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Allen Tate's *The Fathers*, Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle* represent a few of the numerous southern texts which demonstrate an historically evasive rhetorical style, particularly when dealing with difficult or socially taboo issues. Typically, the more important the subject, the less direct the approach. Preoccupation with hospitality, etiquette, and public appearance results in oblique discursive strategies which structure social norms and narrative practices in the American South. In each case, the author's self-identification with southern culture foregrounds his familiarity with these codes and the author's biographies, interviews and critical writings support his use of such systems.

In addition, each author employs a generic device which furthers the elisions and circumventions exemplified by their characters. Tate, Williams and Nordan utilize techniques such as gothicism, plastic theater, and magical realism which blur the boundaries between reality and illusion. These conventions paradoxically distance the reader from the text, at times neglecting important matters and yet, at others, offering ambiguous spaces where contemplation of otherwise unspeakable concerns may occur.

“IN A ROUNDABOUT WAY”: EVASIVE, OBLIQUE AND  
INDIRECT DISCOURSE IN ALLEN TATE,  
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS  
AND LEWIS NORDAN

by

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To Mom and Dad

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## INTRODUCTION

In *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* Bertram Wyatt-Brown notes that southern hospitality, or “affability” as the eighteenth century gentleman called it, distinguished southern character from that of the Yankee. Citing an early example, Wyatt-Brown claims,

As early as 1773, for instance, Josiah Quincy Jr., who was visiting South Carolina to ascertain patriotic sentiments, was appalled – as were many later Yankees – by the prevalence of “men of the turf and gamesters.” It worried him that matters of political philosophy and religion were so frivolously set aside for lighter subjects of conversation. (90)

Competing perceptions that southerners are, in a positive sense, exceedingly polite and congenial or, in a negative sense, that they routinely evade or dodge important matters to the detriment of the issue and the speaker’s moral character, arise from a southern preference for uncontroversial subjects. But despite opposing opinions about its consequences, the consensus seems to be that southerners don’t “just come out and say it like it is.” As journalist Roy Reed has said of southern authors, “No discussion, sermon, or quarrel should be telescoped when it can be drawn out all afternoon with endless opportunity for dodging, feinting, and keeping one’s position obscured” (Reed and Reed 141). Nashville Agrarian/Fugitive Stark Young addressed complaints that southerners evaded important issues, approached them obliquely, or obfuscated them in a rush of

ornate deception, explaining,

As to manners and the accusations against Southerners of insincerity, floweriness, gush, and indirection, the answer is that such reproaches are the defensive arguments of selfishness, of meager natures, of self-conscious egotism, of middle-class Puritanism, or of laziness: it is easier not to consider the other man's feelings. (435)

From its colonial inception, southern culture has reflected the notion that evasive or indirect discourse comprises a portion of its rhetorical habits. For the northern Quincy, this practice highlights frivolity; for the southern Young, it showcases hospitality and sensitivity to one's fellows. For Reed, it comprises an important part of southern literary aesthetics.

These examples represent a few of the numerous writings about southern literature and culture which suggest the prevalence of a rhetorically evasive style, particularly when dealing with uncomfortable or volatile issues. Paradoxically, the more important the subject the less direct the approach and the less open the discussion. This study will investigate instances of indirect discourse and narrative elision in the works of Allen Tate, Tennessee Williams, and Lewis Nordan. Specifically, in the fiction and dramas discussed herein, characters engage in rhetorical modes and dialogic exchanges which illustrate a southern tendency to obliquely approach or evade difficult subject matter. I argue that this tendency is rooted in preoccupations with public opinion, reputation, and appearance which continue to inform southern social norms and narrative practices. In each case, the author's self-identification with southern culture foregrounds

his familiarity with these codes, and in each case the author's biographies, interviews or nonfiction support his use of such systems.

The authors' texts also connect by means of different generic or stylistic devices which facilitate the elisions and circumventions seen in the biographical backgrounds and fictional characters of each artist. Tate, Williams, and Nordan each employ techniques designed to blur the boundaries between reality and the illusory or imaginary. For Tate it is gothicism. For Williams it is plastic theater. And for Nordan it is magical realism. The strangeness produced by gothicism and magical realism, and to a lesser extent plastic theater, refracts the practices seen in the historical examples and fictional creations explored in this study through a destabilizing lens. In some cases, particularly Tate's *The Fathers*, the evasion of consequential subjects like chattel slavery and miscegenation leaves valuable questions unanswered or furthers the inequities he hints toward addressing. And yet in other cases, most notably in Nordan's *Wolf Whistle*, an indirect approach to difficult subject material like a real life lynching establishes a space where contemplation of the otherwise unthinkable may occur. In this sense, the parameters of each genre may facilitate a greater engagement with important problems and questions that might otherwise have gone unexplored.

This examination reflects New Historicism's adage that non-literary texts rival their fictional counterparts as makers of meaning and that the two interrogate and influence each other. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan explain, "The project of a new socio-historical criticism is, then, to analyze the interplay of culture-specific discursive practices – mindful that it, too, is such a practice and so participates in the interplay it

seeks to analyze” (782). Tate’s, Williams’ and Nordan’s texts reflect the authors’ positions within a social framework they each define as southern and the process is reciprocal. Their texts reflect the culturally specific, or culturally emphasized, practice of rhetorical evasion through the dialogue of their characters, and they simultaneously participate in the dialogic practices their characters exhibit by, among other methods, the use of non-realistic generic devices. That is, they participate in the interplay they seek to analyze, but in a less literal way than their characters.

Thus, I imagine, as Stephen Greenblatt might put it, “a poetics of southern rhetorical evasion” wherein the authors in this study both reflect and perform the South’s tendency to gloss difficult subjects. Despite some judgment about the social value of these texts, I have in large measure attempted to avoid what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick implicates as the “good dog/ bad dog” pitfall of New Historicism’s politics and its temptations to punish those authors who support political ideologies now considered unreasonable while praising those whose points of view have survived history more favorably. Such a system discounts the difficult, tangled nature of history and engages in cultural finger-pointing which reduces the texts’ complexity and dismisses the valuable lessons available from ideologically flawed or historically outdated perspectives. Tate, Williams, and Nordan are products of their cultural locations, and their works reflect and complicate the ideologies found there. Therefore, when I offer an evaluative judgment of an author’s work, it is because it demands attention to such an extent that not to mention its political consequence would do the text a disservice or too easily excuse excessive iniquity.

## Chapter One: The History and Origins of Rhetorical Evasion

Chapter One offers historical and literary evidence from colonization to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century concerning the South's reputation for indirect or oblique rhetoric and literature. Peppered among historical examples are illustrations of how these practices and tendencies inform the current historical moment. In addition, this chapter identifies the parameters of discussions which follow in relation to individual authors. Specifically, all of the authors herein are white and male. I do not omit female and minority writers because they do not participate in circuitous language or significant silences. Quite the contrary. The ways in which one may mean one thing and say another or appear to say another, the subterfuges and masks adopted by women and minorities, have long been recognized as mechanisms employed by silenced groups to combat oppression and disenfranchisement. Thus, this study is not specifically about gender or race per se, although anxieties about these issues heavily inform what constitutes "difficult" subject matter.

I then discuss several factors which have influenced indirect or evasive speech. Class status has often determined how openly a southern speaker or writer may voice his opinion. Public scrutiny concerning reputation compelled southern men to project an invulnerable masculine ethos. Antebellum men employed proxies in the courtship and dueling rituals and thus often conveyed both their affection and anger indirectly. Similarly, they historically engaged in ritualized forms of hospitality informed by the closed, provincial nature of southern culture. Audience played a large role in determining what a man could say, how he might say it, and when he remained silent.

Specifically, certain topics and behaviors were off limits when dealing with women and social subordinates. Not surprisingly, almost all discussion of sex was taboo, particularly elements related to miscegenation or homosexuality, while slavery and race relations remain troublesome even for contemporary white authors.

Representations of the South itself, and particularly its peculiar institution, have presented notable difficulties and, as a result, produced regionally distinctive discursive strategies. The Old South, which I broadly define as the period between colonization and the end of the Civil War, suffered a collective touchiness or inferiority complex in comparison to the Northeast and Great Britain. Later, with southerners smarting from Civil War defeat, the Lost Cause was off-limits to dissenters. During and immediately after Reconstruction, those who questioned common romantic depictions of the antebellum South and its reliance on chattel slavery met with resistance and even violence. Up until the early 1960s, white endorsement of African American civil rights and desegregation also proved cause for brutality.

Finally, this chapter examines competing visions of the South presented by writers in the schools of both Romanticism and Realism and explores how contemporary southern scholars have dealt with the opposing aims reflected in each. In their individual chapters, I show how Tate and Williams vacillate between rosy veneers and ugly truths, each reflecting an appreciation of the gentle side of the antebellum South's culture but conceding its flawed make-up and inability to sustain itself. Each indirectly examines a social injustice; in *The Fathers* it is the chattel slavery which plagues the Buchan plantation, while in *A Streetcar Named Desire* it is the homophobia which ends the life of

Blanche Dubois' young husband. Each leads to tragedy, notably Yellow Jim's murder and Blanche's fall from grace once she lacks her husband's male guardianship. Tate's Major and Williams' Blanche are cut from the same cloth, archaic hothouse flowers in a modern world with no protection from the elements and no evading their own inevitable demise. But despite tentative steps toward overtly addressing their subjects, neither Tate nor Williams offers solutions or fully indicts the systems which allow these calamities. Nordan, despite accusations of relegating Emmett Till's fictionalized lynching to the margins of his story, presents the South's dark racial underbelly warts and all, and yet he handles his subject with such sensitivity that surely his oblique approach and refusal to appropriate the murdered boy's voice fall under the umbrella of southern courtesy and its consideration of others' (or the Others') feelings. My aim here is less to argue that evasive rhetorical practices prove either good or bad for its practitioners, its listeners, and its art than to show the myriad ways this convention operates in these texts. The result of this literature and the rhetorical evasions and oblique approaches discussed in this chapter reflects a regional tendency toward paradox which, as C. Hugh Holman explains in *The Roots of Southern Writing*, is a defining component of southern culture.

## Chapter Two: Allen Tate

Allen Tate's poetry and literary/cultural criticism often overshadow his single novel, *The Fathers*, which relates the story of the Buchan family's experiences prior to and during the Civil War and provides an important look at the South's changing landscape in both the 1860's and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This chapter explores *The*

*Fathers'* antebellum community framework which demands honor and courtesy to such an extent that delicate or explosive subject matter is routinely evaded, ignored, distanced, or camouflaged in a manner explicitly linked with southern and agrarian social norms.

As Scott Romine explains,

Allen Tate structures *The Fathers* around a provocative question that assumes the fundamentally negative content of social reality: "is not civilization the agreement, slowly arrived at, to let the abyss alone?" In appropriating Tate's idea of the social negative, I mean to suggest that community is enabled by practices of avoidance, deferral, and evasion; in a certain sense, as Tate implies, community relies not on what is there so much as what is, by tacit agreement, not there. (3)

What is not there in *The Fathers* is explicit condemnation of George Posey's murder of the mulatto slave Yellow Jim for his supposed rape of George's sister. In addition, though Tate attacks Major Buchan's plantation world for its economic basis in chattel slavery, this system escapes indictment for its racist social structure. Though the novel attempts to broach racial inequities, its ending laments the loss of the two men who have profited from the captivity of fellow human beings to a far greater extent than it critiques the systems which allowed their prosperity.

Patriarch Major Buchan exhibits a particularly pronounced oblique approach to sensitive matters. His eminently civilized world leaves no place for personal sentiment, the expression of which challenges a rigid social framework fixated on individual public standing. In this chapter, I show how indirection in verbal communication proves both a blessing and a curse, a way of caring for the feelings of others and ignoring any opposition to the southern way of life, as exemplified by the romanticized but fatally

flawed Major Buchan. Specifically, I show how the fabric of *The Fathers'* antebellum South calls for complicit evasion of the "unapproachable." Major Buchan's evasions appear all the more pronounced in contrast to George Posey's "shocking" disregard for social niceties, while Posey's unconventionally frank, direct approach exposes the restrictive limits of Pleasant Hill's genteel social order.

Tate's novel reflects his personal acquaintance with the antebellum South's rhetorical rules, which include treading lightly on ticklish issues to preserve appearances. A southerner struggling with issues of personal and regional identity, Tate exhibits both an attachment to and rejection of the propriety of southern manners and morays. Critical and biographical evidence indicates that Tate evaded difficult subjects in his personal life as well as his only novel and remained a staunch segregationist until his death.

In addition, Tate's fiction avoids direct comment on touchy issues by filtering them through gothic elements which remove the reader from the most troubling subjects. The novel shifts from its opening realistic tone to an indeterminate reality where the incendiary topics of class difference, race, miscegenation, and sexual violence filter through a gothic lens. Tate's gothicism obliquely criticizes slavery, leaving the reader to fill in the ambiguous spaces resulting from the gothic's nonrealistic stance. However, when viewed in conjunction with Tate's nonfiction, which reflects strong personal feelings of racial superiority, *The Fathers'* strangely incongruous gothic finale falls short of totally condemning human bondage.

### Chapter Three: Tennessee Williams

In a 1969 interview, Tennessee Williams explained, “I always try to write obliquely... I am not a direct writer; I am always an oblique writer, if I can be; I want to be allusive” (qtd. in Waeger 129). Scholars have attributed his oblique style to two factors. First, Williams made the above remark about his concept of plastic theater, which relies heavily on non-diagetic devices, including sound, lighting, flexible sets, screens, projections and pantomime. Plastic theater, he believed, could present the ambiguities of truth *more* realistically than straightforward replication. This approach recognizes the futility of attempting realistic mimesis of life through art. Secondly, although Williams began his career in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when homosexuality was largely condemned, he has broached issues of sexual orientation allusively in early texts and more directly in later ones.

Both plastic theater and issues of sexual orientation fall short of fully elucidating Williams’ unique dramaturgy, what he reveals and what he chooses to hide or suggest. I argue that Williams’ oblique style is not only a product of culturally silenced dialogue about homosexuality and attempts at a new form of theater, but also the result of the author’s southern upbringing and his familiarity with regionally established codes of rhetorical evasion. Rather than challenge the importance of queer studies and plastic theater in Williams’ work, the overlay of a regional lens informs both these approaches in valuable ways, showing how homosexuality has been perceived in the South and how Williams, like Tate and Nordan, employs nonrealistic devices which straddle the line between truth and fiction, overt comment and oblique insinuation.

This chapter first examines Williams' early biography and establishes how young Tom internalized the South's dictum, imparted to him by his mother, that etiquette dominate social interaction. These rules profoundly influenced Williams' personal relationships and his texts, leading to a moral clash where Williams alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, embraces and renounces the manners learned in his youth. I then closely examine the specifically rhetorical and dialogic nature of Williams' oblique style in the characters of his early texts, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947).

For Williams, the South of his childhood provided a backdrop for his early and best known plays. The works discussed here are perhaps the "most southern" of his texts and thus provide cogent examples of the culturally imperative evasive discourse discussed in Chapter One. In these texts, Williams' characters exhibit an unwillingness or inability to directly acknowledge the changed social and economic circumstances of the postbellum South or to broach any subject that might shatter their illusions of civility. As critical response to Williams' work has long noted, his southern characters, unable to face reality or talk about the present with certainty, retreat into an idealized past or attempt to reestablish the past as present, refusing to comment candidly on the crises at hand. The inability to cope with a changing landscape, one which devalued the genteel and chivalrous southern ideal, provides one of the primary foundations for rhetorical evasion in postbellum southern writing and particularly for Williams' anachronistic characters. Further, dramatic tension evolves specifically from the conflict of characters'

engagement with, and transgression of, the South's conversational customs which dictate attention to appearance over substance.

*The Glass Menagerie's* Amanda Wingfield and *A Streetcar Named Desire's* Blanche Dubois struggle to navigate worlds which have largely left their fashion of manners and etiquette behind. However, unlike Amanda who rarely lets down the genteel mask of the belle, Blanche engages in frank discussion to a greater degree. Her situation forces conversation with Stanley which vacillates between coy flirtations and forthright discussions. Both Amanda and Blanche prove unsuccessful in their attempts to carve a place for old ways in a new world. Yet at the end of both texts, despite their defeats, the women ultimately emerge with a sort of victorious dignity; they face the difficult truth with good manners even when inevitably doomed.

The evasive and evolving nature of Williams' characters thus established, I then delineate how, like his characters, Williams' transgression of regional codes of silence and evasion changes over time. Williams increasingly depicts homosexuality and other more controversial subjects (most notably heterosexual sex and profanity) overtly the further he progresses in his life and career. Interestingly, as his work becomes more explicit, his staging becomes more evasive, relying more heavily on plastic theater's ambiguities. In a sense, as the work becomes more overt in one way it must become more oblique in the other. Although Williams' texts move from circuitous or veiled presentation of taboo or socially sensitive issues, his *Memoirs* and interviews indicate he strove simultaneously for both sensitivity and truth. This conflict results in a see-saw effect between explicit dialogue and oblique, non-diegetic devices; as the former

increases the later must as well to preserve Williams' sense of himself as both sensitive and truthful. The clash of ambiguity, which often connotes a hidden truth, and reality reflects what I see as two important themes in Williams' style: first, that the ambiguities of plastic theater provide a more accurate depiction of reality than might otherwise be accessible, and second, that the tension between ambiguity and reality creates one of the defining merits of Williams' drama. In both plays, illusion is preferable to reality and yet, paradoxically, may also supply the means by which to access reality while retaining one's good southern reputation. As Williams said of truthfulness, "There are two kinds: honesty with taste, and honesty without it," and the tug-of-war between these two modes was never fully resolved in Williams' lifetime (*Memoirs* 243). While Williams and his characters often evade the truth for personal or socially prescribed reasons, they also use illusion to construct spaces where reality may be confronted. In other words, if ugly or socially prohibited realities are part of the equation, illusion and obliquity are the ways to deal with it. Some examples of this practice end badly, such as Blanche's inability to operate in a modern world, and some result in artistic richness, such as Williams' use of plastic theater.

#### Chapter Four: Lewis Nordan

Lewis Nordan's novel *Wolf Whistle* tells the story of young Emmett Till's murder for whistling at a white woman in 1955 Mississippi. Nordan grew up in the area, haunted by how his "white trash" neighbors could have committed the crime and escaped justice with the white townspeople's endorsement. His experience compelled him to

controversially fictionalize the historically significant lynching through black humor and magical realism, and as a result, the narrative is peculiar in that it largely omits the murdered boy's voice.<sup>1</sup> I argue that, as a white author, Nordan sympathetically utilizes modes of indirect rhetorical expression that permeate southern discourse in an attempt to reconcile white perspective with black voice, to underscore the magnitude of Emmett Till's experience, and to delve into the depths of racial violence in pre-civil rights America.

The absence of Till's voice does not imply Nordan's disregard for the importance of racial violence. Much to the contrary, this chapter argues that Nordan's unique novel foregrounds the tragic spirit of Emmett Till and the cultural implications of his murder. This allows Nordan to approach admittedly toxic material without compounding the transgressions against Till by misappropriating his voice. The white author's telling of a murdered black boy's story through devices of indirection, those which examine the incident through multiple perspectives to the exclusion of a realistic and straightforward recreation of events,<sup>2</sup> provides a crucial distance between author, reader, and subject which allows for earnest exploration of undeniable tragedy.

Nordan employs several strategic devices in an attempt to avoid irreverence in telling a story he feels does not belong to him. First, humor is often used as a defense

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<sup>1</sup> His sparse dialogue is extremely limited and mostly monosyllabic, although Chapter 9 contains postmortem singing, a device I argue later does not constitute voice per se.

<sup>2</sup> In Chapters Three I argue the divorce from reality is accomplished by Tate's use of gothic elements in "The Abyss" section of *The Fathers*. Similarly, in Chapter Four I discuss Williams' use of "plastic theater" which operates much the same way. Each of these three authors employs non-realistic devices which allow for heightened reader engagement, subjectivity, and speculation.

mechanism, which does not preclude earnest consideration of the material, but - paradoxically - renders it more accessible and allows for deliberate contemplation of what might otherwise have gone unexamined. The same may be said of magical realism, the artificiality of which ironically exempts Nordan from accusations of inadequately portraying Emmett Till's authentic experience and opens "space for interactions of diversity" (Zamora and Faris 3). In addition, the musicality and legacy of the blues prevalent in Nordan's text provide another method for accessing Till's story obliquely, telling a tragic story through exquisitely haunting notes. Finally, Nordan's self-acknowledged and purposeful blurring of the lines between characters, narrator, and reader, aptly illustrates narratologist Gerard Genette's theory of pseudo-diegesis,<sup>3</sup> in which a narrator or character tells another's story as his own, facilitating multiple perspectives and drawing the reader closer to Bobo's experience through its multidimensional representation. Although *Wolf Whistle* lacks any substantive presentation of Bobo's voice, like the echo of Stevens' blackbird just after whistling, the innuendo of Bobo's whistle hovers through the entire novel.

For Allen Tate, Tennessee Williams, and Lewis Nordan, the southern landscapes of their texts provide an appropriate backdrop for the oblique, evasive, and roundabout dialogue. Each of the authors' biographical particulars and his claims about the social, political or aesthetic purposes and intentions of the text, illuminate the objectives and

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<sup>3</sup> Gerard Genette, in *Narrative Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980) pp.237-243, argues that pseudo-diegesis defocalizes the subject through the filter of memory and relates the story through the perspective of another character. By employing the memories and multiple points of view, Nordan destabilizes the narrative, blurring the role of narrator and exacting participation from the reader. However, Bobo himself becomes a part of the community through his murder and as such participates in the telling of his own

methodologies behind rhetorically evasive art. The plantation South's inherent patriarchy and racial subjugation complicate what Tate, whose family lauded their Virginia Tidewater ties and provide the historical example for *The Fathers'* plantation, feels he may express about race and gender. The novel's gothic conventions hint at a mystery surrounding chattel slavery, miscegenation, and sexual violence that biographical evidence indicates Tate shied from. Williams' boyhood as the effeminate grandson of a preacher in the homophobic South leads him to reflect the suicide of Blanche Dubois' young gay husband through plastic theater's wild swing of party lights, cracking gunshot, and polka. Nordan's experience as a poor white teen faced with extraordinary racial tragedy perpetuated by his community provides *Wolf Whistle's* subject. Magical Realism reflects what he explains as a need to explore his own past without fear of trampling its intersection with Emmett Till's or compounding the injury by presuming his ability authentically replicate Till's voice from a white perspective.

As Daniel Singal suggests, Allen Tate possessed a "divided mind" about his alliances to romanticism and modernism. As the following chapters show, internal and psychological divisions plagued Tate, Williams, and Nordan and their works reflect the personal struggles of each man as simultaneous artist, human being, and southerner. Their characters exhibit the sort of oblique rhetorical practices understood or appreciated only by members of their own communities. But for their readers, gothicism, plastic theater, and magical realism distance them from the text and its subject. The oblique story.

methodologies utilized by these authors hint toward problems of race, gender and homosexuality and ask readers to actively construct what is not explicitly presented. In this way, any reader, northern or southern, familiar with traditions of evasive rhetorical practices in the South or not, may participate in composing part of the text. In a sense, they open these texts toward what may be an ultimate reader response. For Tate, Williams, and Nordan, these devices mediate between what might be described as their own historically constrained consciences, perhaps their ultimate imagined readers and critics, and their difficult subjects. Their creative, artistic selves must battle the southern selves of their upbringings and the imagined reactions of their southern communities and families. This combat ultimately results in paradox, moral confusion, and artistic richness.

Finally, use of the generic devices discussed may open discussion about the nature of fantastical or non-realistic literary devices or genres and their use by southern authors. Why, for example, is the gothic tied so strongly with southern literature? Why do southern authors reflect magical realism in their texts perhaps to a greater extent than authors from other American regions? Why does Tennessee Williams pointedly utilize extra-diagetic devices to the extent that he creates a new non-realistic form of theater? While this study cannot answer these questions to any great extent, I hope the recognition of rhetorical evasion as a regional practice shaped by the historical and cultural narrative practices of the South begins to offer new ways of looking at both real-life discursive norms and the fictional generic conventions utilized by southern writers.

## CHAPTER I

### “THE EMPEROR’S NEW CLOTHES”:

#### THE HISTORY AND ORIGINS OF RHETORICAL EVASION

Fred Hobson’s *Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* argues for a widespread compulsion among southerners to either justify or condemn southern culture. Hobson astutely recognizes the uniquely self-conscious South’s impulse to explain itself as so inextricably tied to place that, “explaining the South is almost a regional characteristic in itself” (9). He maintains,

The Southerner, more than other Americans, has felt he *had* something to explain, to justify, to defend, or to affirm. If apologist for the Southern way, he has felt driven to answer the accusations and misstatements of outsiders and to combat the image of a benighted and savage South. If native critic he has often been preoccupied with Southern racial sin and guilt, with the burden of the Southern past - and frustrated by the closed nature of Southern society itself, by that quality which suppressed dissent and adverse comment. (3-4)

This study concerns the flip side of the rage to explain, what Hobson describes as the qualities which have suppressed dissent and adverse comment. Whether comparing himself to the English aristocracy, the victorious Union, or the economically prosperous and intellectual North, the converse of the southern man’s rage to explain has been the impulse to ignore or evade anything which might reflect poorly on himself, his homeland, or his neighbors in a society focused on public appearance.

However, between justification and condemnation lies an indirect or oblique approach in relating not only those subjects which reflect badly on the southerner or his region, but other taboo or difficult topics. I argue that this tendency toward indirection is a regional characteristic much like Hobson's rage to explain, and that the warring impulses toward speech and silence arise from the same set of historical and cultural circumstances. In the South, the importance of telling versus not telling is complicated by a third option of *appearing* not to tell, which arises in part from a preoccupation with public reputation, historical insecurity and defensiveness, and, in some cases, the writer or speaker's inconsistent or conflicted feelings about his subject. However, a crucial point these evasions and indirect approaches offer is that sometimes they are not really evasions at all but sub-textual codes of which both speaker and audience are often aware. It is when the rhetorical situation consists of either a speaker or an audience unaware of such codes or unwilling to participate in them that the exchange may deteriorate into misunderstanding, embarrassment, or violence. In undertaking a substantive analysis of Tate, Williams, and Nordan's texts, investigating the general tendency of southerners to evade or displace troublesome topics, and the ways they do so, helps to explain why these authors, whether apologists, critics or both, approach their subject matter obliquely.

A preoccupation with public estimation and gentlemanly appearance in the South has often led to rhetorical practices which ease social interaction. One such habit has been not speaking directly of troubling subjects. If, as Romine argues, communities cohere through normative behaviors and exist only in a negative sense, that is, "insofar as they define prohibitions," a principal restriction for members of southern communities

has been not to question the status quo and thus undermine the illusion of cohesiveness

(2). W.J. Cash explains,

Criticism of any sort at all was not impossible, surely, but an enterprise for bold and excitement-loving spirits alone. If it touched on any social sore point, on anything which the commonality or their prompters, the planters, counted dear - and there were few things that did not fall under this description - the critic stood an excellent chance of being mobbed... in short, the South was en route to the savage ideal: to that ideal whereunder dissent and variety are completely suppressed and men become, in all their attitudes, professions, and actions, virtual replicas of one another. (90-1)

Pointing out inconsistencies and prejudices interfered with the South's notion of itself as equitable and unified and, thus, conversation routinely sidestepped those issues which might shed a harsh light on the South's desired ideal image.

This chapter offers a look at historical and literary texts which exemplify southern rhetorical evasions and indirection. Class distinctions, manners, hospitality, honor, racial tensions, slavery, miscegenation, sexuality, gender roles, and Civil War defeat all fall under an umbrella of generally sensitive subjects for white male southerners, writers and characters, past and present. While each of these factors does not apply directly to all of the authors discussed in subsequent chapters, all shed light on one or more of the texts in this study, and collectively they illuminate a customary southern tendency to avoid or displace uncomfortable matters which informs later chapters about individual white, male southern writers and texts.

The Veil and the Mask

The stifling of authentic female and African-American voices has long been

explored by scholars and critics. The silencing of minorities and women in the American South and elsewhere has been thoroughly explored by scholars; however, white southern men have met with somewhat similar restriction in what Hobson rightly refers to as “closed” southern society. Likewise, they have devised somewhat subversive strategies for voicing their opinions while retaining their public reputations, honor, livelihoods, and even lives in the violence-prone South. In this sense, for white men, difficult matters have often demanded an indirect or obfuscated approach.

In the South, white women attempted to live up to the exalted image of the southern lady, and the southern belle was often muzzled under the restrictions of gender propriety. Authors like Anne Firor Scott and Anne Goodwyn-Jones have discussed at length the voiceless position of white women in the South both before and after the Civil War. Ritchie Watson says of antebellum author Caroline Lee Hentz, “The conflicts presented in Hertz’s narrative thus indirectly raise objections to the plight of women and of the poor in southern society ... though Hentz could never bring herself to criticize directly and openly the plantation patriarchy” (98-99). To conform to the mandate that they be decorative, skilled conversationalists, but never rude enough to criticize or tackle “masculine” topics, women created veiled and indirect means of telling their stories in ways that avoided overt disparagement; “Women writers occasionally and obliquely betrayed their unease about the role that the southern lady was supposed to play in plantation society, but their role was never one of outright rebellion” (Watson 89). As Scott puts it, they were “a creature[s] of tact;” “Open complaint about their lot was not the custom among southern ladies; yet their contented acceptance of the home as the

‘sphere to which God had appointed them’ was sometimes more apparent than real” (4, 46). Banished from the public sphere, 19<sup>th</sup> Century women resorted to private forums like diaries and letters or exerted influence over their male family members in an effort to express their voices via proxy. While women have been silenced to some extent almost universally by patriarchal systems, in the American South conflation of the southern lady and the image of the South itself<sup>4</sup> accounts in part for the region’s hypersensitivity about matters of gender.

Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* provides some useful examples of southern women’s reluctance to speak frankly. Rhett Butler recognizes a kindred soul in Scarlett O’Hara who, atypically of the southern lady, speaks her mind. He dislikes southern ladies “because they never say what they think” (120). Scarlett “doesn’t hold herself in like some girls do; when she is mad she tells you about it,” much to the chagrin of her well-bred, Savannah-born mother (11). Mitchell makes a geographical distinction here between the frank Georgia frontier woman who has “few reticences,” and is *unlike* those from Savannah (56). Scarlett’s straightforwardness, although depicted as admirable, clearly represents a departure from the norm where, “above all, you never said what you really thought about anything, any more than they [women] said what they really thought” (176). In contrast, “Southerners in the novel believe northern women to be *direct in speech*, assertive, rich, and unlucky in love” (Goodwyn-Jones 342, my emphasis). Mitchell exemplifies Yankee directness in the character of Mr. Calvert’s second wife;

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<sup>4</sup> See Goodwyn-Jones’ *Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936*, W.J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South*, and John C. Ruoff’s *Southern Womanhood, 1865-1920: An Intellectual and Cultural Study*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1976.

Mrs. Calvert seemed ready to weep. She had somehow made a blunder. She was always blundering. She just couldn't understand Southerners, for all that she had lived in Georgia twenty years. She never knew *what not to say* to her stepchildren and, no matter what she said or did, they were always so exquisitely polite to her. (493, my emphasis)

Like the southern women of her novel, Mitchell explains, "I was brought up to consider it better to commit murder than to be rude" (Goodwyn-Jones 328). Clearly, the typical southern lady has been depicted as less inclined to frankness than her northern counterpart.

Mitchell and her heroine are only a small sampling of the predominant voicelessness of women in the South and their attempts to transcend it, often through evasive and indirect rhetoric. Scott explains how in the southern "women's clubs" which sprang up in large number from 1884-1887, "These well-bred southern ladies were fearless in choosing subjects for discussion," but "since most of the reporting of the club activities took place in the woman's pages of newspapers or in their own publications, perhaps many men simply did not know, and the women wisely did not tell them, what was going on" (159-60). Despite women's postbellum entry into the public domains of education, labor, and politics, the image of the deferential belle continued, and continues, to haunt southern women. Dorothy Allison has spoken extensively in her nonfiction about the necessity to keep quiet about both her lesbianism and abusive childhood. The

seven southern women writers<sup>5</sup> in Goodwyn-Jones' study "find themselves, at one point, 'strip[ing southern life] of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it' and, at others, carefully draping the figures they create. By the same token, the masks they wear as authors, the personae they create, half reveal and half disguise the truth within their fictions" (362). As these examples suggest, southern women have long suffered under the muzzle of good manners, leading to new strategies within the bounds of proper etiquette or purposeful tests of the tension between truth and propriety.

In addition to gender, race has traditionally played an important part in the candidness of southern speakers. The discourse of black speakers and writers has often expressed both a superficial public message as well as a more significant private one. During the years leading up to the Civil War, slaves used spirituals and work songs to guide those on the Underground Railroad to freedom or obliquely express discontent. As Al Young explains, "these now-classic Negro spirituals spoke at one level of Jesus and heaven and chariots and angels, they also told stories and expressed other sentiments beyond the surface meaning of their texts" (6). For example, Frederick Douglass wrote in his autobiographies that those who "hear the music as evidence that the slaves are happy with their station in life miss the slave songs' deeper, troubled moanings and meanings" (Gates Jr. and McKay, 4). The mask has also long served as a metaphor for the public face of racial performance. Perhaps the most recognizable example, Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask," shows the grinning and lying countenance

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<sup>5</sup> Augusta Jane Evans, Grace King, Kate Chopin, Mary Johnston, Ellen Glasgow, Frances Newman, and Margaret Mitchell.

adopted out of necessity by African Americans privately outraged or aggrieved by their disenfranchised status. W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness also reflects the inner/outer or masked/unmasked divide between the private and public behaviors and language of black Americans. Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifyin(g) Monkey* labels the indirect and figurative language practiced by African Americans as signifyin(g) and traces the practice to the trickster figure in African folklore. Anthropologist Roger D. Abrahams identifies signifyin(g) as "the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point" and arrive at "direction through indirection" (qtd. in Gates 75). Slaves and their descendants employed this practice to obliquely express ideas which would have been ill received by slave owners, supporters of segregation, and a racially intolerant public.

Subversive oblique discourse by African Americans trying to survive slavery and its aftermath has surfaced in both literature and daily life. Charles Chesnut's tales from *The Conjure Woman* (1899) show the type of signifyin(g) black writers often used to express their opinions and desires indirectly. For example, in "The Goophered Grapevine," first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1887, the white, upper-class Yankee narrator relates a story told to him by ex-slave Uncle Julius. When the narrator wants to purchase the old plantation on which Uncle Julius lives, the old man tells him the grapevines are cursed or "goophered." He explains,

I found, when I bought the vineyard, that Uncle Julius had occupied a cabin on the place for many years, and derived a respectable revenue from the neglected grapevines. This, doubtless, accounted for his advice to me not to buy the vineyard, though whether it inspired the goopher story I am unable to state. I

believe, however, that the wages I pay him for his services are more than an equivalent for anything he lost by the sale of the vineyard. (128)  
The narrator claims, with condescending paternalism, awareness of Uncle Julius's motives and recognizes his signifyin(g) for what it is, Julius' performance of expected submissiveness and harmless trickery. In this sense, Julius ultimately fails in his attempts to create the illusion of the grapevines as haunted. However, his efforts to stop the process clearly show the mask African Americans adopted during Reconstruction when unable to express themselves directly.

The same happened in southern communities between Reconstruction and the Civil Rights movement, and in some cases beyond, in the ways blacks addressed whites. Ayers explains, "White rituals of black naming conveyed various shades of deference, condescension, affection, and respect, tried to maintain the illusion of personal relationships where none existed. Blacks called white men they did not know 'mister', 'cap'n,' or 'boss'" (132). It is safe to assume, as Ayers argues, that these names were used defensively rather than sincerely. Both "The Goophered Grapevine" and the appellations used by African Americans in addressing whites show the manner in which blacks utilized indirect, evasive, or masked discourse to obliquely convey their true thoughts.

While signifyin(g) was often used successfully as a coded means of communication in daily life, black writers were regularly silenced on the southern literary front. Slave narratives, some of the earliest forms of African American writing published in the United States, were routinely excluded from southern bookshelves or examined solely for the purpose of pointing out supposed untruths and inconsistencies with the

image the South desired to maintain of itself. As for white southern writers' feelings about their African American counterparts, Susan V. Donaldson argues,

From John Pendleton Kennedy to George Frederick Homes, white southern men of letters were quick to deplore abolitionist agitation in general and to attack Harriet Beecher Stowe in particular, but they remained stubbornly, fiercely silent on the subject of slave narratives - except perhaps to join in the chorus of accusations accusing their writers of being frauds. Slave narratives might have been referred to obliquely as yet another example of what Kennedy called "abolitionist mischief," but they were never acknowledged as literary works by white southern commentators and certainly never claimed as *southern* literature. (499)

Thus, the question of how black authors fit into the southern literary canon proved sensitive enough for white male authors to pretend to ignore.

### The Southern Man and Class

In addition to the well-established silencing of women and minorities in the South, the southern white male has also found himself under a self-imposed imperative to avoid certain troubling subjects, though it arises from different sets of circumstances than those faced by the disenfranchised. Part of my object in this study is to show the ways white southern men have been constricted in what they say and how they say it. Class provides one important marker influencing this performance.

Debate over the cultural homogeneity of white southerners persists, particularly along socioeconomic lines. Some have argued that the landed gentry dictated social boundaries from the earliest record of the American South to well beyond the Civil War. Historian David Hackett Fisher notes, "In 1773, a clear-sighted northern visitor to

Virginia, Phillip Fithian, observed that ‘the people of fortune ... are the pattern of all behavior here’” (224). Tate also subscribed to this top down view, noting “The South once had aristocratic rule; the planter class was about one fifth of the population; but the majority followed its lead” (“Profession” 519). Fellow Agrarian Stark Young acknowledged the same, stating,

It is not true, however, as many have said, that the higher class completely lost, along with other things, their social manners and customs. It is true, even at this day in the South, that the manners and customs of the South do not wholly arise from the bottom mass; they have come from the top downward. It is true that our traditional Southern characteristics derive from the landed class. (“Not in Memoriam,” 337)

Critic Eugene Genovese argues that the conservative South draws its values not from the yeomanry or “cracker culture” but “decisively from the gentry and its claims to natural aristocracy” (80). As Fisher explains, the Virginia gentleman’s code dictated, “Most of all, a gentleman treated others decently and was true to his own convictions. He was required to lead others of a lower rank, and they were expected to follow his high example” (413). Certainly *noblesse oblige* informed upper class behavior and offered a gentlemanly model, and the idealization of the southern gentleman and lady has often influenced cultural practices in every socioeconomic sector.

But adoption of upper-class values and social mores was not, and is not now, absolute. Critics have noted that behavior in the backwoods and on the southern frontier differed greatly from that of the Virginia tidewater elite. In *The Frontier Roots of American Realism*, Gretchen Martin traces this debate, noting, “several historians, such

as David Hackett Fischer, Steven Hahn, Samuel Hyde, Jr., James Webb and others have recently demonstrated, rural communities maintained social norms, ideals of honor, justice, gender, and liberty that were significantly distinct from town and planter gentility” (4). Fisher notes, “The backsettlers were as sensitive to questions of honor as the gentlemen of Virginia - but not in precisely the same way. In the backcountry, honor had very little to do with gentility” (764). Thus, significant differences existed between the behaviors of upper and lower class whites in different parts of the South.

For the purposes of this study, I take both these points of view as significant. In each distinct circumstance, the tendency of white southern men to either reflect or reject aristocratic values depends on their own class status and that of their intended audience. However, the tendency to displace touchy subjects appears to cross class boundaries as both upper and lower class men are concerned with notions of honor. While the individual implications for the authors in this study are examined in later chapters, suffice it to say that my answer to whether or not social norms are dictated by the upper classes is a definite “sometimes.” Certainly it did for Tate and Williams, both of whom identified with their patrician Virginia ancestry and whose texts simultaneously lament the loss of the romantic South while revealing its flaws, albeit obliquely. Nordan’s self-proclaimed “white trash” status also informs his storytelling but arises less from an imitation of upper class behavior than an autobiographical impulse to reconcile his childhood position as part of a racist community with a violent past and honor the legacy of Emmett Till without misguidedly assuming he may speak for him. Thus, narrative indirection is not a singularly aristocratic notion but instead one which operates in

different ways in different rhetorical contexts, which are in turn informed by the class of the speaker and audience.

### The Invulnerable Veneer

Historical examples of gentlemanly behavior, particularly *what not to say*, have long influenced young men in the South. Figures held up as exemplars of southern manhood traditionally admitted no faults. Martin argues that 19<sup>th</sup> Century backcountry woodsmen of Scotch-Irish descent practiced “disclosure,” or the revelation of foolish or unmanly behavior.<sup>6</sup> Her analysis presupposes a reticence or *nondisclosure* on the part of the largely English settlers who became Virginia’s tidewater elite. Wyatt-Brown explains that nondisclosure was common for southern men from childhood; “After ‘clothing’<sup>7</sup>, the child learned not to confess and be forgiven but to avoid detection and humiliation” and “the Southern boy could not easily confess a failure to his father” (150, 155). Southern men were reluctant to show weakness and instead projected an invulnerable public ethos. For example, when Andrew Jackson was shot near the heart he downplayed the incident by replying, “I believe he has pinked me a little” (Watson 16). Even with a near fatal war wound, Jackson exhibited a veneer of masculine invincibility.

Southerners were often depicted with self-imposed blinders when it came to their own shortcomings. Authors used parody and humor to describe faults, both of which act as devices to soften overt criticism.<sup>8</sup> Ayers says of one southern author,

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<sup>6</sup> For a female example see my earlier discussion of Scarlett O’Hara’s tendency toward her father’s “frank” Irish blood as opposed to her mother’s Savannah, Georgia discretion.

<sup>7</sup> The time when young boys began to wear trousers rather than gowns.

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter Four, “‘Not My Story to Tell’: The Elusive Black Voice in Lewis Nordan’s *Wolf Whistle*” for a complete discussion of humor’s function as an oblique method of critique.

Corra Harris, writing near the apogee of the Confederate statue craze, offered a wry parody of the efforts of her fictional Ruckersville, Georgia. “The truth was, the figure of the soldier on the pedestal was of extremely short stature. This was due to the fact that the Daughters of the Confederacy, who had erected the monument, had not been able to afford the price demanded, and the skinflint sculptor who shortened the legs of the hero to make up the difference. It was a sacred defect about which Ruckersville *was so sensitive that it was never mentioned.*” (335, my emphasis)

Harris acknowledges the ticklishness of the community about its defects, and by extension the South’s defects, and herself practices the oblique critique of parody when approaching them. In a similar acknowledgment of southern stoicism in the face of embarrassing circumstances, Henry James commented that Lee’s statue in Richmond seemed stranded in incongruous surroundings; “Lee, his likeness sculpted in Paris, seemed to stare off into the distance, studiously ignoring his crass setting” (393). James’ words here echo those in *The Fathers* which describe the overnight appearance of Susan Posey’s ghostly white hair; “What could Doctor Cartwright have made of Susan’s white hair? Well, he was a Virginia gentleman and he would have ignored it” (272). The gentleman, it seems, knew when to feign blindness to anything which would upset the ideal imposed on his surroundings.

While history demanded that southern men not show their weaknesses, it also required that others overlook them. Wyatt-Brown argues that southern reticence to speak publicly of faults is based in Stoic-humanist tradition;

Honor as expressed in gentility demanded family reticence, not to conceal anyone’s wrong-doing, but to shield honor itself... Jefferson himself would never have requested a public confession [of his nephew’s alleged liaison with Sally

Hemmings]... the rules of gentility forbade the president from ever mentioning the business... Deathbed contrition occasionally led to breaches of the taboo against personal, public confession. (310-11)

Wyatt-Brown offers several other examples as well. In the case of Jackson's companion Colonel Thomas Hart Benton and his quadroon mistress, Jackson was so careful about public exposure that "even his most recent biographers have not mentioned the liaison;" similarly, when a white man left his estate to his slave mistress, "what was most galling to survivors about these incidents was not just the loss of estate that they entailed but also the exposure to public criticism." In the case of white serving girl Polly Lane who became pregnant by a slave, "she denied pregnancy, and the [white male] jury, true to racial custom, ignored the evidence of her swollen belly" (Wyatt-Brown 311-317). When Robert E. Lee returned from a two year absence and did not recognize his son, the son was "'shocked and humiliated'...but quickly added, 'I have no doubt that he was at once informed of the mistake and made ample amends to me'" (Wyatt-Brown 107). Lee's son no doubt recognized calling attention to his father's faults as unsuitable behavior for a southern gentleman, least of all the son of the Confederacy's ultimate hero. These examples show how the faults of others, particularly those with a kinship bond, were routinely omitted from public discussion to preserve individual and family honor.

The Hospitality of Provincialism

Hospitality comprised an important part of honorable character in southern life<sup>9</sup>. Tate notes, “the typical Southern conversation is not going anywhere; it is not about anything. It is about the people who are talking, even if they never refer to themselves, which they usually don’t, since conversation is only an expression of manners, the purpose of which is to make everybody happy” (“Southern Mode” 583-84). The idea of one’s good reputation among fellows was so important that not appearing rude or inhospitable sometimes trumped veracity. Sociologist/ Humorist John Shelton Reed relates an incident when he declined a male flight attendant’s romantic advances, saying, “I didn’t want to be rude so I made up a [phone] number” (“Kicking Back” 8). Stark Young argues that what may be construed as insincerity is intended to exhibit a larger courtesy.

It is comically true that you may dislike meeting X on Monday, but you say, nevertheless, I’m glad to see you. This declaration may not be true to what you feel toward X on that particular day, but it is true to your feelings for him by the year, feelings that would have been falsified on Monday that you were glad to see him; you are, therefore, in X’s case, insincere by the moment but sincere by the year; only self-centered boors could think otherwise. (346)

Young’s big-picture take on conversational etiquette again indicates the performative nature of southern rhetoric. Making another happy in one’s company demanded that capricious and fleeting emotions be subsumed under the larger umbrella of courtesy.

Young further argues,

The discussion of manners, affability, friendliness turns on the salubrity of

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<sup>9</sup> I broadly define hospitality here as a cordial and generous disposition toward guests, whether sincere or not.

people's living close together. An at-home-ness among others is implied; and a lack of suspicion-the most vulgar and humiliating of traits, I was taught by my elders-with regard to others and their intentions-it was better a thousand times, they said, to be deceived than to be common; a taste for the approval of others - how Southern! - derived from politeness, friendliness, and vanity; the belief that one of most natural impulses is the wish that the other person may be happy in our company. (345)

To do otherwise would reflect badly on the honor of the speaker, whose goal was to see his conversation was courteous in the eyes of others and thus uphold their good opinion of him.

Young's examples explain why hospitality has been a primary concern in the South. The relative geographical isolation and rural composition of the South provides some answers as to why "good" behavior was and is acutely important there. In a sense, provincialism magnifies the importance of manners in a closed community. Romine argues that community is at best a "simulated consensus" and "coheres by means of norms, codes, and manners that produce a simulated, or at least symbolically constituted, social reality" and suggests that what the community collectively agrees to avoid helps to define it (3). One practice designed to reflect the idea of community as cohesive is its active construction of discursive norms. To be "rude" or direct or say something that might offend was not as significant in a transitory, impersonal, urban environment as in an agrarian setting, a closed and finite microcosm of people interacting over and over again which bred an intimacy the industrialized and migratory north lacked. To insult someone you would not see day after day was easier and had substantially less effect than insulting someone you would see regularly in the course of everyday living, or someone excluded from the subsistence collective of the extended neighborhoods. The anonymity

provided by large cities has traditionally been unavailable in the small southern town.

Therefore, getting along with one's neighbors, and their opinion of you and your family, carries greater importance in a closed social circle.

### The Influence of Audience

Good conversation has proved an historically important part of gentlemanly behavior in the South;

A pleasant conversation was thought to be an indispensable part of a social existence. A gentleman of Virginia who somehow survived into the twentieth century put it this way: "Salt yo' food, suh, with humor ... season it with wit, and sprinkle it all over with the charm of good-fellowship, but never poison it with the cares of life. It is an insult to yo' digestion, besides bein' suh, a mark of bad breedin.'" (Fisher 353)

Good breeding thus demanded congenial discussion. The "cares of life," presumably serious topics, were to be studiously avoided. When approached, it was with gentlemanly euphemism. In *Social Life in Old Virginia Before the War*, Thomas Nelson Page asserts,

charming bits of masculine gossip were retailed by the older young gentlemen, and delicious tales of early wickedness related, all the more delightful because they were veiled in chaste language phrased not merely to meet the doctrine, *maxima reverentia pueris debetur*, but to meet the higher truth that no gentleman would use foul language. (11).

One could be a rogue as long as the outward appearance of propriety was maintained through *how* the story was told, the specific language chosen.

Sensitivity to audience was particularly important to white men when dealing

with subordinates. As Wyatt-Brown points out, perhaps no attribute was more important to the southern gentleman than honor, which dictated that *noblesse oblige*, reputation and appearance contributed to social status. A nobleman's suitability to rule was determined partially by his proper treatment of lower-class whites. Cash notes,

If the common white was scorned, yet that scorn was so attenuated and softened in its passage down through the universal medium of this manner, struck at last so obliquely upon his ego, that it glanced off harmless. When he frequented public gatherings, what he encountered would seldom be naked hauteur. Rather ... [the gentleman would] patronize him in such a fashion that to his simple eyes he seemed not to be patronized at all but actually deferred to. (41)

The result supposedly allowed for honor in all sectors of the socioeconomic scale.

However, one doubts whether the common man's eyes were, in fact, so simple. As with most inequitable power dynamics, the subtext of authority and servility probably showed. Wyatt-Brown notes that southern men's touchiness over virility<sup>10</sup> "stemmed from deep anxieties about how others, particularly Northerners and Englishmen saw them. Yet the braggadacio, the role-playing, the self-deception, should not be seen as 'gentlemanly masquerade' ... They meant every word" (35). What did matter was the appearance of equality, which preserved the subordinate's individual honor. Cash offers a specific example in the Confederate soldier, noting, "down to the final day at Appomattox his officers knew that the way to get him to execute an order without malingering was to flatter and to jest, never to command too brusquely and forthrightly" (43-4).

Such consideration also helped the poor white distinguish himself from blacks. Reed explains of one group of whites who quit their jobs under a forthright Yankee boss,

their quarrel was not with the work but a perceived lack of respect and therefore an affront to their honor; as one put it, “SOB wants to boss you around like he owns you” (“Kicking Back” 10). Lower-class white’s sensitivity to position comparative to blacks in the South’s social strata relates directly to Nordan’s self-labeled “white trash” version of the lynching of Emmett Till where “cracker” protagonist Solon Gregg seeks to punish the fictional Till for his violation of the social order by whistling at a white woman.

If a gentleman had to watch what he said around men of lower rank, he most certainly practiced self-censure around white women. Knowing what not to say in the presence of a lady was another facet of the southern gentleman’s duty. In *The Plantation Mistress*, Catharine Clinton relates an example of gender interactions on the plantation:

While visiting the home of an ante-bellum southern planter, one visitor was charmed by the grace and hospitality of the mistress. She was warm, gentle, and refined in her manner. He found her a genial hostess and a model of what he expected “the southern lady” to be. Having gained the permission of his host to stroll around the plantation alone during this visit, the stranger one day spied his host’s wife hard at work. The matron was considerably disarrayed; hoop removed from her skirt, she was bent over a salting barrel, up to her elbows in brine. As he was about to approach her, the gentleman realized that he faced a delicate situation. To fail to greet her might seem rude, but to acknowledge her would put the woman in an awkward position. He had essentially caught his hostess behind the scenes, accidentally violating the rules by wandering backstage. Thus he ambled by without a direct glance. This would have been an insult in the normal course of events, but as an acceptable outcome it reveals the absurdity of the myth-ridden South. A guest passes right by the mistress of the plantation, paying her less attention than he would a slave. Exalted imagery and an unwillingness to cope with reality when it conflicted with the ideal created the eccentric world. (16-17)

<sup>10</sup> Here, Wyatt-Brown draws from Kenneth Lyn’s study of regional humor, *Mark Twain and Southwestern*

Faced with the predicament of having caught a southern lady in a compromising situation, the southern gentleman's defense was to ignore it. He could no more acknowledge the tenuous position of the lady than he could treat lower class whites as he would slaves. The appearance of the plantation mistress as the apotheosis of southern womanhood and the sensitivity of the yeomanry and "crackers" to their position in the hierarchy of southern culture relative to African Americans demanded that white men leave both marginalized groups with a façade of dignity.

Again, *Gone with the Wind* exemplifies the rules governing interaction between the sexes. Ashley suspects Scarlett is about to prostitute herself to Rhett but, "The suspicions which tore at him were too terrible to put into words. He did not have the right to insult her by asking her if they were true" (550). While Ashley clings to the gentlemanly mandate that no lady deserves direct accusation of unladylike behavior, in contrast, Rhett specifically undermines the gentlemanly code of silence. He knows Scarlett did not love her husband Charlie, but,

he wouldn't let her pretend to the nice polite sentiments that she should express. What a terrible thing it was to have to do with a man who wasn't a gentleman. A gentleman always appeared to believe a lady even when he knew she was lying. That was Southern chivalry. A gentleman always obeyed the rules and said the correct things and made life easier for a lady. But this man seemed not to care for rules and evidently enjoyed talking of things no one ever talked about. (183)

Rhett's behavior illustrates the importance of discursive rules in the social structure of the South. A gentleman, it seems, should know when to keep his mouth shut around a

lady, and Rhett is no gentleman. But being a gentleman is not always what it is cracked up to be. Arthur Mizener calls *The Fathers* “the novel *Gone with the Wind* ought to have been” and Rhett Butler and George Posey share a kinship in their refusal to bow to community standards (vii). Each is an outsider who disrupts the highly ordered and idealized world of the plantation. While the genteel planters and their families ignore or neglect to question matters of racial inequity and gender bias, Rhett and George plunge right in without regard to social niceties, calling attention to their artificial construction.

Similarly, Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” implicates an entire town for its refusal to confront Miss Emily, presumably because of her gender and former class status. A pharmacist declines to ask why she needs rat poison. A posse forms to spread lye around her stinking basement. “Would you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?” asks one member (126). She has no taxes in Jefferson County because, “Colonel Sartoris invented an involved tale to the effect that Miss Emily's father had loaned money to the town, which the town, as a matter of business, preferred this way of repaying. Only a man of Colonel Sartoris' generation and thought could have invented it, and only a woman could have believed it” (122). Because Miss Emily would be unwilling to accept charity, the entire town, and especially its male members, is complicit in an elaborate deception which allows her to escape the tax law, thwart drug regulations, and ultimately murder her lover, all without prosecution. Though Faulkner points to increasing modernization as the demise of the old code of silence, the idea that a traditional southern gentleman does not broach imprudent subjects with a lady, even to the extent that she gets away with murder, seems clear.

Little known author Ruth McEnry Stuart's "The Unlived Life of Little Mary Ellen,"<sup>11</sup> published in the late 1800's, provides a strikingly similar example. After being jilted at the altar, Mary Ellen mistakenly opens a present with a doll meant for her niece and, in her grief, believes it is her daughter. The entire town performs an elaborate charade, complete with a mock funeral for the doll after it is mauled by a dog, pretending the doll is indeed her child. Ayers points out, "The rest of the town, wanting to avoid embarrassment and striving to keep Mary Ellen quiet, went along with the charade, enacting an elaborate conspiracy to avoid the truth" (352).

In both Faulkner and McEnry Stuart's stories, both mentally unstable women lose their romantic partners, are dead by the story's end, and require "protection" through elaborate and absurd means from a community that believes they cannot care for themselves. While both stories smack of irony, a kernel of truth exists in the depiction of a southern town which will do just about anything to preserve the reputation of its ladies and community. Though Faulkner's modern generation of municipal officials finally demands that Miss Emily pay her taxes, I believe this frank confrontation to be more the exception than the rule.

### The Silence Surrounding Sex

As one might imagine, the topic of sex, especially relations outside the boundaries of one's race, class, or marriage, has been particularly taboo for both men and women.

Wyatt-Brown notes, "Women frequently did not know what their husbands were doing

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<sup>11</sup> McEnry Stuart, Ruth. "The Unlived Life of Little Mary Ellen." *Simpkinsville and Vicinity: Arkansas Stories of Ruth McEnry Stuart*. Ed. Ethel Simpson. Fayetteville, AK: U of Arkansas P, 1983. 68-89.

when abroad. Many did not wish to know. And it would scarcely have been honorable to bring candid reports home” and suggests that, in speaking about sex, “gentlemen had to guard their language, literature had to avoid unmentionable topics, prudery reigned” (275, 293). He explains further,

a man should by all means never acknowledge in mixed company his illicit liaison with a woman, black or white. Whispers among members of the same sex did not constitute public exposure... If someone had violated good taste and brought up the matter in their [women’s] hearing, however, then all family members, the “sinner” included, would have been disgraced. Transcendent silence was the proper policy. (308)

Mitchell explains Scarlett’s awareness of her gender’s particular inability to address sexuality when she finds a prostitute with Rhett’s handkerchief,

Bad women and all they involved were mysterious and revolting matters to her. She knew that men patronized these women for reasons which no lady should mention - or, if she did mention them, in whispers and by indirection and euphemism .... She could never, never let him know she even realized that bad women existed, much less that he visited them. A lady could never do that... “Oh,” she thought in fury, “If I just wasn’t a lady, what I wouldn’t tell that varmint!” (250-51)

Not surprisingly, sex topped the list of unspeakable acts in a South beset with anxieties over propriety.

Sex proved, understandably, off limits in mixed company’s conversation, but even in matters of courtship, southern men often approached their intended brides via proxy. Courtship rituals reflected the importance of marriage to planter society in establishing kinship bonds and strengthening the shared economies of plantation

households. Clinton explains that in the courtship rituals of wealthy planter societies, smitten couples commonly “employed go-betweens in the early stages of courting” (63). Further, a women often rebuffed a first proposal, “an action that did not necessarily signal defeat...; A rejection could be mere form, or a signal for more time” (64). One can only imagine the consequences had a lady’s disingenuous refusal been taken at face value. Again, *Gone with the Wind* exemplifies antebellum courting practices and explains that during and after the war, “girls who knew very well that a lady always refuses a gentleman the first three times he proposes rushed headlong to accept the first time” (218). Though circumstance might have changed such rituals, the idea of approaching romantic relationships obliquely through a surrogate and ritualized refusal speaks to a tradition of indirect discourse in the South.

Of all sexually explicit topics, no one idea held sway over the southern imagination like the fear of miscegenation. Cash explains of the planter wife,

Even though she feigned blindness, as her convention demanded she should - even if she actually knew or suspected nothing - the guilty man, supposing he possessed any shadow of decency, must inexorably writhe in shame and an intolerable sense of impurity under her eyes... And the only really satisfactory escape here, as in so many other instances, would be fiction. One the one hand, the convention must be set up that the thing simply did not exist, and enforced under penalty of being shot; and on the other, the woman must be compensated, the revolting suspicion in the male that he might be slipping into bestiality got rid of, by glorifying her. (84-86)

The result was gyneolatry and the apotheosis of white southern womanhood. Thus, ignoring the problem created a kind of moral currency where silence paid dividends to both white men and women. Whether it was the white man’s fear of becoming like his

African American conquest or fear of black masculinity and its stain upon white women, as is the case with Bobo's wolf whistle discussed in Chapter Four, miscegenation was not openly discussed. But, Wyatt-Brown notes, should the liaison between a black man and white woman become public, "One avenue of escape did exist: a claim of having been raped, a claim that Southern whites have continued to prefer to believe even into the recent past. (The Scottsboro case of 1931 and incidents arising during the same period in rural Alabama are among the more famous illustrations)" (316-17). This idea surfaces explicitly in *The Fathers* with Yellow Jim's supposed violation of Jane Posey. As Chapter Two discusses, Tate's refusal to clarify the actual events of that evening typifies the trepidatious approach writers often felt when dealing with issues of race mixing.

It is important here to note that although talk about sex was generally taboo, southerners avoided talk about homosexuality to an even greater degree. In his case study of homosexuality in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, John Howard claims that "though sexual experimentation between boys was expected, it was not fully condoned. The young feigned innocence; the old feigned ignorance. Parents and other adults in authority commonly turned a blind eye" (43). Of an interview with a young man, Howard explains,

More than his homosexuality, Mark Ingalls's mother disapproved of his second marriage. The two had never discussed homosexuality, observing as so many others did a system of "mutual discretion," as historians Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis have called it. But avoidance of the topic did not indicate a lack of awareness on either side. As Ingalls's mother demonstrated, her views could be communicated when the situation warranted. "Knowing what you know," she said to her son, "why are you doing this?" - why are you getting married a second time? According to Mark Ingalls, this was "the closest she ever came to

naming it. (46)

But most importantly, Howard states, “And perhaps most characteristic of *the language of southern indirection*, queers were simply understood as being “that way” or “like that” (67, my emphasis). Not only was homosexuality not addressed overtly, according to Howard it was simply a part of a culture in which indirection was the norm. Chapter Three invokes the idea that, like extramarital sex and miscegenation, talk about homosexuality was both silenced and approached obliquely, and explores this theme in relation to texts by Tennessee Williams.

#### The Sword and the Savage Ideal

As Wyatt-Brown notes, southerners have traditionally had a reputation for quick tempers, often going beyond “quaint prickliness about insults,” and thus criticism was often delivered indirectly (23). An intensity of reaction may explain another pattern of indirection involving the proclivity of southerners to soften criticism with an apology or simultaneous compliment. Reed notes this pattern as well and explains,

One of the great remaining regional differences has to do with how criticism is understood. When Northerners criticize ... they do it forthrightly, and they may not mean any harm. Sometimes they're even trying to help. When Southerners criticize, they either do it very indirectly or they *intend* to give offense. One businessman from Ohio, now in Georgia, complained about this. He told *U.S. News and World Report*, “If [Southerners] think a guy is an SOB they'll apologize before they say it. I wish they'd call it like they see it. But, as someone once said, Southerners will be polite until they're angry enough to kill you. (125)

Approaching a taboo subject indirectly reflected the honor of the speaker, but genuine

concern over reprisal has also influenced the manner in which southern men approach delicate matters. When a southern man was affronted, the outcome was often violent.

The tendency to apologize for or mitigate criticism has provided material for more than one southern comedian, as the title of contemporary columnist Celia Rivenbark's *Bless Your Heart, Tramp* demonstrates. That is, in the "a spoonful of sugar make the medicine go down" tradition, if you're going to call someone a tramp, given the violent nature of the South it had better be followed by a qualifying statement like "bless your heart." Rivenbark kids that this phrase is the key to successful social exchanges in the south, but her humor, as much humor does, finds ground in reality. As I discuss in Chapter Three, Williams' Blanche Dubois is one practitioner of this sort of backhanded compliment.

The inherently coercive nature and physical brutality of chattel slavery also partially explains the South's reputation for violence. But the idea of the South as a quick tempered and violent region persists well beyond the antebellum period and even the tempestuous years of Reconstruction. In *The Origins of the New South*, C. Vann Woodward explains that from 1877-1913 the South practiced a

continued adherence to the tradition of violence. For violence was, if anything, more characteristic of the new society than of the old. In the place of the code duello, the traditional expression of violence in the Old South, gunplay, knifing, manslaughter, and murder were the bloody accompaniments of the march of Progress. The old state of South Carolina, with less than a quarter of the six New England states' population, reported nearly three times their number of homicides in 1890. (158)

Woodward speculates that those accounts may have been underreported and sums up by

stating, “The South seems to have been one of the most violent communities of comparable size in Christendom” (159). Violence continued to plague the southern states as a de facto component of its culture; “The immediate causes were often absurdly trivial. Of the quarrels resulting in the shooting of five men on one day in a Mississippi county, two arose over the opening of doors and two over petty debts” (160). Thus, the South has long reflected a violent disposition, the threat of which demanded a careful approach to sensitive matters.

Donaldson notes that the proclivity of white southern men toward violence stems from anxieties over their position at the top of southern social hierarchy;

Strangely enough, though, status and even gender identity were never quite a sure thing for white men in the antebellum south, where personal and social standing rested largely on the good opinion of one’s fellows. If white men were to maintain their position among men and above women and black slaves, they had to prove their mettle over and over again, in duels and in appalling brutal, eye-gouging brawls that Elliot Gorm has documented in such vivid detail. The pressure to assert one’s manhood seemed particularly heavy to white male authors like Simms and Hayne. (496)

As with courtship, planter society often settled disputes via proxy through the exercise of the duel. The practice of employing another as a delegate was routine in the highly ritualized practice of the antebellum duel. After a direct challenge was issued and accepted, the primary parties were excused from further negotiations. Appointed seconds then conducted the particulars with the principles accepting or rejecting negotiations via their seconds. Having another relate one’s intent, it seems, was common practice.

The use of proxies in sensitive cases where questions of honor arose from

vulnerabilities in love, status, and personal warfare suggests the importance of approaching delicate subjects indirectly. The result of offense to a man's honor, whether real or imagined, intentional or unintended, often took violent form. Thus, southerners have frequently meted out criticism with exceptional care, couching their disapproval or disagreement in euphemistic compliment, humor or apology.

### The South as Subject

All the subjects covered in this chapter thus far, gender, sexuality, class, race, hospitality, provincialism, and violent response, have been influenced by the South's notions of propriety and conversational etiquette. But as Hobson notes, sensitivity about region, about the South itself, may provide the most compelling example of a subject about which southern men exercised caution, particularly with regard to its peculiar institution. The South, and by extension its indefensible connection to slavery and segregation, has proved perhaps the touchiest of all sore subjects.

The problem of reconciling dependence on slave labor with a burgeoning democracy in the New World plagued the American South from its colonial beginnings and led to countermeasures designed to contradict the perception of slavery's brutality.

Fisher explains,

The harsh reality of slavery undercut the cultural ideal that it was meant to serve. The result was an elaborate system of subterfuges, in which Virginia planters tried to convince themselves, if no one else, that their peculiar system was little different from that which had existed in rural England. As early as 1727 William Byrd II wrote to the Earl of Orrery, "Our poor negroes are freemen in comparison of the slaves who till your ungenerous soil; at least if slavery consists in scarcity,

and hard work.” Other subterfuges were also resorted to. A slave was rarely called a slave in the American south by his master. Slaves were referred to as “my people,” “my hands,” “my workers,” almost anything but “my slaves.” They were made to dress like English farm workers, to play English folk games, to speak an English country dialect, and to observe the ordinary rituals of English life in a charade that Virginia planters organized with great care. (389)

The result was an indirect manner of acknowledging reality, particularly in terms of semantics. Thus, the paternalism invoked by slave owners in the early to mid nineteenth-century and reflected in postbellum plantation romance literature derives from the earliest Americans in the South.

The “founding fathers” recognized, to some extent, the hypocrisy of such a system in the New World’s democracy. Lewis P. Simpson explains of Thomas Jefferson,

Jefferson suppressed the knowledge he had intimated in the famous and singular eighteenth chapter of *Notes on the State of Virginia*: the knowledge that he was living with slaves who were becoming Afro-Americans as surely as the British were becoming Anglo-Americans; the knowledge that the alien black self as it became less alien and more “Americanized” would emancipate itself from the self of the white master, while at the same time the self of the master - ironically trapped by the idea that its very freedom depended on its perpetuation of a benevolent but complete and permanent dominion over the black slaves - would realize more and more the impossibility of emancipating itself from its bondage of slavery. (“Autobiography” 78)

Despite the obvious difficulties of slavery, the South rejected the notion it could be mistaken and adopted circuitous methods and evasions to handle the problem.

Confederate defeat in the Civil War only exacerbated the South’s tendency to overlook its flaws. Southerners venerated the antebellum South to such an extreme that tales of the “Lost Cause” often neglected to mention that the Confederacy had, in fact,

lost. In *A Dutch Fork Farm Boy* (1952), South Carolinian James Eleazor explains he was twelve before he discovered the truth about the outcome of the Civil War at school;

And it was one of the saddest awakenings I ever had. For hours on end I listened to Grandpa tell of whipping the lard out of the Yankees on a dozen battlefields. Despite their odds in every battle, the matchless Lee and Jackson had cut the enemy's ranks to pieces... It was when I got to that point [Gettysburg and Appomattox] in our history book that I discovered the bewildering fact that the South had lost that war. I was depressed for days and felt that we should go back and finish the thing right. (10-11)

Margaret Mitchell experienced the same in her childhood, explaining, "I heard everything in the world except that the Confederates lost the war" ("Interview" 1). Her fictional efforts reflect the unspeakable nature of southern defeat. Again *Gone with the Wind* provides a useful example of the relationship between tactful conversation and the southern gentleman. Scarlett O'Hara muses of her love interests, "They both see the same unpleasant truth [of pending Confederate defeat], but Rhett likes to look it in the face and enrage people by talking about it - and Ashley can hardly bear to face it" (235). Scarlett's cousin Melanie says of the two men's doubts about the southern cause; "He [Ashley] meant exactly what Captain Butler meant, only he didn't say it in a rude way" (234). The rare mention of Confederate failure demanded a careful approach if it surfaced at all. In an infrequent departure from the prevailing myth of moonlight and magnolias, Ellen Glasgow's "The Deliverance" satirizes the southern inability to acknowledge defeat in a family's attempts to keep the loss from its blind (literally and figuratively) grandmother. And yet Glasgow remains the subject of some debate, with a "sense of the dying aristocratic South that some critics say she clung to sentimentally

throughout her life, and others say she fought fiercely with her realism” (Goodwyn-Jones 226). In either case, her reflection of the South as unwilling to admit failure is clear.

When outright refusal to accept Confederate defeat no longer sufficed as history became clear and children grew to adulthood, antebellum plantation fiction provided a way to relive the South’s glory days. Watson explains, “In order for the South to justify its cause it was necessary to believe that the plantation system had constituted a beneficent and mild, though perhaps anachronistic, patriarchy” (130). For example, Eliza Whitfield Bellamy’s *Four Oaks* (1867), “provided southerners with a timeless retreat into which they could retire and within which they could ignore realities that they found too disturbing or too humiliating to acknowledge” (Watson 84). Ayers explains that southern authors in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> Century had “a desire to explain the South, to suggest that despite slavery and military defeat the Old South had nurtured some values worth maintaining” (340). Evading anything that would conflict with this image remained intensely important in the South’s collective conception of itself.

No one idea was more important to upholding the image of the South than the need to quash dissent regarding its most controversial subject, race. Cash argues, “There it [the violent truth of slavery] stood then - terrible, revolting, serving as the very school of violence, and lending mordant point of the most hysterical outcries of the Yankee. But the South could not and must not admit it, of course. It must prettify the institution and its own reactions, must begin to boast of its own Great Heart” (83). Wyatt-Brown notes, “Cash argued that the drive for community consensus, which so effectively silenced dissent, rested upon a common popular assumption: the alleged necessity to hold African

American firmly under the yoke of white supremacy” (xix). This notion heavily informs Tate and Nordan’s texts as they attempt to address issues of race with varying degrees of success. Louis D. Rubin notes,

The idea that Tate might, in a novel about the antebellum South, desire to portray the worst as well as the best effects of slavery was inconceivable to [fellow Agrarian Donald] Davidson. His view on the proper treatment of slavery in literature was more or less that of southern newspaper editors of the 1850s: It must not be criticized, for it would aid the attack on the South. (Rubin, *Wary*, 262-63)

Despite his efforts to criticize the economic basis of slavery, Tate could never bring himself to fully approach its social inequities. Nordan, a child in the Mississippi town which acquitted Emmett Till’s white murderers and attacked northern journalists who exposed the verdict’s injustice, also wrestled with his own implication in the event.

For those whites who dared speak out against racial evils, retribution could be severe. Most notably, in 1885 George Washington Cable’s “The Freeman’s Case in Equity” called attention to the South’s, and by extension the country’s, history of racial barbarism and continuing inhospitable treatment of freed Negroes. He writes,

The greatest social problem before the American people to-day is, as it has been for a hundred years, the presence among us of the negro. No comparable entanglement was ever drawn round itself by any other modern nation with so serene a disregard of its ultimate issue, or with a more distinct national responsibility. The African slave was brought here by cruel force, and with everybody’s consent except his own. Everywhere the practice was favored as a measure of common aggrandizement. When a few men and women protested, they were mobbed in the public interest, with the public consent. There rests, therefore, a moral responsibility on the whole nation never to lose sight of the results of African-American slavery until they cease to work mischief and injustice...If we take up this task, the difficulties of the situation are plain. We have, first, a revision of Southern State laws which has forced into them the recognition of certain human rights discordant with the sentiments of those who

have always called themselves the community; second, the removal of the entire political machinery by which this forcing process was effected; and, third, these revisions left to be interpreted and applied under the domination of these antagonistic sentiments. These being the three terms of the problem, one of three things must result. There will arise a system of vicious evasions eventually ruinous to public and private morals and liberty, or there will be a candid reconsideration of the sentiments hostile to these enactments, or else there will be a division, some taking one course and some the other.  
(<http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/huckfinn/hfequity.html>)

Response to Cable's pronouncements was swift and fierce, ironically providing an example to his charge that those who protested publicly were set upon with public approval. The Cables lost their personal and professional relationships in New Orleans and never lived there or anywhere in the South again. Yet Cable remained convinced that similar voices existed but were coerced into silence. Ayers explains,

He had long been considering what he would say, and he felt compelled to say it despite warnings from those cared about him ... The white South – including almost all of white New Orleans- turned on Cable with a viciousness he had not anticipated. Old friends refused to acknowledge him; the newspapers carried personal attacks. He moved his family to Massachusetts, where they lived the rest of their lives. Over the next decade, Cable poured most of his energies into articles and debates over racial justice in the South. He was convinced that there was a "Silent South" of whites who longed for justice as he did, who would speak up if they had a chance. Despite Cable's repeated personal encounters with such people on his tours of the South, they remained silent after he left. (346)

Given Cable's example, it easy to see why those who sympathized with his sentiments about the protracted inequities suffered by African Americans would not have admitted so publicly.

Romanticism or Realism?

To what extent southern texts have reflected the literary modes of Romanticism or Realism has been a matter of some debate. Certainly the popularity of the plantation romance after the Civil War clung to the image of the South as the land of moonlight and magnolias, complete with happy slaves under a benevolent master, flirtatious but chaste maids, dashing gentlemen, and images of reconciliation between North and South. Ellen Glasgow labels the tendency of southerners to romanticize and sentimentalize their culture and history at the expense of truth, democracy, and aesthetics “evasive idealism.” As Ayers notes, “Glasgow considered herself a hardened and realistic observer of life, detached and ironic, holding no faiths or illusions” and explains that she claimed to “write of all the harsher realities beneath manners . . . beneath social customs, beneath the poetry of the past, and romantic nostalgia of the present” (359). As she puts it, good literature “does not come from an evasion of facts, but a recognition of them” (Goodwyn-Jones 233). And yet critics remain divided about whether her texts practice the Realism she preached or fail to overcome the predominant mode of literary Romanticism. Like Twain, who famously referred to the South’s tendency toward sentimentality as “Sir Walter Scott disease,” Glasgow thought poorly of the practice, maintaining that it glossed over critical issues, perpetuated hierarchical social structures, and undermined artistic endeavors.

Twain himself has been soundly criticized for the ending of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) in which he undermines Jim’s escape from slavery by revealing he was previously “freed.” The same applies to *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson’s* (1894) revelation that the savage white “master” is actually a slave switched at birth.

Similarly, Joseph Holt Ingraham's The Quadroone (1841) positions black characters as the moral center of the novel and then undercutting this idea when we find they are actually white. Watson argues that the novel, "fails to develop the ironies implicit in the narrative's reversal of conventional character roles. In order to work these ironies out to their inevitable conclusions the author would be compelled to confront in his text the deep discordances in southern culture, and Ingraham is incapable of moving his novel toward such a confrontation" (820). Southern authors, while attempting to tell the truth about their region, vacillate between the need to expose the South's flaws and the need to justify their culture.

And yet, these authors have managed to touch on issues which deserve attention, even if they undermine their authenticity in the end. *Huckleberry Finn* is often taught as an example of racial tolerance, and Glasgow's assertions that her work reflected the "real" South show a willingness to confront the evasive idealism she believed bankrupted southern literature. Certainly these authors must be viewed within their historical contexts, their successes acknowledged along with their flaws. How successful authors have been at negotiating the need for truth with authentic affection for their region is a large part of my examination of how Tate, Willaims, and Nordan's texts operate.

Contemporary scholars reflect a similar struggle with what to reveal and what to avoid when the South is their subject. Referring to Genovese's theory that the antebellum conservative plantocracy was in actuality a "family" which encompassed "independent laborers" (slaves) which were figuratively and often biologically a part of the plantation family, Michael Kreyling notes,

Genovese's recommended hierarchy of social power and activity that places the white male at the apex of the pyramid, followed by his female mate, and so on down through children and the infantilized... That Genovese can push his argument for the viability of the southern-conservative tradition nose-to-nose with the volatile issues of sexual predation and the subjection of women of all races, and then swerve as if they are not there in his path, indicates that issues of sex and gender; along with issues of race, confront the inventors of the southern community at every twist. (*Inventing Southern Literature* 181)

The "swerve" Kreyling identifies here is precisely the subject of this study, particularly how and when it aids or injures its speaker or audience. For Kreyling, these important issues are hurdles southern authors and critics must face in reflecting the South in any truly meaningful way.

Final proof of my contention that rhetorical evasion offers both a means to dodge and access difficult subject matter, sometimes simultaneously, is evident in one thing most scholars have managed to agree upon, a pronounced tendency toward paradox evident in the South. In *The Roots of Southern Writing*, Holman explains that the South is categorized by a dialectic between, "Calm grace and raw hatred. Polished manners and violence. An intense individualism and intense group pressures toward conformity. A reverence to the point of idolatry of self-determining action and a caste and class structure presupposing an aristocratic hierarchy" (1). Despite its reputation for indirect communication, those southerners who participate in evasive rhetoric do not convey less, or less accurate, information than their more direct counterparts. Woodward's "The Divided Mind of the New South" notes the paradox of southerner's veneration of the Old South's archaic romanticism and progressive propagandists for the New Order of

industrialism, “and this with no apparent sense of inconsistency, certainly none of duplicity” (157). The tendency of southern conversation to skirt the issue, delay the point, and meander along with apologies, deferrals and displacement of criticisms, all the while concurrently hitting the precise target it means to find, is the product of the paradoxical cultural heritage of the South as defined by Holman. Societal pressures clash with individualism to create a regional linguistic idiosyncrasy where conversational forms appear to supplant meaning but actually rely on established codes and norms which paradoxically convey intent through indirection. Conversation, then, fits neatly into Holman’s paradoxical southern paradigm.

No matter what its consequences, rhetorical indirection is a fixture of southern conversation. Although one may certainly argue that people in places other than the South are reluctant to approach some subjects directly, particularly those which are embarrassing, controversial, or otherwise touchy, the prevalence of this practice as a regional code deserves attention. Despite reluctance to directly “come out and say it,” for those in the South such evasiveness does not typically beget miscommunication, at least not for those indoctrinated with this social code. It is only when those unfamiliar with this social construction, namely outsiders to the community, are exposed to its specifically regional practice that troubles expressing and interpreting meaning arise.

For Tate, Williams and Nordan, each author’s individual background in the South informs what he has to say, and will not or cannot say, about the region and its inhabitants. Though each of the authors identifies himself as a southerner, they come from different classes. Tate and Williams came from formerly aristocratic families with

ties to Virginia and saw this lineage as an integral part of their characters. Though both grew up in reduced financial circumstances, their model for socially appropriate or inappropriate behavior was the southern gentleman. For the self-proclaimed “white trash” Nordan, the tendency toward indirection is more difficult to trace. Along with the permeability of the cordon sanitaire and the difficulty of compartmentalizing “backcountry” and “tidewater” cultures, one explanation for Nordan’s indirection is the difficulty of talking about race. While Tate, for example, appears to use indirection to avoid issues of race and miscegenation, Nordan uses it as a means of access. That is, avoidance here is twofold. It may reflect an inability to grasp or unwillingness to acknowledge difficult subject matter, and, as I show in the coming chapters, it may also provide a means to talk about issues that might otherwise have gone unexplored.

## CHAPTER II

### “IN A ROUNDABOUT WAY, THE WAY HE ALWAYS TOLD UNPLEASANT THINGS”: ELUSIVE GENTILITY AND ELUSORY GOTHICISM

#### IN ALLEN TATE’S *THE FATHERS*

Though Allen Tate is perhaps known best for his poetry and his contribution to the Nashville Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, his single novel, *The Fathers*, offers an important look at the struggles of a southern family modeled on Tate's own ancestry in the antebellum South. In his abhorrence for the abstract, Tate sought to create a provincial novel that would express the universal tension between public, socialized behavior and private, random impulses. Artists in the first half of the twentieth century often explored this dichotomy, particularly with regard to the role of the artist; T.S. Eliot's objective correlative touted the concrete object as uniquely qualified to express the abstract, and Robert Frost noted, "You can't be universal without being provincial, can you? It's like trying to embrace the wind" (19). For southern writers, and specifically in *The Fathers*, the historical and geographical setting of the South, where concrete behaviors and performance of social ceremonies manifested abstractions such as honor, nobility, gender boundaries, and morality, offers a tangible forum for exploring the theoretical dialectic between traditional and modern values, and collective and individual responsibilities.

*The Fathers*' clash between community values, represented by patriarch Major Buchan, and individual values, represented by his outsider son-in-law George Posey, is easily misread simply as the clash between traditional Agrarianism espoused by Tate and his fellow Nashville Fugitive/Agrarians and modern industrialism/capitalism. However, in assessing this approach<sup>12</sup> critics have recognized Tate's novel as far more complex. As Arthur Mizener puts it,

The central tension of *The Fathers*, like that of its structure, is a tension between the public and the private life, between the order of civilization, always artificial, imposed by discipline, and at the mercy of its own imperfections, and the disorder of the private life, always sincere, imposed by circumstances, and at the mercy of its own impulses. We see, on the one hand, the static condition a society reaches when, by slow degrees, it has disciplined all personal feeling to custom so that the individual no longer exists apart from the ritual of society and the ritual of society expresses all the feelings the individual knows. We see, on the other hand, the forces that exist - because time does not stand still - both within and without the people who constitute a society, that will destroy the discipline of its civilization and leave the individual naked and alone. (ix)

It is tempting to read *The Fathers* solely as an indictment of George Posey's disregard for civilization. Posey's indifference to social mandates results in narrator Lacy Buchan, flashing back to his adolescence, remembering George as a wild horseman perpetually plunging over a cliff. However, Mizener reminds us that both the old and new culturally mandated rules suffer from internal flaws. Richard Law similarly argues,

the action of the book is a complex dialectic between two mixed values, not between traditionalist light and modern darkness. That dialectic, once in motion, exhibits something of a life of its own, to be sure ... That the novel represents a conscious exploration of the weaknesses as well as the strengths of tradition is

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<sup>12</sup> The original source for discussion George Posey and Major Buchan as representative of Northern/Southern cultural conflict is Lionel Trilling's review of *The Fathers*.

evident from the careful structure of the domestic catastrophe which overwhelms the Buchans. (359)

In the end, both Major Buchan, the internal symbol of antebellum social order, and George Posey, the modern, Yankee carpetbagger outside the dominant social order, prove inept at negotiating the challenges of postbellum life. In other words, Mizener and Law argue that Tate pits social discipline against individualism, but declines to clearly privilege one over the other.

To some extent this is true. Tate does carefully balance the public and private in *The Fathers*. However, in reading *The Fathers*, I can't help but connect its veneration of the plantation tradition with Rubin's assessment of Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" which argues for Tate's conviction that, "The agrarian community that had been the Southern way of life was with all its faults vastly preferable to what was taking place now" ("Serpent" 354). *The Fathers* expresses a similar sympathy for the Major's antebellum culture despite its shortcomings, faults Tate depicts as less an abominable weakness than a beautiful innocence too delicate to withstand the onslaught of modernity and industrial-capitalism. Further, *I'll Take My Stand's* "Introduction: A Statement of Principles" asserts that all twelve contributors "tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way" (xxxvii). Despite his affection for the industrialist George Posey, Lacy ultimately rejects his lead and reaffirms the traditional community and agrarian values of Pleasant Hill. Major Buchan's social framework, though tragically doomed, offers the preferable way of life, which, as Rubin asserts, dominates Tate's "Ode." In a sense, Major Buchan and George Posey reflect the

clash of what Tate disparages as “The New Provincialism” and a traditional sense of regional identity grounded in history. Detached from history, Posey lives every day in provincialism, “that state of mind in which regional men lose their origins in the past and its continuity in the present, and begin every day as if there had been no yesterday” (542). Tate argues instead for southern regionalism which gives “a backward glance” toward the civilization of Major Buchan as it moves into the modern world. What the provincial Posey lacks is the “consciousness of the past in the present” which distinguishes true southern character, and this flaw ultimately leads the modern Posey to the “ravenous grave” Tate’s “Ode” predicts.

An important part of the “way of life” argued for by Rubin and Tate and reflected through *The Fathers’* Major Buchan is what may be expressed in relation to what must be repressed according to regional codes of discursive etiquette. This chapter explores *The Fathers’* antebellum social framework which demands honor and courtesy to such an extent that delicate or explosive subject matter is routinely evaded, ignored, distanced, or camouflaged in a manner explicitly linked with southern and agrarian values. First, I explore Major Buchan’s eminently civilized world, a place where personal sentiment has no place and the expression of which challenges the rigid social framework. Specifically, I show how the fabric of *The Fathers’* antebellum South calls for a complicit evasion of the “unapproachable.” In the hierarchical, bucolic world of Pleasant Hill, Major Buchan’s civility allows no room for direct and forthright discussion of contentious issues as defined by regional norms. Rather, they demand an oblique approach and, importantly, these contortions result in both positive and negative repercussions both for

Tate and the other authors discussed in this study.

Major Buchan's evasions appear all the more pronounced in contrast to George Posey's "shocking" habit of plunging straight to the heart of the matter with no regard for the social niceties which typically ease the way for discussion. As my introduction notes, such niceties are of particular importance in the highly stylized and performative social rituals of the South. Posey's nontraditional and unconventionally frank, direct approach exposes the restrictive limits of Pleasant Hill's genteel social order. Posey's explosive behavior evinces how a heightened preoccupation with honor and gentility, and the evasions created by this focus, leaves the South devoid of successful coping mechanisms in the face of defeat.

Its internal conflicts notwithstanding, Tate's novel also reflects his personal acquaintance with the antebellum South's rhetorical rules, which include treading lightly on ticklish issues and keeping up appearances. In *Allen Tate: Orphan of the South*, Thomas A. Underwood argues that part of Tate's motivation for *The Fathers* was to locate his own place in southern history and tradition. Through the fictionalized story of his Virginia ancestry, Tate laments the loss of a culture in which he found much to admire, yet he clearly delineates the problematic nature of that system as rife with fatal weaknesses and faults. A southerner struggling with issues of personal and regional identity, Tate exhibits both an attachment to and rejection of the propriety of southern manners and morays. As Simpson notes, Tate was "both defender and antagonist of the South, always at war with himself even when he was defending the South" (64). Despite Tate's modernist and new critical rejection of the individual artistic personality, his

biography reveals much about his notions of propriety and manners in southern discourse; specifically, examining Tate's personal life and critical stance sheds light on *The Fathers'* fictionalized clash between old and new social ideologies. Despite his claim that the South deserved depiction devoid of romanticism's rosy glow, Tate remains constricted by notions of the propriety associated with that romanticism both in writing his fiction and revealing his personal history. Critical and biographical evidence indicates that Tate evaded difficult subjects in his personal life as well as his only novel.

In addition, Tate's fiction avoids direct comment on touchy issues by filtering them through the use of gothic devices. Gothic elements remove the reader from the most troubling subjects in the novel while simultaneously providing a critical forum for their examination. The novel's final two of three sections, "The Crisis" and "The Abyss," morph from the generally realistic tone of "Pleasant Hill" to a misty, indeterminate reality where all is not as it seems. The incendiary topics of class difference, race, miscegenation, and sexual violence filter through a gothic lens. The result of this strategy is twofold; first, it dilutes Tate's discussion of these issues and undermines his criticism of chattel slavery; second, it leaves the reader to fill in the ambiguous spaces which result from the gothic's nonrealistic stance. Michelle Massé explains that gothic's dreamlike qualities allow us to "safely experience what we do not want to acknowledge in waking life" (229). Gothic elements provide a tool for portraying a contradictory mixture of southern romantic myth and veritable realism. Thus, Tate's novel straddles an ideological line, incorporating both the old and the new, the oblique and, with less frequency, the direct. Gothicism is one means by which

evasion and confrontation paradoxically occur simultaneously.

*The Fathers* is a liminal text, reaching on the one hand back to the Old South's genteel civilization while surging forward to find a place for southern tradition in the modern world. Thus, Tate both condemns and adopts evasive regional discourse, as it so warrants. As noted in my last chapter, such evasiveness has been used with both genuine civility as well as the conscious and unconscious suppression of truth or marginalization of the Other. Tate's personal and artistic evasions similarly result in both gently positive and, at times, horrifically negative consequences, although the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive; that is, one action or inaction may have simultaneously good and bad results. What is certain is that the conflicting urges to evade difficult subject matter and confront and dispel the legacy of antebellum romanticism by depicting the South "warts and all" are apparent in *The Fathers*, Tate's criticism, and his dramatic personal history. In the end, Tate and his character's evasiveness reveal a great deal about the South's strict psychological need to maintain its virtuous appearance to itself and to its detractors.

### The Influence of Biography

Though Tate disdained a confessional style of writing, preferring instead Eliot's artistic impersonality, Tate's personal life, particularly his southern boyhood, undeniably influenced his work. Underwood's biography explains Tate's preoccupation with place;

In the prologue [to the aborted memoir which later became *The Fathers*], Tate tried to show how his relationship to his parents had shaped his identity ... His parents' greatest wrong, he maintained, was to lie to him about his birthplace. Wanting her son to be more Southern than he actually was, Tate's mother deluded herself into thinking he was born in Fairfax, Virginia, "among her family, who had not been

wrong-sided” during the Civil War. Tate’s father, unwilling to challenge his wife, did not tell him the truth until after her death. Taking a car trip with his father, Tate discovered - at age thirty - that he was born in Kentucky. Pointing to a roadside house in a small town in the southeastern part of the state, his father remarked curtly, “That’s where you were born.” But Tate invented the story. It was he who lied about his birthplace. Long before his mother’s death in 1929, he knew he was born in Kentucky, not Virginia. It is difficult to determine why he made up the story for his memoirs. Perhaps he had come to believe it himself. Perhaps he was punishing his parents again for a childhood that left him unsure of their affections and ambivalent toward the South. Indeed, the angst that their Southern mythmaking produced in him during the 1920s and 1930s was far more extreme than that generated by his memoirs. (4)

So strong were his mother Nellie’s ties to the birthplace of southern culture that she fabricated a closer relationship with Virginia than either she or her son actually possessed.<sup>13</sup> Tate apparently continued her subterfuge into his adult life. Despite reduced circumstances in childhood, Tate “compensated for the shame he felt over his parents’ financial condition by carrying himself as something of a Southern aristocrat” (Underwood 15). Much like Tennessee Williams, Tate felt himself dispossessed of the southern nobility he believed was his birthright and both authors’ mothers did little to dispel this illusion. If he could not fancy himself a southern gentleman financially, Tate could, at least, behave accordingly and affect the appearance of a southern gentleman.

For Tate, true nobility linked gentility not with money but with conduct. *The Fathers’* narrator, Lacy Buchan,<sup>14</sup> notes,

Nobody in my youth discussed money; we never asked how much money people had; and it was a little different, I believe, from the ordinary good breeding that demands reticence about the cost of things... The individual quality of a man was

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<sup>13</sup> Tate’s mother was born in Illinois (Underwood 8).

<sup>14</sup> I assume here and throughout this chapter that Lacy’s character espouses many of Tate’s own convictions, particularly since the novel was originally intended as an autobiography and then a memoir.

bound up with his kind and the “places” where they lived; thinking of a man we could easily bring before the mind’s eye all those subtly interwoven features of his position. “Class” consisted solely of a certain code of behavior. (135)

Conveniently for Tate, the lack of money proved no impediment to aristocratic rank. Having money didn’t mark one as a gentleman; not talking about money did. Tate’s assertion that the Buchan reticence to talk about money differs from “ordinary good breeding” is tied to place and it is no surprise, then, that the prestige and historical importance of a Virginian lineage preoccupied his attention.

Once, after catching his son refilling a whiskey bottle with water, Tate’s father remarked, “’Son, the next time you steal the whiskey don’t ruin it for others by putting water in it.’ Orley, who attributed such behavior to blacks and poor whites was not bothered by his son’s intemperance but by the social significance of the behavior” (Underwood 15). As the example with Orley shows, Tate learned from an early age that social perception mattered terribly and this preoccupation continued into his adult life. Part of his fascination with his first wife, author Carolyn Gordon, was her ambiguous nature; she “held the attraction of being romantically experienced while appearing to be a complete innocent,” and when she became pregnant, Tate “within a week ... was backdating the marriage to explain Carolyn’s condition” (Underwood 104, 110). Clearly, some subjects demanded a careful hand, not for their own sake but for their social importance. Social respectability or its façade was partially achieved, for better or worse, through the mannerly evasions found in the South.

Noble behavior mandated attention to *appearance*, to social significance, yet Tate

often behaved decidedly “ungentlemanly.” Like George Posey, Tate turned the social injunction to keep quiet about the unspeakable on its ear. When Allen and his first girlfriend, Eleanor Hall, met at Vanderbilt, their friends believed the two were in love but “were astounded when they went to bed together. [Hall explained] ‘Nobody had ever heard of anybody doing such a thing at Vanderbilt ... It may not have been the behavior itself that Allen’s friends found objectionable. Perhaps they were shocked because Eleanor and Allen made no secret of their commitment to one another” (Underwood 51). Similarly, Tate strayed chronically during his marriages and apparently made little attempt to conceal his behavior from either his friends or his wives, despite the stigma of infidelity. In Tate’s private life, the impulse to keep up appearances and the impulse to throw reputation to the wind often warred for control.

Several other exchanges between Tate and his personal acquaintances support the notion that southern conversation demanded an oblique approach to maintain the appearance of order. After a run-in with a Vanderbilt professor, a dean advised Tate to “go to the man and apologize to him. But you *don’t* have to mean it!” (Underwood 45). At the very southern Vanderbilt, the appearance of contrition was enough. Another incident involves Tate’s friend Andrew Lytle, editor of the *Sewanee Review*. In 1947 the Lytles rented the house of former Iowa Writer’s Workshop director Paul Engle and somehow a storm window was broken. When Engle asked about the damage, an argument ensued. Walter Sullivan explains,

I have often wondered what Paul meant by this question. I knew him well during my Iowa years and liked him then and later, but I have never fully understood

him. The culture in which he had grown up,<sup>15</sup> his manners, his way of getting through the world were different from mine and certainly different from Andrew's. Paul said what he meant to the point of bluntness and, paradoxical as this may seem in a poet, worried little about subtleties and implications that to Andrew were often more important than the actual utterance. I do not think Paul meant to accuse Andrew of duplicity, but Andrew felt himself accused. (34)

Again, attention to appearance eclipsed content. Sullivan, a contemporary of Tate's at Vanderbilt and a native southerner, cannot understand the non-southern Engle's bluntness and lack of subtlety but correctly notes that for Lytle these implications meant more than the "actual utterance."

In what amounts to an attempt to avoid the perceived incivility of bluntness, when Tate became embroiled in an ideological dispute with *Bookman* editor Seward B. Collins in 1933 he "persuaded his brother Ben to begin signing a series of letters that he himself was writing. The first such letter to Shafer began, 'My brother, Allen Tate, being under the existing circumstances unwilling to communicate with you directly, has asked me to write you his opinion of your letter to him'" (qtd. in Underwood 203). For Tate, the circuitous route to discussion of a tricky subject provided a means of access, albeit obliquely. As noted in the preceding chapter, the use of go-betweens has historically provided one methodological means of evasion in the South. In a sense, Ben Tate acted as his brother's second on the field of honor, allowing Tate to criticize Collins without running the risk of appearing ungentlemanly.

In addition, Tate and fellow Agrarian Donald Davidson had a falling out partially

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<sup>15</sup> Engle was born in Cedar Rapids and had spent his formative years there, at the University of Iowa, and then in New York before returning (Sullivan 34-5).

due to Davidson's hints that Tate and his fellow Agrarians had abandoned the cause.<sup>16</sup>

Tate responded by declaring to Davidson that when he had "mildly alluded to my [financial] predicament" his friend, well versed in the subtleties of southern conversation, deliberately ignored the comment and Tate received no assistance (Rubin *Wary* 263).<sup>17</sup>

Tate apparently believed that Donaldson, a devout southerner, understood his situation from the subtle hints he provided and consciously decided not to intervene or offer support.

Yet another cultural misunderstanding similar to the argument between Lytle and Engle took place when Tate's third wife, Helen, turned Lytle away at the door one afternoon;

Andrew might have understood her position, but she did not know how to explain it to him. ... The nuances of her message and the words she used would have been of utmost importance. But before any subtleties of language could affect anything, she had to observe formalities that were crucial in Andrew's code of personal relationships and of which Helen was ignorant. Andrew tried to allow for the fact that she came from Minnesota, but he was deeply offended. (Sullivan 73)

Apparently Helen was not polite enough, allusive enough, or southern enough for Lytle's taste. According to Sullivan, her being from Minnesota precluded her understanding of the "nuances" and "subtleties" of southern discourse.

As previously noted, *The Fathers* began as Tate's attempt at autobiography. Tate

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<sup>16</sup> Davidson to Tate, October 3, 1938, Tate to Davidson, October 6, 1938. (*The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*. Ed. John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1974. 292-302.)

<sup>17</sup> Davidson, "The 'Mystery' of the Agrarians: Fact and Illusions about Some Southern Writers." *Saturday Review of Literature*. 26 (1943): 6-7; Tate to Davidson. December 4, 1942. *Literary Correspondence*. 328-29.

claimed *Ancestors of Exile* was an effort to establish his opinions “very indirectly, by making the framework a piece of genealogy” (Letter to Mark Van Doren, qtd in Underwood 175). But it also had the reverse effect; just as the genealogy provided a framework for supporting Tate’s opinions, his fictionalization provided a framework for understanding his genealogy. Afraid that approaching his past too personally would reveal things he didn’t want to see,<sup>18</sup> Tate instead conflated his personal identity with that of his narrator and, metaphorically, with the South. The indirection of southern rhetorical strategies should, by now, be clear in *The Fathers*, but the novel was not Tate’s only brush with issues of propriety and reputation in publishing.

After writing the biographical histories *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier* (1928) and *Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall* (1929), Tate attempted to write a biography of Robert E. Lee. After considerable research, however, he abandoned the project. Rubin speculates, “Tate abandoned the book because, of the three southerners he took on, only ‘Lee was a Virginian,’ a fact that caused Tate to find his mother’s Old South wanting” (29). Though Tate never specified what made him desert the book, the idea that he would undermine the legacy of old Virginia through his writing was unthinkable. Tate’s refusal to continue with the biography constitutes an evasion of sorts. If Tate couldn’t say something nice, or could not reconcile the truth with the image of Lee he wished to portray, he would not say it at all.

Several attempts were made to write Tate’s own biography while he was still

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<sup>18</sup> I argue later that this concern also preoccupied Tate in relation to his proposed literary biography.

alive; however, Tate blocked attempts to publish anything that would portray him in a light he found unflattering. Though it is reasonable to assume that few people want their faults publicly exposed, Tate's self-identification with the southern gentleman and the masculine code of honor which dictated fastidious attention to appearance made the issue that much weightier. Rubin abandoned his attempt in the face of Tate's restrictions, telling him, "There is no way that I could write the biography you deserve unless I am given full authority" and "I simply could not *exclude* portions of your experience relevant to your life and art. If I *were* to attempt that, someone else would point them out. All I could and would assuredly do would be to keep the narrative focused on the main show" (qtd. in Underwood 415). Rubin believed that, despite Tate's claims to the contrary, Tate's work was intensely personal and any attempt at an impersonal biography would prove useless. Therefore, he resigned from the project. Tate then selected Robert Buffington as Rubin's successor only to have him claim that if "he left out all of the names he had been pressed to leave out, there would not be much left to write" (Sullivan 102). Buffington left the project as well. In the meantime, Radcliffe Squires turned out *Allen Tate: A Literary Biography* (1971) but hinted in his preface toward the problem of Tate's status as a living poet and the restrictions imposed on him by the author. Ned O'Gorman attempted to write an unauthorized biography but was threatened by Tate's third wife Helen with legal action. Paramount to all potential biographers was the matter of Tate's numerous and frequent sexual indiscretions. Fearful that his biography would besmirch his literary reputation, Tate forewent the honor.

Much the same thing happened to Tate's *Memoirs and Opinions*, which contains

two chapters originally part of an aborted “book of memories.” Tate quit the project, as he explains in the preface, because he could not bring himself “to tell what was wrong” with his friends and acquaintances “without trying to tell what was wrong with myself ...I couldn’t let myself indulge in the terrible fluidity of self-revelation” (xi). His attitude may be partially explained by a modernist aversion to the self-confessional, but Tate’s abandonment of the book as he first conceived it is also a function of gentlemanly Virginian honor. In telling what was wrong about himself, Tate would break the code of conduct which dictated evasion of the unspeakable. Like John Langdon’s boorish behavior on the field of honor, anything that could not be defended was set aside and ignored.

A final example of Tate’s aversion to having unflattering personal information made public is his relationship with the Princeton library. After selling many of his papers to Princeton, he panicked that they might be used against him and wrote to the librarian William S. Dix in 1967 in an attempt to retrieve them (Underwood 414). The attempt was ultimately unsuccessful, but the incident illustrates Tate’s unwillingness to reveal any personal character flaws. His preoccupation with reputation led not to change his behavior (biographical accounts indicate his cantankerousness only increased with age) but to the evasion of those truths, at least in print, which would cast him as less than honorable. Tate’s reluctance to expose his faults to the public is by no means exclusive to his character; however, the unique code of southern honor and the importance of appearance and reputation in the South supports the notion that Tate’s aversion was fueled by his adherence to regional norms.

Each of these examples serves to establish the South's attention to a conversational tradition which disallowed direct confrontation and relied instead on indirection and implication in approaching delicate subject matter. Tate participated in this discursive tradition himself and was, as the above examples attest, surrounded by others who operated under similar cultural assumptions.

Like his life, Tate's critical work reveals his attempts to shatter the Old South's myth through modernist techniques and a contradictory reticence to examine the unsavory or the personal too closely. In "The Profession of Letters in the South," Tate explains, "If there is such a person as a Southern writer, if there could be such a profession as letters in the South, the profession would require the speaking of unpleasant words and the violation of good literary manners" (530). And yet as Tate's career progressed, much as he did in his personal life, he paradoxically continued to adhere to an aristocratic and gentlemanly antebellum ideal as he sought to examine the flaws of that ideal. The contradictions in his texts illustrate the cognitive dissonance he experienced as a result. In a letter to John Peale Bishop, Tate noted that "all 'highly developed societies' must rely on an 'ostrich-like code' to keep their sanity... 'At present we live in a world where the disorder is at the surface. So all honor to Major Buchan'" (Singal 258). But in *The Fathers*, Tate does pull his head from the sand, albeit briefly. Specifically, despite his attempts to show a realistic South where an enslaved and thus sexually available mulatto girl hides under bleachers and a slave half-brother is murdered by his own family, Tate remains remarkably reluctant to *directly* address anything that might cast a shadow over the agrarian way of life founded in antebellum culture.

Underwood argues, “Tate’s attraction to Modernism is that the psychological style he learned from his parents made him want to hide both his emotions and his Southern identity in a literary technique based upon indirection” (327). The oblique nature of modernism surfaces in Eliot’s objective correlative, a technique seen in Tate’s focus on the images of the gleaming gun. Given modernist attention to the concrete “thingness of the thing” in expressing abstractions, direct assertion of the abstraction itself proves impossible; thus representation takes place through concrete manifestation due to the limited ability of language to express theoretical or hypothetical concepts. It is no surprise that modernism initially attracted Tate given the Agrarian’s later advancement of the tangible in favor of the abstruse nature of ideology or philosophy. Daniel Joseph Singal argues much the same in “The Divided Mind of Allen Tate” from *The War Within* as he explains that Tate’s “Modernist self-consciousness stood irrevocably between him and the identification with the region he sought. His fate was to become perched on the precise balancing point of ambivalence between the two cultures – a position he found alternately excruciating and delicious” (238). Modernism, then, attracted Tate with its revolutionary air and provided a mechanism for overturning the maudlin image of the antebellum South perpetuated during and beyond Reconstruction. But Tate’s attacks on the social order of the antebellum South are limited and oblique.

I argue that modernism attracted Tate not only as a way to shred the maudlin veil shrouding the antebellum South, but in fact operated on the same assumptions of indirection noted by Underwood. The psychological style learned from his parents, then, is kindred to modernism’s indirection, not opposed to it. Instead of direct confrontation,

Tate prefers to hint around the edges. Modernism, then, is not diametrically opposed to southern practices of indirection but instead offers a method for joining the two.

This phenomenon may be partially explained in terms of gender. Underwood asserts that Tate, “began rejecting any piece of Southern literature or poetry in which he detected the faintest trace of anything ‘saccharine or grandmotherly’” (87). Donaldson notes that this approach sought to “dissociate modern southern letters from the successful women writers of the nineteenth century who seemed to exemplify these good manners” (492). Tate’s “The Profession of Letters in the South” claims “the genteel tradition has never done anything for letters in the South” (530). Perhaps good “feminine” literary manners were to be rejected, but good southern, gentlemanly, “masculine” manners were not. Tate’s defense of the South warts and all still constitutes a variety of defense and this defense is complicated by the conflicting notions of what to conceal versus what to reveal.

### Agrarianism

If Tate’s personal relationships indicate an evasive or circuitous mode of discourse, his criticism reveals an even closer tie between silence and manners in the south. In “A Southern Mode of the Imagination,” Tate explains,

The traditional Southern mode of discourse presupposes somebody at the other end silently listening: it is the rhetorical mode. Its historical rival is the dialectical mode, or the give and take between two minds...The Southerner always talks to somebody else, and this somebody else, after varying intervals, is given his turn; but the conversation is always among rhetoricians; that is to say, the typical Southern conversation is not going anywhere; it is not about anything. It is about the people who are talking, even if they never refer to themselves, which they

usually don't, since conversation is only an expression of manners, the purpose of which is to make everybody happy. This may be why Northerners and other uninitiated persons find the alternating, or contrapuntal, conversation of Southerners fatiguing. (583-84)

Particularly interesting here is Tate's claim that the silent listener or implied audience of the southern gentleman frames discourse as a one way street lacking the "give and take" of the dialectical mode. The link between region and conversation indicates Tate's belief that *southern* conversation is about manners and making both speaker and audience "happy." One component of such etiquette is the silence of the audience in accommodating the rhetoric of the speaker. That courtesy is then reciprocated as the two exchange places and take their turns. Thus, if conversation is "only an expression of manners" designed to make everybody "happy," then the quelling of remarks during the speech of another, or the evasion of those topics of conversation which might make the participants unhappy or uncomfortable, comprises part of the southern gentleman's aristocratic duty.

A similar argument concerning the conflation of morals, manners, and speech is set forth in *I'll Take My Stand*, particularly in Stark Young's "Not in Memoriam, But In Defense." Though Young's writing obviously does not come from Tate himself, the introduction to the Agrarian manifesto aligns each of the participating authors with a single principle, the southern way of life. The book's introduction also notes that,

The amenities of life also suffer under the curse of a strictly-business or industrial civilization. They consist in such practices as manners, conversation, hospitality, sympathy, family life, romantic love - in the social exchanges which reveal and develop the sensibility in human affairs. If religion and the arts are founded on

right relations of man-to-nature, these are founded on right relations of man-to-man. (xliii)

The introduction, to which each of the contributors subscribed, reveals the importance of manners, conversation and hospitality, the interdependency between which Young takes up in his entry.

Young's claims anticipate Tate's remarks on southern discourse and argue that attention to manners, and particularly how one's listener responds to the conversation, is a hallmark of southern culture,

The discussion of manners, affability, friendliness turns on the salubrity of people's living close together. An at-home-ness among others is implied; and a lack of suspicion-the most vulgar and humiliating of traits, I was taught by my elders - with regard to others and their intentions-it was better a thousand times, they said, to be deceived than to be common; a taste for the approval of others - how Southern! - derived from politeness, friendliness, and vanity; the belief that one of most natural impulses is the wish that the other person may be happy in our company. *As to manners and the accusations against Southerners of insincerity, floweriness, gush, and indirection, the answer is that such reproaches are the defensive arguments of selfishness, of meager natures, of self-conscious egotism, of middle-class Puritanism, or of laziness: it is easier not to consider the other man's feelings, or it is sinful to pretend to feelings that we do not feel.* In those regions, however, where such non-flowering sincerity is most highly commended, you will not detect any lack of color when they are trying to sell something; it is a sin only when it merely makes life more pleasant for some one. (345, my emphasis)

Notable here is Young's admission that southerners have been charged with the related violations of insincerity and indirection. The rhetorical mode, it seems, is misunderstood as duplicitous by those unfamiliar with southern regional codes. While regional outsiders, or those southerners not part of the grand Agrarian design, that is, anyone other

than white, landed males, sought the kernel of truth they believed buried under a gush of flowery rhetoric, Young claims that the gush itself is both the highest form of flattery and sincerity. For Young, and implicitly for Tate, indirection was not about obfuscation but about honoring the listener by putting him or her at ease.

Such conversation is tied explicitly to honor. Young argues that the southern mode promotes group welfare above the individual. Further, he provides a specific example of how what may be construed as insincerity exhibits a larger courtesy.

It is comically true that you may dislike meeting X on Monday, but you say, nevertheless, I'm glad to see you. This declaration may not be true to what you feel toward X on that particular day, but it is true to your feelings for him by the year, feelings that would have been falsified on Monday that you were glad to see him; you are, therefore, in X's case, insincere by the moment but sincere by the year; only self-centered boors could think otherwise. (346)

Young's big-picture take on conversational etiquette again indicates the performative nature of southern rhetoric. Making another happy in one's company demanded that capricious and fleeting emotions be subsumed under the larger umbrella of courtesy. To do otherwise would reflect badly on the honor of the speaker.

The custom of deferring to the feeling of others is manifest in *The Fathers*, particularly in the character of Major Buchan, and indicates a larger pattern of evasive discourse in the South. In the following examination of the evasive discourse in and of the text, Young is proven both partially correct and horribly mistaken in his assumptions. Indirection is both a blessing and a curse, a way of caring for the feelings of others and ignoring any opposition to the southern way of life promulgated in *I'll Take My Stand*.

## “Pleasant Hill”

Tate begins *The Fathers* by establishing ties between the fictional Buchan family and region; “the name of Buchan, obscure in origin, became assimilated to that unique order of society known latterly as the Virginian aristocracy” (3-4). The introductory section, “Pleasant Hill,” reveals the “rigid life” of the Buchan clan. Led by the Major, life at Pleasant Hill involves a regime of strict order and discipline. Masculine honor and gentlemanly behavior predominate. A portrait of Lacy’s grandfather reveals “he had never known fear” (22). Virginian honor dictated that, like his ancestors, Lacy appear invulnerable. Similarly, his masculine role model, the Major, speaks in “the standard English of the eighteenth century ... Speech was like manners, an expression of sensibility and taste” (17). In an aristocratic South, rhetorical form overshadowed content. The sensibility and taste reflected by regional practice meant that unsuitable subject matter be evaded or approached with caution.

Life at Pleasant Hill revolves around appearance. Running on the day of his mother’s funeral, Lacy doubts his behavior is appropriate, yet “I ran again, as if being out of sight made it proper” (8). Lacy knows that running away from the funeral will be seen as inappropriate, thus it must be hidden. He is proved right; for when George Posey runs off during the mother’s funeral, Mr. Higgins, the yeoman farmer and neighbor says “‘Boy,’ he said, ‘hit ain’t right fer a man to gallivant off on a day like this.’ ... perhaps I went far enough with Mr. Higgins to appreciate the correct sentiment that he had expressed. But now that he had expressed it I resented it” (12-13). Unable to break with

convention himself, Lacy is both shamed and excited by the possibilities of Posey's breech.

Unlike Posey, the Buchan clan doesn't run away from arduous content. They simply approach it with the discursive paradigm available to them, the indirect rhetoric of southern culture. For example, after the death of their mother, Semmes says to Lacy, "You didn't clean my boots this morning, sir!" A shy look came into his drooping eyes that told me he was saying that life went on, we had to go on as we had lived, without mother" (15). His coded, indirect language allows Semmes to communicate with Lacy without head-on violence. And Lacy, indoctrinated in this code, understands it for what it is, a comment about the death of their mother and not about shoes. Lacy does the same in connection with a different set of shoes. After George Posey gives him a rifle, he muses,

I thought out of gratitude for the gun I would offer to clean them [George's boots], as I did my big brother's and of course he'll say no, but it'll please him. Then I thought: he might not say no. And I decided to let Jack Lewis do it. I said - with my back half turned, I was so embarrassed, in the kind of rudeness that my mother took almost as seriously as lying - I said: "Well, good-by, Mr. George." (25)

Had George Posey been part of the Buchan's genteel framework, Lacy would undoubtedly have offered to clean his shoes, sure of his refusal. But given Posey's outsider status, Lacy cannot be sure Posey will understand his offer as it is intended, as a performative thank you for the gun and not a sincere offer to clean his boots. In the Buchans's understanding of manners, the offer itself would be enough, and the

performance of the overture would not necessarily demand further action. Lacy's initial belief that "of course" Posey would decline indicates he is barely aware that anyone could behave differently. But given Posey's inclination to disregard the social codes of the Buchan's genteel antebellum world, Lacy cannot take a chance that his soon to be brother-in-law will misunderstand his oblique route in thanking him.

One scene in particular typifies the rhetorical prevarications of the antebellum South. When George Posey comes to Pleasant Hill and neglects to follow proper protocol by formally announcing his presence to his hosts, the Major rebukes him by saying, "'Well, Mr. Posey, I am sorry that we had no opportunity to make you comfortable'" (33). Despite its apologetic wording, the Major's remark admits no fault on his own behalf but indirectly accuses Posey of bad behavior; he means to convey his disapproval of Posey's poor manners in deviating from the expected performance. He responds much the same way to Posey's generous gift of a gun to Lacy, saying, "I don't know that we are entitled to your kindness-no sir, I don't know that we are" (34). Both self-deprecating statements appear to assign fault to the Major and his family instead of Posey. Rather than address Posey's behavior directly, the Major's self-referential comments center on his own conduct and leave an opening for Posey to articulate an honorable apology. Posey, however, will not or cannot participate in the game.

Lacy soon realizes there is more to the conversation than surface appearance might indicate;

Why hadn't papa inquired after George's family, the first thing he always did when he met anybody, black or white? And why hadn't George asked about our

folks? I didn't understand it all then, but I soon did, in a few minutes; I knew that papa was telling George Posey *in a roundabout way, the way he always told unpleasant things*, that young men from distant places, like Georgetown, twenty-five miles away, who happened to become acquainted with one of his sons, had no claim upon any other member of his family. I suddenly became aware of the silence that had engulfed George Posey's remark. (34, my emphasis)

The Major's objection, like his admonition of George's previous behavior, cannot overtly express his disapproval. Lacy notes, "what papa had said to him would have blasted off the earth most of the people I knew, yet George Posey was affected not at all, and sat imperturbable at what I felt now was the end of the storm. Papa just looked bewildered. He could do no more - he had fired his heaviest charge short of insulting his son's invited guest" (35). Clearly the Major finds Posey's remark insulting but cannot behave in kind. His social framework provides no apparatus for processing and responding to Posey's behavior. The Major must tell unpleasant things in a roundabout way, but his oblique attempts go unrecognized. Lacy remembers,

Papa looked as if someone entitled to know all about it had denied the heliocentric theory or argued that there were no abolitionists in Boston. That was the first time I knew the meaning of the word aghast: he was aghast. But George Posey was calm. When I thought about it later I saw that there was nothing papa could do; his visitor hadn't been rude in any sense that papa knew rudeness; he had, as a matter of fact, been courteous. He had simply refused to recognize the only danger-signals that papa knew how to give, and he, George Posey, ought to have been the guardian of his own safety. That is what he was; but he sensed no danger. That papa was aghast was only due to his never having seen anybody like this young man. Papa had run into a panther, and he had fired a charge that had hitherto been good enough for his game; but the game had been rabbits. (36)

Ever the southern gentleman, the Major must approach his difficult subject circuitously through a series of codes Posey rejects or misconstrues. The apparent miscommunication

leaves the Major at a loss for words, devoid of ammunition in the face of an enemy playing by different rules.

The Major's roundabout style is easily disregarded by a player operating independently of the social norms governing the game, in this case the conversational etiquette of place and tradition. As Rubin states, "George Posey is the modern man; he possesses no code or social standard against which to measure his actions. He is impervious to Major Buchan's freezingly polite disapproval because he has no sense that it is disapproval. Each experience that Posey encounters is without precedent, because he has not tradition of social or moral behavior to inform his response" (*Wary* 319). Though Rubin may too hastily characterize Posey as unaware of his transgression, Posey operates outside any social restrictions about what may be said as opposed to what must be repressed or approached circuitously. He is often described as a man alone and devoid of social responsibility. His explanation for his rudeness comes after the fact. Lacy recognizes Posey's delayed but credible explanation as self-serving, knowing that Posey "was not now saying it by way of apology; he had saved it until he could use it to press an advantage. That my father had no inkling of this I saw in his still puzzled eyes ...he did not live among people who pressed advantages and he just couldn't take it in" (36-7).

The reason for Posey's pressing his hand soon becomes clear. He desires the Major's daughter, Susan;

George Posey got up and folded his arms. "Major Buchan," he said in an even voice, "I intend to marry your daughter." Papa tossed his head. Big man that he was, he was on his feet like an acrobat. He threw his head back and opened his mouth, but no words came. A look of innocent wonder spread over his face, the

incredulity he might have felt on first contemplating a flying-machine. (38)

Posey's scandalous pronouncement violates the stringent courting protocols which required hopeful suitors gain the father's permission before a marriage proposal. The Major's response to this violation of convention is further limited by notions of propriety. When Posey indicates that the Major's consent "wasn't necessary," the Major must wonder if his daughter's honor and reputation are compromised; "Has this fellow actually won my daughter, was the thought I could see in his face" (38). The exchange ends when George visits the ladies and the Major compliments him in front of the others, saying "he has the instincts of a gentleman!" (40). Here, the Major admits defeat the only way he knows how, graciously inviting his inevitable son-in-law to the family and delicately reminding those present that nothing unfavorable should be said against him. The direct statement of Posey's intention in lieu of the his asking permission leaves the Major with no recourse.

Lacy's remembrance of this exchange contains perhaps one of the most important passages in the book;

Our lives were eternally balanced upon a pedestal below which lay an abyss that I could not name. Within that invisible tension my father knew the moves of an intricate game he expected everybody else to play. That, I think, was because everything he was and felt was in the game itself; he had no life apart from it and was baffled, as he had been baffled by George Posey, by the threat of some untamed force that did not recognize the rules of his game. I admired George Posey even when I did not understand him, for I shared his impatience with the world as it was, as indeed every child must whose discipline is incomplete. He could do the things that I should lose the desire to do by the time I was grown and my own master. I remembered the only time I had seen my father blush; somebody had tried to tell him his private affairs, beginning, "If you will allow me to be personal," and papa blushed because he could never allow anybody to be

personal. (43-4)

For the Major, social regulation provides the only appropriate mode for personal interaction. For Lacy, though Posey's brash individualism attracts him, his mature point of view allows him the distance to recognize his discipline to the social order as incomplete. This implies that, in the end, discipline remains preferable to the abyss. The social game and its reliance on indirect discourse provides a way in which to avoid the moral void of the abyss. Though Lacy the adolescent suffers from a conflict of ideologies, Lacy the mature narrator recognizes this conflict as the product of an incomplete socialization, a character flaw.

At this point, the Major's evasive social decorum should be axiomatic given the preceding evidence and the focus of this study. But we cannot exhaustively consider what the Major evades and how he evades it without looking to the Posey family's brushes with indirection as well. Though the two behaviors appear superficially similar, the impetuses behind each distinguish one from the other along the lines of regional practices and norms. Specifically, what the Major avoids reaffirms his engagement with agrarian social values of gentility and hospitality,<sup>19</sup> while what the Poseys avoid reaffirms their individualized, industrialist, capitalist status.

The first instance of George Posey's evasiveness comes when he and the Major encounter a young bull let loose in a cow pasture. As the bull attempts to mount a cow Posey blushes; "He looked helpless and betrayed. I saw papa give him a sharp, critical glance, and then he said, 'Mr. Posey, excuse me, I have some business with Mr. Higgins.

I will ask Lacy here to take you back to the house.’ Papa’s eyes were on the ground while George mastered himself” (45). What is part and parcel of the natural order embarrasses the man from Washington D.C. whose money comes from profiteering and questionable trading. But despite the Major’s imperative to avoid the indelicate, procreation simply comprises part of the natural world, against which there is no taboo. Tate’s essay “The Angelic Imagination” argues of sexuality, “The carnal act [is] a commitment to the order of nature, without which the higher knowledge [of the soul] is not possible to man” (404). Southern discourse dictates avoidance of the unmentionable, but definitions of disagreeable subject matter differ across cultural lines. Lacy recalls a time his mother explained that a bull in similar circumstances was there “on business.” Given the idealization of southern womanhood, and female purity in particular, perhaps Mrs. Buchan’s nonchalance toward animal husbandry is surprising. But the sexual nature of the bull’s visit sustains an integral part of the plantation’s economy and, thus, as part of an agrarian life, is embraced as natural behavior. Industrialist George Posey cannot understand its public place.

Posey’s refusal to attend Mrs. Buchan’s funeral comprises the other important example of his noncompliance with the region’s cultural habits, a pattern he later repeats by avoiding his own dead mother’s room. From the procreation of livestock to the end of human life, the agrarian spirit accepted the life cycle as part of the natural order, but Posey lacks ties to this tradition. Lacy explains, “My new brother George had needed intensely to leave, to escape from the forms of death which were, to us, only the

<sup>19</sup> A more detailed discussion of this issue is taken up later in this chapter in relation to *I’ll Take My Stand*,

completion of life, and in which there could be nothing personal, but in which what we were deep inside found a sufficient expression” (23). For the Buchans, social ritual offers protection and personal identity. As Rubin notes,

the idea of death is terrible and threatening to [Posey], since he cannot imagine it as gentled by ritual. Thus he can only try to ignore it; he will not attend Mrs. Buchan’s funeral; he will not visit his dead mother’s room. Unprotected by moral forms or social ceremonies, he is exposed to the brute force of raw, elemental nature, to master it or be mastered as he must be. (*Wary* 319)

George Posey has fled the funeral and says of the mourners, “They’ll all starve to death, that’s what they’ll do. They do nothing but die and marry and think about the honor of Virginia” (107). The rituals, and the honor they supposedly produce, fall to the practical concerns of the capitalist.

But while Posey runs from notions of southern masculinity, Lacy embraces them. Though temporarily seduced by the lure of a man who “could never have anything to do with death,” in the end he chooses family, and by extension, southern tradition (14). As Lacy puts flowers in his mother’s casket, he decides “the ritual in which I was about to participate became an heroic quest” (88). Lacy’s idea that he would be a “gentleman” when grown and his adherence to the chivalric code suggested by the quest motif contrasts Posey’s refusal to attend the funeral, a slap in the face to ritualistic codes of honor. Lacy ultimately follows his father’s preeminently southern example. At his wife’s funeral “the old gentleman was crushed but in his sorrow he knew what everybody else was feeling, and in his high innocence he required that they know it too and be as and particularly the ideas of Stark Young.

polite as he” (98). However, his first thought is immediately for his guests; “I hope I have not neglected any of our friends” (98). Thus, the son embraces the ritualistic chivalry of the father and hence the agrarian tradition of the South.

Posey expressly rejects this tradition. An important nod to courtly tradition is the Fairfax County gentleman’s tournament, complete with Parade of Chivalry, jousting, and laurel crowns for the winning knight’s “Queen of Love and Beauty.” These ceremonies recreate the highly ritualistic chivalric traditions of medieval Great Britain; as the tournament commentator explains, “It is beyond disputation that the chivalry of this County is unsurpassed in our State, which in turn is unsurpassed in the world for cultivation of the manly arts of Nimrod and Mars - the hunting field and the field of war ... those great and ancient preoccupations of manhood handed on by our English sires as eminently befitting the notice of janetlemen” (66). Mark Jancovich argues, “The culture of the Old South is presented as one that was organized around rituals, games, and formal manners, all of which are seen as ways of dealing with ‘the abyss’: the chaos which underpins social reality” (115). Consequently, more than simply a test of skill and strength, the tournament has moral significance insofar as it holds together the very fabric of society. Despite George Posey’s participation, he clearly rejects the ceremonies as ridiculous and disrupts the proceedings by breaking with custom. Though he gives his colors to Susan, she doesn’t wear them and doesn’t blush “as any other girl would” when called to the podium in her hoop skirt to accept the crown (69). Her refusal to participate in the public ritual indicates her thorough integration to Posey’s private, unsocialized world.

After beating local competitor and former tournament winner John Langton, Posey must crown his future wife, but Lacy notes that he “looked again at the wreath, a little ruefully, and I felt that he was about to do something ridiculous, and I think he felt it too” (70). Instead of crowning Susan, he drops the wreath in her lap and laughs. The drunken Langton receives the gesture as a violent one and when he challenges Posey to a duel, Posey immediately accepts only to undermine the ceremonial nature of the proceedings. First, he subverts the ritual by claiming “I don’t want a less public place... I’d prefer the Court House yard” (71). Despite the traditionally public nature of the tournament, southern custom dictates that the gentlemen settle the dispute privately. After proving his marksmanship with a well aimed practice shot, Posey punches Langton on the chin shunning the expected ritualistic duel for the more personal fisticuffs. The go-between then remarks, “Mr. Posey agreed to come out here and there was only one thing to come for. Not for this” (75-6). Posey’s refusal to participate in the ritualistic chivalry of the South is clear.

Several additional examples of Pleasant Hill’s evasive discourse permeate this section. When Cousin John denounces Posey’s behavior as “outrageous” he qualifies his statement, saying, “I ain’t judging him” (81). Despite his assertion to the contrary, his comment clearly means to pass judgment; however, given the delicate nature of his opinion, calling into question the character of Major Buchan’s inevitable son-in-law, he must meliorate his pronouncement in a way that removes any overt offense. The post-tournament relationship between the Langton and Posey families attests to the rule of silence surrounding matters damaging to the appearance of familial nobility. Lacy

remembers,

the families were as intimate as ever, the Langtons *never having mentioned it to any of us, assuming that John's behavior had better be ignored because it could not be defended*; we, for our part, and papa especially, were happy to accept that view, since John Langton's boorishness on that now famous occasion had left Brother George's conduct in a better light than it would have deserved had his opponent been an honorable man. (86, my emphasis)

Like all good southerners, these two families evade what cannot be justified. It is to the good of all, therefore, that the subject is dropped.

A final example of Pleasant Hill's code of silence is Cousin John's relationship with longtime mistress, Miss Maggie, "the woman mother never mentioned, and she was never more civil to Cousin John" (57). When publicly confronted he responds, "My friends, there has been an allusion to my private life. It would be as contemptible of me to evade that allusion as it was of my fellow citizen to make it... I am a man... Gentlemen, I did not enter this race as a gelding" (58). The "unseemly" relationship between John and Maggie is publicly acknowledged only in self defense. The man responsible tries to run but is beaten and his head held under the town water pump. Another spectator says to Lacy, "The idea of hollerin' out about Miss Maggie. Why she's nobody's business but the jedge's" (59). Violation of the code of silence results in community endorsed violence. Interestingly, an old man incorrectly speculates that the transgressor is a Yankee when he is in fact a local boy. His conjecture implies that only someone unfamiliar with the southern code of indirection would make such a blunder. In this world, nobody mentions the unmentionable without consequence.

## Gothic

As Donaldson notes, anxieties over race and gender often lurk under the surface of southern literature by white men, as the title of her anthology with Goodwyn-Jones, *Haunted Bodies*, suggests. Ghostly presences provide a foundational element of gothic convention, the ambiguities of which saturate the latter sections of *The Fathers*. But Tate's novel is not only haunted by the figurative specter of female or African American writers. It is also quite literally populated with disturbing and ambiguous characters and events which align it with the gothic tradition. Though the term "gothic" is by no means a stable category, traditionally gothic fiction incorporates several identifiable elements. Fred Botting explains,

Gothic fictions ... promote vice and violence, giving free reign to selfish ambitions and sexual desire beyond the prescriptions of law of familial duty. By nefarious means Gothic villains usurp rightful heirs, rob reputable families of property and reputation while threatening the honour of their wives and orphaned daughters. Illegitimate power and violence is not only put on display but threatens to consume the world of civilized and domestic values. In the skeletons that leap from family closets and the erotic and often incestuous tendencies of Gothic villains there emerges the awful spectre of complete social disintegration in which virtues cedes to vice, reason to desire, law to tyranny. Uncertainties about the nature of power, law, society, family and sexuality dominate Goth fiction. (4-5)

Further, Leslie Fiedler argues that "male" gothic is Oedipal, and David Punter categorizes the gothic as a "dialectic of civilisation [sic] and barbarism (xiii). Punter and Glennis Byron note that the subgenre of southern gothic texts, of which Faulkner is the

progenitor,

appropriates elements of the traditional Gothic, combines them with the particular concerns of the American South, and is characterized by an emphasis on the grotesque, the macabre and, very often, the violent [and] ... investigate[s] madness, decay and despair, and the continuing pressures of the past upon the present, particularly with respect to the lost ideals of a dispossessed Southern aristocracy and to the continuance of racial hostilities. (116-17)

Finally, as Allan Lloyd-Smith puts it, southern gothic explores the “political horror of a failed utopianism” (120).

*The Fathers* unmistakably meets these demarcations of the gothic, and in particular, the southern gothic. At its core, the novel is, as a fictionalization of Tate’s ancestry and an intergenerational text, a family drama. The interracial and quasi-incestuous familial relationships between Jane and Yellow Jim as well as Jane and Lacy, evinces the violation of sexual taboos Botting establishes as part of gothic convention. George Posey’s industrialism and raw capitalistic nature situate him as gothic villain, while his courtship and marriage to Susan threaten her honorable status as a symbol of southern womanhood. The decline and fall of Pleasant Hill and the rise of the “illegitimate” Posey with no ties to place or tradition evinces the social disintegration Botting argues for as inherently gothic. The frightful images of white nightgowns floating through hallways, unseen eyes peeping from behind cracked doors, unstable relatives’ wild rants, and the dark interior of the Posey mansion establish the ghostly uncertainties associated with gothic tenets. Moreover, the Major and George Posey’s vying for Lacy’s affections, indeed, who will prevail as his ideological, metaphorical and

epistemological father, positions the text squarely in line with other gothic texts fraught with the paternal anxieties and complications noted by Fiedler. Further, Punter's dialectic of civilization clearly aligned with the Major, and barbarism associated with the "uncivilized" Posey, completes the notion of *The Fathers* as an unqualified gothic text. Finally, the Buchans' loss of Pleasant Hill and its lifestyle reflects Lloyd-Smith's definition of southern gothicism as failed utopia.

The gothic nature of Tate's text serves as a way to approach his subject obliquely, as I will argue in subsequent chapters is also the case with Tennessee Williams' use of plastic theater and Lewis Nordan's use of magical realism and gothicism as well. In these three cases, each author uses non-realistic devices to both distance and render approachable the dangerous realities of the texts' content. Robert Miles argues that "original" gothic writer Matthew Lewis' novels *The Monk* and *The Castle Spectre*, "both feature unspeakable secrets" and that, "*The Monk's* central narrative principle is to cloak, transparently, the 'unspeakable'" (51, 52). In *The Fathers*, gothicism both cloaks the realities of the antebellum South's reliance on chattel slavery and other uncomfortable or explosive issues and provides a space where those realities might be explored. As Massé puts it,

Using condensation, displacement and various representational modes as tools, we carefully rework our desires into the stuff of dreams, in which we can safely experience what we do not want to acknowledge in waking life...In literature, we weave the beautifully elaborated fabric of language that lets us articulate what could not otherwise be known or said, not only for ourselves but for others also. (229)

Similarly, Jerrold Hogle argues, “The longevity and power of Gothic fiction unquestionably stem from the way it helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural” (4). Lewis’ transparent cloaking, Massé’s displaced experience of what the psyche shuns, and Hogle’s notion of how gothicism both addresses and disguises anxieties all undergird the view that gothic devices paradoxically provide both distance from and access to the otherwise unspeakable. For Tate, the duality of gothic elements provides the comfort of alienation from the unspeakable and entrance to talk about, or at least begin to broach, issues of race, sexual violence, family loyalty, cultural decline, and miscegenation.

As Punter and Byron explain, gothicism is particularly prevalent in southern fiction. Tate’s use of the gothic draws from a long tradition in southern letters, particularly from Poe, whom Tate greatly admired. In “Our Cousin, Mr. Poe” Tate notes, “he is so close to me that I am sometimes tempted to enter the mists of pre-American genealogy to find out whether he may not actually be my cousin” (400). *The Fathers* alludes directly to the American gothic master, as Lacy says, “I remembered the meaning, if not the words, of one of Poe’s tales: *No man need succumb to death utterly except by his own feeble will*” (80). This association aligns Tate even further with the thematic and structural conventions of specifically southern gothicism. But perhaps the best example of *The Fathers*’ conflated southern and gothic elements is Lacy’s explanation of Susan’s hair, which has inexplicably turned white overnight; “What could Doctor Cartwright have made of Susan’s white hair? Well, he was a Virginia gentleman

and he would have ignored it” (272). The link between the explicitly southern Virginian and the impulse to ignore the startling and unexplained transformation in Susan manifests the theme of this entire study; good southerners don’t mention what is better left unsaid.

### The Crisis

The gothic begins to surface in *The Fathers*’ second section, “The Crisis,” which moves the action of the text to Georgetown and the home of the Poseys where private, rather than public, concerns take precedence. The change proves a shock to the newly wed Susan who “could not have imagined a family that did not live by rigid order wherein everything meant something, whose meaning had long been agreed upon” (184).

Public consensus ruled private decorum in Pleasant Hill but not the industrialized

Georgetown. Lacy notes,

Our domestic manners and satisfactions were as impersonal as the United States Navy, the belief widely held today, that men may live apart from the political order, that indeed the only humane and honorable satisfactions must be gained in spite of the public order, would have astonished most men of that time as a remote fantasy, impossible of realization. (125-6)

The lack of public order leaves the Poseys without the protective cover of “civilization.”

Lacy explains, “the Posey’s were more refined than the Buchan’s, but less civilized”

(179). Yet they are doomed because, as Lacy supposes, “excessively refined persons

have a communion with the abyss; but is not civilization the agreement, slowly arrived at,

to let the abyss alone?” (185-86). The Posey’s cultivated lifestyle offers no protection

outside the protective sphere of socially constructed norms, the horror of which aligns an

unmannerly world with a gothic abyss.

“The Crisis” also offers a look at evasions practiced by the Posey clan which differ greatly from the Major’s genteel indirection. Of the elderly Posey women, Lacy explains, “On the rare occasions when they came downstairs to chatter with some of the old ladies of the town, Miss Milly would vaguely sniff if money, childbirth, or poverty were mentioned, and Aunt Jane Anne could not admit that common people were real - ‘It is just too painful that they should exist’ (184). Again, Tate reiterates that money does not establish nobility. While not addressing the “unspeakable” is a large part of the Buchan, and southern, rhetorical strategy, the Posey women’s reluctance to acknowledge poverty and “commonness” is not shared by the Buchans. In the South, participation in public ritual offers social status and a lack of financial resources matters little. Aunt Milly’s aversion to talking about childbirth mirrors George Posey’s embarrassment at the visiting bull in the cow pasture. The capitalistic Poseys equate human worth with financial solvency and ignore the importance of agrarian concerns like the natural connection between birth and death. Both common people and the cycle of life have a specific role in an agrarian society; thus they may be acknowledged since there is a cultural framework to which they conform, by which they may be understood. For the Poseys, what must be avoided differs from what must be avoided by the Buchans insofar as it destroys rather than promotes the civilization which keeps the abyss at bay. While approaching the unapproachable might rouse the Poseys’ snobbery and class discrimination in a private sense, any violation of Pleasant Hill’s social order threatens to undermine the whole of southern culture and thus the stakes are high for the southern characters in avoiding troublesome subjects.

“The Abyss”

*The Fathers*' final section, “The Abyss,” is the most gothic, ambiguously plotted and less realistic than the previous two. Susan learns of her two brothers', Semmes' and Lacy's, attraction to George Posey's sister Jane, and, soon after, the enslaved half brother of Posey, Yellow Jim, is found in Jane's room. It is unclear if he has raped Jane and equally unclear whether Susan has had a hand in facilitating her sister-in-law's presumed attack. Law argues,

The maze of ambiguities of the rape scene and its aftermath takes us near the heart of the society which produced Lacy. The narrator very strangely keeps crucial information to himself, mulling over his knowledge but not sharing it either with the other characters or with the reader. It is therefore impossible to reconstruct exactly what his knowledge consists of, but his reticence and at least part of his knowledge seem related to a previous scene, one nearly as ambiguous as the present one.<sup>20</sup> (361)

Lacy can only imply that Susan has framed Yellow Jim; “I considered the rest of it but I could not make myself say more. I felt that I had said all I was entitled to say: it was what I had heard and seen, and it was really all that I had known: from it Semmes ought to be able to know as much as I did” (248). The miasma surrounding the incident reflects the desire, terror, sexual anxiety, and psychological disorientation of gothic convention. gy.

Along with its gothic elements, the lack of clarity surrounding the events may partially result from Lacy's adolescence, which provides him the cover of innocence.

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<sup>20</sup> Law notes that in the previous scene with Lacy and Jane, “the narrator appears anxious not to specify” the nature of his encounter with Jane arguing that his remark “When *it* was over” (*The Fathers* 198) could

However, Tate's narratological choice in establishing the scene through Lacy's memory absolves him of responsibility to explain the tricky situation. Like Lacy, who has said all he is "entitled" to say, Tate declines to clarify the incident. If Semmes can determine what happened for himself, Tate seems to imply, the same should pertain to the perspicacious reader. Interestingly, Law notes that the scene takes us near the heart of society, not the narrator, but the circumstances and region that produced him. When Semmes kills Yellow Jim and Posey retaliates, Lacy frets over how to tell his father; "Could I tell it all? Had I the right to tell what happened on the rocky ledge the night of May twenty-third? I said: I will tell papa first what I saw in Alexandria the next morning, and let him ask me why I was there, and little by little I can bring it out" (269). Lacy must approach the difficult point through circuitous means, bringing the truth out "little by little" and only at the behest of his listener/father, both of which southern tradition demand. The cryptic scene thus reflects the reluctance of southern culture to closely examine the matter as Lacy's silence acts as a metaphor for the South's, and the author's, refusal to directly tackle the issues surrounding miscegenation, sexual violence, racial fratricide, and racial scapegoating.

In "*The Fathers: A Postsouthern Reading*," Kreyling takes Tate to task for Lacy's, and *The Father's*, evasion of slavery's ills.

Schematic interpretation of *The Fathers* as meaning the how and why of the annihilation by modern industrial capitalism of the stable order of tradition is undermined when we see how the narrative evades the economic grounding of the

refer to the kiss or to Lacy's loss of virginity.

traditional order itself. The defining of some human beings as commodities is usually attributed to George Posey. Lionel Trilling might have been the first to notice that George Posey rides into the tournament on the back of Yellow Jim. But we can only preserve this neat schematic reading by ignoring Lacy's own evasion of the economic facts of Pleasant Hill. (197)

Kreyling convincingly points to three specific instances of Lacy's willful refusal to address chattel slavery and its repercussions. First, after watching slave Henry Jackson delivering wood to the house and hearing Semmes pronounce that Pleasant Hill has too many Negroes, Lacy explains how those episodes provided "my introduction to the world where people counted and added things, the first intrusion of change in to my consciousness, and I only dimly knew what it meant" (9). Kreyling notes that Lacy's evasion of slavery is "keyed to the phrase 'counted ... things'; Semmes counts *people* (198) and that it is the southern/agrarian Semmes who does so, not the capitalist Posey. Secondly, Kreyling notes the scene where, gazing out over the plantation and its slave quarters, Lacy's attention follows the driveway up the road leading away from Pleasant Hill and ultimately rests on the waters of the Potomac leading to cities beyond the main. In other words, he glosses over the realities of chattel slavery in favor of attention to avenues of escape. Finally, as to the scene under the bleachers with the Mulatto girl, Kreyling argues, "Almost all critiques omit this episode from their exhibits. Mizener does cite it, yet evades its import by turning to a literary comparison of Wink Broadacre ...[as] Tom Sawyer (xiv). Who can think of Tom Sawyer implicated in fornication and possibly incest?" (199). In each of these three examples, both Lacy and the narrative approach and then retreat from the realities of the South's "peculiar institution."

Kreyling further argues that Lacy, “‘dimly’ recognizes the presence of history (change) in his enclave of tradition because full recognition would be the acknowledgment of the abyss” (198). In the traditional southern mode, whatever cannot be convincingly explained must be viewed in a dim and indistinct light or semantically evaded.

Kreyling is not the first to note that Tate’s refusal to explicitly address the issue of slavery mars *The Fathers*. In “Last Days of the Charming Lady,” written as a response to H.L. Mencken’s anti-southern diatribe “The Sahara of the Bozart” and aimed at a southern audience whom he wanted to examine their own misguided tendency toward sentimentalizing the past, Tate “carefully avoided any explicit mention of slavery, he attributed the fear of ideas and the disdain for the intellect that governed literary tastes in the antebellum South to the region’s doomed commitment to ‘the permanence of a special politico-economic order’” (Underwood 113-114). Mencken also criticized Tate’s “Remarks on the Southern Religion,” in which Tate explained how the South’s lack of religious tradition led to defeat in the Civil War. Mencken charged that Tate “delicately wriggled around the most pressing of all Southern questions” (Underwood 380). In 1953 Tate’s contemporary and friend Walter Sullivan noted, “Posey’s intention is morally neutral. The intention of the ante-bellum society was good. But there were rents in its armor, gaps in the philosophy on which it was built,” but he himself declines to name those flaws specifically (“Novelists” 115). Similarly, Jimmy Cantrell maintains of *The Fathers*,

Major Buchan’s personal tragedy, which Tate extends to the entire South, is that he refuses to recognize the incompatibility of his familially based idealism and

chattel slavery... The planter class ... and Major Buchans, base[s] its genteel society on chattel slavery: the deprivation of human liberty. The ...George Poseys recognize this fact and act accordingly; they take what they desire without pretending to honor the code of paternalism or the sense of family that undergirds that code. In so doing, they not only threaten the ... Major Buchans economically; they also question the very basis of the society. (208-9)

Slavery reveals the Achilles heel of the antebellum South, the refusal to recognize the basic inhumanity and incivility of the slavery underpinning civilized southern culture. Lacy's civilization demands the abyss be let alone; the obvious problem remains that ignoring the abyss merely perpetuates the willful ignorance which ironically allows it to exist and thus subverts the nature of the "civilized" culture itself.

That discussion of slavery attacks the very fabric of traditional southern culture was not lost on Tate's fellow Agrarian Donald Davidson who objected to the "rape" scene. In a letter to Tate, Davidson writes, "You seem here to play into the hands of our Yankee torturers" (qtd. in Rubin *Wary* 267). Rubin notes, "The idea that Tate might, in a novel about the antebellum South, desire to portray the worst as well as the best effects of slavery was inconceivable to Davidson. His view on the proper treatment of slavery in literature was more or less that of southern newspaper editors of the 1850s: It must not be criticized, for it would aid the attack on the South" (*Wary* 262). Apparently, the southern practice of hushing up discourse concerning the peculiar institution continued well into the modern age.

If cultural concerns proved sufficient reason for avoiding the subject of slavery,

artistic concerns added fuel to the fire. Donaldson notes that anxieties about race<sup>21</sup> and gender underpin much white, male writing;

Even though the southern literary canon has traditionally been defined as white, male, and conservative - and Tate has had a large hand in defining that canon - the profession of letters in the South and its accompanying literary texts have always had a peculiarly haunted air, an aura of repressed ghosts besieging the white male writers and destabilizing his writing. Tate's testiness, in fact, might well have a good deal to do with his half acknowledged suspicion that lying both within and without the monumentalized surface of the white patriarchal writer he earnestly sought to celebrate is a potent rival and Other - the figure of the black trickster, defined by fluidity and open possibility. (493)

Tate was open about his agenda in reclaiming southern letters from feminization, but he remained largely silent on the subject of black authors, at least in writing; however, it seems appropriate to assume from incidents like his refusal to meet Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson during their stop at Vanderbilt that his opinion was not favorable. While Tate might have indirectly acknowledged the evils of slavery, he could not imagine a racially integrated southern social system or accept an integrated belletristic forum. Black voices had never been a part of the "official" or "traditional" southern culture Tate and the Agrarians sought to further, and they intended to keep it that way.

Donaldson explains of earlier writers,

white southern men of letters were quick to deplore abolitionist agitation ... but they remained stubbornly, fiercely silent on the subject of slave narratives - except perhaps to join in the chorus of accusations accusing their writers of being frauds. Slave narratives might have been referred to obliquely as yet another example of what [John Pendleton] Kennedy called 'abolitionist mischief,' but they were never acknowledged as literary works by white southern commentators

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<sup>21</sup> Donaldson draws from Toni Morrison here, whose theories I revisit explicitly in Chapter Four in relation to Lewis Nordan.

and certainly never claimed as southern literature. (499)

In terms of legitimating black authors and their visions of the South, Allen Tate followed the lead of Kennedy and others who maintained white male hegemonic control of “southern” literature.

Allen Tate’s *The Fathers* evinces the cultural practice of evasive conversational etiquette through the dialogue and behaviors of its characters. Similarly, Tate struggled with a similar injunction of silence when addressing the faults of the antebellum South as well as his own character. In the end, *The Fathers* sporadically adheres to code of indirection, seemingly caught, like its narrator, between Major Buchan’s romantic Old South ideal and Posey’s violence to the old code needed to operate in a modern world. It vacillates between the two, one minute decrying the old myth of moonlight and magnolias and attacking anything the least bit romantic, the next touting the virtue of the very same and adhering to its cultural mandates. The novel addresses the implications of chattel slavery but declines to do so directly, leaving a paradoxical legacy that seemingly reveals the tragic flaws of the antebellum order, yet does so in a way that simultaneously obfuscates as much as it exposes. This pattern of evasion ties Tate’s personal identification as a southern gentleman and his use of gothic devices to regional codes of discursive etiquette.

Perhaps the final scene depicting the Yankee takeover of Pleasant Hill best exemplifies the southern compulsion or compassion to elide the unthinkable. When Mr.

Higgins tells the Major that he is now the owner of the plantation, “Papa was not listening to him” (273). Similarly, young Lacy tries to evade the question of what happened to the slaves; “‘Our people,’ I said to myself. ‘Our people. I turned to Jim Higgins trying to evade it’” (303). Ultimately, the Major hangs himself rather than see the traditions he has spent his life upholding vanish. In a world in which public image governed moral exchange, defeat was unthinkable to the southern gentleman. Tate’s identification with the southern elite led him, like the Virginia doctor who ignores Susan’s inexplicably white hair, to evade those facets of his culture which would overtly challenge the sympathetic, though ultimately doomed, image of Pleasant Hill.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE OBLIQUE TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: HONESTY WITH TASTE

In a 1969 interview, Tennessee Williams explained, “I always try to write obliquely... I am not a direct writer; I am always an oblique writer, if I can be; I want to be allusive” (qtd. in Waeger 129). Scholars have attributed what Williams calls his oblique style to two factors. First, Williams made the remark specifically in relation to his concept of plastic theater, which enhances the presence of non-diagetic devices<sup>22</sup> on stage. Plastic theater, he believed, could present the ambiguities of truth *more* realistically than straightforward or photographic replication of detail. Such an approach recognizes the futility of attempting to trap or compartmentalize the complexities of reality and thus presents truth or reality not in spite of - but through - its subjectivities.

Secondly, though Williams began his career in the mid-twentieth-century when homosexuality was still largely condemned, his texts have always approached issues of sexual orientation, whether allusively - as in early works like *The Glass Menagerie* - or more directly - as in *Memoirs* and later works like *Hard Candy and Other Stories*. Critics debate whether Williams’ treatment of sexual identity succumbs to McCarthyism’s predominant anti-homosexual discourse or represents a courageous step in daring to address the matter at all. And while I tend to side with those who argue that Williams’

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<sup>22</sup> The use of sound, lighting, flexible sets, screens, projections, and pantomime, among other devices.

mention of homosexuality, indirect or otherwise, constitutes personal and artistic bravery to approach Williams' oblique style solely in terms of queer or dramatic theories neglects an important part of his personal history and its impact on his oblique dialogue and staging methods.

Both plastic theater and issues of sexual orientation fall short of fully elucidating Williams' unique dramaturgy, what he reveals, what he implies, and what he chooses to hide, in short, the full range of reasons for his ambiguity, obliqueness, elusiveness, and evasions. I believe an important component missing<sup>23</sup> from study of Williams' oblique style is his life long identification as a southerner and his understanding of the codes of southern linguistic etiquette. As we have seen, the South dictates more subtle, less direct, and always gracious conversation as the dominant social norm. I argue that Williams' oblique style is not only a product of culturally silenced homosexual dialogue and attempts at a new form of theater, but also the result of the author's upbringing in the South and his familiarity with regionally established codes of rhetorical evasion. This chapter examines the tension between competing impulses to reject "unseemly" subject matter as unspeakable or to embrace its truths, even if they come at the expense of propriety. Moreover, rather than challenge the importance of queer studies and plastic theater in Williams' work, the overlay of a regional lens informs both these approaches in valuable ways, showing the distinctive historical perceptions of homosexuality in the South and how Williams, like Tate and Nordan, employs nonrealistic devices in an effort to more fully explore an elusive truths.

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<sup>23</sup> A notable exception is Kimball King's "Tennessee Williams: A Southern Writer" (1995) which seeks to address the fact that "surprising little has been said about his [Williams'] debt to Southern literary

This chapter first examines Williams' early biography and establishes how young Tom internalized the South's, and particularly his mother's, dictum that etiquette dominate social interaction. These rules profoundly influenced Williams' personal relationships and his texts, leading to a moral clash where he alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, embraces and renounces the manners learned in his youth. I then closely examine the specifically rhetorical and dialogic nature of Williams' oblique style<sup>24</sup> in the characters of his early dramas, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and contrast those texts with his later, more explicit, and lesser known texts.

For Williams, the South of his childhood provided a backdrop for his early and best known plays. The works discussed here are perhaps the "most southern" of his texts and thus provide cogent examples of the culturally imperative evasive discourse discussed in Chapter One. In these texts, Williams' characters exhibit an unwillingness or inability to directly acknowledge the changed social and economic circumstances of the postbellum South or to broach any subject that might shatter their illusions of civility. As critical response to Williams' work has long noted, his southern characters, unable to face reality or to talk about the present with certainty, retreat into an idealized past or attempt to reestablish the past as present and refuse to comment candidly on the crises at hand. Still, it is important to note that evasion does not imply unawareness, as both Amanda Wingfield and Blanche Dubois are perfectly cognizant of their predicaments.

conventions or his regional bias" (627).

<sup>24</sup> With the exception of homosexuality which, although discussed here briefly, is more thoroughly examined independently later in the chapter.

They are not only aware of their declines but obsessively so, and their elisions are less about admitting the facts to themselves as they are in establishing a convivial veneer for others. The inability to cope with a changing landscape, one which devalued the genteel and chivalrous southern ideal, provides one of the primary foundations for rhetorical evasion in postbellum writing and particularly for Williams' anachronistic southern characters. Further, dramatic tension evolves specifically from the conflict of characters' engagement with and transgression of the conversational customs of the South which dictate attention to appearance over substance.

Williams' first major commercial success, *The Glass Menagerie*, contains perhaps the most anachronistically southern character of his entire canon, Amanda Wingfield. Amanda exemplifies the displaced southern belle desperately clinging to a bygone era and its veneer of social gentility which dictates that anything violating the appearance of propriety be ignored or expressed in a carefully flattering light. Two years after Amanda's character rocketed to archetypal status as the fading, southern aristocratic lady, Blanche Dubois appeared to challenge her place as the preeminent example of wilted southern womanhood. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* Blanche, much like Amanda, struggles to navigate a world that has largely left the Old South's manners and etiquette behind. However, unlike Amanda who rarely lets down the genteel mask of the belle, Blanche engages in frank discussion to a greater degree. Her situation forces direct conversation which vacillates between coy flirtations - steadfastly avoiding any mention of the unpleasant - and her "frank" discussions with Stanley. Both Amanda and Blanche prove unsuccessful in their attempts to carve a place for the old ways in a new world.

Yet at the end of both texts, despite their defeats, the women ultimately emerge with a sort of victorious dignity; they face the difficult truth with good manners even when inevitably doomed.

The evasive and evolving nature of Williams' characters thus established, I then delineate how, like his characters, Williams' transgression of regional codes of silence and evasion changes over time. Williams increasingly depicts homosexuality and other more controversial subjects (most notably heterosexual sex and profanity) overtly the further he progresses in his life and career. But he also experiments more heavily with extra-diagetic devices in his later texts, the increased use of which facilitates the oblique approach Williams refers to in the quotation which opens this chapter. Moreover, although Williams' texts progress from circuitous or veiled presentation of taboo or socially sensitive issues, his *Memoirs* and interviews indicate he strove simultaneously for both sensitivity and truth. Simply put, over the course of his career Williams becomes less evasive on a personal level and more evasive on a professional one. Though it may be too strong to speculate that Williams uses plastic theater to a greater degree in his later texts to compensate for his explicit subject matter, the complicated relationship between the two demonstrates the perpetual battle between his needs to expose and evade.

The clash of ambiguity, which often connotes a hidden truth, and reality reflects what I see as two important themes in Williams' style: first, that plastic theater's ambiguity provides a more accurate depiction of reality than might otherwise be accessible, and second, that the tension between ambiguity and reality creates one of the

defining merits of Williams' drama. In both plays, illusion appears preferable to reality, and yet paradoxically, may also facilitate access to reality while retaining one's good southern reputation. While Williams and his characters often evade the truth for personal or socially prescribed reasons, they also use illusion to construct spaces where reality may be confronted. In other words, if ugly or socially prohibited realities are part of the equation, illusion and obliquity are the ways to manage them. Some examples of this practice end badly, such as Blanche's inability to operate in a modern world, and some result in artistic richness, such as Williams' use of plastic theater. Thus, the evasive rhetorical practices of Williams himself, the similar practices of his characters, and the concept of plastic theater allows Williams the freedom to explore controversial issues while maintaining his status as a southern gentleman well steeped in the manners and conversational mannerisms of the South. As Williams said of truthfulness, "There are two kinds: honesty with taste, and honesty without it" (*Memoirs* 243). Attempting simultaneous disclosure and evasion, that is, getting at the truth or the point in a roundabout way is, I argue, part of southern cultural language traits. It is Williams' identification with the southern gentleman (or, as he later suggested, the southern lady) that compels him to strive for tastefulness while simultaneously attempting to honestly express issues of sexual orientation and other controversial subjects in his portrayal of the nebulous truth of universal human experience. My aim here is less to argue that evasive rhetorical practices are either good or bad for its practitioners, its listeners, and its art than to show the myriad ways, some positive, some negative, this convention operates in Williams' texts.

## Biography and Region

The influence of region on Williams is indisputable. Anthologized in W.W. Norton's *The Literature of the American South*, the name Tennessee Williams is frequently mentioned along with Twain, Faulkner, O'Connor and Welty as a quintessentially Southern author. Kenneth Holditch and Richard Freeman Leavitt note:

Expressions of devotion to the South are typical of the playwright...no writer of this century more than Williams, who was strongly influenced by his Mississippi youth and his many years of residence in New Orleans and Key West, has been as markedly southern in his choice of settings, characters, plots, and themes. Mention of his name evokes for readers and playgoers all over the world a vivid image of the Deep South. No influence, other than his family and his sexual orientation, had as much influence on shaping the dramatist's work as the South that produced him. (x)

Even Williams' chosen moniker ties him closely with his southern heritage.

Given his close alliance with place, there is no doubt that the Deep South's insistence on decorum profoundly influenced Williams, who once said, "I have learned ... that the further south you go in the United States, the more congenial life is" (Holditch and Leavitt 58). This love of congeniality, which often dictated that politeness and appearance take precedence over veracity, warred constantly with Williams' personal and professional search for truth. The outcome of the push and pull of these two factions is that region surfaces alongside issues of Realism and sexual orientation as a defining factor in Williams' oblique or allusive style. I argue that his religious upbringing, his mother's fierce identification with Delta culture, and his Mississippi boyhood led Williams to internalize the South's insistence on rhetorical indirection as part of a code of

honor and gentility.

In “Facts about Me,” Williams notes “Roughly there was a combination of Puritan and Cavalier strains in my blood which may be accountable for the conflicting impulses I often represent in the people I write about” (Day and Woods 58).<sup>25</sup> Generally, he attributes his sensitive, pious, and priggish traits to his mother, Edwina, and his sensual and free-spoken side to his drinking, gambling, and womanizing father, Cornelius Coffin. However, critics have mistakenly taken Williams’ word about his mother’s categorization as Puritanical. I argue that Edwina’s piety and aversion to sexuality more accurately reflect the character of the archetypal southern belle than the Puritanism often cited as part of the New England character. Her distaste for sexuality certainly had no impact on her well documented coquettish behavior. What Williams does not acknowledge is that his father’s behavior aligns C.C. with the hearty, backwoods Scots-Irish Southerner while his mother’s conduct positions her as part of the Virginia Tidewater elite. Thus, while it is tempting to read Williams’ take on his parents’ volatile relationship as a clash between northern or non-southern (Puritan) and southern (Cavalier) values, Williams’ internalized character conflict is more about the conflicting ideologies of lower-class, southern backcountry folk and upper-class, southern aristocracy, or at least those who maintained the appearance of such. As a result, Williams’ biography informs the dialogue of his characters as they are conflicted by issues of propriety; what must remain unspoken or obliquely implied (the Puritan/Belle), and what may be stated directly (the Cavalier).

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<sup>25</sup> Williams uses these terms much differently than David Hackett Fisher and in Chapter Two I argue that cavalier ethos perpetuated the practice of approaching sensitive matters circuitously or through coded language. Here, Williams uses the term cavalier to indicate quite the opposite.

Williams' parents, particularly his mother, profoundly influenced him as a person and an artist. Edwina Dakin Williams was a relentless Southern belle. Her parents, the Reverend Walter Dakin and Rosina Otte Dakin, while not rich, as a minister and minister's wife they were considered part of "society." As authorized biographer Lyle Leverich explains of Edwina's girlhood,

At that time, there was no deeper South than the area around Natchez [Mississippi], with its magnificent antebellum homes. By the turn of the century, the wounds of the Civil War, if not entirely healed, were looked upon with commiseration for both the gray and blue sides. The turbulence and upheaval of the twentieth century were not to be felt for another decade. In Natchez, Edwina was to discover to her delight that Mississippians still held to all of the Old South's genteel codes and customs - the receptions and cotillions, the courtly manners and reverence for home and family. Except for the industrialized cities of the New South like Knoxville, the postwar era in Mississippi was more reversion than Reconstruction. (21)

Edwina's idyllic childhood surrounded her with genteel southern culture and she cultivated the role of the belle throughout her lifetime. One of the customs Edwina believed valuable was conversational skill. Consider the quotation noted in Chapter One which conveys a Virginia gentleman's advice to "Salt yo' food, suh, with humor ... season it with wit, and sprinkle it all over with the charm of good-fellowship, but never poison it with the cares of life. It is an insult to yo' digestion, besides bein' suh, a mark of bad breedin." (Fisher 353). This sentiment reflects a southern discursive tendency toward uncontroversial subject matter. Conversation is for sociability and amusement, must entertain the listener, and should avoid poisonous subjects. To discuss the "cares of life" was tactless and low class. In Edwina's Deep South, humor, wit,

charm, and avoidance of ugliness defined good conversation. Serious or uncomfortable subjects were particularly unsuited, custom dictated, for women's conversation.

Edwina believed in these edicts and preserved her good appearance and reputation at all costs. For example, when she and C.C. moved their family to St. Louis under reduced circumstances, she found her new neighbors missing the *noblesse oblige* she had shown the less fortunate as a youth. The social elite snubbed the family and Edwina struggled to mask the family's decreased class status. She longed for the orderly world of the Delta "where family was all important and where it was considered *nouveau riche* to mention money or ostentatiously to exhibit one's wealth" (Leverich 52). For Edwina, talk about money was *gauche* and thus avoided. Much like Tate, Edwina believed manners indicated class to a greater extent than money. In addition, sexual matters required hushing up. Despite an aversion to sexuality of any kind, battles over which Williams describes hearing through his parents' bedroom walls, Edwina insisted on a faultless public image for the family. Though there was little intimacy in their relationship, "Mrs. Cornelius Williams made up her mind that, outwardly at least, the marriage would appear conventionally proper" (Leverich 67). But money and sex were just the tip of the iceberg. Anything that went wrong was to be glossed over, laughed off, or omitted from conversation. In her own memoir, Edwina omits any mention of struggles in her relationship with Rose. When Edwina fell seriously ill and underwent several operations, the family decided not to tell Rose until Edwina was well into recovery. Even the wandering C.C. put in appearances at social functions where his absence would have caused speculation. All in all, the Williams family, led by Edwina's

unwavering devotion to the gentility of her youth, strove to maintain a reputable façade.

One final Williams family circumstance may illuminate the importance of public respectability. Williams' relationship with his sister, Rose, was one of the closest of his life. Her mental illness, subsequent institutionalization, and finally, an ill-advised lobotomy, affected him deeply. Rose accused her father of molestation and set off a chain reaction resulting in her permanent stay at a mental facility.<sup>26</sup> One of their concerns must have been how her claims would impact the family reputation. Allen Sinfield explains,

This was something unthinkable, 'unutterable,' for the mother, *and hence the lobotomy*. Leverich adds that when Rose was admitted to the State Hospital in 1937, the report did not say that Cornelius had made improper advances toward Rose, but it did say that she had 'delusions of sexual immorality by members of the family.' Both Spoto and Lyle (sic) are inclined to go along with the parental and official line: Rose said such things because she was crazy. However, it is entirely unsafe to suppose that Rose's version was substantially untrue. She was prevented by the lobotomy from announcing such an awful situation. (189-90)

Coming from a home where his sister was lobotomized so she "wouldn't tell" of sexual abuse, real or imagined, Williams knew as a youngster that certain topics demanded a prudent conversational approach and that severe penalties applied for transgression. The *announcement* of Cornelius' alleged abuse of his daughter apparently equaled or perhaps surpassed concern over the act itself. At the very least, it played some role in the decision

that Rose undergo a dangerous, now-debunked medical procedure. Here, rigorous

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<sup>26</sup> There is no critical consensus about whether Rose's charge was true. In his biography, Donald Spoto notes that Rose accused her father but does not speculate whether he had, in fact, propositioned her. Lyle Leverich's authorized biography states that Rose's accusations were patently false, the product of a hypersexuality brought on by her mother's repressed attitudes toward sex and a mental imbalance.

attention to propriety's façade undercuts not just admission, but even acknowledgment, of heinous criminal acts like child molestation or incest. Rose's predicament and the family's reaction show the persistent Williams family determination to keep up appearances.

Similarly, all Williams family weaknesses were carefully hidden from public view. The primacy of the family in southern culture reflects the importance a united front, particularly by not talking about events that might fracture the public family image, even to the detriment of the truth. As James T. Sears explains, "The appearance of wrong-doing is more central to Southern family life than the commission of wrongful acts" (15). That Williams' mother found the situation "unthinkable" and, tellingly, "unutterable" suggests that the imperative to maintain outward respectability demanded the incident be swept aside and banished from conversation. Rose's situation and its growth from Edwina's refusal to openly discuss its possible causes present a final example of Tom's indoctrination in the family's recognition of the "unutterable" nature of indelicate, awkward, and taboo subjects.

#### *The Glass Menagerie* (1945)

In "'Shut Up!' 'Be Quiet!' 'Hush!': Talk and It's Suppression in Three Plays by Tennessee Williams," Thomas F. Van Laan expressly addresses the dialectic between speech and its repression, arguing that *The Glass Menagerie*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Suddenly Last Summer* contain similar patterns of volleying discussion in which characters attempt to silence one another. He asserts that *The Glass Menagerie's*

Amanda Wingfield “is the most consistent and deliberate practitioner of the motif” (245). Given that Amanda holds court with Blanche Dubois as *the* canonical fading southern belle, her attention to appearances, to maintaining genteel illusions by suppressing the unsavory or uncomfortable, comes as no surprise. Despite the circumstances she faces, Amanda attempts to uphold the conversational etiquette of the South which dictates that troubling subject matter be omitted from discussion, minimized, or, barring the success of those strategies, approached with good humor.

Amanda acknowledges the importance of “the art of conversation” in her Mississippi Delta youth saying, “Girls in those days *knew* how to talk, I can tell you” (403). When Tom asks what she talked about Amanda replies, “Things of importance going on in the world! Never anything coarse or common or vulgar ... My callers were all gentlemen - all! Among my callers were some of the most prominent young planters of the Mississippi Delta - planters and sons of planters” (403). Amanda’s references to the planter background of her suitors explicitly links avoidance of coarse, common or vulgar topics with class and region. Interestingly, she claims that although the conversations included “things of importance going on in the world,” they simultaneously avoided anything crude or impolite. Surely contemporary issues of importance did not exclude those that might offend, quite the contrary. Significant events often involve war, politics, social issues, and other weighty, tragic, or uncivil matters. Yet Amanda’s speech suggests that important things cannot be vulgar, or at least cannot be spoken of in a vulgar manner, implying that the “art” of conversation requires the delicacy to know what to leave out.

Another tale from Amanda's southern girlhood further exemplifies the indirect discursive practices she has been raised to believe demonstrate good breeding. When Amanda frets that the gentleman caller Tom has asked to dinner might be a drinker she explains;

The only way to find out about those things is to make discreet inquiries at the proper moment. When I was a young girl in Blue Mountain and it was suspected that a young man drank, the girl whose attentions he'd been receiving, if any girl *was*, would sometimes speak to the minister of his church, or rather her father would if her father was living, and sort of feel him out on the young man's character. That is the way such things are discreetly handled to keep a young woman from making a tragic mistake! (420)

Preventing a woman from tragically marrying a drinking man required a delicate approach. Overt criticism or even inquiry was to be avoided and discretion proved fundamental. Tellingly, not only does Amanda relate that manipulating timing and social graces mattered, she outlines the chain of command. Rather than ask her beaux herself, a young woman might ask the minister to ask him, or have her father ask the minister to ask him. The conversation, then, is twice removed from the initiating party and provides an interesting connection to the antebellum courtship rituals discussed in Chapter One. The distance created by such circuitous measures upholds appearances all around. The young man might never know of suspicions about his character. Or if confronted, he could still save face with the girl - impossible if she approached him directly. On the other hand, the young woman never sullied her image by admitting awareness in the first place. Thus, Amanda's Blue Mountain girlhood provides examples of the oblique discourse she practices in the present and implores her children to respect and replicate.

Part of Amanda's strategy in approaching the tragedy of Laura's emotional and physical limitations relies on guidelines internalized in her youth. If gentility dictates avoiding the unseemly, then discussion of Laura's predicament deserves the most generous of terms. Amanda banishes the word "cripple" from her home. When Laura calls herself crippled, Amanda attempts to gloss over the deficiency; "Nonsense! Laura, I've told you never, never, to use that word. Why, you're not crippled, you just have a little defect - hardly noticeable, even! When people have some slight disadvantage like that, they cultivate other things to make up for it - develop charm - and vivacity - and - *charm!* That's all you have to do" (410). Several strategies surface in these few sentences. First, Amanda insists the word disappear, as if not saying it will make it not true. She contends that Laura is not, in fact, crippled, then offers a contingency plan which minimizes the problem, calling it "little" and "slight." The planter ethos requiring honor and invulnerability lead her to deny or downplay the issue. Significantly, Amanda is not unaware of her daughter's infirmity, she simply quibbles over the proper semantics to describe it in an attempt to address it with both honesty and taste. Williams notes in the opening stage directions that Laura's crippled leg *is* a slight problem and may be suggested on stage by a very small limp. When viewed this way, Amanda's assertion that Laura's physical disability is simply a "small defect" is pretty accurate. In fact, her pep talks to Laura begin to look like good mothering.

When Tom calls Laura crippled, Amanda continues her attempts to maintain appearances. She rebukes him; "Don't say crippled! You know that I never allow that

word to be used!” He replies “Laura is very different from other girls” to which Amanda add, “I think the difference is all to her advantage” (430). Clearly Amanda knows Laura’s differences are an obstacle not a benefit; however, when she cannot squelch talk of Laura’s condition she concerns herself with defining that difference as favorable. When Tom says others may perceive Laura as peculiar Amanda predictably replies, “Don’t say peculiar” (431), steadfastly clinging to the standards of her genteel upbringing. If something is wrong, and make no mistake that Amanda knows there is, it must be presented in the best possible light. Amanda’s roundabout manner in approaching the problem is more a matter of how truth should be presented than what the truth actually is. Though Tom disagrees with Amanda’s handling of Laura’s situation, he cannot complain that she is uneven in her treatment of her children. When she questions Tom’s nocturnal wanderings she says, “You do act strangely. I - I’m not criticizing, understand *that?*” (420). For all her concern, Amanda’s interactions with both children show her sincere efforts to support them in the only way she knows how, by ignoring or diminishing the faults she clearly knows are there.

Tom increasingly threatens Amanda’s efforts to silence anything that might reveal the family’s difficulties. When she confiscates his books he explodes; “What in Christ’s name ... am I supposed ... to do?” and she yells at him to not use that expression and to lower his voice (412). Van Lann notes:

Amanda’s efforts to curb Tom’s speech in these later episodes clearly reflect her wish to silence what is being said rather than the person saying it. She perceives him as the voice of a hostile reality that she cannot accept in its actual form but must alter in her imagination if she is to deal with it. In this scene she becomes

the victim in the aggressor-victim pattern: she tries to fight off the aggression of hostile reality by silencing its spokesman. (245)

Van Laan argues that Amanda must alter a hostile reality from its actual form in her imagination, but a more accurate expression might be that she tries to suppress performance of a hostile reality with which she is all too familiar. As with Laura's defect, Amanda knows the truth; it is that harsh presentation compounds the injury. For example, when Amanda tells Tom she knows of his Merchant Marine plans she says, "I know what you're dreaming of. I'm not standing here blindfolded" (422). The actual form of reality remains the same in both the real world and Amanda's imagination; however, her background dictates a specific manner in which that reality must be reflected through performance. Aware of the hostile reality all along, she attempts to control response to that reality to keep up appearances.

And yet there are things Amanda doesn't know about Tom because she cannot or will not decipher his enigmatic dialogue. Michael Paller argues that Tom is unequivocally gay, has a penchant for secrets, and his silence and hints about his lifestyle constitute an oblique disclosure of homosexuality; "'Oh, I could tell you many things that would make you sleepless!' Tom tells Amanda in a moment of anger. And in a quieter moment, as Tom obliquely tries to explain himself to his mother, he says, 'You say there's so much in your heart that you can't describe to me. That's true of me, too. There's so much in my heart I can't describe to *you!*'" (24). Both mother and son are bound by notions of propriety in addressing one another; however Amanda's and Tom's conversation importantly reveals that while they may regret their inability to

communicate, neither makes much of an attempt to remedy the situation. Tom invents wild stories to cover his fear of revelation and his annoyance at Amanda's inquiries. Amanda knows all is not well with her children, yet battles to maintain the illusion of harmony.

Finally, Amanda relies on her southern charm even after the gentleman caller's visit goes disastrously awry. Upon hearing of Jim's engagement she titters, "Ohhhh - how nice!" though this is clearly just lip service (462). To Jim's thanks for her southern hospitality she replies, "It really wasn't anything at all," though she has gone to considerable trouble and hung desperate hopes on the evening's outcome (462). In each of these cases Amanda manages to convey an appearance of geniality despite watching the family's future fall apart. As she does when referring to her husband's untimely departure, she relies on humor to gloss over the unspeakable truth; "Come in here a minute I want to tell you something awfully funny... The gentleman caller has made an early departure. What a wonderful joke you played on us!" (463). The action which essentially ends Amanda and Laura's future is played off as a joke, maintaining the outward appearance that all is well with the family.

But Amanda's veneer soon cracks as she ends the play by suggesting her illusive version of reality offers more truth than Tom's supposedly objective view. She suggests he is the one living in a world of illusion telling him, "Don't think about us, a mother deserted, an unmarried sister who's crippled and has no job" (464). Her use here of the previously banished word "crippled" and her frank assessment of the family's situation contrasts starkly with her earlier attempts to downplay their precarious footing. C.W.E.

Bigsby argues, “At the beginning of the play she proscribes the word ‘cripple’; and at the end she uses the word herself. It is her first step towards accepting the truth of her daughter’s situation and hence of the need which she must acknowledge and address” (42). While Amanda’s use of the word is significant, I argue that rather than signify the first step in accepting Laura’s condition, it actually forms the first step in her giving up addressing the problem she has acknowledged all along.

Amanda’s acceptance of Laura’s condition is important, but I argue that it is merely her first outward or public acceptance. Until this point, she has used the charm of the southern belle to put the best face on an impossible truth. The family’s calamitous circumstances have been known to Amanda all along. In fact, she is acutely aware of their precarious position; however, it is the *mode* through which they are addressed that must change. Amanda’s southern charms, created partially through evasions of anything upsetting, are no protection in a world that no longer plays by the same rules. Like Laura’s candle in a world lit by lightning, Amanda’s ability to project the graciousness of the southern belle is exhausted.

Several significant changes from the Library Edition of *Menagerie* to the Acting Edition are important to a discussion of southern etiquette, the prominence of civility in conversation, and the avoidance of direct speech when it comes to controversial or discomfiting subject matter. Charles S. Watson argues that Williams’ revision of *Menagerie*’s dialogue in the Acting Edition “reveals his intention of developing the theme of the passing of good manners in modern America. Although he does not confine this quality to one part of the country, it is clear that he particularly associates it with the

old South” (75). Although the Library Edition suggests a decline in gentility and civility identified with the Old South, the revisions intensify this notion. The removal of the projection screen for staging purposes necessitated the inclusion of additional dialogue which furthers the motif of deteriorating manners. I assert that the manners to which Watson refers include the South’s imperative to engage in civil conversation, omit speech that might be construed as insulting, and practice social niceties though they might be purely performative.

The opening of the Acting Edition includes a specific incident which highlights the importance of genteel interaction for Amanda. Watson notes,

Williams wrote a new opening speech for Amanda in which her polite behavior contrasts with the rudeness she met at church. She tells Laura that the church was crowded except for one pew in which one little woman was sitting. She ‘smiled very sweetly’ and said, ‘Excuse me, would you mind if I shared this pew?’ The woman retorted that she certainly would since the space was rented. Amanda complains, ‘These Northern Episcopalians! I can understand the Southern Episcopalians, but these Northern ones, no.’ (75)

That the woman might not want to share her pew is understandable, but to say so violates southern etiquette. That this exchange takes place in a church highlights the waning ideal of Christian charity so important to southern hospitality. Clearly, Williams intends that we identify with Amanda here. Even if the woman in the pew resented sharing, the polite, and southern, thing to do would have been to offer it anyway and suffer in silence.

Several other examples show the importance in the South of avoiding anything socially inappropriate. Scene Three of the Acting Edition changes the subject of the

serialized magazine story Amanda sells from “*The Gone with the Wind* of the post-World War generation” to “the horsey set on Long Island.” Waston argues that this change avoids unflattering mention of the Old South. As I discuss in the introduction to this study, criticism of the defeated antebellum South and its culture was often perceived as treasonous by southerners long suffering from a postbellum identity crisis and a sense of ideological dislocation. Therefore, the switch from magazine articles about the scandalous behavior of the elite South to those about the scandalous behavior of the elite North shows Williams’ attention to the South’s edict of silence surrounding those things that might reflect badly on the region for which he retained great affection. Further, the later edition bestows gentleman caller Jim with additional exclamations of politeness (mostly “yes ma’m’s), offers a noble toast to the Old South, and, despite a blackout and Amanda’s and Laura’s odd behavior, declares the evening “wonderful.” Here, the revisions do for Williams what Amanda strives to accomplish, uphold good southern manners, particularly with regard to the Old South’s portrayal. Thus, the changes from the initial text of *The Glass Menagerie* to the Acting Edition show Williams’ revisions as specifically designed to flatter the legend of the Old South and its importance to the performance.

*The Glass Menagerie*’s primary practitioner of the brave face required by southern culture is Amanda. Her single-minded devotion to upholding appearances ties her closely with the regional imperative that the unpleasant, no matter how true, is unfit for polite conversation. It is important to acknowledge that Amanda is not unaware of the family’s tragic circumstances but that she battles them with attention to appearances.

Tom's role as narrator of the memory play calls into question how closely he may have mirrored Amanda's behavior as opposed to how strongly he actually attempted to break down the wall of silence imposed by her notions of gentility. It is an unanswerable question, but one that deserves some thought about Tom's claims he delivers truth in the pleasant guise of illusion. In some ways, this claim seems better suited to understanding Amanda's behaviors than Tom's. Finally, the changes found in the Acting Edition add to Williams' motif of mannerly conversation and strengthen his picture how the South's gentility informs the Wingfield family dynamic.

*A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)

The opening scene of *A Streetcar Named Desire* indirectly establishes the tension between the South's traditional way of life where conversations were muted, polite, and deferential with a new, bold, and direct speech:<sup>27</sup>

STANLEY (*bellowing*): Hey there! Stella, Baby!  
(STELLA *comes out on the first floor landing, a gentle young woman, about twenty-five, and of a background obviously quite different from her husband's*)  
STELLA: Don't holler at me like that. (470)

This first exchange dichotomizes Stanley's bellowing and Stella's "obviously quite

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<sup>27</sup> I align Blanche here with the "Belle Reve South" in contrast with Stanley's New Orleans, which although a southern city, differentiates itself in two ways. First, New Orleans is, as Williams notes "a cosmopolitan city" which distinguishes it from the plantation tradition. His stage directions note that race relations are relaxed in a way they are not in the "traditional" or more rural south, and, by extension, I argue that the aristocratic codes of behavior found there are not as important in an urban, bohemian environment with a complex heritage of French, Spanish, English, African and other cultures. Second, as a representative of the new world with which Blanche finds herself at odds, it is important to note that Stanley is a Polish immigrant and therefore unlikely to feel obligated to replicate southern traditions. So although New Orleans is a southern city and Stanley, as an inhabitant, is a southerner, these important distinctions influence the interaction between the two characters.

different” background, the family plantation Belle Reve. Though Stella’s link to the earlier plantation world of Belle Reve is not yet established in this initial scene, the later revelation of her girlhood contextualizes her behavior. First time readers and theatergoers may not grasp the significance of this opening exchange, but Williams certainly knew how Stella’s background would be revealed and structured the beginning dialogue accordingly. Disclosure of Stella’s background allows us to (re)read the opening dialogue as symbolic of the ideological clash between the old-fashioned Blanches, the interceding Stellas, and the modern Stanleys. The well-mannered Stella, despite her obvious attraction for Stanley and his world, retains enough of the cultured womanhood learned in her southern youth to reprimand his behavior. Immediately we see how the Stanleys of the world bellow straight ahead while the ladies and gentlemen of the Old South feint and whisper.

When the mothlike Blanche arrives, the stage directions indicate, “*Her appearance is incongruous to this setting. She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or a cocktail party in the garden district*” (471), establishing her, along with Stella, as the product of a cultivated background. Blanche’s status as the archetypal southern belle is axiomatic, her iconic status as representative of southern womanhood so pervasive that Jefferson Humphries identifies her as *the* iconic belle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (127). One imagines that at Belle Reve yelling and “inappropriate” talk were frowned upon, and a hint or gentle suggestion should have proved sufficient without

resorting to vulgar heavy handedness. For example, when Blanche encounters Eunice, the Kowalski's neighbor and landlady, the two women's expectations clash as Blanche's roundabout assertions cause misunderstandings:

EUNICE: A place like [Belle Reve] that must be awful hard to keep up.

BLANCHE: If you will excuse me, I'm just about to drop.

EUNICE: Sure, honey. Why don't you set down?

BLANCHE: What I meant was I'd like to be left alone.

EUNICE [offended]: Aw. I'll make myself scarce, in that case.

BLANCHE: I didn't mean to be rude, but – (472-73)

Here, Blanche must clarify her request because her dismissal proves too subtle for Eunice. Forced to bluntness, Blanche then feels compelled to qualify her remark by saying she didn't "mean to be rude, but-." Appearance and illusion characterize Blanche's self-identity, so her rudeness warrants apology if she is to make a genteel first impression. But she *has* been rude, shooing off the woman who has helped her. The "but-" and trailing dash shifts a portion of the blame to Eunice for not picking up on her oblique request. Further, Blanche's statement ends mid-sentence relieving her of explaining who she really faults for the error. Clearly Eunice lacks the manners necessary to understand genteel behavior. Blanche manipulates language here to maintain the façade of civility despite her bad behavior and without having to openly admit responsibility for her snub.

Blanche's appearance of politeness, gained through evasion and displacement, attack and retreat, continues when Stella comes home to greet her as she says, "I thought

you would never come back to this horrible place! What am I saying? I didn't mean to say that. I meant to be nice about it and say – Oh, what a convenient location and such – Ha-a-ha!" (473). As in the earlier exchange, what she says and what she claims to mean conflict. Two important factors come into play here. First, obviously by following her disparaging remark about the Kowalski home with claims of her intent to keep silent, Blanche manages to both say what she thinks and absolve herself of responsibility for the criticism. Second, her forced laughter attempts to lessen the harshness of words unbecoming a lady. Williams has commented on the use of humor, saying "I find humor more and more interesting. Black humor especially...I make some serious, even tragic observations about society, but I make them through the medium of comedy" (Rader 355). Like Williams, Blanche *does* mean to make a serious observation, but her staunch sense of propriety imposes limitations on the method and form used to condemn Stella's surroundings. Comedy provides Blanche with an oblique medium to comment on the serious, and later tragic, circumstances.

Nevertheless, Blanche's humorous timbre employed to soften the blow proves ineffectual and necessitates a more direct approach, but the new tactic fares no better. She shifts her method and exclaims, "Oh, I'm not going to be hypocritical, I'm going to be honestly critical about it!" and says that only in her worst dreams could Mr. Edgar Allan Poe have done justice to such a dismal place." But Stella's reaction that Blanche is being "a little intense" results in Blanche's retreat from the controversy; "forgive me, blessed baby! [*She suddenly stops short.*] The subject is closed!" (474). Realizing she has said too much, Blanche quickly changes her approach from attempts at frank

criticisms to the genteel alternative to humor, silence. Yet, as her successor, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof's* Maggie the Cat, says, "Laws of silence don't work. Silence about a thing just magnifies it" (5-6). Whether her good manners kick in or she remembers the necessity of her sister's hospitality, Blanche's abrupt departure from the subject avoids transgressing appropriate protocol.

These exchanges establish Blanche's position as mannerly southern belle as she manages to convey a twofold message: revulsion at her squalid surroundings and gentility in her refusal to make a candid, unladylike remark about her sister's situation without the mitigation of incongruous lightheartedness or immediate retraction. We see she avoids hypocrisy when, in the final scene of the play, Eunice compliments her hair, and Blanche responds, "[*accepting the compliment*] It's a problem" (557). Williams indicates here that Blanche can simultaneously accept and deny the compliment. In the realm of the double-edged comment, apparently Blanche can take it as well as she can dish it out.

Blanche's backhanded compliments of Stella's appearance further indicate the duality of her speech. Unaware her sister is pregnant, Blanche says:

BLANCHE: ... - you've put on some weight, yes, you're just as plump as a little partridge! And it's so becoming to you!

STELLA: Now, Blanche –

BLANCHE: Yes, it is, it is, or I wouldn't say it! You just have to watch around the hips a little. Stand up.

STELLA: Not now.

BLANCHE: You hear me? I said stand up! [STELLA *complies reluctantly*.] You messy child, you, you've spilled something on that pretty white lace collar! About your hair – you ought to have it cut in a feather bob with your dainty features. Stella, you have a maid, don't you? (475-76)

She then goes on to critique her accommodations.

BLANCHE: What kind of bed's this – one of those collapsible things?

[*She sits on it.*]

STELLA: Does it feel alright?

BLANCHE: [*dubiously*] Wonderful, honey. I don't like a bed that gives much.  
(475-77)

Within minutes of her arrival Blanche has criticized Stella's home, figure, clothes, hair, housekeeping, and furniture, all the while couching her reproaches in sisterly advice and peppering them with compliments. Whether Blanche's primary motivation is to criticize Stella's weight gain, or, conversely, to compliment her newly expanded figure as becoming, is unclear. Compliment and criticism conflate making specific intent almost impossible to decipher. Typical of southern rhetoric's code of honor, the way in which the listener receives the information is deflected from speaker to audience, leaving an out for both. Stella may choose to accept Blanche's words as helpful and thereby gloss over anything that could be construed as a condemnation, or, if she does take offense, Blanche's previous compliments give her, as the speaker, an opportunity to backtrack and qualify her criticism by claiming she meant to flatter. In either case, honor and pride on both sides may emerge unscathed. That having been said, it seems likely that Blanche means to criticize, although her manner leaves her a ladylike out. Yet again, a circuitous path appears most prudent in approaching criticism or other risky subjects.

Despite her dubious appraisal of Stella's situation, Blanche relies on her

previously “tactful” commentary to pave the way for telling Stella that Belle Reve has been lost, a subject which prefigures a rent in Blanche’s illusory veil of obedience to etiquette. Blanche says, “I haven’t asked you the things you probably thought I was going to ask. And so I’ll expect you to be understanding about what *I* have to tell *you*” (478). In advance of her tragic announcement, she pleads her case by saying she stayed and struggled while Stella fled. Rather than berate her sister, Blanche says, “I’m not meaning this in any fault-finding way, but all the burden descended on *my* shoulders” (478). Despite her denial of fault-finding, Blanche’s next statement, “But you are the one who abandoned Belle Reve, not I!” is clearly accusatory (particularly in the choice of the word “abandoned”), even if its impetus is defensive (479). Blanche must preface her revelation in a manner that absolves her of wrongdoing, and her next lengthy monologue deteriorates into a screaming diatribe. She loudly denies responsibility for the loss, attacks Stella for supposedly thinking her negligent, and denounces Stella for being “in bed with your – Polack” instead of defending the homestead (480). The abrupt emergence of this unladylike behavior on the heels of her earlier attempts at “civilized” conversation sets up one of Williams’ primary themes; unable to flourish in a modern world which rejects the civility of the Old South, Blanche vacillates wildly between the two modes, at one moment clinging to the ordered, mannered old ways and the next frenetically transgressing the imperative to speak delicately. While Amanda Wingfield’s façade cracks only toward the end of *Menagerie*, Blanche battles the opposing forces, the need for appearance and the need for truth, throughout the entire play.

Blanche is not the only Dubois sister who has clung to an antiquated

preoccupation with conversation and appearances. Stella's roots as a southern lady steeped in the traditions of proper conversational etiquette show in her instruction to Stanley to "say something nice about her [Blanche's] appearance. And, oh! Don't mention the baby, I haven't said anything yet" (483). In addition, she has apparently misled Blanche as to the couple's circumstances, saying, "She wasn't expecting to find us in such a small place. You see I'd tried to gloss things over a little in my letters" (484). When Stanley questions the loss of Belle Reve Stella admonishes him, "Shhh! She'll hear you" to which he replies "I don't care if she hears me. Let's see the papers" (484). Unbound by notions of cavalier propriety, Stanley rifles through Blanche's jewelry and furs, saying, "Here's your plantation, or what was left of it" (486). Stella, presumably retaining some vestige of her aristocratic upbringing, replies, "You have no idea how stupid and horrid you're being" (486). Stella's glossing over her current circumstances maintains her own illusion of familial bliss by avoiding any mention of the difficulties the Kowalskis might face.

Yet another mode of indirection in the text is the use of humor to approach the unapproachable or shake off what might otherwise ruin the illusory cloak of gaiety. When Mitch fails to appear at Blanche's birthday party, she attempts to save face by asking:

Stanley, tell us a joke, tell us a funny story to make us all laugh. I don't know what's the matter, we're all so solemn. Is it because I've been stood up by my beaux? It's the first time in all my entire experience with men, and I've had a good deal of all sorts, that I've actually been stood up by anybody! Ha-ha! I don't know how to take it ... Tell us a funny little story, Stanley! Something to help us out. [*She throws back her head and laughs. Stella also makes an*

*ineffectual effort to seem amused. Stanley pays no attention]. (536)*

The three diners exemplify a continuum of responses to the situation with Blanche's laughter on one side, Stanley's inattention on the other, and Stella's ineffectual effort in-between. Blanche wears a defense veneer of gaiety against modernity's direct assault against civility and uses laughter and storytelling as diversionary tactics. She must pretend the insult of Mitch's behavior does not penetrate the mask of the southern belle who neither transgresses nor is transgressed upon. Her attempts at laughter and insistence on a funny little story are to "help out" the group. To give in to the moment is unthinkable. Alas, Blanche's attempts to laugh it off ultimately prove fruitless. When Stanley gives her a train ticket; "[*Blanche tries to smile. Then she tries to laugh. Then she gives up both and springs from the table and runs to the next room. She clutches her throat and then runs into the bathroom. Coughing and gagging sounds are heard*]" (540). Clearly laughter is not the best medicine. Despite attempts at deflective humor, the unthinkable truth descends and no amount of forced gaiety can mask it.

The most important dialogue in which the struggle between implied versus overt rhetoric takes place between Blanche and Stanley. In scene two Blanche attempts to let down the façade of gentility and speak to Stanley in his own direct way; however, the endeavor proves difficult, showing how ill at ease Blanche really is outside the South's civilizing force where a man never dare question a lady's motivation or veracity. After attempting flirtatious banter, which ultimately goes awry when Stanley refuses to participate in the ritual of disingenuous compliment and equally disingenuous gracious

acceptance (“I don’t go in for all that stuff”), Blanche says, “You’re simple, straightforward and honest, a little bit on the primitive side I should think. To interest you a woman would have to – [*She pauses with an indefinite gesture*]” (488). Here her speech trails off again as she waits for Stanley to supply the answer, avoiding speculation about what would peak his interest and putting the conversational ball in his court. Her flirtatious evasions of talk about Belle Reve ultimately prove unsuccessful when Stanley demands straight talk. The ambiguous nature of her earlier dialogues transforms as she adopts a new rhetorical mode to accommodate Stanley’s forthrightness. She changes tactics, saying, “Yes-yes-cards on the table ... Well, life is too full of evasions and ambiguities, I think. I like an artist who paints in strong, bold colors, primary colors. I don’t like pinks and creams and I never cared for wishy-washy people” (488).

But Blanche’s attempts here are not the unembellished truths Stanley demands. Her claim that life is too full of evasions and ambiguities contradicts almost everything her character stands for. The woman who covers bare light bulbs and claims she wants magic fully embraces evasions and ambiguities, and Stanley knows it. He sees through her claims of simple and straightforward truthfulness, yelling, “Let’s cut the re-bop” (488). It is only when all her attempts at illusion are exhausted that Blanche will admit to weakness. She relents,

“Let us proceed without any more double-talk. I’m ready to answer all questions ... All right. Cards on the table. That suits me. [*She turns to Stanley*]. I know I fib a good deal. After all, a woman’s charm is fifty per cent illusion, but when a thing is important I tell the truth: I haven’t cheated my sister or you or anyone else as long as I have lived.” (488-89)

The matter to be discussed here is Belle Reve; “Our improvident grandfathers and father and uncles and brothers exchanged the land for their epic fornications – to put it plainly” (490). Blanche, too, must become a bit “primitive” and plain spoken. She can put aside some of her illusory charm to ward off Stanley’s attack, but she is clearly not at home in his realm.

After their confrontation Blanche admits to Stella; “We thrashed it out. I feel a bit shaky, but I think I handled it nicely, I laughed and treated it all as a joke” (491). Again we see Williams, through Blanche, use humor to make serious or tragic observations obliquely. Given Williams’ comments about the appropriateness of humor to comment on serious subjects, we understand that like Williams, Blanche *does* mean to make a serious observation, but her staunch sense of propriety imposes limitations on the method and form used to condemn Stella’s surroundings. Comedy provides Blanche with an oblique medium to comment on the serious, and later tragic, circumstances.

In contrast to Stanley, Mitch offers archetypal southern gentleman, or at least the closest Elysian Fields has to offer. Most importantly, Mitch plays by Blanche’s conversational rules. Whereas Stanley won’t respond to her fishing for a compliment, here, when Blanche says “I’m an old maid schoolteacher,” Mitch answers with the expected masculine courtsey, “You may teach school but you’re certainly not an old maid” (499). To this she responds “Thank you, sir! I appreciate your gallantry!” employing diction that hearkens back to a chivalrous ideal (499). This conversation establishes Mitch as a desirable and much needed suitor.

But so desperate is Blanche for a knight in shining armor, she overlooks in Mitch

the same boorish behavior she viciously assails in Stanley. When Stanley loudly calls for Mitch to rejoin the poker game and Mitch replies with a bellow of his own, Blanche responds saying “Gracious, what lung power” both commenting on his masculinity and calling attention to, with a gentle rebuke, the Stanley-like behavior (499). Similarly, later in the play she of Mitch’s reluctance to take his jacket off, “perspiration is healthy,” which, when juxtaposed with her earlier assessment of Stanley’s corporeal nature, indicates her attempts to make lemonade from a lemon. She astutely avoids Mitch’s ungentlemanly questions about her weight and age by immediately changing the topic, a tactic seen time and time again which facilitates evasion of any “unsuitable” topic of conversation. For example, she does the same during her birthday party when Stanley questions her claims of being twenty-seven. Should anyone have the bad behavior to blatantly point out a fib, decorum dictates the conversation return to more congenial subjects. Status as a transgressor of etiquette is, ironically, not assigned to the liar but to whomever has the ill manners to call the speaker on the lie. Just as Blanche attempts to uphold her status as a virtuous Southern belle through fabrications and omissions about her past, her drinking, and her age, so she constructs Mitch as an appropriate gentleman caller while endeavoring to modify or rationalize any qualities that might disqualify him as a potential mate. A gentleman such as Mitch enjoys the benefit of Blanche’s evasions and twists of truth while Stanley’s overtness forces her to reciprocate with similarly “crude” directness.

Stanley soon disabuses Mitch of his perception of Blanche. When he turns up late and disheveled, Blanche, ever the one to pretend everything is fine, says, “Something’s

the matter tonight, but never mind. I won't cross-examine the witness. I'll just – pretend I don't notice anything different about you" (543). When he asks her if she is out of her mind she simply ignores him. Similarly, when Mitch says Stanley has accused Blanche of lapping up his liquor "like a wild cat" she says "What a fantastic statement! Fantastic of him to say it, fantastic of you to repeat it! I won't descend to the level of such cheap accusations to answer them, even!" (544). Putting her head in the sand is just another way of maintaining superficial appearances. Should someone be rude enough to reveal an inconvenient truth and glossing over the situation by changing the subject or joking won't help, then a last resort is to ignore the speaker. Blanche isn't just oblique here; she is downright evasive.

When it is obvious the conflict can no longer be avoided or spun to an advantage, the issue comes down to the battle between realism and illusion. Caught in the web of evasions and deceits about her past, Blanche admits, "I don't want realism ... I'll tell you what I want. Magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it!" (545). However, Blanche vacillates between two apparently contradictory ideas, saying "I don't tell the truth" and "Don't say I lied to you ... Never inside, I didn't lie in my heart" (546). The paradox of her reality, both a lie and a truth, reflects Williams' ideas of oblique and subjective truth. Part of what immortalizes Blanche as an icon in American theatre is her authentic ambiguity. She wholeheartedly believes both her statements. If not telling the truth and lying are not the same thing, then reality must lie somewhere in-between or reflect both. Blanche attempts to

reconcile magical illusion and reality and fails; paradoxically, she is the ultimate projection and the ultimate failure of Homan's southern paradox.

Despite Blanche's desperate reliance on antiquated notions of propriety, she questions their necessity and effectiveness as well. In a rare expression of frustration with the code she lives by, Blanche says to Mitch during their early courtship, "I guess it is just that I have - old-fashioned ideals [*She rolls her eyes knowing he cannot see her face*] " (525). Secretly mocking the very pretensions she seeks to preserve, Blanche clings to and yet wants to abandon social restrictions. Later, her every option exhausted, she haltingly begins to write to Shep Huntleigh; "Sister and I in desperate situation ... Would you be - interested - in ..." and then "You never get anywhere with direct appeals" (508). Blanche feels she must deceive Shep in order to get what she wants. The more desperate her situation, the less forthright she may be in her attempts to repair it. Reading these two scenes together we see Blanche wish for an end to pretense, to evasion, and specifically state her belief that direct appeals are useless. Even though these examples show Blanche's frustration with the social rules which deem direct appeals ill-mannered, she remains unable to transcend them.

Blanche's appearance in the lives of the Kowalskis acts as a catalyst for Stella, who must choose between the straight talk of Stanley's new world and her family tradition of maintaining honor through illusion. Clearly, Stella's love of the colored lights Stanley provides and her return after Stanley hits her align her with his ideology of frank evaluation and discussion. However, at the end of the play after Blanche has accused Stanley of rape, Stella ironically retreats to the familiar code of evasion, saying,

“I couldn’t believe her story and go on living with Stanley” (556). Eunice encourages her to keep up the illusion; “Don’t ever believe it. Life has got to go on” (557). To keep the unrefined reality Stanley embodies and which fuels their marriage, the couple must collaborate in covering up his crime. Blanche, and thus Williams, have the last laugh here in that Blanche’s visit indelibly alters the openness of the couple’s previous relationship. Their willful denial ironically compels their participation in the very evasion and displacement that Stanley’s acts of violence have tried to destabilize. Thus, to see Blanche as a fibber and Stanley as a beacon of a rough truth is impossible at the end of the text.

From her first discussion with the landlady to her final comment about the kindness of strangers, Blanche engages in circuitous and evasive discourse mandated by the gentility of the traditional South. And yet despite her equivocations, she becomes increasingly frank when necessary, when the constraints of discursive civility no longer effect the outcome she seeks. The tension between these two elements creates the ambiguity which make Blanche and *A Streetcar Named Desire* some of Williams’ most successful creations. Further, though Blanche’s evasiveness may be axiomatic at this point, the above examples fit her neatly into the larger framework of southern discursive norms where evasion is par for the course and circuitous conversation is welcomed as a sign good etiquette rather than derided as an untruth. Blanche’s evasive nature, her struggle to maintain the beautiful illusion in the face of ugly reality, also mirrors Williams’ own struggles to tell the truth of his experience and of the human condition while remaining true to the civilizing forces and customs of the South he so loved.

## Homosexuality

The genteel evasions and circuitous conversational approaches of Williams' characters mirror his own claims that he strove for obliqueness in art and evidence that he practiced it personally. Scholars and queer theorists focus on this indirection as a tactic employed when overt representation of gay characters and issues proved impossible. Prevailing social mores in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century did indeed demand kid gloves, hints, ghosts, indirections, absent presences, and implications when representing homosexuality. As John Clum writes, "Williams was compelled to write about homosexuality, but equally impelled to rely on the language of indirection and heterosexist discourse" (*Acting* 166). But if the 1950s were a difficult time for gay rights, they were even more troublesome for Williams given his traditional southern, religious upbringing. Although Williams' writing is typically discussed in terms of homosexual ideology and his representations of the South, the link between the two has been left largely underexplored. It is important, then, in terms of Williams' obliquity that he was not only gay but gay and southern. Finally, critics have often commented on the paradoxical nature of Williams' work. I argue that this aspect of Williams' texts is grounded partially in the duality of Williams' desire for truth in art, reflected through plastic theater, and respect for the gentle manners of his early life.

Scholarly opinion divides over whether Williams' oblique approach to homosexuality furthered gay rights or betrayed a responsibility to depict gay characters in

an open and positive manner. Some critics argue Williams' indirection wasted an opportunity to initiate a mainstream dialogue about homosexuality. Others credit Williams with enormous accomplishment, contending that any reference to "deviant" sexual practices, no matter how indirect, constituted a symbolic victory. In truth, both these arguments have some validity. My aim here is to outline the ways in which both camps have defined Williams' oblique style in order to then show a connection between the indirection in his texts and his intimate familiarity with the conversational nuances of southern culture.

One customary explanation for Williams' obliqueness remains firmly located in the dominant anti-homosexual ideology of his era. As David Savran explains in *Communists, Cowboys and Queers*, "Williams insisted, with some justification, that he could not stage his homosexuality directly or candidly in the 1940s and 1950s" (82). Sinfield contends, "The plays are not oblique because Williams couldn't handle gayness, but because he had to negotiate prevailing theatre institutions" (194), and, indeed, pressures to conform to societal models of decency exerted tremendous influence on Williams' career, especially his early works. Sinfield explains, "The shape of theatre for much of this period, [end of nineteenth century to early 1970s] like society generally, was dominated by assumptions about good manners, respectability, and keeping up appearances. No wonder representations of gayness in theatre were generally oblique and/or hostile" (2). Paller argues that Williams "struggled to introduce into his work subject matter that was not talked about in polite society, let alone the commercial theatre of the 1930s and '40s" (47). Overtly writing a gay character into any text was

problematic in the mid-century, and few if any well known gay writers dared reveal their sexual orientation or write openly gay characters. However, Williams allusiveness allowed him, like others, to present homosexuality under the radar.

Critics have argued that Williams' indirect portrayal of gay characters amounts to homophobia. Clum recounts, "During the early years of gay liberation, gay critics complained that Williams was not 'out' enough in his work and demanded that he stop writing *around* his homosexuality" (161, my emphasis). Although they do appear, usually briefly, ambiguously, or off stage, the gay characters of Williams' plays endure difficult circumstances. The cannibalistic revenge of street youth on *Suddenly Last Summer's* Sebastian Venable and Brick's anguish over the nature of his relationship to Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* both evince the negative and violent repercussions for homosexual activity or close proximity to issues of sexual orientation. Sometimes the elusive gay character is hardly delineated at all; for example in "The Angel in the Alcove" the relationship between the protagonist and his shadowy visitor remains vague and in *Menagerie* the nocturnal wanderings of Tom Wingfield go unexplained. Further, the death of some characters before the action commences neatly removes them from direct exposition. For example, the suicide of Blanche Dubois' guilt-ridden young husband occurs before *Streetcar* opens. Although the "queer sisters" in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* presumably enjoyed a successful committed relationship, they are long gone by the time Brick and Maggie inhabit the same bedroom. And, of course, Skipper has conveniently offed himself before the first scene. Even Williams' later more explicit works contain homosexuals who are punished for their predilections. For example, in

“Hard Candy” and “The Mysteries of the Joy Rio,” aging homosexual men die in a decaying movie theater as they indulge in heartbreakingly dispassionate and anonymous sexual encounters. These examples suggest that being a gay Tennessee Williams character doesn’t guarantee stage time, sympathetic characterization, or even survival.<sup>28</sup>

But despite charges of inimical treatment of gay characters, some scholars have argued that, given heterosexist social and historical circumstances, Williams’ representations of homosexuality at all constitutes artistic and personal bravery. Commentators have suggested that sexual indirection in the plays should be attributed to self-oppression; Sarotte, for instance, argues that most of the overt homosexuals in the plays are dead before the start because of the author’s own guilt complex, his inability to show himself on the stage as he truly is. True, they are dead in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Streetcar*, and in *Camino Real* we are offered a self-hating stereotype who is immediately killed. However, there are equally good grounds for arguing that an unusual determination to set queerness on the stage led Williams to risk his career by alluding to it at all (Sinfield 193).

Given the circumstances, I agree that Williams’ inclusion of homosexuality, no matter how oblique, is a step in the right direction. No matter how oblique - it *is* present. As Savran argues,

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<sup>28</sup> Williams’ half realized or absent homosexual characters have been the subject of extensive critical analysis; in addition to Savran and Sinfield, see in particular Georges-Michel Sarotte’s *Like a Brother, Like a Lover: Male Homosexuality in the American Novel and Theater from Herman Melville to James Baldwin*, New York: Doubleday, 1978.

His homosexuality is both ubiquitous and elusive, everywhere in his work and yet nearly impossible to pin down. It structures and informs all of his texts, yet rarely, especially in his plays, produces the unequivocal homosexual character that most critics look for in attempting to identify a homosexual text. Instead, Williams' homosexuality is endlessly *refracted* in his work, translated, reflected, and transposed. (82)

Despite Williams' indirection, gay concerns are an integral part of his work and of significant importance to scholars of queer theory.

In actuality, Williams' treatment of homosexuality positions him somewhere between hero and villain. Clum asserts that Williams cautiously addressed gay issues in two ways; "One is the clever use of what he calls 'obscurity or indirection' to soften and blur the homosexual element in much of his work. The other is a complex acceptance of homophobic discourse, which he both critiques and embraces" (164). Critique of homophobic discourse was so rare during Williams' time that, despite any negative connotations attached to his gay characters, the author's willingness to approach the issue at any level proved radical. In his essay "Something Wild..." (1945), Williams explains,

Art is a kind of anarchy, and the theater is the province of art... Art is only anarchy in juxtaposition with organized society. It runs counter to the sort of orderliness on which organized society must be based. It is a benevolent anarchy: it must be that and if it is true art, it is. It is benevolent in the sense of constructing something which is missing, and what it constructs may be merely criticism of things as they exist. (Day and Woods 8)

Though he does not make the connection explicit, the anarchy to which Williams refers most certainly includes artistic presentations of homosexuality. In creating homosexual characters, either in a manner obviously detectable or more allusive, Williams overturns

and questions established notions of sexual morality. He constructs what has been missing, gay characters. In this above quotation, one could almost substitute the word homosexuality for art in that, during Williams' lifetime, queer identity and its perceived threat ran counter to the "orderliness" of traditional and socially sanctioned heterosexual norms. Because anarchy grants the individual definition of his or her own moral sense, it allows for nontraditional forms of sexual orientation and behavior as there is no custom to which to conform. Additionally, Williams' *Memoirs* reflect sexual anarchy through frank depictions of his own numerous and often casual or commodified sexual acts. But why the need for benevolence? Again, the early schooling Williams received in southern manners may shed light on this seemingly contradictory philosophy of revolutionary chaos and critical kindness. Again, the paradox of Williams as simultaneous detractor and promoter of gay rights is grounded to some degree in his early home life. While he depicted gay characters to varying degrees, he could never abandon the southern hospitality which demanded kindness even in anarchy.

Williams' oblique style provides a mode for battling the conflicting aims of the southern mores with which he was raised and the homosexuality he grew to acknowledge. In *Growing Up Gay in the South* (1991) Sears explains, "There have been few empirical studies on southerners' attitudes toward homosexuality and homosexual persons. A recent study examining regional differences found that whereas a majority of non-Southerners profess tolerance toward such minority groups as atheists, communists, and homosexuals, a majority of Southerners do not" (44). If gay and lesbian issues proved taboo for most of the nation, they were, and in some sense remain, absolutely

unspeakable in much of the South. As John Howard humorously puts it, “Still, you can’t walk into an archive in the South, look under h for ‘homo,’ and expect to find a lot” (6). Thus, Williams’ oblique approach is not only generally de rigeur but also distinctly tied to southern heterosexist norms.

Williams’ southernness could not have helped but influence his oblique depiction of homosexuality. Paller argues, “Williams was born into a sexually dysfunctional family amid a deeply conservative Southern society in 1911 ... The society into which Williams was born was deeply homophobic” (9). Given the ingrained anti-homosexual ideology of the South, Williams was forced to express himself through “subtler and more complex” methods, even if some of those expressions reflected an internalized version of the homophobia by which he was surrounded (9). According to Paller, the evasive or oblique nature of Williams’ work is tied definitively to place.

A heightened intolerance of homosexuality in the Bible Belt informs Williams’ indirection. States with existing or recently repealed anti-sodomy and crimes-against-nature laws correlate almost directly to the former Confederate states.<sup>29</sup> Fundamentalist religious beliefs lead many to condemn homosexuality as amoral. In *Lovers and Beloveds* Gary Richards, drawing from the Agrarian tradition of Christian faith, explains that they:

posit [ed] the South as the site of ‘true’ Christianity’s last stronghold, often drawing on vitriolic Confederate rhetoric to do so ... The letter - if perhaps not

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<sup>29</sup> For further reading on the legal aspects of homosexuality see *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, edited by John Howard, particularly his included essay “‘The Library, the Park, and the Pervert: Public Space and Homosexual Encounter in Post-World War II Atlanta’ and James A. Schnur’s ‘Closet Crusaders: The Johns Committee and Homophobia, 1956-1965’ a case study of mid-century Florida law.

the spirit - of Christian law is as condemnatory of same-sex acts as it is sexist, elitist, and xenophobic. The Old Testament casts such acts and bestiality as equally offensive [Lev. 18:22-23 RSV and Lev. 20:13 RSV] ... there seems to have been little legitimate place for same-sex desire in the Christian South imagined by Agrarians. (14-15)

Objection to homosexuality on the grounds of religious faith was by no means limited to the Agrarians but the sentiment has pervaded southern culture since its beginnings.

Living with his minister grandfather would have exposed Tom to institutionalized religious condemnation of homosexuality at a young age.<sup>30</sup> During an interview as an adult he claimed, “You know, I’m a profoundly religious man, although most people don’t realize it” (Real 43). Although Williams has never commented directly on the relationship between his sexuality and his religious beliefs, the homophobia of the religious South may likely have been one of the reasons he neither completely recognized nor acted upon his desires until well into his twenties.

Commensurate with religion was/is the primacy of the family in southern culture. The agricultural nature of the South’s economic base traditionally called for large families so children could provide assistance in farming and crop raising. Long distances between neighbors resulted in social functions which revolved primarily around family life. Clinton notes of the southern family:

An extended kinship network increased rather than decreased in the post-Revolutionary southern states. The growth of cotton culture demanded more and more land for profitable cultivation, and extending the family was seen as the best method to secure territory ... southern society on the whole remained a

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<sup>30</sup> Although southern religion might not have been accepting of homosexuality, the Reverend Dakin actually supported his grandson after Tom revealed he was gay. Whether Dakin really believed homosexuality was not sinful or was just supporting a “wayward” family member is unclear. In any case, Williams’ main concern was to keep the issue from his mother.

conservative, tightly knit, hierarchical, and closed system. In it, an established family equaled political and economic power. Without connections, businesses languished. Without family ties, politicians could not count on successful bids for office. Without intermarriage, planter dynasties failed to prosper. (36-37)

Homosexuality threatened not only religious or personal morals, but financial and political prosperity in a society where procreation was a cultural asset. Preservation of the southern family depended upon the condemnation of same-sex relationships which could disrupt the social order, creating a kind of moral anarchy. Family continued to influence homosexual identity through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Richards asserts of the Agrarians,

Overt biblical condemnation was not, however, the only or even the most forceful element in Agrarianism's antagonistic stance toward homosexuality. To the contrary, Christianity's valorization of the patriarchal family also contributed significantly. For most of the contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* and their sympathizers, the Agrarian South centered on the cohesiveness of the nuclear and extended family, its biblical sanctions, and its perpetuation through heterosexuality. (15)

Howard, editor of *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South* (1997), reveals in his acknowledgments page; "I'm luckier than most gay Southerners, I think, in that my family of origin is largely supportive of me and my work" (xiii). Many were not so lucky. From the antebellum South to the conservative fifties, and even to the relatively tolerant attitudes of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, the importance of family lineage in the South complicated how openly gay people might express their sexual orientation.

In addition, the traditional role of masculine honor in the South leaves little room

for effeminacy.<sup>31</sup> In the Introduction to *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* Howard asserts that although homosexuality and casual sex were commonplace in Mississippi during the second half the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1945-1985), “androgyny, though doubly suspect, also thrived” (xiii). Again, appearance takes precedence - *looking* gay compounded the affront of simply *being* gay. As Judith Butler reminds us, gender is performative. Given the primacy of reputation and honor in southern culture, the outward exhibition of characteristics associated with the opposite sex (dress, speech, mannerisms, etc.) would likely have proved more shameful than a well-closeted relation whose secret was apparent only to a close few. Kimball King argues that Williams subverts the typical southern hero figures who, “to prove their manhood ... dominate their women in a paternalistic environment. Williams attributes many perversions and distortions of human behavior to the rigid gender stereotypes he uncovers in the Southern landscape” (635). The rigidity of customs which dictated that men and women exaggerate their gender differences would have left no space for overlapping or crossing boundaries or transgressing proscribed roles.

The South’s history exposes a long tradition of anti-homosexual sentiment, perhaps more acrimonious than in other portions of the country. The love that dare not speak its name dared not whisper it in the South.<sup>32</sup> Arguably there can be additional

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<sup>31</sup> Although my discussion centers on homosexuality here, disgrace for lack of “manliness” applies to effeminate straight men as well.

<sup>32</sup> Some scholars argue that the perception of the South as disproportionately homophobic is not true. In “Queering the South” Donna Jo Smith argues: “One myth that is particularly southern *and* queer reflects the notion that it’s harder to be queer in the South than in the rest of the nation. Southern and non-southern

concerns for homosexuals in the South when deciding how openly they may express their sexual orientation. Thus, the intersection of homosexuality and region comprises a crucial element in a critique of Williams' rhetorical prevarications.

### The Changing Williams Landscape

As Williams' career progressed, his work became less and less evasive with regard to homosexual themes. The further Williams ventured from his personal closet, the more overt these representations became. When asked in 1966 if he considered himself a southern writer, Williams replied; "I think I am becoming less associated with the South than I was originally. I was a Southern writer because my parents were Southern and I was born in the South" (qtd. in Waeger 126). Williams' conflicted status as both evasive southerner and explicit author inform the subtle dialectics at work in shaping his evasive narrative style. As his reputation grew, Williams' life and dramatic settings moved further away from the South as did his need to conform to its rhetorical conventions. The further he moved from his southern roots both geographically and chronologically, the more outspoken he became in his drama. However, two important exceptions, Williams' genteel interpersonal exchanges and his use of plastic theater, evince how his southern background continued to influence his life and work at the same

queers alike have internalized this myth to the degree that it has had a significant effect on southern queer experiences ... And of course, like all myths, this one contains its grain of truth, reflecting some southern queer realities. Even the most cursory attention to current events, however, suggests that queers are made the target [of homophobia]" everywhere" (381). While such skepticism is healthy in that it avoids reducing myriad individual realities to a disingenuously homogenous whole, the performative nature of gender distinguishes "being queer" from "being out" in the South. Attention to appearance would condone homosexuality before it condoned the appearance of queerness. While there is no definitive study, the South's reputation as typical of the film *Deliverance* is certainly enough to establish region as an additional

time the explicit nature of his productions and publications moved away from it.

The publication histories of Williams' work show a marked change over time in his approach to controversial subject matter and his adherence, or lack thereof, to dialogic codes of circuitry. He became much more direct about representations of sexuality, homosexuality, and crudities of language and subjects unthinkable for the "genteel" environment of his earlier plays. Although this chapter looks closely at Williams' three earliest successful dramas, it must be noted that later works such as *Hard Candy and Other Stories*, *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, and *Memoirs*, among others, annihilate the façade of southern gentility with a vengeance. Their explicit representations of sexuality and use of profanity contrast starkly with the allusive civility of his earlier works. Commenting on the need for direct and stark truth, Williams wrote in his journal, "My next play [*Battle of Angels*] will be simple, direct and terrible – a picture of my own heart... It will be myself without concealment or evasion... a passionate denial of sham" (Leverich 335). Similarly, speaking directly to the reader in "Person-To-Person," Williams says, "I want to go on talking to you as freely and intimately about what we live and die for as if I know you better than anyone else whom you know" (878). Speaking freely came more easily to Williams as his career progressed.

And yet, despite these changes, Williams consistently claimed, even late into his career, that he strove to be oblique. The author, like his characters, paradoxically internalized and simultaneously rejected the obligation of the southern gentleman to concern.

avoid, defer, or displace the “unspeakable.” Homosexuality clearly provides the most important example of Williams’ inclusion and exclusion of contentious matters. Savran notes that his works,

In their obliqueness ... embody the unresolved tension between Williams’ assertions that he ‘never tried to disguise [his] homosexuality’ and that he ‘never found it necessary to deal with’ [homosexuality] in [his] work’ Colonizing the contradictory ground between ‘never tried to disguise’ and ‘never found it necessary to deal’ Tennessee Williams consistently writes his desire as equivocally as he writes himself in a corpus of work in which ‘every word is autobiographical and no word is autobiographical.’ Throughout his work for the theater of the 1940s and 1950s, homosexuality appears – ever obliquely – as a distinctive and elusive style. (83)

Williams’ “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy expresses a paradoxical union of opposites that informs his early work, as we have seen in the earlier discussion of *Menagerie* and *Streetcar*. But as his career progressed Williams did, in fact, “deal with” presentations of homosexuality, but in doing so insisted that his representations still strove for good taste.

The coexistence between southern gentility and the search for truth creates a paradox fundamental to understanding Williams’ texts. Honesty and taste, ugly reality and gentlemanly propriety, are not mutually exclusive when viewed through the lens Williams’ southern heritage. Despite more overt treatment of homosexuality in both Williams’ later work and his *Memoirs*, the revelation that Williams always *tried* to write obliquely suggests he did not see the two as irreconcilable. Dianne Cafagna writes, “steeped in this inheritance of ‘manners’ and ‘mendacity,’ Williams felt caught within what Hugh Holman has called ‘a union of opposites, a condition of instability, a paradox’” (119). The fundamental paradox is Williams’ oblique style to tell a direct

truth. For example, in the stage directions to the sexually explicit “Hard Candy,” Williams cautions the reader that “some measure of obscurity or indirection is called for” and “I am beginning to approach those things in the only way possible without head-on violence that would disgust and destroy and which would only falsify the story” (qtd. in Savran 113). Despite a sordid story of prostitution, pornography, fellatio, public sex, and death, Williams maintains that his story employs devices that are obscure, indirect, and nonviolent. Interestingly, to create disgust is to falsify the story. Although it is tempting to read this statement ironically, there may be some merit to the notion that indirection and truth are not incompatible. We might argue so far as to say good manners are *necessary* for truth. Truth, Williams claims, lies within the boundaries of good taste; however, the juxtaposition of “Hard Candy’s” shocking frankness with Williams’ assertion that it employs obscurity and indirection suggests he pushes the frontier boundaries of propriety to effect change. By asserting that his approach utilizes obscurity and indirection and then presenting a clearly explicit story, Williams creates a new paradigm in which the unseemly is subsumed - at least to an extent - as part of the norm.

Although his later work is graphic and explicit Williams clearly expresses his intent not to offend. A comment about the movie version of *Baby Doll* reflects the same impulse to refrain from the unseemly; “the movie has many things in it that I did not want to write. It has at least one scene that I objected to when it was being filmed. It was symbolic in a way that I considered in bad taste.’ What scene? Williams declined to identify it – surprisingly enough, in the interest of good taste. ‘Too evil,’ he said, but

would say no more” (Davis 44). Despite his explicit texts, Williams steadfastly strove to avoid bad taste, even to the point of refusing to identify what comprised it.

The clash of explicit truth and evasive propriety surfaces perhaps most clearly in Williams’ scandalous *Memoirs* which, written after his public coming out on “The David Frost Show” in 1970, include graphic details of Williams’ own life and particularly his sexual escapades. But despite its explicit content, Williams explains,

Due to the uncompromising nature of these memoirs, which may be their principle virtue, a number of friends prefer not to have their names linked with mine in this story of my life. I understand and respect this preference. I could invent them as characters the way one might in a piece of fiction, making them different from themselves, but that would violate the first premise of this book; and so I’d rather omit them completely, however regrettable a gap that makes. (99)

Here Williams promotes the truthfulness of his memoirs and yet is gentlemanly enough to respect the wishes of those who did not want their personal histories exposed to public view.

But *Memoirs* may not have been as straightforward as Williams maintained. Paller argues, “In his *Memoirs*, Williams never hesitates to discuss his homosexuality, but the pain and confusion he experienced while coming to understand his nature are completely elided” (11). As much as he claimed to practice an oblique style for its benefits, he also maintains that, “Fear and evasion are the two little beasts that chase each others’ tails in the revolving wire-cage of our nervous world. They distract us from feeling too much about things” (*Memoirs* 53). Clearly these are the seemingly incongruous convictions of a man caught between evasion as gentlemanly and evasion as

cowardly. Evasion is as ambiguous and as paradoxical as Williams' texts themselves. It's all in how you use it. In his *Memoirs*, chivalrous honor toward others overrides Williams' regret and even the principle virtue of openness in the story of his life. Typically, Williams muddies the water of any attempt to weigh the two competing factors of taste and truth; however, clearly both were of great importance.

#### Ever the Evasive Belle

Williams practiced the art of mannerly conversation, the sort we have seen Amanda Wingfield and Blanche Dubois, in his personal life, even late into his career when he had moved from alluding to touchy content to (mostly) naked exposure of even the most controversial subjects. Despite his need for unconcealed truth in his art, he practiced the rules of social interaction from his boyhood, namely never to overtly offend in conversation, late into his adult life. As he explains, "When I write I don't aim to shock people, and I'm surprised when I do. But I don't think that anything that occurs in life should be omitted from art, though the artist should present it in a fashion that is artistic and not ugly. I set out to tell truth. And sometimes the *truth* is shocking" (Rader 332). When Russian poet Yevtushenko told Williams he had only put about 30% of his talent into *Small Craft Warnings*, Williams writes, "I was distressed but I kept my composure. 'I'm very happy to know,' I said with the cool of a Southern lady, 'that I still have so much of my talent left'" (*Memoirs* 9). Evidently the rule that a southerner always keep his or her composure lasted throughout Williams' lifetime. Williams also employed humor as his characters often do to smooth over any troublesome

circumstances. After an ostentatious display of wealth by the homophobic Yevtushenko, Williams writes, “I was now a bit put out. I called him a ‘capitalist pig’ - the remark applied with a veneer of humor. Then I launched a counterassault [on Russian intolerance of homosexuals]” (*Memoirs* 9). Williams, like his characters, manages to maintain the appearance of gentility through circuitous means, here the mediating action of humor, while still expressing a controversial point of view. Apparently the role of the “Southern Lady” was one Williams relished long after he had left the South.

Williams’ personality was so enigmatic that many of those who thought they knew him well were surprised to find he often catered to their individual perceptions of his character. As noted in Chapter Two, southern conversation is often about “honoring the listener” and Williams obliged by showing and telling friends what they expected to see and hear. Leverich notes of Williams:

Often purposefully evasive, he seemed composed of several personalities. Playwrights, like actors, are artists of many parts and play many roles, and so Tennessee Williams was many things to many people, including those intimates who pridefully staked their claim to knowing the “real” person. His letters were frequently slanted to the pleasure or expectations of the recipients, whose reminiscences are too often colored by a one-sided picture of their friend. (xxii)

Leverich also notes that Williams’ odd behavior often mystified his friends, “especially those who thought of themselves as confidants but whom he, in fact, suffered or tried to avoid” (xxii). That those who counted themselves among his friends but whom Williams in truth disliked remained unaware of his true feelings, suggests that the oblique and evasive practices of Williams’ early training persisted. He would rather smile and

indulge than offend. Thus, maintaining the illusion of gentility and avoiding the disgrace of stepping outside his gentlemanly persona led Williams to practice politeness and evasion in his personal relationships as well as his art even as his texts often obliterated such concerns with a vengeance or attempted to negotiate between propriety and truth.

### Plastic Theater and Realism

Peggy Prenshaw notes of Williams' texts, "Three paradoxes appear consistently: the effect of the past on the present, especially that of the southern past, the consequence of human sexuality, and the role of the artist" (10). This chapter has explored the influence of the South and the consequence of homosexuality on Williams' obliqueness, and Prenshaw's comment identifies the final forum in which Williams' indirection plays a significant role, that of his dramaturgical philosophies. In the production notes to *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams defined a new dramatic form he called "plastic theater," characterized by the use of symbolic and extra-diagetic elements. This device is both one of the most allusive and, despite its nonrealistic presentation, one of Williams' most effective characteristics in presenting the complex and subjective ambiguities of reality.

The use of allusive patterns transcends the dialogue of Williams' characters themselves to permeate his aesthetic and artistic philosophies. He explains of *The Glass Menagerie*,

Being a "memory play," [it] can be presented with unusual freedom of convention. Because of its considerably delicate or tenuous material, atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction play a particularly important part. Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn't be, trying to escape its

responsibly of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are. The straight realistic play with its genuine frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes, its characters that speak exactly as its audience speaks, corresponds to the academic landscape and has the same virtue of a photographic likeness. Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance. These remarks are not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do with a conception of a new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture. (395)

Williams' claims that plastic theater, which presents the essence of truth through suggestion, not only provides a closer approach to truth than realistic theater but proves necessary *because of* its considerably delicate or tenuous material. Williams explicitly states here that delicate subjects require suggestion, subtlety, and allusion.

Esther M. Jackson argues that plastic theater's technique was influenced by factors such as poetry, post-World War II culture, visual arts like painting, sculpture, architecture and film, and earlier writers, particularly Whitman and the transcendentalists. I add to this list Williams' identification as a southerner. Plastic theater, by any name, although by no means unique to Williams or other southern dramatists and authors,<sup>33</sup> is informed in part by the significance of propriety to the southern gentleman and the South's tradition of decorum in relation to delicate or tenuous material. Williams may well have relied on "atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction" to convey meaning had he been born and raised in, say, Poughkeepsie, but it

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<sup>33</sup> Jackson notes, "Eugene O'Neil, writing in the twenties, had described a form similar to that which Williams sought to create. He called this form 'supernaturalism' and described Strinberg as an early interpreter of it. The idea of a 'plastic theatre,' as defined by both playwrights corresponded to notions of form shaped by European artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (192).

seems likely that this particular playwright's schooling in the social and rhetorical arts of the southern gentleman influenced his indirect and abstruse approach to staging reality, presenting truth through suggestive means. For example, in *Streetcar* the swirling Varsouviana polka which surfaces each time Blanche mentions her tragic first husband clarifies the disturbing nature of the scene she finds when entering "a room I thought was empty - which wasn't empty, but had two people in it ... the boy I had married and an older man" despite the omission of any specific description of what she has seen (527). In *The Glass Menagerie*, the stage directions note, "the scene is memory and is therefore nonrealistic," that is, it is his earliest attempt at plastic theater where he may "give truth in the pleasant guise of illusion" (399-400). Plastic theater gives Tom the option of alluding to his nocturnal excursions with no compulsion to recreate the details. For example, as he leaves the tenement building via the fire escape, presumably for the last or nearly the last time, the dance-hall music plays as he descends into the "narrow abyss of the alley" (464). Williams' use of the word abyss here echoes Allen Tate's preoccupation with avoidance of the unspeakable as well. We may presume that Tom's purposeful embrace of that which Tate dictates be evaded indirectly reflects the nature of his nocturnal excursions to "the movies," that is, to see other men. Each of these examples reflects Williams' use of plastic theater in relation to homosexuality. Given its allusive nature, although it is not exclusive to region, plastic theater seems a natural extension of southern parlance and an aesthetic choice in presenting homosexuality which is apropos of Williams' heritage.

Critics have debated Williams' highly stylized, allusive, and less than direct means of expression in terms of his categorization as a Realist. While earlier scholars saw Williams' work as primarily realistic, critics soon acknowledged the complicated relationship between Williams' truth and his ambiguity.<sup>34</sup> As Annette Saddik explains, "a central complexity of Williams' early work lies in its ideological rebellion against realism while simultaneously working within its boundaries" (42). Savran argues, "By so disrupting the relationship between the past and the present, Williams' plays tend to undermine the purely linear and irreversible temporal progression on which ... American realism in general, depends" (92). Jackson explains that the idea of a plastic theater "established a precedent that characterized Williams' plastic form. The setting itself was conceived as an element of his poetic language; that is, as poetic configuration characterized by the capacity to alter its location in time, space, and sensibility, without loss of dramatic continuity" (200). Despite the fluid and slippery nature of Realism's label, most critics agree that Williams early, "most realistic," works both participate in and problematize the genre.

Part of the difficulty in attempting to categorize Williams as a Realist is that ambiguity, for Williams, *was* realism. And yet, despite his claims that ambiguity offered

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<sup>34</sup> John Gassner asserted in 1954 that "the most affecting scenes of *The Glass Menagerie* are written with sensitive realism" (351) (*Theater in Our Times*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1954) and his stance was typical of the initial reception of *Menagerie*, *Streetcar* and *Cat*. However, although it was challenged more and more often as Williams' career progressed, the perception of Williams as at least something of a realist persists. For example, Ronald Hayman comments that, with the exception of *Camino Real*, all of the major plays prior to *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here* "had been realistic" (193). (*Everyone is an Audience*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993). For a complete discussion of Williams' categorization as realist vs. antirealist see Annette J. Saddik's chapter "'I Don't Like to Write Realistically': Williams' Uneasy Relationship with Realism" pgs. 42-73 in *The Politics of Reputation*.

truth, Williams acknowledged that his style also left much to the imagination, refused to preach a dogmatic message. In his essay “Critic Says ‘Evasion’, Writer says ‘Mystery’” Williams notes,

Every moment of human existence is alive with uncertainty. You may call it ambiguity, you may even call it evasion. I want them to leave the *Morosco* [theater] as they do leave it each night, feeling that they have met with a vividly allusive, as well as disturbingly elusive, fragment of human experience, one that not only points at truth but at the mysteries of it. (Day and Wood 73-74)

He could not present human experience in its entirety because the truth of “truth” rendered it, by design, empirically inexpressible.

Williams himself saw no false dichotomy between being realistic, which he equated with truthfulness, and being evasive. He believed the use of nondiegetic devices and other forms of symbolic allusiveness in his work were, perhaps, more realistic, more indicative of human experience, more “true,” than art striving to faithfully create realistic detail. In a 1962 interview he claimed he wanted to be “more allusive rather than on the nose”:

TW: ‘ That I’m conscious of more than ever. I’ve been writing too much on the nose, you know, and I’ve always sensed the fact that life was too ambiguous to be ... to be presented in a cut and dried fashion. I’ve always been conscious of that, but I think I’m surer now. I think the one beautiful and great thing about the new wave of playwrights is that they approach their subject matter with this kind of allusiveness. The whole attitude of this new wave of playwrights is not to preach, you know. Not to be dogmatic, to be provocatively allusive. And I think that’s much truer ... Human relations are terrifyingly ambiguous. If you write a character that isn’t ambiguous you are writing a false character, not a true one.’ (Funke and Booth 99)

Williams' new form functions as both a distancing device, divorcing the audience from realistic expectations, and a paradoxically inclusive device, conveying more "truth" to the audience both in spite and because of its indirect<sup>35</sup> portrayal. Plastic theater, then, is a form of obliquity born out of Williams' need for artistic truth.

Plastic theater provides one of the most powerful characteristics of Williams' work precisely because it attempts to portray truth evasively. What contemporary critics once denounced<sup>36</sup> is now recognized as a valuable tool of expression. Arthur Ganz argues that the problem with Williams' plays was not,

the disguises, transpositions, even evasions in his handling of the theme of homosexuality. They were, in fact, arguably a source of his strength, for they protected him from over-simplifications and encouraged the genuine ambiguity and complexity of his attitude to take symbolic form in his plays... (the oblique view, after all, often reveals things that are invisible when the object is contemplated directly). (136-37)

Williams agreed, saying, "I still feel that I deal unsparingly with what I feel is truth of character. I would never evade it for the sake of evasion, because I was in any way reluctant to reveal what I know of the truth. But ambiguity is sometimes deliberate, and for artistically defensible reasons" (Day and Woods 71). Paller asserts:

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<sup>35</sup> I use "indirect" and "nonrealistic" here in the same manner in the sense that anything depicted in a way that does not strive to recreate accurate detail is depicting it obliquely.

<sup>36</sup> In response to critical attacks on the basis of his evasiveness, Williams responded "In his reviews of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Mr. Walter Kerr has spoken of an "evasiveness" on my part in dealing with certain questions in the play, mainly questions of character, pertinent mostly to the character of the young male protagonist, Brick Pollitt. This is not the first time I've been suspected of dodging issues in my treatment of play characters. Critics complained, sometimes, of ambiguities in *Streetcar*" (Day and Woods 70).

Williams is engaging in what had been, from his earliest work, his principal dramatic strategy: to reveal a little while concealing a great deal more. There is a fundamental tension, in other words, found in Williams' best plays, between the need to reveal and the need to conceal. However, far from being the serious flaw that some critics interpret it to be, this tension proved to be not only necessary, but fruitful and positive. (1)

In addition, plastic theater demands increased participation from the audience and reveals truths about *their* characters. For example in *The Glass Menagerie*, "Individual members of the audience will reach their own conclusions as to the nature of that [Tom's] secret life. Those who have eyes to see will see. Those who do not will see ... something else" (Paller 41). Plastic theater accommodates the subjectivities of reality, reflecting its true complexity, and facilitating audience participation and self-awareness.

Straddling the line between truth and its mysteries, reality and evasion, Williams created a dynamic new form which solidified his place as one of the few major American dramatists of the mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century. The tension between direction and evasion has created some of the most conflicted, complex, and coveted roles in American theater. Further, plastic theater allows for a more complete and truthful recognition of reality than directness which confines the plays and limits a full and multi-dimensional understanding of truth for both characters and audience. As Stephen Stanton puts it; "Truly, he has always tried to penetrate to facets of our innermost natures that are invisible when observed directly" (14).

Several factors influence Tennessee Williams' claim that he regularly attempted to reflect truth by writing obliquely. The dangers of revealing homosexuality led to allusions and implications when exploring issues of sexual orientation. Over time, as

Williams' texts became more overt in their presentation of homosexuality, his claim of allusiveness demanded new explanations. His mother's unfaltering devotion to the sociability and gentility of the Old South influenced him throughout his career. The South's cultural imperative to elide direct conversation about indelicate or troublesome subjects was internalized by Williams as a child, practiced in his adult life, and reflected in his works. As he explains, "If the writing is honest it cannot be separated from the man who wrote it" (*Memoirs* 100). Characters in *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* paradoxically replicate and resist the impulse to conceal or remain silent for the sake of good manners. As Thomas Adler puts it, "The South, Williams seems unmistakably to say, has experienced the greatest difficulty in bringing into harmony, into integration, its body and soul" (31). This paradox creates one of the defining characteristics of Williams' dramas. Williams himself saw no problem with the contradictions inherent in his work. As he once quipped, "I am contradictory baby" (Jennings 229).

Finally, a word about generic devices. Like Allen Tate's ghostly gothicism and, as we will see in the following chapter, Lewis Nordan's magical realism, Williams' plastic theater presents truth through an ambiguous and unrealistic, yet truthful, lens. Plastic theater reveals an ambiguous reality which reflects a more accurate truth than possible through detailed realism by reason of its very subjectivity and obliqueness. In the case of all three authors, and, I argue, southern authors as a group (whose work has been the subject of much critical discussion about otherworldly or "non-realistic" elements such as the grotesque, magic, the tall tale, and storytelling to name a few) use

their ambiguous or hybrid generic forms to open a world of otherwise inaccessible possibility to the reader. As Williams himself put it, “Sometimes the truth is more accessible when you ignore realism” (Brown 264).

## CHAPTER IV

### “NOT MY STORY TO TELL”: THE ELUSIVE BLACK VOICE

#### IN LEWIS NORDAN’S *WOLF WHISTLE*

*They tortured him and did some evil things too evil to repeat*  
- Bob Dylan “*The Death of Emmett Till*” 1963.<sup>37</sup>

Lewis Nordan’s novel *Wolf Whistle* centers on an infamous 1955 hate crime in which two white men escaped justice for murdering Emmett Till, a 14 year old Chicago boy accused of whistling at a white woman in the Jim Crow South. Their acquittal by an all-male, all-white jury sparked a national outcry that helped solidify the burgeoning civil rights movement. As a teenager growing up in rural Mississippi, Nordan witnessed first hand much of the subsequent conflict surrounding the event, compelling him to fictionalize the subject utilizing the unusual and controversial choices of black humor and magical realism to relate an historic, racially charged incident. Although the text tackles the tragedy Nordan found personally profound, the narrative is peculiar in that it largely omits the murdered boy’s voice.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>From “The Death of Emmett Till,” available only as a bootleg single until released by Sony in 1993 on The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan Outtakes.

<sup>38</sup>His sparse dialogue is extremely limited and mostly monosyllabic, although Chapter 9 contains postmortem singing, a device I argue later does not constitute voice per se.

In “Mississippi Goddamn,” Randall Kenan praises the novel for “extraordinary aesthetic achievement” but calls the absence of Emmett Till’s voice “no small disappointment,” suggesting that the racial tragedy of a black boy murdered by white men suffers through this omission. Nordan’s narrative does indeed focus on the surrounding community to the extent that the fictionalized murder of Emmett Till appears almost incidental; however, such monofaceted analysis proves deceptive. Although the voice of Bobo, the fictional Emmett, eludes direct representation in the text, Kenan’s view of *Wolf Whistle* as “solely the story of the white folks” requires expansion (595). As a white author, Nordan utilizes modes of indirect rhetorical expression that permeate southern discourse in an attempt to reconcile white perspective with black voice, emphasize the magnitude of Emmett Till’s experience, and plum the depths of racial violence in pre-civil rights America. *Wolf Whistle*’s characters practice the type of rhetorical evasion and circuitry discussed in Chapter Two, while Nordan’s meta-narrative self-consciously employs similar indirection; such self-consciousness exempts the text from charges of marginalizing Emmett Till’s fate, the magnitude of his experience, and its impact on race relations and racial history in the South. Further, Bobo’s absent tongue is not necessarily antithetical to his inexorable presence. As Toni Morrison theorizes, an Africanist presence saturates the whole of American literature “even, and especially, when texts aren’t ‘about’ Africanist presences or characters” (46).

Bobo’s absence does not imply ineptitude on Nordan’s part in relating the gruesome story successfully. Much to the contrary, this chapter argues that a specifically southern, evasive narrative style, along with humor, magical realism, music, and

communal narratology, permeates Nordan's unique novel with an overwhelming Africanist presence, foregrounding the tragic spirit of Emmett Till and the cultural implications of his murder. This unique approach provides Nordan with a protective glove for handling admittedly toxic material, the tools to talk about an historical racial tragedy from his personal perspective without tactlessly misappropriating Till's voice. The white author's telling of a murdered black boy's story through devices of indirection, those which examine the incident through multiple perspectives to the exclusion of a realistic and straightforward recreation of events,<sup>39</sup> provides a crucial distance between author, reader, and subject which allows for sincere and thoughtful examination of historical and personal tragedy.

Nordan employs several strategic devices in an attempt to avoid irreverence in telling a story he feels does not belong to him. First, regionally based rhetorical codes of evasion, of skirting or talking around a central issue in a manner which underscores rather than undercuts its import, make up a considerable part of Nordan's strategy here. Second, although a pernicious use of humor in relation to racial issues cannot be denied, humor in conjunction with grim subject matter also contains a remarkably human and fitting response to tragedy and loss. Used as a defense mechanism, humor does not preclude earnest consideration of the material, but - paradoxically - renders it more accessible and allows for deliberate contemplation of what might otherwise have gone unexamined. The same may be said of the text's reliance on magical realism, the

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<sup>39</sup> In Chapters Three I argue the divorce from reality is accomplished by Tate's use of gothic elements in "The Abyss" section of *The Fathers*. Similarly, in Chapter Four I discuss Williams' use of "plastic theater" which operates much the same way. Each of these three authors employs non-realistic devices

artificiality of which ironically exempts Nordan from accusations of inadequately portraying Emmett Till's authentic experience and opens "space for interactions of diversity" (Zamora and Faris 3). In addition, the musicality and legacy of the blues prevalent in Nordan's text provides another method for accessing Till's story obliquely, telling a tragic story through exquisitely haunting notes. Finally, Nordan's self-acknowledged and purposeful blurring of the lines between characters, narrator, and reader, aptly illustrates narratologist Gerard Genette's theory of pseudo-diegesis,<sup>40</sup> in which a narrator or character tells another's story as his own, facilitating multiple perspectives and drawing the reader closer to Bobo's experience through its multidimensional representation. Although *Wolf Whistle* lacks any substantive presentation of Bobo's voice, his specter effusively haunts it with a long, low whistle that resonates throughout the narrative. For Nordan, the mere fact this subject demands such prudence evinces its magnitude.

Although Bobo's voice lacks direct representation, the silences Nordan creates articulate much about an historical experience he can only access obliquely. As Michel Foucault asserts of increasingly repressive attitudes and labeling of sexual practices, silence presents an alternative yet equally important side of discourse;

which allow for heightened reader engagement, subjectivity, and speculation.

<sup>40</sup> Gerard Genette, in *Narrative Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980) pp.237-243, argues that pseudo-diegesis defocalizes the subject through the filter of memory and relates the story through the perspective of another character. By employing the memories and points of view of several characters, Nordan destabilizes the narrative, blurring the role of narrator and exacting participation from the reader. However, as I will argue later, Bobo himself becomes a part of the community through his murder and as such participates in the telling of his own story, if only posthumously.

But this [changing socio-sexual norms] was not a plain and simple imposition of silence. Rather, it was a new regime of discourses. Not any less was said about it; on the contrary. But things were said in a different way; it was different people who said them, from differing points of view, and in order to obtain different results. Silence itself - the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers - is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within all-over strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say ... There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse. (27)

Thus, Nordan's strategy of silence on the subject of Emmett Till's experience speaks volumes. If we are to fully and meaningfully engage with the text and the historical tragedy behind it, we must examine what is said in conjunction with what is not said and understand that both inform our experience of the story. Foucault suggests that the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century need to control sexual discourse, regulating its usage and labeling much talk about sex unfit for polite discussion, created a widespread fascination with the subject which prompted the development of a complex alternative schema of language and linguistic behavior, a new lexicon heavy with implied meaning. Race undoubtedly ranks alongside sexual matters as an evident subject for such linguistic gymnastics of the unspoken. Nordan's silent treatment of his subject boosts the notion of what is at stake in *Wolf Whistle* by presenting Emmett Till's experience in an alternative, largely implied, yet equally authentic, narrative form. Emmett Till's embedded story need only be viewed through the *elements that function alongside the things said* to find a text fully infused with his presence.

## Bobo and Biography

Nordan has spoken extensively of his feelings about recreating Emmett Till's story and his decision to essentially leave it on the periphery in favor of writing the "white trash version" of the lynching. In a 1997 interview, the author claims that appropriating the boy's voice would have been irreverent, and indeed, the reconstruction of Emmett Till's voice by a white man remains at best problematic. Nordan admits struggling with his authority to relate the incident appropriately, saying, "I was unable to write the Emmett Till story of all those years in part because I didn't feel it was my story to write" (Ingram and Ledbetter 84). Yet, as a white author who has struggled with issues of propriety and misappropriation in telling a story of the racial Other, Nordan's reticence to attempt realistic recreation of Till's murder avoids callous disregard. Instead, he employs stylistic methods of indirection to approach the unapproachable.

Nordan's personal familiarity with Till's death informs *Wolf Whistle's* oblique style of concentrating on the poor white community rather than the victim. He notes, "I had the story of the people who were on the periphery of this terrible thing, who didn't know what was going on, who didn't understand their own culpability in the situation. That was the story I had to write, the murderers' story, the family of the murderers, the friends and drinking buddies of the murderers." (Ingram and Ledbetter 84). As a white author, this is the only means for Nordan as an individual to access the otherwise inaccessible horror of a black child's brutal homicide by white men, through the story of

the population which spawned the circumstances and individuals responsible for the killing. Nordan's personal place in that community was emotionally crippling;

I felt like an outsider to the story because I knew the murderers. My father was a friend of one of the guys who killed Emmett Till. We know their family, and yet when it happened, we withdrew into a cocoon of silence, even at the dinner table. We never spoke of the murder. I never said, did Mr. Milam really do this? I never said anything, and nobody else said anything about it either. We were horrified by it. We were so shocked we couldn't deal with it at all, couldn't even talk about it. (Ingram and Ledbetter 84)

So shocked and horrified that he and his family were stunned into silence, Nordan initially shut down and found writing the story impossible. *Wolf Whistle* remedies the effects of immobilizing, silencing shock by approaching the subject from different angles with a variety of narrative tools.

Despite, or perhaps because of, personal tragedy<sup>41</sup> Nordan is also inclined toward a quirky humor that characterizes his personality as well as his fiction. In the introduction to Nordan's *Sugar Among The Freaks*, Richard Howorth describes organizing a reading for a crowd of regional booksellers. Howorth reassured Nordan that flattery of the merchants was unnecessary. Nordan's response was to begin his talk by saying he "planned to go against [Howorth's] advice, *which was to say how much he loved booksellers*, and that he would simply read one of his stories" (ix). Howorth relates yet another similar incident;

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<sup>41</sup> Along with his proximity to Till's murder, Nordan also suffered the loss of a son and an unstable childhood with an alcoholic stepfather.

He asked what I would like him to read, and again I said the matter was up to him, but, if I had my druthers, I would like him to read something long ... As he prepared to read to the crowd, he explained that, although *I had asked him to read a very short story*, he had decided to read instead a long one. I don't know whether inverted truth is a device Lewis Nordan employs in his writing and therefore plays around with in life, or if it's a part of his character that ineluctably comes out in his fiction. But if you asked him, I am certain you could not rely on his answer. (ix-x)

Here, Nordan conflates humor and rhetorical indirection in his own interesting style, what Howorth calls "inverted truth." Nordan's jesting, although it appears to go against Howorth's requests, results in his performing the reading exactly as asked. The same inversion applies to Nordan's storytelling techniques in *Wolf Whistle*. Though Nordan claims the novel is about the community members surrounding Till's murder rather than the murder itself, narrative places the incident front and center, in essence reversing expectations about the novel's intent. Although Nordan writes about the people on the periphery, Bobo provides the central preoccupation and unifying theme of the narrative. Without Bobo as a focal core, there would be no periphery from which to write.

*Wolf Whistle* (1993)

Both Nordan and *Wolf Whistle's* characters engage in the specifically southern dance of eliding language central to explicit meaning. Ironically, along with Bobo - whose whistle constitutes an infraction of utterance rather than action-, another character who transgresses conversational convention is his "victim." Lady Sally Anne Montberclair, fictional recipient of the ill-fated wolf whistle, highlights the prevaricative verbal idiosyncrasies found in southern convention through her failure to comply with the

mandates of an established code of rhetorical evasion. Sally Anne enters Red's Goodlookin' Bar and Grocery and blatantly asks for sanitary products. Her request startles Red, the proprietor, who explains, "Usually men bought Kotex. A man knew how to purchase a box of Kotex. A man would whisper a discreet word to Red - like, 'The Crimson Fairy's visiting my house today, podner, can you do a little something to help me out?'- and Red would slip him what he needed, like contraband, to be smuggled away" (30). Sally Anne clearly voices what etiquette dictates should remain silent, or at least requires handling via proxy. Her behavior flusters Red and Solon Gregg (Bobo's murderer), who cannot speak or look her in the eye. That men typically purchase feminine hygiene products instead of women suggests that the rest of the community complies in upholding a prescribed code of social conduct.

Embarrassment in this instance is key. The creation of an uncomfortable situation often results in the ostracization of or violence toward the violator where the community's power to exclude embarrasses and exiles those who remain ignorant of, or refuse to participate in, culturally dictated silence. Such is the case with Emmett Till. Alternately, a break with the norm may also place the perpetrator in a dangerous position of power. The capacity to disconcert challenges the hierarchical power dynamic by placing the embarrassed in a state of shame while the embarrasser emerges unscathed, especially if he or she proceeds unaware of the blunder. Such is the case with Sally Anne, whose understanding of the transgressive nature of her request is unclear. As she approaches, she says, "Red, I know I'm intruding here, and I'm sorry, honest I am, but it's an emergency. Do you carry tampons?" (29). Her ambiguous apology might apply to

her need for the product, her request for it, or her interruption of the men's loafing. However, no matter what her intent, it is Red and Solon, not she, who are at a loss for words. Thus Sally Anne functions as both violator of code and usurper of power. Red, finding no remedy for Sally Anne's faux pax, readies himself to protect this code of honor through violence. He keeps the store's gun under the counter directly next to the unmentionable items; "He kept a bone handled .44 pistol right beside them, so he would always know right where it was" (30), thus creating a proximal relationship between the object of Red's embarrassment and a remedy for it. Sally Anne, as a white woman, occupies a social and gendered space (this is, after all, the site of the mythical southern belle) where responsive violence to her breach of conversational etiquette remains implied. Her unlucky admirer, a young, black man who thus lacks similar protective qualities, suffers the consequences of his offense with immeasurable trauma.

Sally Anne is not the only character whose equivocal behavior forefronts the discursive code of civility and evasion established in the South. Solon Gregg attempts to extort money from Sally Anne's husband by telling him where to find Bobo, but the scheme fails because the two characters operate on differing social assumptions. Solon attempts to exact payment by underscoring the opposite, saying to Lord Montberclair, "I hope you won't feel no compulsion to pay me nothing for this information" (56). However, the interchange goes horribly awry when Lord Montberclair takes Solon at his word or perhaps pretends to misunderstand; "Solon said, 'No payment necessary, none at all.' Lord Montberclair said, 'You're a good man,' and paid Solon nothing, the stingy son of a bitch" (60). Solon's true motive is obviously payment for his information; however,

the strategy proves ridiculously ineffective when Lord Montberclair operates outside regionally prescribed rhetorical roles. Both Lady and Lord Montberclair fail to understand the implications of their actions but their privileged positions as wealthy and white insulate them from violent repercussion. Red never actually shoots Sally Anne for asking about Kotex, and Solon simply walks away from her husband with empty pockets. Bobo, however, lacks similar defensive circumstances.

### Indirection and Race

Circuitous southern speech and conduct defies specific racialization; both blacks and whites participate. However, the practice of rhetorical indirection manifests differently in African American communities and Nordan's characters Auntee and Uncle reflect the ways blacks utilize evasive discourse for different motives, with heightened levels of self-consciousness and performativity. African Americans, subject to racism and a stringent set of socially imposed criteria in interactions with whites, must negotiate their positions as both insiders, by way of being southerners, and outsiders, as an historically marginalized race. Bobo's Auntee and Uncle reflect this Du Boisian double consciousness - acting one way with the white public while privately desiring or acting on the opposite - in an exchange with the men who ultimately murder their grandson. When Solon and Lord Montberclair arrive at Bobo's relatives' house to punish him for his infraction, Uncle entreats, "Don't take him, Mr. Solon. I'd be satisfied if you just give him a good whuppin" (140). Presumably Uncle doesn't *want* Solon to whup the boy at all, but he cannot convey the message directly for fear of repercussion. Auntee

recognizes the futility of this approach and berates him, saying “Is that all you can say? Is that the onliest words you ever learned to speak in this world? – you’d be satisfied with a whupping? – that’s it?” (140); however, like Uncle, she too remains powerless to voice her true request.

This powerlessness leads Auntee to try a different, yet equally indirect approach in attempting change the outcome of the incident by feigning generosity, southern hospitality, and racial subservience in an effort to reestablish a racial power dynamic suitable to the white men. In *Civilities and Civil Rights* William H. Chafe addresses the tension between race relations and civility, noting, “Civility is ... a way of dealing with people and problems that made good manners more important than substantial action” (8). Unable to act overtly, Auntee must rely on good manners. As she prepares a strategy for defusing the situation she thinks of a relative, a former slave; “Auntee Reena say slave she have to do all manner of things with a man you hate, slave do, jess staying alive. What Auntee got to do ain’t nothing. What Auntee got to do easy” (142). Here, the necessity of accommodating whites persists from slavery through Jim Crow, and both Auntee and Uncle are aware that their behavior, what they must say and what they cannot say, will impact Bobo’s fate.

Auntee attempts to engage Solon’s sense of propriety in her appeal for mercy; “Auntee thought hard about what she was going to say next, because if it didn’t work she would hate herself for the rest of her life. She said it anyway. She said ‘Mr. Solon, would you like to set a spell and rest your weary bones?’” (141). Her actions suggest that perhaps the couple’s southern manners can make up for Bobo’s breach as they continue

to host the man who has come to kidnap their nephew, with Uncle searching for a coffee cup and sugar and Auntee offering, “I gots me some cold bread and black strap molasses, if you hungry” (144). The couple squabbles over Uncle’s suggestion that he must hunt for a clean cup, implying Auntee’s housekeeping skills are sub-par. Her reply, “They ain’t nothing *but* clean cups in that kitchen, you old white-headed fool” (142), asserts her abilities as a domestic, an appropriate place for a black woman, in an attempt to show Solon that the family members do indeed know their proper social position. In addition, Auntee’s scolding aims to position her on Solon’s side of the argument, saying, in effect, “See, he is an old fool. Just like Bobo is a young fool. But I can handle them, put them back in their place.” Auntee’s imperative to deprecate herself and her family hearkens back to the regime of slavery and the strategies slaves like Auntee Reena were forced to adopt. Unable to say “You *can’t* or *won’t* take my boy,” Auntee must rely on her sociability and deference to underscore a request for benevolence. Additionally, any direct statements for Bobo’s release are respectful requests, “Don’t take him, Mr. Solon,” or questions, “You ain’t gone shoot him, is you?” (141), as the couple cannot overtly or vigorously demand that a white man, with racial, cultural, and physical power (embodied in the gun), release a black boy.

Solon’s actions show both an initial misunderstanding and subsequent rejection of Auntee’s performance of a willingly subservient black woman. Both Solon and Auntee are not avoiding the subject, they merely agree to participate in the appearance of avoidance. First, as he prepares to murder the couple’s grandchild, Solon absurdly refuses to abandon his attachment to southern manners. His acceptance of Auntee’s

performance underscores the entrenchment of rhetorical evasion in interracial discourse. Certainly Solon cannot expect the couple will not mind if he murders Bobo; however, direct acknowledgment of a hope for leniency comes only after considerable feinting by Auntee and the expected, and socially performative, acceptance by Solon. For him, killing a black boy is acceptable but turning down coffee and a comfortable chair would be rude. In fact, both the “duty” to punish Bobo for his infraction and the obligation he feels to be courteous to Auntee and Uncle stem from the same place, a responsibility to uphold southern values, manners, and moralities. Solon’s reply to the couple’s hospitality, “Well, I couldn’t stay” (143) indicates both a misinterpretation of the offer as sincere and a signal that their strategy will prove inadequate. Aware that the couple is trying to stall, he cannot expose their plan of attack without breaching etiquette himself. An indecorous response from Solon would position the black couple in a higher social position than the “white-trash” Solon, a reversal of the social hierarchy Solon seeks to reestablish by punishing Bobo for the breach that inverted it in the first place.

When Solon’s observance of manners finally comes to an end, “Go get in the car. We had enough chit-chat and foot-dragging” (144), his response indicates there has been “enough” chit-chat, but such a statement also suggests that perhaps some chit-chat was expected, even necessary. Solon’s willingness to abandon civility strips away the illusion that Auntee and Uncle’s deference will suffice. The need to protect the honor of a white woman against the sexual advances of a black man trumps any concern over minute social niceties. Ultimately, civility provides only a mask for the oppressive and violent nature of social relationships under Jim Crow.

Further, Auntee and Uncle are compelled by history and a tradition of racial inequality to practice proprieties while Solon, as a white man interacting with African Americans, can ultimately disregard such practices at will. Both parties acknowledge such civility; however, it is a specifically white construct in which Auntee and Uncle must participate if they are to save their nephew. Solon operates within this convention on the grounds of manners, then disregards it on the basis of race, while the black couple must exhibit this behavior because they lack alternatives. Uncle addresses the twofold nature of his conduct, saying, “That was just a way of talking to white folks you know” (147). Again, the dual position of African Americans, having to operate within a racially stratified, southern, white world, foregrounds the circuitous narrative tradition, in this instance a survival mechanism rather than a courtesy. For African Americans in the South, the consequences of stepping outside acceptable modes of discourse come with severity where the stakes amount to life and death, not simply a slap on the wrist for a discourteous transgression. It is Bobo’s lack of familiarity with this mechanism, or an unwillingness to adhere to it, that unduly leads to his death.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and other African American scholars have categorized the practices of indirect language by African Americans as Signifyin(g) and, as Gates states, “All definitions of Signifyin(g) that do not distinguish between manner and matter succumb ... to serious misreading” (70). Gates explains the traditional African Signifying Monkey narrative poems in which the monkey relates an insult from the Elephant to the Lion. The Monkey’s figurative speech is taken literally by the Lion who then demands an apology from the Elephant. After the Elephant trounces him, the Lion

realizes his mistake and returns to exact revenge on the monkey (54-55). Although Auntee and Uncle do not lie to Solon, they do adhere to the Signifyin(g) tradition of figurative language through their disingenuous hospitality in order to exact a desired result from the object of their signification. Solon takes the offer of hospitality literally, oblivious or unwilling to acknowledge the textual undercurrent of double meaning. Thus he privileges the courteous manner in which the couple communicates with him over the implied content of their speech, remaining unaware of, or unwilling to address, their real concerns.

Intentionally or not, Solon seriously misreads Auntee and Uncle's rhetorical strategies in dealing with the plight of their nephew. Like the Lion in Gates' parable, he misunderstands the couple's figurative language and takes their invitation to sit a while and enjoy refreshments as sincere. This is not to suggest that Auntee and Uncle are the trickster figures associated with Signifyin(g) in the most narrow sense. Instead, they employ one of the more broadly defined tropes of Signifyin(g) that anthropologist Roger D. Abrahams' identifies as "the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point" and arrive at "direction through indirection" (qtd. in Gates 75). By manipulating language to express their intent through courtesy, the two African American characters understand each other and the implications of their confronting Solon about Bobo's predicament. Thus, Signifyin(g) is both a way for the couple to communicate with each other as well as attempt to save their nephew's life through what Solon perceives as their performative adherence to social and racial hierarchy and his own appropriate response.

## Absent Presences

Just as Auntee and Uncle exhibit strong connections to traditionally southern, indirect discourse, albeit through necessity rather than convention, much of Nordan's fictional white community does the same.<sup>42</sup> As Randall Kenan notes, the text details every aspect of life in *Arrow Catcher* *but* the all-important murder of Bobo. In many instances, as soon as the topic surfaces, the community immediately drops it in favor of mundane details that appear to overshadow it. Directly after the offending whistle, Solon attempts to incite a lynch mob at Red's Grocery only to have Red change the subject;

Solon said "Did you hear him out on that front porch, bragging about white women? Seem like I heard him say he was carrying a pitcher of a white woman in his wallet. Did anybody else hear that?" Red's hair stood up straighter and more electric than usual. He said, "Well, now, welcome home, Solon, welcome home from the big N.O., boy, the Big Easy." (39).

Similarly, when Solon tells another character of his plan, the conversation quickly turns from murder to a debate about fishing and beer. Throughout the text, trivial concerns prevail over the larger issue of Bobo's transgression and subsequent murder. The trial of the murderers ends abruptly after Bobo's Uncle fingers the men who killed his nephew and then jumps to "days later." However, this approach leaves the scene open to multiple

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<sup>42</sup> Although the scope of this chapter is limited to one novel, Nordan uses indirection in other works as well. In *Boy with Loaded Gun* the semi-autobiographical character Sugar Mecklin's haircut overshadows the funeral of his father on the same day. Again, unthinkable loss is glossed over in favor of the ordinary. Gregory Morris notes that in this "memoir" Sugar learns of his stepfather's death obliquely (overhearing a phone conversation) and that Nordan tells the story of his own stepfather's death obliquely as well by blurring generic lines between autobiography, memoir and fiction. As Morris puts it, "Lewis Nordan is as truthful as he can bear to be" (60). From "Boy with Loaded Gun: The Confessions of Lewis Nordan." *Southern Literary Journal* 36.2 (2004): 59-81.

interpretations, prompting consideration of the subject, possibly to a greater degree than detailed description could have done. Likewise, by confining Bobo's dialogue to a few monosyllabic comments, Nordan refuses to attempt the realistic recreation of a voice so complex it defies simple representation.

Nordan's refusal to confront the unpleasant truth explicitly comes not only from the mouths of the characters but from the exclusion of Bobo's voice, most notably in the scene of his murder. While his murderer makes small talk, Bobo manages to flee the car, leaving Solon to ponder the boy's "unexpected rude streak." At no point do Solon or the narrator consider the implications of Solon's actions. Rather, Solon concentrates on Bobo's breach of etiquette. Despite the imminent threat of Solon's violence toward the boy, he remains preoccupied with the sharp rocks under Bobo's running feet. Again ridiculous minutiae subsume the larger issue; superficial discomforts overshadow Bobo's life or death battle. By refusing to address Bobo's experience directly through appropriation of his voice, Nordan adheres to specifically southern indirect discursive practices. When taken in this larger context, Nordan's unwillingness points to the severity of this crime not its triviality. By skirting the issue central to the text, Nordan performs the very sort of indirect interplay seen in his characters, and by doing so, paradoxically affirms the enormity of Bobo's murder. Despite these omissions, and ironically because of them, *Wolf Whistle* remains Bobo's story.

## Humor

As part of an indirect communicative style, Nordan uses humor paradoxically to indicate the gravity of his subject. Bobo's absent voice allows for, and perhaps demands, a use of humor otherwise irreverent and profane in conjunction with earnest consideration of the murdered boy's perspective. Traditionally, humor may attempt to diffuse serious situations and, as Robert Gingher suggests, "Nordan's own fiction is rich with this awful laughter, but in that peculiar compound of wacky darkness lies the secret grounding of his craig. ... Humor is a survival tool, a way of dealing with and distancing oneself from tragedy" (244). Here Nordan blends comic and monstrous elements, implying their similarity, emphasizing the serious nature of his subject, suggesting an inability to tackle it explicitly, and instead approaching it with defensive humor. Holman describes humor as an assault and critique on intolerable subjects, saying, "There has also existed a raucous, ribald, and extravagant humor which is the realist's way of dealing with the unbearable or intolerable aspects of life" (91). A detachment from the terrible nature of reality, particularly poignant in Nordan's work given that it centers on an historical incident rather than a purely fictive one, enables the reader to approach what might otherwise have been unapproachable. Holman says of previous southern writers, "Each narrator depends on this social and cultural distance to make possible the crudities, cruelties, and depravities that would otherwise have been almost unbearably shocking" (90). Similarly, Evelyn Fishburn notes, an "important function of humor is to provide the

space for the unsayable to be said” (160).<sup>43</sup> Thus, humor may breach the rigid boundaries of socially accepted discourse.

The use of humor in relation to a tragic event fails to render the event itself funny. Rather, it creates a tension between the disparate subject and its treatment, polarizing the two by comparison. Thus, when humorous tone collides with tragic subject matter their wild juxtaposition results in a stronger representation of the substance of the text and its tragic consequences. Fred Chappell agrees, noting that Nordan’s use of humor and parody has serious undertones; “Where is it written that parody is necessarily a parasitic form, unable to aim for serious goals and to attain distinguished achievement? It is needful to recall that the first great novel ever written [Don Quixote] is parodic in intention and perhaps articulates a truer criticism of life because of that fact” (252). Nordan does not parody the murder of Emmett Till. Rather his parody aims for the preposterously iniquitous circumstances leading to the tragedy and its terribly absurd conclusion. Chappell also notes, “If the notion of taking the story line of a parody seriously disturbs readers, Nordan would probably count it as an asset. He means to disturb, probably even to distress” (253). Nordan seems to concur, stating,

The only way I could establish the difference between too serious and not too serious, was comic... I was always writing from the same place, that is that deeply serious, melodramatic horror that’s at the heart of my work. Something about me believes that comedy comes out of darkness and that all comedy is underpinned by loss. (Maher 118)

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<sup>43</sup> Fishburn’s discusses humor here as part of magical realism, a subject I take up later in this chapter.

If indeed humor comes as a response to loss, tragedy, and unimaginable horrors, then Nordan's use of the comic provides perhaps the most appropriate, and most human, response to the death of Emmett Till and, as such, does not preclude earnest consideration of the material. By no means do I suggest that humor is utilized exclusively in this fashion, either in this novel or elsewhere. An injurious use of humor at the expense of targeted individuals or groups can inflict ideological, physical, and social damage when wielded to disparage. For example, the "dead nigger" and "gin fan" jokes at the schoolhouse certainly fall into the category of pernicious humor; however, their juxtaposition with the lone voice that dares to contradict them only magnifies their pejorative nature.

### Magical Realism

Like his use of inverted truth, Nordan's use of magical realism provides an unrealistic format for his very real exploration of a real tragedy. As Flannery O'Connor maintains, magical realists are "realists of distance" (44). Art Taylor argues in "Magical Realism and the Mississippi Delta," "the goal of magical realism was a new encounter with and understanding of a reality which steadfastly resisted expression in conventional terms; as critic Luis Leal has written, in magical realism, 'the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts'<sup>44</sup>" (443). Taylor also notes that magical realism in *Wolf Whistle* "appears at moments of extreme tension or outright horror" suggesting that the genre provides "a cathartic release from tension and terror" (446, 448). Like similar modes of indirection discussed

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<sup>44</sup> From Leal's "Magical Realism in Spanish Literature," trans. Wendy B. Faris, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. 121.

throughout this dissertation, magical realism provides all important access to the otherwise inaccessible. Citing Jean-Francois Lyotard's notion that the postmodern writer "searches for new presentations ... in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (185), Faris argues that magical realism exemplifies this strategy. Like *Wolf Whistle*, magical realism embodies both magic and undeniable realism.

Taylor and other critics assert, correctly, that the American South and its history provide a likely setting for magical realism's oblique but useful approach to reality.<sup>45</sup> Gingher argues, "the southern United States comes naturally upon magical realism, for the root of its writing is vision sprung from ruin, one as ornery and mytho-magical as its exemplars who follow in the great tradition of Faulkner, Welty and O'Connor" (468). Thus, Nordan's use of magical realism indicates both his attempts to approach the mystery of Till's death, its complicated roots and consequences, and his regional ties to the South.

Like Blanche Dubois, Nordan prefers magic over reality. However, unlike Blanche, rather than utilizing magic as an escape from reality Nordan relies on magic as a mode to access and interrogate unpleasant realities. Nordan's use of magical realism serves as another device through which Nordan can convey Emmett Till's story indirectly since it is too painful to take on face to face. It is also, perhaps, one of the only ways which, as a white writer, he may honestly tell Emmett's tale without overstepping the bounds of racial propriety. Representation authentic in spirit, but not necessarily lifelike

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<sup>45</sup> Specifically, Deborah Cohn's *History and Memory in the Two Souths: Recent Southern and Spanish American Fiction* parallels Spanish American and U.S. Southern histories, suggesting that their similar hardships (cultural conflict, poverty, and colonization) create an ideal setting for the use of magical realism.

in performance, is the goal here. Nordan asserts, “That is my intention and my point: to render the natural world as itself and, at the same time, as unearthly” (“Growing” 5 ). Taylor argues, “for Nordan, magical realism provides a way - and perhaps the only way - for a white Southerner in his circumstances to confront the amazements of his own region and the injustice of his own people, to transform a past and even to rewrite a history without denying the brutality of known facts, and to glean from despair both personal and persistently historical some glimmer of hope ahead” (445).

Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris’s introduction to the authoritative anthology *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* explains that the essays therein

generally agree that magical realism is a mode suited to exploring - and transgressing- boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical or generic. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction ... So magical realism may be considered an extension of realism in its concern with the nature of reality and its representation, at the same time that it resists the basic assumptions of post-enlightenment rationalism and literary realism. Mind and body, spirit and matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other, male and female: these are boundaries to be erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned in magical realist texts. (6)

According to its primary theorists, then, magical realism provides Nordan with a suitable mode for addressing the binary boundaries of black and white in an attempt to transgress, blur, and bring together. As “an extension of realism” magical realism offers a fusion or coexistence of Bobo’s and the white community’s realities. That the two possible worlds might prove irreconcilable in a different fictional mode helps to explain Nordan’s generic

choice. Nordan has said his aim in writing *Wolf Whistle* was partially to interrogate or expunge his personal feelings about an incident so close to home, while at the same time carefully acknowledging his exclusion from ever fully understanding it because of his race. He attempts to recount the impact of Till's death on the real life community where it took place, thoughtfully and sympathetically narrate Bobo's experience, and reconcile black and white perspectives about the event. Magical realism allows for a space where all of these issues may be explored.

That Emmett Till's death is a genuine historical tragedy makes it a suitable candidate for magical realism's subversive impact. Faris argues, "In many cases, in magical realist fictions, we witness an idiosyncratic recreation of historical events, but events grounded firmly in historical realities - often alternate versions of officially sanctioned accounts" (169-70).<sup>46</sup> Nordan utilizes the genre to offer a multi-dimensional look at racial history in America, undermining two "official" versions, black and white. First, this sympathy subverts (white) racist assumptions that Bobo's murderers were justified in their actions. Further, and more importantly, Nordan's sympathetic recounting of Bobo's dilemma, his last moments, and the grief of his family undermines the (black) concept that all whites in Itta Bena (the real life Arrow Catcher) were complicit in or approving of Till's death. Although the "black/white official version" oversimplifies the complexities surrounding both the black and white communities' responses to Till's murder, it is important to note that *Wolf Whistle* subverts these general assumptions and offers an alternate verdict for Till's murderers without altering historical

fact; we see Solon's actions, know him to be guilty, and judge him accordingly. Because magical realism challenges assumptions about reality, it creates an alternative space where overturned assumptions lead to new worlds and possibilities. Nordan allows for the reconciliation of black and white as one of those possibilities through generic convention.

Nordan is not alone in utilizing the vision of an alternative reality as a tool for critiquing ticklish, risky, or unstable issues in the South. Zamora and Faris identify 19<sup>th</sup> century gothic fiction as a predecessor to magical realism (17) and Mary Carney's "Gothic Undercurrents in the Novels of Lewis Nordan"<sup>47</sup> explores this connection in Nordan's novels as well. As I argue in Chapter Two, Allen Tate undermines conventional reality in "The Abyss" section of *The Fathers* through gothic forms. The subversion of realistic expectation allows him to tackle what might otherwise remain untouchable; miscegenation, sexual violence, fear of black male sexuality, and the decline of the traditional southern manners and customs. Rather than "let the abyss alone," Tate utilizes gothicism to explore its manifestations and yet remain civilized. In addition, Tennessee Williams's concept of plastic theater mirrors Rawdon Wilson's assessment of magical realism's "narratives in which space is extremely plastic, given to unpredictable shapes and deformations, and ... [which links] plasticity to the experience of time" (219). Williams asks us to suspend our disbelief when characters mime their actions or symbols appear on screens. Magical realism plasticizes, that is, destabilizes or

<sup>46</sup> Faris relies here on Zamora's "Magic Realism and Fantastic History: Carlos Fuentes' *Terra Nostra* and Giambattista Vico's *The New Science*." *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 8.2 (1988): 249-56.

<sup>47</sup> From *Southern Quarterly* 41.3 (2003): 78-91.

makes pliable, realistic expectation in the same manner Williams' plastic theater allows for multiple perspectives of a single incident. Like Tate's approach to the abyss and Williams' approach to homosexuality, Nordan uses the unreal as an approach to race. For all three of these authors, unrealistic devices - which depart from a direct and straightforward narrative - facilitate more, not less, understanding.

### Music

In addition to magical realism, Nordan relies on song as an alternative means of narration. Nordan has commented on what he calls the "undersound" of his work, its "rhythms and its cadences and its music" (Maher 120) and claims that he listened to the blues almost the entire time he was writing *Wolf Whistle*. Roberta S. Macguire's "From the Blues to Jazz: Lewis Nordan's Fiction as 'Equipment for Living'" and Barbara A. Baker's "Riffing on memory and Playing Through the Break: Blues in Lewis Nordan's *Music of the Swamp* and *Wolf Whistle*" both investigate the importance of music in Nordan's fiction. Music, and specifically the blues, is yet another means of indirect storytelling grounded in a specifically southern setting. Both the blues and jazz originate in the American South, suggesting that song plays an integral part of the strategies utilized by southerners. Here, given the violent and racially charged history of the South, stories too painful or dangerous for frank discussion find release through artistic musical expression. Baker's essay acknowledges that while the blues has become a uniquely American art form, its roots are "distinctly southern" and that its use allows Nordan to achieve "redemption through aesthetic strategies that strongly resemble the blues music he absorbed as a child in the Mississippi Delta" (20).

Macguire's analysis traces the arc of Nordan's fiction from a blues aesthetic to one that emulates the artistic elements of jazz and suggests that a Burkean frame of acceptance, a comprehensive and realistic approach to the "sizing up of obstacles and then formation of a strategy for doing battle with those obstacles," is part of Nordan's narrative strategy (9). As cultural critic Albert Murray suggests, the blues operates as "an experience-confronting device that enables people to begin accepting the difficult, disappointing, chaotic, absurd, which is to say the farcical or existential facts of life" (qtd in Macguire 8). When ordinary language fails, song expresses what might otherwise have gone unsaid.

The notion of song as narratological surrogate for speech or thought holds true for both Nordan's approach to Emmett Till's story and several of *Wolf Whistle's* characters. Bobo's music, his whistle, provides the all-important "undersound" against which the narrative of the white characters is set. The innuendo of Bobo's whistle hovers through the entire novel alongside more overt representations of song. For example, during Sally Anne Montberclair's ill fated crusade for Kotex the front porch blues singer underscores the theme of violence as retribution for voicing the unthinkable as he sings "about beating his woman until he gets satisfied" during the exchange between Sally and Red (29). His song voices the norms of the community, i.e. - women don't talk about Kotex. When the wayward Solon returns to his family to see the burned Glenn for the first time, the family washtub band silently gather their instruments as if by unspoken understanding and sing to the boy, but no one speaks or otherwise alludes to his condition (74-77). Thus, song provides the novel's characters with an alternative and oblique

method of expression.

The black community also utilizes song, particularly the blues, to regain a collective voice oppressed in a racist regime. Like their enslaved forebearers, Arrow Catcher's African Americans rely on the coded and idiomatic language of the blues to express their genuine convictions, thoughts and feelings. Like Paul Laurence Dunbar and Maya Angelou, they know why the caged bird sings. Oppressed groups' utilization of alternative modes of discourse is not a new idea; however, in *Wolf Whistle* it serves to reinforce a larger pattern of indirect language in a regional context.

One scene, however, contains not only the song motif but a character who progresses through a successive dialogic structure of which music is only one part. Mrs. Gregg's voice moves through the narrative in incremental phases of silence, stammer, clichés, mixed clichés, and, finally, song. Through these alternative media she details her abuse by Solon and his subsequent attempted murder by his own son. Alice and the schoolchildren visiting Mrs. Gregg's burned son are inexplicably moved to imitate her Christmas carols, despite the fact that Christmas is months away. Despite the inanity of the lyrical choice, the songs provide Mrs. Gregg with an individual discourse and an audience that can share it; "Now Alice understood. By thinking of the tune 'Here Comes Santa Claus' Mrs. Gregg could speak without stammering. With that tune in her head, she could say anything. Santa Claus had broken her chains and set her free" (17). As Alice listens to the tunes she is born again, seeing the start of Christianity, the emergence of racial harmony, civil rights atrocities, a host of civil rights leaders, and Emmett Till dead. Though the song sparks Alice's hope (black and white children singing together) it

ultimately tears away the veil of Alice's illusions (the world is ugly, she will never have her married lover). In this scene, song gives Mrs. Gregg voice and gives Alice the blues.

The correlation of the above scene and Nordan's own attempts at writing *Wolf Whistle* should be clear. Beginning from a shocked personal silence, Nordan progressed over a number of years to *Wolf Whistle's* song. It is a song sung through dark comedy, a chorus of peripheral characters, blues music, and a lyrical magical realism. These devices provide Nordan with a carol to talk about an incident which had shocked the author and his family into horrified silence. That the only specific reference to Emmett Till takes place in this scene is significant. It is as if Nordan says here, "Ok, here it is, here I am, here is Emmett. I must approach his tragedy and those culpable for it with a song or risk never finding the courage to talk about it at all." Like the other methodologies of indirection discussed in this project, music provides an alternative means by which to handle an explosive subject.

#### Narratology

The narratological question of Bobo's absent voice must be considered as well. Nordan has addressed this exclusion, revealing "some Faulknerian something-or-another, blood guilt, that made everyone in my story, except Emmett, fair game" ("Growing" 6-7). Although the text lacks Bobo's voice, his perspective permeates the narrative, particularly in a scene in which he views his own death, his body's postmortem experiences, and the experiences of the community during the time before his body is found. Here, the boundary between Bobo's and the narrator's perspectives blur through

what Genette calls pseudo-diagesis, which defocalizes the subject through the filter of memory and relates the story through the perspective of another character (237-243). Nordan admits, “The point of view of the novel is comprehensive, including not only major and minor characters, black and white, male and female, dead and alive, but even the buzzards on their telephone poles and pigeons in the rafters” (“Growing” 5). By employing the memories and points of view of several characters, Nordan destabilizes the narrative, blurring the role of narrator and exacting the reader’s participation in reconstructing the truth. Bobo himself becomes a part of the community through his murder and as such participates in the telling of his own story, if only posthumously.

The destabilization of Bobo’s character, along with both time and place, occurs in the scene where Bobo appears as mermaid, as demon eye, as magic, as angel, and finally, as omniscient narrator, signaling a shift in his character’s perspective, creating a sentience unavailable until the moments directly before and after his murder. He sees events in the past for which he was not present; he sees events in a future in which he is dead. By taking on these omniscient qualities, Bobo effectively operates on a cognitive level as narrator of his own story. His all-seeing eye relates the events, taking over narrative perspective in pseudo-diagetic fashion. Here, we do not hear Bobo as first person “I” but we see what he sees through a powerful and self-actualized gaze. This phenomenon emerges even more clearly in the italicized portions where Bobo sings in first person, the only substantial example of his voice found in the book. The use of italics rather than quotation marks here interweaves Bobo and narrator, rendering their perspectives indistinguishable. The difficulty of conclusively untangling the perspectives

of character and narrator in this chapter offers a more comprehensive view of Bobo's narrative. The mishmash of voice and perspective, narrator and narrative object, imbues Bobo with a unique opportunity to both create and narrate his present and future through an indirect mechanism. He is indistinguishable from the rest of the community and thus becomes a part of their narrative history. In effect, Bobo appropriates the stance of the narrator rather than vice versa, fully permeating the text with his perspective. The narration of his own story shows through the deadly silence of southern rhetoric, proving it ineffectual.

The secrecy surrounding racial violence and the lynching in *Arrow Catcher*, Mississippi cannot contain its consequences. Nordan's novel is itself an example of how the truth will find a way out, as *Wolf Whistle* airs the dirty laundry of systematic pre-civil rights lynching of African-American men. Again, had Nordan endeavored to realistically recreate Emmett Till's last words, certainly there would have been those who took issue with his attempts and questioned the veracity of his efforts. Thus, the use of pseudo-diagnosis to relate Bobo's final moments avoids impropriety.

By refusing to attempt direct presentation of Emmett Till's experience, *Wolf Whistle* differs from texts by white authors that have trivialized or denied an Africanist presence. In *Playing in the Dark* Morrison asks, "When does racial 'unconsciousness' or awareness of race enrich interpretive language and when does it impoverish it?" (xii). Clearly an acute awareness of race saturates Nordan's text. At first glance this focus may appear to privilege the point of view of the white community; however, Nordan's self-consciousness with regard to race distinguishes *Wolf Whistle* from texts that marginalize

black experience. Nordan's approach negotiates between the need for Bobo's voice and his self-doubt at accurately representing it in fictionalizing a tragic historical event. His solution avoids "the shorthand, the taken for granted assumptions that lie in [black images'] usage" which Morrison argues are par for the course in the depiction of black characters. Her criticism argues for "an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject, from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (90). By removing Bobo from much of the action of the text, Nordan avoids his objectification, relying instead on the chapter in which Bobo's perspective imbues the text with his subjectivity to carry the weight of racial violence in the story.

Similarly, and in part drawing from Morrison, Goodwyn-Jones and Donaldson explain that anxieties over race and gender often surface subtextually in many white, male texts. In her assessment of *The Fathers*, Donaldson argues,

the profession of letters in the South and its accompanying literary texts have always had a peculiarly haunted air, an aura of repressed ghosts besieging the white male writers and destabilizing his writing. Tate's testiness, in fact, might well have a good deal to do with his half acknowledged suspicion that lying both within and without the monumentalized surface of the white patriarchal writer he earnestly sought to celebrate is a potent rival and Other - the figure of the black trickster, defined by fluidity and open possibility. (493)

Not only does Nordan openly acknowledge this destabilization through his choice of subject matter, he embraces it in an attempt to make *Wolf Whistle's* racial haunting explicit. In a world of magical realism, ghosts are not only present, they are to be

expected and they are very, very real. Nordan doesn't repress Bobo's ghostly voice; rather, he lets it sing. Nordan uses this haunting not to celebrate the voice of his own white authorship but the voice of the Other to which Donaldson refers. Bobo's voice is less repressed than presented with one of the limited outlets available to a white writer attempting to do it justice.

The former chapters decline to describe or imagine Bobo's plight, while his own chapter provides him with the subjective authority to describe and imagine his own circumstances through the filter of magical realism. When asked by his editor why the novel was so bountiful and extravagant while at the same time "skimpy" when it came to the character of Emmett Till himself, Nordan explains,

This book, like any book, demands a moral center ... firm ground on which a reader may stand in complete confidence that it will not move. Especially this is true in a book like *Wolf Whistle*, where the ground of reality is so unstable, so likely to shift away from conventional expectations of reality. Emmett (Bobo in the fiction) and his family are the moral, emotional, psychological and life-affirming core of this novel, which a reader may trust to be permanent, and around which all the rest of the world may go mad. ("Growing" 7)

Thus, Nordan best serves the story of Emmett Till's tragedy by bringing it the public eye while refusing to appropriate or marginalize his voice. However, as both Morrison and Nordan himself suggest, Bobo's primary function is still as the "moral center" of the novel. In the end, *Wolf Whistle* is Emmett Till's story.

In telling the difficult and seemingly untellable tale of Emmett Till's murder, Lewis Nordan uses traditionally circuitous southern rhetoric, including humor, magical realism, song, pseudo-diagnosis, and communal point of view to provide the distance

imperative to his storytelling. What may appear as emotional detachment is actually a collection of narrative devices that facilitate the telling of a cathartic tale born out of the need to exorcise personal demons. At the same time, these methodologies allow Nordan, as a white author, to avoid hubristic misappropriation of Emmett Till's specifically African American and historically significant voice. Paradoxically, by skirting direct representation of the murder through these devices, Nordan privileges its gravity, purposefully creating a tension between the civility that facilitated the tragedy and its horrific reality. Just as *Wolf Whistle's* characters operate within a southern narrative code of equivocation, so does its author, and the text emerges none the worse for wear. An attempt to reconcile the dichotomous natures of the South, southern literature, race, and race relations, informs Nordan's ambiguous narrative spaces.

Moreover, these locations of silence and prevarication engage readers in an attempt to provide the missing pieces, implicating the audience in critical response to the incident and its symbolic ramifications. That which the mind cannot see, those indefinite and intangible fears, proves the most insidious. As Paller explains of Tennessee Williams, "When emotions such as those Williams felt while writing *The Glass Menagerie* must be expressed subtextually, they are often rendered all the stronger; when boundaries are established against expression, expression must find another way to break through. Igor Stravinsky had this in mind when he observed, 'The more art is controlled, limited, worked over, the more it is free'" (47). Perhaps concrete means cannot wholly unveil the appalling realities of racism, hatred of difference, intolerance, and unthinkable violence.

Consider Hitchcock's films. *Psycho*'s implied violence is chilling, perhaps all the more frightening because we see only blood in a shower drain and a looming shadow rather than a knife penetrating Janet Lee's body. A balloon floating adrift in the breeze in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* recreates the fearful unknown experienced by an abducted child's parents. Had a realistic depiction of the kidnapping been attempted, the viewer would *know* what happened, while omitting it pulls the observer into the chaotic terror and wild confusion of the parent. Even Bob Dylan's lyrics, "They said they had a reason, but I can't remember what./ They tortured him and did some evil things *too evil to repeat*," (my emphasis) acknowledge the impossibility of realistically embodying the true horror of the abyss through art. By leaving realities to the imagination, Tate, Williams, and Nordan, like Hitchcock, create an environment in which the reader's horror and revulsion can expand to fit the space, and this internal anxiety-ridden reflection may be the most accurate picture available of an otherwise incomprehensible reality. Perhaps Morrison says it best in her 1993 Nobel Lecture which notes, "silence is deep, deeper than the meaning available in the words" ([http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html)).

Kenan laments of *Wolf Whistle*, "this reader longs for a space in which the undeniable pain and physical scars of oppression and miscarriage(s) of justice are explored .... One cannot help but sigh in regret, imagining what profundity might have been attained had the author attempted what is apparently still the unimaginable to too many Americans" (594). But Nordan's use of humor and indirect expression do offer

this desired space through their very omissions. Any attempt to define and address racial violence as a knowable, externally encapsulated force neglects its monumental constitution, renders it a simple story. The real focus, and therefore the hope for real change, remains internal, urging the reader toward serious consideration of its nature. Despite Kenan's claim to the contrary, personal outrage, loss, and tragedy inform every aspect of this text precisely because these issues remain embedded. The narrative skirts the implications of Bobo's murder precisely because the incident looms as the primary event of the text, and such an evasion challenges the reader to read between the lines in the context of southern rhetorical strategies. Ultimately, Nordan's refusal to attempt channeling the voice of a murdered black man signifies the enormous impact and unfathomable tragedy of racial violence in the South. Through its very absences, *Wolf Whistle* invites a critique of social issues that proves incomparably profound.

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