one of the voodoo books that stealing a woman’s panties would shut her womb up tight, and she slammed the book shut in disgust. Too late for that she thought. Could the woman really be pregnant? And with Wayne’s child? The thought was too much to endure.

Ever the curious naturalist, Grace had first thought she would watch the snake eggs hatch. Then her knowledge of the damage a rattler can do prompted her to decide to pour gasoline over the eggs and set them afire. No need to encourage the population of a dangerous species. And yet, didn’t they deserve to live as much as some people? Besides she could smell them; they weren’t likely to be a threat to her. Not only that, but with the current price of gasoline, she wasn’t about to waste a drop. So one afternoon she took the bucket of eggs to the banks of the bayou that ran along the back of her property and flung them far and wide. “Take your chances like the rest of us,” she shouted and for a moment thought she heard an approving echo from the clouds.

She grew almost everything she ate and with winter coming on, the basement was full of sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, even carrots and cabbage. The turnip and mustard greens in the garden would last until the first killing frost, and she had canned green beans and tomatoes. Sugar, corn meal, flour, coffee, and an occasional chicken would be about all she’d have to buy,

except for eggs and milk from Uncle Clyde and Aunt Ethel, who still had chickens and a cow. Grace had considered chickens and a cow, but feeding them would cost too much. "Get rid of some of these dogs and cats, you might could have some practical animals," Wayne had always said. Nevertheless, Grace was proud of the fact that she could carry on in much the same way her ancestors had who had settled this land in the nineteenth century.

The winter proved to be unusually harsh for Mississippi and along with the weather came a flu epidemic a few days before Christmas. Grace knew nothing about it until she ran into the postman, Floyd Winston, at the mailbox at the end of the lane where she had walked the half mile to mail in her electricity payment. "Oh, it's bad in town, real bad. Half the stores are shut down. Wayne's down with it, real serious they say." Then he drove on off, light on the top of his pickup blinking.

True, Wayne had left her, true he might have somebody else, but as far as Grace was concerned, he was still her husband. Wayne had weak lungs due to having smoked from an early age, and this was compounded by the fact that he picked up every germ the public had to offer from his job downtown. She had nursed Wayne through many a cold and flu epidemic, and she knew exactly what would make him better-- homemade chicken soup. So she boiled up the chicken she was saving for her Christmas dinner, and made the best soup anybody could ask for. Then she called Wayne's cell phone, intending to leave a message since she didn't expect an answer. But to her surprise a low, female voice answered, "Hello."

"I've got some chicken soup for Wayne," Grace stammered.

"Who is this?" the woman said, now with a note of suspicion.

"His wife. This soup will make him better. I'll deliver it."

"That won't be necessary." The voice had grown as cold as the weather, and the phone clicked off.

Grace looked helplessly at the empty receiver in her hand. She had chicken soup for Christmas dinner. And when the carolers came from the Bolivar Landing Methodist Church where her membership remained though she did not, she turned out the lights and didn't acknowledge them with cookies as she had in happier times. Right after Christmas she had her telephone taken out.

Maria Mather had come South from Boston with a degree from Harvard and a desire to change the world.. She taught in a high school in Bolivar Landing through the Teach for America project and earned a master's degree at the local university in Social Work. She had stayed on working in a job in the Human Services office, convinced that she had found her life's calling. She could think of no place on earth so in need of reform as right here. Imbued with the zeal and determination of her Puritan ancestors, Maria had taken on poverty, childhood obesity, teen-aged pregnancy, and a number of other categories in which Mississippi leads the nation. She was on the board of the local Habitat for Humanity, she had an after-school mentoring group for teen-aged girls, she taught gym classes on a volunteer basis at elementary schools in the county. Lean and fit herself, she had been a star basketball player at her college in Boston. She was also fearless, a characteristic that stood her in good stead.

In February the biggest ice storm to have hit Mississippi in recorded history ripped through the state leaving devastation in its wake. "God's pruning," Maria thought grimly as she looked out her window at the tangle of tree limbs that covered the road, "but he overdid it this time." Then she ate a quick breakfast of steel-ground oats and pulled on her jeans, sweater,

boots, coat, hat, and gloves and set out to walk the two miles to the office. Along the way she stopped to lend a hand to several neighbors who were struggling to get their cars untangled or to even get out their front doors.

As she approached the office, she saw a State Trooper's car, lights flashing, parked at the curb. She hoped her supervisor, Christine, hadn't had an accident trying to drive in from a neighboring town. The door was still locked, and she pulled out her key to open it when the Trooper jumped out of the car, walked around to the passenger side, and pulled out an infant seat with a baby in it.

"Thank God," the Trooper said, following Maria into the office. "I couldn't have entertained this kid much longer." With that he plopped the seat and child down on the counter. The baby was black with light skin, gold earrings, and tiny braids tied with pink ribbons. She had astonishingly blue eyes. She held out her arms to Maria, who unbuckled her from the seat and settled her on her hip.

"You look like an old hand at this," the Trooper said.

"I used to volunteer at an orphanage back home, and I had little brothers and sisters." The baby laughed and pulled at Maria's hat.

"Sure glad you showed up. She likes you better than she did me I think." As he turned to go, he took the baby's hand. "Bye, little girl," he said.

"Just a minute. What's going on?"

"They didn't call you from the hospital?"

"No."

"Bad wreck out on Hwy. 1." The trooper lowered his voice as if the baby, still clinging to his hand, would understand. "Car left the road, hit a tree. Somehow the seat with the baby in it got thrown clear of the vehicle. The parents, no seat belts, died on impact. It's a miracle this little guy is still alive." The baby chortled.

"She must not have been out in the weather a long time."

"Delivery truck came up on the wreck almost immediately and called it in. When I got there, he had the baby in the cab of the truck keeping her warm. It was real bad." The Trooper's eyes filled with tears as if he had just taken in the tragedy. "Fellow by the name of Wayne Williams, worked for Canon Cars, and a Morris woman who worked there too, both dead."

"This child's parents then?"

"I reckon, from the look of it. Wayne was a white guy, the woman black. I bought a truck from him a couple of years ago. I thought he was married and lived out at the old Calhoun place with his wife."

"Probably he was married to the Morris woman now. I think I've seen her in TV ads."

The Trooper smiled. "You're not from around here are you?" Maria looked him straight in the eye and couldn't help but note that he was taller than she; not many men were.

"I'm from Boston, not that it makes any difference. But what am I supposed to do with this baby?"

"They changed and fed her out at the hospital but said they couldn't keep her, that Human Services had to take over until the sheriff's office could locate the next of kin."

Maria felt unaccustomedly helpless in the face of this charge. "Look, I don't have any bottles, diapers, baby food. You can't leave me like this."

The Trooper grinned. He liked the sound of those words coming from the mouth of this take-charge Yankee woman with challenge wrote all over her. He touched his hand to his gun and said, "Make me a list. I'll get whatever you need."

“Here, hold her until I find something to write with.” Maria handed the baby over and went behind the counter, found paper and a pencil, and made a list. The Trooper, continued to talk, sometimes to the baby, sometimes to Maria. The baby pulled his ears and nose and made soft, singing sounds. He said his name was Talmadge Fairchild. He asked the baby her name and then asked Maria hers. He asked the baby how old she was. He said he was twenty-seven, single, and had grown up in Bolivar Landing.

What an ego, Maria thought, only half listening. As if any of this is about him. She had long ago decided that men weren’t worth the trouble. They just got in the way.

“I hope she’ll take a bottle. If she’s been breast fed I’m in trouble.” She looked up from her list to see the Trooper staring pointedly in the direction of her breasts and felt herself, much against her will, blushing deeply, a fact not missed by Talmadge Fairchild. “Here’s all I can think of now,” she said, exchanging list for baby. “I don’t know how we can pay. I don’t have any cash on hand.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it,” Talmadge said, stuffing the list in his pocket. When he returned from Wal-Mart he had not only the necessities on Maria’s list, but a portable bed, a stroller, a rattler, and a teething ring. And when Maria was still in charge of the baby at the end of the day, he came back to take them home.

As soon as Clyde heard about the wreck, he told Ethel they would have to go tell Grace. “She’d want to know, Ethel, you know she would. Sorry as Wayne was, he was her husband for 25 years. And her out there with no phone or nothing. It’s our duty to go break the news.” So Clyde and Ethel climbed in the truck that was fortified with snow grip tires, and they started out. After an hour on the treacherous roads, Clyde stopped the truck at the end of Grace’s impassable lane, and made walking staffs from a fallen tree for each of them. Then he and Ethel trudged the half mile to the house. Their labored breathing, the breaking limbs from their sheaths of ice, and the crunch their boots and staffs made on the icy path were the only sounds. No birds sang.

Grace was feeling better than she had in weeks. Somehow she was comforted by the fact that everybody was now isolated, frozen in, immobile, and so when Adolph began to bark (the outside animals were now in) and when she saw Clyde and Ethel coming up the steps, she felt intruded upon. She quieted the dogs who had sounded the alarm, and opened the double doors.

“Hi, Honey,” Ethel said and smothered Grace in a hug the minute the doors opened. “You’re not big as a minute. Are you getting enough to eat?”

“We’ve got some bad news, Grace, in case you ain’t heard,” Clyde said, taking off his stocking cap and stepping inside the door. The grandfather clock in the hall began to toll, striking noon.

Grace sat down abruptly on the hall tree bench. In her jeans, sweatshirt, and wildly curly hair she looked childlike and vulnerable. “It’s Wayne isn’t it? Something’s happened to Wayne.”

“The Lord gives and he takes away,” Ethel said.

“And he metes out justice where it’s due. Wayne brought it on himself the way he done. So don’t grieve yourself over it.”

“Tell me,” Grace said, her face as transparent as the ice outside the window.

“Him and the nigger woman was killed in a wreck, hit the ice and slid into a tree. But the little bastard baby was thrown clear in what looks to be a miracle, safe as could be in a car seat.”

“What kind of future does she have to look forward to, though? The sins of the fathers,” Ethel said.

“And mothers,” Clyde said. “Anyways, we thought you ought to know being as you was married to him for so long.”

“We’re real sorry about how it turned out,” Ethel said.

“But thank goodness y’all never divorced because Wayne had him a good life insurance policy. You’re well taken care of, Grace. We’ve done checked.”

Then Grace began to cry, her head in her hands, gut-wrenching sobs that brought all three dogs circling around her. Adolph, clearly the leader of the pack, put his paw on Grace’s knee.

“Why Grace, pull yourself together. Looks like you’d be relieved,” Clyde said.

“Hush, Clyde. The child’s in shock.” Ethel made her way through the dogs and drew Grace to her ample breast.

During the next three weeks, Maria’s research netted zero as far as living kin of the baby or at least of living kin willing to take her in. LeKeisha had come south from Detroit to take care of her ailing grandmother, and when she died, LeKeisha stayed on having gotten a good job at Canon Cars. According to the birth certificate, the baby was named Wendy Williams. Every morning until the roads were cleared Talmadge came to drive Maria and the baby to the Human Services office and to take them home in the evening. And he installed a new infant car seat in Maria’s car before she started driving in herself. But he still dropped by the office often during the day.

“I never saw a man as foolish over a baby,” Maria said to Christine. “You’d think he’d be busier out arresting criminals.”

“Ha, if you think he’s hanging around here on account of that baby, you’ve got another think coming.”

But Maria was already on the phone to Detroit again, trying to track down some willing kin. But LeKeisha had no brothers and sisters, her mother had just learned she had cancer, and the more distant relatives were hard put to feed the mouths they had. She hung up and sighed, “No luck, Christine. I can’t stand the thought of this child going to an orphanage.”

“Maybe Talmadge will adopt her,” Christine said with a sly grin.

“This child needs a mother,” Maria said, reaching down to the baby who grabbed her finger with both hands. “And I’m determined to find her one. I’m going out to see Grace Williams.”

“Well, I swanee. I never heard such an idea. The woman’s a hermit, holed up there and bitter because Wayne left her. To say nothing of the fact that this child is black.”

“He’s her husband’s child, though. It won’t hurt to try. May I have your permission?”

“Oh, sure, go ahead. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

So Maria bundled up the baby, buckled her into the car seat in her Toyota, and drove out to the old Calhoun place. Talmadge had explained to her where it was. The weather was springlike, and but for all the broken trees, scattered like bones across the landscape, the ice storm might have been a bad dream. Clyde had cleared Grace’s lane, and the jonquils were in full bloom, a canopy of yellow blanketing the ground. The air was heavy with the scent of sweet olive and winter honeysuckle, and as Maria carried the baby up the wide front steps and onto the columned porch, she thought she had never seen a prettier place, a fine place for Wendy to grow up.

The dogs were sounding the alarm, not yet having been returned to the outdoors, and soon Grace opened the door. "Yes?" she said politely, something of the Southern lady remaining even in her altered circumstances.

"I'm Maria Mather, and I'd like to speak with you a few minutes, please."

"Come in," Grace said, stepping aside and wondering what this tall, well-dressed white woman was doing with this black child. She directed them into the parlor with its chandelier, marble mantelpiece, Tiffany lamps and period furniture. Maria settled on a horse hair sofa, the baby in her lap playing with her earrings. She thought how clean the place was, how unlike what she had almost expected, a Miss Habersham ruin of dust and decay. Grace sat across the room.

"I work for Human Services," Maria said, "and I'm trying to find a home for this child. She's an orphan."

"I'm afraid I can't help you," Grace said. "Many years ago we had servants, people whose doors were always open to the homeless, the orphan. But times have changed."

"Yes, that's true, but still, surely this baby will not have to grow up in an orphanage."

At that moment Adolph bounded across the room and licked the baby right across her face. Grace sprang to her feet and came over, alarmed. Wendy squealed with delight, though, swung around, reached for the dog, squeezed his nose. He reciprocated by licking her hands. This introduction done, Wendy looked straight up into the eyes of Grace. Grace screamed, put her hand over her mouth, and backed away. Maria jumped to her feet, the baby tucked under her arm.

"My God," Grace said. "The eyes."

"Blue, and that's very unusual but no cause for alarm."

"They're Wayne's eyes. My dead husband's eyes. Oh, I see what you're doing now. How cruel. Please leave. I can't stand this. Please, please take her away." She seemed on the verge of hysteria.

And so Maria, in the unaccustomed position of being at a loss, left the house as quickly as she could with Adolph watching sadly. When she told Talmadge about it later, he said, "What did you expect? Grace Williams comes from a long line of slaveholders, came here with slaves to clear the land, fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War, and never got over it. The last thing she'd want to see is her husband's blue eyes looking at her from the face of a black child."

"Still, she lived with the man 25 years. It seems to me she would not want his child growing up in an orphanage."

"That's crazy talk," Talmadge said. "That's past ridiculous."

Grace couldn't sleep at all the night following Maria and Wendy's visit. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Wayne's blue ones staring accusingly at her from that little black face. Finally, well before dawn, she got up, slipped on her jeans and sweat shirt, made coffee, took a cup down to the bayou, and sat on the bank, oblivious to the dew. The dogs followed, wondering. "What did the woman mean, bringing that child out here, Adolph?" she asked. Adolph looked to the beagle Buddy and the fyce Sissy as if for answers. The cats wandered down to the bayou too, worried about breakfast. "What have I done to deserve this pain?"

Sensing trouble the animals sat quietly while Grace remembered the first time she became aware of those blue eyes watching her from across the room during English class. How the right one closed in a wink. How they both closed before he kissed her for the first time. How tears welled in them as they said their wedding vows. How tears streamed from them the night of the miscarriage. How they widened in surprise and delight the Christmas she had saved up enough to buy Wayne the deer hunting rifle he had always wanted. How they clouded with pain the time he broke his leg.

“What am I supposed to do? Answer me that,” she shouted to no one in particular and the universe in general. At that moment the sun began its slow rise over the bayou, trees glistened, mist faded, birds sang. But the sky was streaked with red, a reminder of her father’s adage, ‘Red sky in the morning, sailor takes a warning.’

“No! Never! Don’t ever, ever ask that.” Then a low rumble came from the heavens. Thunder undoubtedly, but with a roll and pitch like laughter.

Two days later, a Friday afternoon, Maria had just fed the baby and put her down for a nap in her play pen behind the counter, when Grace called. “I want to adopt Wayne Williams’ baby,” she said. Maria, not usually given to surprise, was struck dumb for a minute. When she recovered her social work techniques, she expressed approval and suggested that she bring Wendy out to stay a few days, and then make the final decision. Christine was floored and asked Maria if she thought that was a suitable home for an infant.

“The woman has a good heart,” Maria said. “You can tell by the way she treats her pets.”

“Ha,” Christine said. “A pet and a baby are two different propositions.”

“Anyway, she’ll be a lot better off there than in an orphanage.”

“If Grace doesn’t raise her to think she’s a slave or a live-in maid.”

“I’ll keep an eye on this baby, believe me,” Maria said. “I’ll even stay out there with them for a night or two.” So when the child woke up, she packed up her things, put her in the car seat, went by the apartment to pack her own overnight bag and get more supplies for the baby, then drove out to the old Calhoun place.

On Monday morning Maria was at the office early and when Christine came in she was triumphant in her account of the week-end. “Grace was a little tentative at first, but Wendy took right to her, such a sociable baby. Grace acted like the baby was a china doll the first time she tried to change her diaper, but by the end of the week-end, she had gotten the hang of it. After all, she’s at home in the natural world and babies are a part of that. Just too bad she never had any of her own.”

“No resentment? No sense that she’ll take out her anger at Wayne on the child?”

“None of that. She could even look the baby straight in those blue eyes. And you know, I don’t think she is angry at Wayne. I think she loves him no matter what. Their wedding portrait still hangs in the parlor. But I’ll keep watch. I’ll go out there often. Now I’ve got to get the legal part going.”

That afternoon Talmadge stopped by to see the baby. When he saw the child was not in her usual place, he gestured a question to Maria, who was on the phone with a client. As soon as she hung up, she said, “Good news. Grace Williams is adopting Wendy.”

Talmadge looked as though he had been punched in the stomach. He slumped against the counter. “You’re kidding, right?”

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“I took Wendy out there this week-end. It’s all on go. They’re good together. Wendy’s got a home.” Maria got up from her desk with a bright smile to take some paperwork to Christine’s office, and when she came back up front, Talmadge was still there, his face cloudy. “You still here?” she said, straightening papers on her desk.

“You know what you are?” he said, in a tone that made Maria look up. “You’re a damn ole do-gooder with your Yankee self and your social engineering. Even your name. I know about Mathers. I took American lit. They’re cold and pious and think they know better than anybody. They burned witches.”

Maria sat down abruptly, her face as red as if Talmadge’s large hand had slapped her.

“You don’t know anything about us, but you think you do,” he went on. “You don’t know how racism can work down here. You don’t know what kind of life you’ve consigned that baby to. I’ll tell you how I feel, not that you care. I feel like you’ve given away our child.” And with that Talmadge stormed out the door.

“Well, my Lord,” Christine said, walking in from her office. “I guess that young man was coming just to see the baby after all. I had thought for sure he had a crush on you.”

Maria didn’t analyze why, but she did not like hearing that at all. And though convinced she was right, she had never felt worse about a decision. She felt so bad she couldn’t sleep, which was a first for her. Never one to suffer passively, however, by morning she knew what she would do. She would somehow convince Talmadge to go with her on her next visit to Grace’s and let him see for himself. She made it a rule not to call men, but this morning she went straight to the phone and dialed the number Talmadge had given her in case of emergency. A sleepy voice said hello, and she plunged right in, her heart pounding.

“Talmadge, I’m going out to see Wendy after work, and I hope you’ll go with me, and maybe you’ll feel better about things and will you go? Please?”

Following a long silence, an “O.K.”

Maria breathed then. “Oh, good. I’ll pick you up about 4.”

“No. I’ll pick you up.”

“Oh. O.K. See you then.”

They hardly spoke as they drove out to the old Calhoun place in Talmadge’s pick-up truck. He was off-duty, dressed casually in kakis, loafers, and a button-down shirt. Maria had not seen him out of uniform and thought he looked surprisingly well as an ordinary guy. When a knock on Grace’s door brought no answer, they walked around the house and what they saw made them stop abruptly.

Grace sat on the ground in a sea of jonquils and blue bells. She held the baby on one knee with her right hand. Wound around Grace’s left arm was a bright green snake.

“My God,” Talmadge whispered. “The woman is a snake handler.” Maria put her hand on his shoulder.

“Shhhhh,” she said.

“Snake,” Grace said. “Good snake.”

“Daaaa,” the baby said, and stroked the snake gently.

Grace sniffed the snake and held it to the baby’s nose, who laughed. “Some snakes are good and some bad and you’ll learn the difference.”

Then Adolph bounded up from the bayou, ears on alert, went straight to Talmadge and Maria and stood barking. Grace scrambled to her feet, putting down the snake and holding Wendy to her heart. “Oh,” she said, turning around, “I didn’t know you were there. Please do come in the house. We’ll have coffee.”

“We came looking when you didn’t answer the door,” Maria said. She thought that Grace seemed ten years younger than the first time she had seen her. “How are you two getting along?”

The setting sun cast a soft glow over Grace and Wendy, turning the baby’s bronze skin to gold. “Red sky at night, sailor’s delight,” Grace said. “We’re doing just fine.”

It was dark by the time Maria and Talmadge left Grace’s. Talmadge juggled the baby on his knee, fed her supper, and rocked her to sleep. They learned that Grace had signed Wendy up for the Mom’s Day Out program at the Methodist church and had volunteered to work in it. They left with a promise to come back soon. As they drove down the lane to the road, Talmadge cleared his throat. “Them two need each other, no doubt about it.”

Those two, Maria thought, but didn’t say. She did say, “Grace is more forgiving than I could be if some man had left me after 25 years.”

“I can’t imagine that any man would dare to leave you that way.” Maria didn’t know if that were a compliment or not.

“Look,” Talmadge went on, “I shouldn’t have talked to you like I did. You do good work. I was way out of line.”

“That’s O.K.,” Maria said. “I should have given you more warning, not have sprung it on you.”

“Can I come out here with you again?”

“Sure,” Maria said.

“Well, with that out of the way, want to get some supper?”

“Sure.”

“How about some dancing?”

“Dancing?” Maria had visions of people standing in one place, shaking all over, which was the only kind of dancing she had witnessed in these parts. She had taken ballroom from the time she was a child and liked the kind of dancing where the partners actually touched each other. But, oh well. “O.K.” she said.

The Open Roadhouse was a cozy restaurant-bar with memorabilia from the 50’s on the walls and colored lights draped around the ceiling. The small band sat on a raised platform at one end. They waved when Talmadge walked in; in fact, everybody in the restaurant seemed to know him. After an excellent bar-be-que sandwich with cole slaw, the band struck up, and Talmadge held out his hand. They started with a two-step to a Zydeco number, then a cotton-eye Joe, and then, surprisingly, a waltz. Maria was amazed.

“Where did you learn to dance? I mean, real dancing?”

“Mama,” he said. “She thought all civilized people should know how. Torture for a kid, but I enjoy it now.”

“Me, too,” she said, looking straight into his eyes. As the music slowed, his arms tightened around her, and North and South found common ground.

[Editor's Note: I propose that for the foreseeable future the format of this essay—footnotes instead of the endnotes POMPA has been using—ought to be the one we follow.]

ESSAY

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“The Show Must Go On”: Money and Death in William Faulkner's *Pylon*

Marx and Engels on technology -- from *The Communist Manifesto*:

"The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned . . ." (25-26).

Scholars have usually considered *Pylon*, like *A Fable*, as an aberration in Faulkner's career as a writer, a novel set outside the fictional landscape of Yoknapatawpha, written in response to pressure from Hollywood, an escape from the more serious themes of his other novels, and not as worthy of critical praise as his more classically modernist works. But despite Faulkner's own commentary on the writing of *Pylon* as a distraction from his work on *Absalom, Absalom!*, read in the context of what I see as Faulkner's continuous engagement with the commodification of human life under the conditions of capitalism, *Pylon* emerges as much less of a deviation from the usual themes and concerns in Faulkner's fiction than one might think.¹ In spite of appearing perhaps in its most overt form in this novel, Faulkner scholars have for the most part ignored a central concern with the relationship between labor, production, and money

¹ See the introduction to the special issue of *The Mississippi Quarterly* on Faulkner, Labor, and Capitalism arguing that the theme of a critique of the nature of capitalism reoccurs throughout Faulkner's novels and short stories as well as in his essays and speeches that he made throughout his lifetime.

in *Pylon* and have rejected the usefulness of Marxist analysis for understanding the book. The constant references to money in the novel, while not entirely disregarded, have remained eclipsed by a primary emphasis on Faulkner's relationship to Hollywood, art, the writing process, modernism, media, and society in the aftermath of World War 1.

Readers of Faulkner too often forget or seem uninterested in the historical and material context in which he wrote. Interestingly, an issue of *The Nation* published in 1933 includes an article on Faulkner in Hollywood by William Troy along with a series of debates about Marx, low wages, labors disadvantageous share in the products of its works, and workers uniting. A popular magazine such as this reminds us that even if Faulkner didn't read Marx he must have engaged to some degree the anti-capitalist intellectuals and Marxist discussions that erupted when American capitalism hit rock bottom with the closing of all banks on March 4, 1933.² Hollywood itself provided for Faulkner perhaps the most vivid and monstrous personal confrontation with the alien and soulless nature of human relations reduced to money, and *Pylon* stands as arguably Faulkner's most direct fictitious representation of a capitalist society in which everything gets mediated by the dollar.³

When Howard Hawkes, producer and friend of Faulkner in Hollywood, tells him to stop writing about hillbillies and to write about people flying, Faulkner writes *Pylon*, but the 1935 novel reflects less about Faulkner's knowledge of flying and more about human beings – flyers instead of hillbillies – struggling to live in a dehumanized society in which social relations become obscured and negated by money, and in which capital crushes anything that stands in its

² *The Nation*, vol. cxxxvi no. 3542 wed May 24, 1933. Held by the University of Virginia Special Collections Library.

³ *The Communist Manifesto* is perhaps Marx's most succinct argument for how money becomes the mediator of everything under capitalism. "The bourgeoisie," he says, "wherever it has gotten the upper hand, . . . has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties . . . and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment' . . . It has resolved personal worth into exchange value . . ." (25).

path. Faulkner disliked Hollywood precisely because it epitomized the mass production, mediocrity, and brutal repression created by a money-driven economy. According to Faulkner, Hollywood not only had no soul and forced him to engage in writing that will sell because he needed the money, but the fierce competition fuelled by everyone's need to make more and more money made it, he told Shelby Foote "the only place in the world where a man can get stabbed in the back while climbing a ladder" (Blotner, 447). The film industry in Hollywood did not encourage anything for Faulkner other than commercially successful formula pictures and Faulkner became painfully aware that while he made a pittance contributing to these picture films, the companies he worked for made huge profits off of his back. In a letter to Maud Faulkner, he writes facetiously:

I have a good job now, with Hawks. . . . The picture will be a big one. . . . The studio is giving Hawks three and a half million dollars to make it. . . . You met him at MGM . . . a cold-blooded man, but he will protect me if I write a script that will make money for him.⁴

However, regardless of Faulkner's timely political critique of an increasingly money-driven society both in his assessment of Hollywood and in his writing of *Pylon*, Faulkner scholars have for the main part preferred instead to read the novel as a timeless representation of the angst and alienation of modern man. Some exceptions include Taylor Hagood's interrogation of how media creates narratives for capitalist culture, Karl F. Zender's focus on both Faulkner's and the reporter's need for money getting in the way of their artistic aspirations, and John T Matthews' explanation of the reporter's obsession with the flyers as an idealization of the proletariat. But none of these readings address quite well enough the novel's direct and sustained attack, almost parodying Marxist analysis, on an economic system under which money and greed

⁴ Letter to Mrs. Maud Faulkner, 1943. Held by the University of Virginia Special Collections Library.

drives everything, and workers are forced to sell both their forgotten labor and their lives for a market determined wage while capitalists get richer and richer.⁵



Most readings of *Pylon* have focused primarily on the reporter rather than the unconventional trio of flyers who both seem to struggle to resist many of the trappings of an economic system and bland machine-like inhuman existence driven by money, and yet at the same time find themselves inevitably both defined and slowly destroyed by it; while the need for money largely controls their everyday needs to eat and sleep, they also appear to make decisions outside of a primary desire for money. Laverne, for example, jumps to win Roger's love and approval, not for twenty dollars as the reporter puts it, and her relationship with Schumann and Jiggs blatantly defies the usual economic and sexual exchange that Marx describes as characterizing conventional heterosexual marriage and familial bonds under capitalism.⁶

In the very first scene of the novel, Jiggs looks in a shop window, preparing readers both for a landscape in which objects and money take on mystical powers, and for capitalism's exploitation of the flyers. The window contains two things, a pair of boots and a placard promoting the air show with pictures of the flyers and their planes. The scene serves as an immediate reminder of the way in which consumer capitalism collapses the difference between people and inanimate objects. Both the boots and the airman are for sale and both can bring in profit, and even within the image of the flyers themselves, human and object become blurred: "the trim vicious fragile aeroplanes and the pilots leaning on them in gargantuan irrelation as animals not trained or tamed but just for the instant inert . . ." (3). At the very least, rather than

⁵ In fact John T. Matthews specifically makes the point that Marx is too reductive to apply to Faulkner's politics and writing.

⁶ In other words, their relationship does not seem to be predicated on an economic exchange, or as Marx puts it in *The Communist Manifesto*, their "family relation" does not seem to be reduced "to a mere money relation" (25).

embracing capitalist ideology, Jiggs is seduced by its celebration of class inequity even as it tries to exclude his class; acutely aware of his own “greasestained tennis shoes”(3), he awkwardly enters into a “museum of glass cases . . . in which the hats and ties and shirts, the beltbuckles and cufflinks and handkerchiefs, the pipes shaped like golfclubs and the drinking tools shaped like boots and barnyard fowls and the minute impedimenta for wear on ties and vest-chains shaped like bits and spurs, resembled biologic specimens put into the inviolate preservative before they had ever been breathed into” (3-4). We are reminded not only of the absurd value of objects created under consumer capitalism but also of how consumer capitalism replaces need with desire thus driving up the value and prices of basic necessities like shoes. This becomes even more egregious when Jiggs is forced to sell the boots for which he paid over twenty dollars for only five even though he had only worn them twice.

The reporter insists over and over again that the flyers do not participate in flying and jumping out of planes for the money; “they don’t need money,” he says, “it aint money they are after anymore than its glory . . . they don’t need money except only now and then when they come in contact with the human race like in a hotel to sleep or eat now and then or maybe to buy a pair of pants or a skirt to keep the police off of them. Because money aint that hard to make: it aint up there fourteen and a half feet off the ground in a vertical bank around a steel post at two or three hundred miles an hour” (44). But, at the same time, money clearly dominates their lives precisely because they don’t have any. As exemplified in the following passage, a constant concern over money saturates the narrative that tells their story:

[Jiggs] collected the parachute guy’s twenty five bucks for him while the parachute guy was still on the way back from work because the parachute guy gets twenty-five berries for the few seconds it takes except for the five bucks he has to pay the transport pilot to take

him to the office you might say, and the eight cents a pound for the flour only today the flour was already paid for and so the whole twenty bucks was velvet. And Jiggs collected it and beat it because they owed him some jack and he thought that since Schumann had won the race that he would win the actual money too like the program said and . . . be able to pay last night's bill at the whore house . . ." (67).

But when Schumann tries "to collect his one-O-seven-fifty . . . they wouldn't pay him" (67) and they have to go "to Amboise Street and [get] a room . . . because in the Amboise Streets you can sleep tonight and pay tomorrow. . . . Only they hadn't paid for last night yet. . . . So they left the kid asleep on the madam's sofa" (69). Reminiscent of migrant labor, and other forms of exploited labor, (including that of women and children), they do what they can to make just enough money to survive; they move "[f]rom coast to coast and Canada in summer and Mexico in winter, with one suitcase and the same canopener because three can live on one canopener as easy as one or twelve, -- wherever they can find enough folks in one place to advance them enough money to get there and pay for the gasoline afterward." (44).

This confusion over whether or not they do what they do for the money continues throughout the novel. In the last chapter, a number of newspapermen argue among themselves over the very same question: "You talk like he didn't kill himself taking a chance to win two thousand dollars" (299) says one. "That's correct," says another "[o]h, he would have taken the money, all right. But that wasn't why he was flying that ship up there. He would have entered it if he hadn't had anything but a bicycle, just so it would have got off the ground. But it aint for the money. It's because they have got to do it, like some women have got to be whores. They can't help themselves. . . . If it had just been the money, do you think he could have thought about money hard enough to have decided to risk his life to get it in a machine he knew was

unsafe” (300). “Don’t kid yourself,” the other replies, [i]t was for the money. Those guys like money as well as you and me. . . . She would have bought herself a batch of new clothes and they would have moved to the hotel from wherever it was they were staying” (300).

What I argue in this paper is that what makes these flyers both interesting and enigmatic is that the unique nature of their occupation makes detectable what Marx calls the social relations that underpin labor and which according to Marx usually remain entirely obscured and buried by the mystical nature of money and all commodities. Fairly simply they produce a product (an airshow), and earn a wage, both of which have a value that remains determined by something entirely outside of any inherent characteristic of the product or labor itself such as risk or skill; rather, both commodities – the airshow and the flyers (reflected in their wage) has a value determined by what Marx calls socially necessary labor, governed according to Marx purely by the logic of the market and disregarding any human or social element.



On some level, Schumman gets into a “machine he knew was unsafe” (300) because he needs a job, a wage, money to pay for his next meal and to sleep somewhere else other than a whorehouse, and flying is what he knows how to do; as one newspaper man puts it, “they were trying to do what they had to do, with what they had to do it with, the same as all of us . . . ” (299). On another level, however, he does it because he likes to fly, because he had always wanted to fly even against his father’s wishes that he follow in his footsteps and become a doctor, and because he wants to hold onto some semblance of skill and autonomy even as more expensive planes begin to replace that skill; As new innovation in machines, or as Marx puts it “the constant revolutionizing of production” (Communist Manifesto 25-26), transforms, or disturbs, the skill and labor of the flyers, Schumann, because he doesn’t have the money to buy a new plane, occupies a sort of transitional space in which he must use his skill to combat new

technology. Of course, this ultimately fails; while he momentarily escapes becoming a mere extension of a better machine, in order to keep winning he has to fly more and more dangerously which eventually leads to his death.

As Jigg's tells his driver who asks if Schumann has a chance of winning the race, "[s]hip's obsolete. It was fast two years ago, but that's two years ago. We'd be O.K now if they had just quit building racers when they finished the one we got. There aint another pilot out there except Shumann that could have even qualified it" (10). Jiggs understands that with the constant technological improvement in planes, Shumann's skill as a flyer becomes more and more irrelevant and more difficult to reinvent; winning either just takes passively operating a better machine or putting oneself in danger. Thus, ironically even as the novel presents these flyers as gypsy-like free birds unconfined by materialistic values, it become clear that just in order to survive they must succumb to the changes in capital production required for capitalists to stay competitive in the market. This makes the exact point that Marx makes in *Capital* that it is an illusion that in a market economy as opposed to feudal or slave economies people are free to choose the nature of their labor.

Not only is their labor driven by capitalist production, it is also forgotten. The sign that says "Colonel H. I. Feinman . . . through whose undeviating vision and unflagging effort this airport was raised up and created out of the waste land at the bottom of lake Rambaud at the cost of one million dollars" (784) is a vivid example of the way in which products are distanced from labor as well as of labor being distanced from its product. The planes also take on more significance than the people flying them; people come to the air show to see the "snarl and snore of engines," something "mechanical instead of blood, bone and meat," while the "disembodied" (22) announcers voice "to which apparently none listened"(23) sounded "as though it were the

voice of the steel-and chromium mausoleum itself talking of creatures imbued with motion though not with life . . . incapable of suffering, wombed and born complete and instantaneous, cunning intricate and deadly, from out some blind iron batcave of the earth's prime foundation" (25). Faulkner's language here denotes a disturbing recognition of a scene in which machines/objects have become more important than people. Later this disembodied amplified voice echoes Jiggs's prediction that while "the other boys are good too . . . Myers and Bullitt have the ships. So I'll say third will be Jimmy Ott, and Roger Shumann and Joe Grant last, because as I said, the other boys have the ships" (28). Even the reporter, who might idealize the flyers to a large degree, recognizes the dehumanization of the flyers as they are forced to risk their lives to make money for Feinman and the other capitalists with investments in the airport: "they aint human like us" the reporter says "they couldn't turn those pylons like they do if they had human blood and senses and they wouldn't want to or dare to if they just had human brains. Burn them like this one tonight and they don't even holler in the fire; crash one and it aint even blood when you haul him out: it's cylinder oil the same as crankcase" (42). The reporter can't quite grasp the source of their inhumanness as the nature of capitalist production but nonetheless glimpses the disregard for human life in this moneymaking enterprise reducing the flyers to machinelike parts or extensions of the planes.

Likewise, the reporter glimpses that their lives and freedom are eclipsed by the way in which they are dictated by money. Over and over again, the flyers get narrated in terms of money and their relationship to money or lack of it. It's as if the reporters and newspaper men don't even have a language for humanity outside of money; While Schumann remains defined by the extent to which he does or doesn't fly for the money, Laverne gets judged by her act of leaving

after Schumann's death, the motivation for which is also explained by the newspaper men in terms of money:

“Do you mean you think she cleared out just to keep from having to pay out some jack to bury him if they get him up?” the fourth said. “Why not?” the second said. “People like that don't have money to spend on corpses because they don't use money. It don't take money especially to live; it's only when you die that you or somebody has got to have something put away in the sock. A Man can eat and sleep and keep the purity squad off of him for six months on what the undertaker will make you believe you cant possibly be planted for a cent less and preserve your self respect. So what would they bury him with even if they had him to bury. (299)

This conversation indicates that nothing remains sacred outside of money, not people, not social relations, not even death or grief; even this gets reduced to someone needing money and someone wanting to be paid, “all that is holy is profaned . . .” as Marx puts it in the *Communist Manifesto* (25-26). Earlier, Jiggs discusses the motivation for striking also in terms of money:

”Roger and Jack . . . have gone to the meeting” Jiggs tells the reporter, “To strike. . . For more jack. It aint the money: it's the principle of the thing. Jesus, what do we need with money” (149).

Once again, motivations and actions are both simultaneously because of money and despite money. In all of these scenes money becomes strangely both detached and at the same time inseparable from other motivations, principles, or passions. Again, there is a vague sense, a glimmer, that something other than money drives, or should drive, human beings, but nobody can articulate it because the human element of social relations has become so buried by the importance of money.

Both the lives and the deaths of the flyers, and the telling of them, are vividly mediated through the exchange of money, first by “the afternoon's program of events” that “can be purchased for twenty-five cents” (23), then by the reporter talking to the editor on the phone trying to tell their story while “the bland machinevoice chanted” for him to “[d]eposit five cents

for three minutes please” (63), and then finally through news reducing them to a profitable abstraction, to something subhuman, into headlines that will sell, such as “FIRST FATALITY OF AIR MEET. PILOT BURNED ALIVE” (39). Throughout the novel, Faulkner depicts in vivid and lengthy detail the exchange of newspapers for money; the scene of the reporter buying a newspaper from an elevator man is an especially striking reminder of both the recommodification of the air show itself through the reporting of it and also of the quite literal exchange of money mediating the relation between the reporter and the elevator man:

“I think they are all crazy,” the elevator man said. He had not looked at the reporter again. He received the coin in the same hand which clutched a dead stained cob pipe, not looking at the other. “Them that do it and them that pay money to see it.” Neither did the reporter look at him. (50).

On another occasion, he “fumbled in his pocket; the coins rang on the floor” (109) as he dropped them, and once he decides not to “throw away a nickel like it was into the ocean because another lunatic has fried himself” (53).

Money drives Schumann to his death in more ways than one; he is paid money to fly so that hundreds of spectators will pay money to watch him fly. In addition, because “Schumann don’t even own a ship” (945), doesn’t even have the money to buy one, his obsession with holding on to his occupation gets more and more precarious. Schumann does win the first race despite the announcer’s predictions, but by “beating them on the pylons” (29) due to his skill; his attempt to hold onto some kind of skill and autonomy becomes basically suicidal. For Schumann, attempting to own his labor, the product of his labor, and the means by which he labors, becomes associated only with death. The plane he does manage to secure later on for later races which will allow him to continue competing is unsafe and he is encouraged to fly anyway to avoid loss of profits for Feinman and the other owners of production sponsoring the event: “these boys have

got to get their ships ready” the announcer repeats, “We’ve got to be ready to give these people that are buying the tickets out there something to look at”(153). The severe difference between Feinman’s monetary interest in Schumann flying and the maximum monetary return Schumann can expect for putting his life in danger becomes foregrounded here and it is rather the owners of labor who risk the lives of the flyers for money, not the flyers themselves. The reporter of course is not class-conscious enough to recognize this and has therefore only the blurred sense that it makes no sense to risk your life for the kind of money the flyers hope to receive. Rather, unable to afford their own planes let alone the air shows, the flyers live at the mercy of the owners of production and their profit margins, doing what they do in hope of a little prize money.

From Feinman’s position, tickets must be sold and “people that are buying tickets” must have “something to look at” (153) even if Roger has to fly an unsafe plane that leads to his death which is in turn subsequently commodified by the newspaper business for further profit. Roger’s death also leads to the break up of the community of flyers, and Leverne ends up basically prostituting herself to Matt Ord because he promises to put her son through school; later she is forced to forsake her son because she doesn’t know if she can “buy him enough food to eat and enough clothes to keep him warm and medicine if he is sick” (317). Even more disturbing, when the committee representing the business men of New Valois who have sponsored the meet decide to reprint programs after the death of one of the flyers, they agree to pay for it by cutting the other flyer’s pay.

All the loss of life means to these gentlemen is loss of profit and to negate this loss they are able to capitalize on the willingness of others to risk their lives for an even lower reward. Faulkner expresses here in startling terms the way in which money functions as the tool of the rich, how money is used to make more money for the privileged class, and how workers have no

control over the profits produced by their labor; a flyer then as a worker must, in Marx's words, "struggle not only for . . . physical means of subsistence" but also for "the possibility, the means, to perform his activity."⁷ Also, as presumably the flyers will work for less rather than not work at all, in Marxist terms the flyers depict how the capitalist "either renders the worker, who is restricted to some particular branch of labor destitute, or forces him to submit to every demand of this capitalist"⁸ and "the consideration of his own private profit is the sole motive which determines the owner of any capital"⁹.

This ongoing question over the flyers' mysterious and unfathomable relationship to money, then, echoes Marx's references to the strange nature of money and all commodities that conceal the socially necessary labor that underpins them.¹⁰ The problem with the way the reporter and other newspaper men try to understand the flyers is that they can only comprehend money as a wage and a commodity, and not as a reflection of social relations. They also assume that the flyers are free. If they could understand the social relations underlying the production of money, the relations between the worker and the capitalist, the flyers would cease to be such a conundrum. So just as from a Marxist perspective it is impossible for a chemist to find a property in a diamond that determines its price, it is likewise impossible to understand a property such as risk or skill in the flyers' occupation that determines its value (wage). Schuman quite literally becomes the fodder of a society driven by the accumulation of commodities. The flyers are bought and sold for a profit while any human element is denied. Their human labor is so

⁷ *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 67.

⁸ *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 66.

⁹ *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 81.

¹⁰ In section 4 of chapter one of *Capital*, Marx explains how we think of the value of objects and wages as determined by some inherent value in the objects or work themselves when in fact these values are solely determined by socially necessary labor, i.e. the amount of labor necessary to generate profit. So just as from a Marxist perspective it is impossible for a chemist to find a property in a diamond that determines its price, it is likewise impossible to understand a property such as risk or skill in the flyers' occupation that determines its value (wage).

devalued and debased in efforts to accumulate more profit and more objects (more expensive planes, more fancy signs for Feinman's airport) that humans are quite literally destroyed; economics negates the human quite literally.

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