“FATHOMLESS, SYMBOLIC, AND THREATENING”:
CAPITAL AND IDENTITY IN MOTION IN FAULKNER’S THE SOUND AND
THE FURY AND STYRON’S SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE

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By
Aaron Solomon Finley
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Introduction

“We seem to try in the single furious breathing (or writing) span of the individual to draw a savage indictment of the contemporary scene or to escape from it into a make-believe region of swords and magnolias and mockingbirds which perhaps never existed anywhere.” – William Faulkner (Hobson 3)

The following argument follows a certain chronology. It begins somewhere in the postbellum Southern United States where a group of Southern writers and theorists saw an inevitable change on the horizon and made the conscious decision to define themselves in the struggle against it. That inevitability was the spread and eventual globalization of industrial capitalism which had begun to creep into the American South bringing with it the threat of a complete transformation of the politics, the economy, and the identity of the region. Those who sought to slow or stop the invasion were engaged in a futile battle. The “Lost Cause” of the Confederacy had become the Lost Cause of the Old South – an idealized myth of the American South of generations past. It was a concept created through nostalgia, the very proclamation of which was the first
significant evidence of its passing. Yet there were those who sought to fight for its return. If there ever had been a time during which this struggle would have proven successful, that time had certainly passed. The anxiety and unrest of the modernist literature of the American South would not only tell the story of the struggle, but would hint at the inevitability of defeat. Without a connection to the land and region that this generation decided had once existed – and was determined to get back – the individuals of the time struggled to re-establish a distinct Southern identity that they felt their ancestors had possessed. What resulted was a fragmented sense of self that was at once tied to both a grandiose notion of decades gone by and a bitterness that accompanied the realization that it would never return. The Southern identity of the early decades of the twentieth century was one that sought to distinguish itself both with a pride in history and a resistance to the change that had swept it away. The problem was, however, that the American South could never be the same again, and the rest of the world was to follow.

For the remainder of this introductory chapter, this discussion will center on the creation of this concept of the Old South and the identity those who wished for its return were determined to establish. The central ideas of a paternal power structure, of resistance, and of association with “place” are the building blocks of this identity. For the sake of time, they will only be quickly established and discussed in this chapter, as the depictions of them in the works of two Southern writers will serve to spell them out more fully along with their consequences for the protagonists therein. Those consequences, largely resulting from the futility of this noble fight will be assessed and evidenced in the next two chapters. The first of these will examine the interplay of
Northern industrial capitalism and its ramifications for the South and Southerners in a widely discussed novel from the time, William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. Following that, the discussion will shift to an example of the Southern novel published over thirty years later. William Styron’s *Set This House on Fire* depicts how the fate of the American South was a foreshadowing of events that would soon take place around the world. The globalization of industrial capitalism (and the material and consumer culture that accompanies it) is shown through the eyes of a Southern character who left his native “place” of the American South to seek out something like a Southern identity elsewhere only to discover for himself the futility of this effort abroad as well. Finally, in the concluding chapter, this analysis will comment on these two novels as they display characteristics of the transition from modernism to postmodernism, and the different possibilities for the realization of regional identities during these two periods. This transition, and its ramifications for a regional identity, is highly tied (as these novels show) to the spread and globalization of industrial capital and the effects this global phenomenon has on the individuals who become inundated by the accompanying culture.

**The End and the Beginning of the Old South and Southern Identity**

“One of the grandest creations of the New South was a mythical concept of an Old South,” Charles Aiken writes of the phenomenon that was taking place shortly after the turn of the century. He is referring to the idea that “Twelve Southerners”, in collaborating to publish the 1930 Agrarian manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and...*
the Agrarian Tradition served to create or craft a version of the Old South considerably more than to reflect any actual history. The identity that the Agrarians sought to defend, if not recapture or recreate, was that of the “unreconstructed Southerner,” John Crowe Ransom writes, “who persists in his regard for a certain terrain, a certain history, and a certain inherited way of living” (1). This “certain inherited way of living” around which the Agrarians sought to unify and rally their movement was said to be firmly rooted in the pastoral and natural South itself: its land, its history, and its people. “Increasingly in the 1930s,” Martyn Bone suggests, “the Agrarian sense of place was of a rural, self-sufficient and nigh-on precapitalist locus focused on the small farm, operating largely outside the cash nexus, and absent large-scale land speculation” (5). The themes presented here – those of tradition, anti-industrialism, “sense of place,” untainted and natural land and culture – became central to the Southerner’s sense of self with the growing interest in maintaining a separate identity from that of the North, despite having lost the Civil War. It is in this way that the plight of the turn-of-the-century Southerner would come to be called the South’s “second Civil War” (Godden, Fictions of Capital 139).

However, Bone is skeptical of the highly idealized vision of the South that the Agrarian purported to be defending (8). Even subsequent defenders of the “Twelve Southerners,” such as Louis Rubin, Jr. (who wrote introductions for both the 1962 and 1976 republications of I’Il Take My Stand), have had difficulty ascertaining whether the Agrarians’ depiction of the “Old South” was even intended to be viewed as a historic reality or some mythical re-creation. Due to his concession that “the image of the old agrarian South in I’Il Take My Stand was the image of a society that perhaps never
existed,” Rubin, in his 1962 introduction, suggests that “as poets they [John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson] were given to the metaphor, and they instinctively resorted to an image for their critique of American society” (Bone 30). However, resulting from harsh criticism from Donald Davidson himself with regard to these claims, Rubin partially reversed these opinions for the 1976 introduction. In this later edition, Rubin writes that it was “misleading” to highlight “the ‘metaphoric’ element” of the collection, stating that “the [Agrarian] enterprise was envisioned as a literal and practical program” (Bone 30-1). Michael Kreyling insists that Rubin’s former description was more apt as the Agrarian manifesto posits “images” that “constitute the vocabulary of the stable, traditionalist, religious community” that “do not bond well with the contingent grammar of history” (Kreyling, Inventing 37). What it undeniable, however, is that Ransom had certainly stated that the “unreconstructed Southerner” was heir to “a certain inherited way of living.”

**The Old South: A Patriarchal Power Structure**

One central component to the American South’s “inherited way of living” was a patriarchal family and social structure. The rhetoric that supported this system was rooted, as it had been in countless patriarchal cultures prior, in the “natural” order of life. One of the “Twelve Southerners,” Andrew Nelson Lytle’s essay is rooted in the “natural” depictions of the Southern family whose life is supported by the small farm they operate.
Titled “The Hind Tit,” Lytle’s article is steeped in the rhetoric of tradition, paternal power, and the man’s symbiotic relationship with the land.

Before dawn the roosters and the farmer feel the tremendous silence, chilling and filling the gap between night and day. He gets up, makes the fires, and rings the rising bell. He could arouse the family with his voice, but it has been the custom to ring the bell; so every morning it sounds out, taking its place among the other bells in the neighborhood. Each, according to his nature, gets up and prepares for the day: the wife has long been in the kitchen when the boys go to the barn; some of the girls help her, while the farmer plans the morning work and calls out directions.

(221)

Kreyling comments on the function of this type of rhetoric by stating that “the Agrarians produced the South in the same way that all historically indigenous social elites produce ideological realities: out of strategies for seizing and retaining power (cultural, political, sexual, economic, and so on) that are then reproduced as ‘natural’” (Inventing 6). Lytle’s phrasing, such as “taking its place” and “according to nature”, suggests that such scenes are in order with the way of the world. Tradition and nature here go hand in hand to create a perfect syncopation between the Southern lifestyle and the natural world. Lytle here does not mention the slave labor that also characterized this historical Southern landscape, unless the farmer “calls out directions” to them. Still, the patriarchal philosophy held the farmer in the position of “father” over the field workers as well. For
a brief explanation of the role this hierarchy played at this historical moment, Philip J. Hanson defers to historian Jay Mandle who writes that, “in a society in which production required a steady application of mass labor and in which the producers of that labor were subjected to racial discrimination, paternalism emerged as functional to each side” (Hanson 5). Hanson also refers to the influential work of Eugene Genovese who posits “the logic of… the antebellum Southern socioeconomic system as, in central ways, resistant to capitalist practices and possessed of a feudal, paternalistic, logic in its labor and social relations.”

Paternalism therefore became an ideology that came to reside over entire power relations of the South, and one that due to a shifting economy following the emancipation of the slaves began to lose its footing entering the twentieth century. Efforts to maintain this power structure became central to the recapturing of the Southern identity and began to find expression in the arts and literature from the region. In *Fictions of Capital*, Richard Godden refers to multiple instances in the Southern fiction of the time which display “a need to recover or rehabilitate a supreme father at the very moment when paternalism, as a key to Southern social relations, is losing its economic currency… out of these relations grew both the agrarian demand for the patriarch and the aesthetic forms used in his defense” (161). The adherence to patriarchal dominance thus became crucial for a Southern man who sought to return to the lifestyle that he had “inherited”. Godden also cites the work of Genovese to establish another way in which the paternalism present in the region functioned to solidify the concept of a Southern sense of self.
Through paternalism the planter class articulated a consciousness of its own situation and its position with regard to the capitalist economic relations of the North; the idea of the father was used to define a series of organic relations which were directly opposed to the forms of individualism associated with the capitalist market… the Southern planter-class came to argue that capitalist relations organized all human relations through a cash nexus, and paternalism was therefore a pattern for defining exchanges between the members of society which would counter the forms of acquisitive individualism associated with the market. (Godden, *Fictions of Capital* 162-3)

This paternalism also functioned to help draw a distinction between the North and the South that was crucial for the developing Southern identity. As will be further discussed in the following chapter, both the paternalistic and oppositional components of this identity are of the utmost importance to Jason Compson of *The Sound and the Fury* in his attempts to maintain a sense of self that is tied to the region.

**Southern Identity and a Sense of Self Opposed**

In concord with the paternal power structure that was central to a postbellum Southern identity was a growing identification with a resistance movement. “Especially after the publication of *I’ll Take My Stand*, the Agrarians conceived (or invented) their ‘South’ as a site of resistance to capitalism’s destruction of ‘place’ through land
speculation, real-estate development, urbanization, and industrialism,” Marytn Bone writes (5; as with all quoted italics throughout this thesis, emphasis in original). It is perhaps this rallying opposition that provides the fervor with which many Southerners sought to assert their regional identity. “Southern cultural self-consciousness,” Kreyling writes, “has historically expressed itself in such terms of anxiety of invasion and takeover” (Inventing 171). While this growing unease about the future of the American South was becoming clear in the literature of the time, it would not be until the cause was championed in I’ll Take My Stand that the resistance movement would have a name. “The South’s passive indifference to industrialism is not adequate to withstand realtors’ activities and campaign to wake up the section and over-advertise it,” H. C. Nixon writes in one of the manifesto’s essays (199). He warns against a transition from “the Southern perspective toward a bourgeois materialism” that would serve “to shift the embodiment of ideals from the country gentleman to the captain of industry or finance” (189). But, as many of these twelve would admit, their oppositional call to arms was not raised in advance of the take-over they sought to resist. Rather, by the time the collection was published, as John Crowe Ransom would write in the book’s first essay, “Industrialism has arrived in the South” (19). The battle cry, at its very origin, is therefore founded on the desperation of the late hour from which it springs. It is an ideology that sets itself in direct opposition to the burgeoning consumer culture of a Northern industrialism that is thought to be a “dehumanizing” and “abstracting” force.

This force, as Ransom argues, is accompanied and defended by a certain rhetoric of progress. This concept serves to supply the Northern industrial campaign with its
justification, attempting to suggest that everything that changes and shifts moves towards a greater good. In order to align oneself against the spread of such a system is to necessarily align oneself against its justification. Ransom seeks to do this by pointing out flaws in the progressivist’s logic and also its detriment to the Southern individual.

The progressivist says in effect: Do not allow yourself to feel homesick; form no such powerful attachments that you will feel a pain in cutting them loose; prepare your spirit to be always on the move… the state to which [the progressivist] wants us to progress never has any finality or definition… This is simply to say that Progress never defines its ultimate objective, but thrusts its victims at once into an infinite series. Our vast industrial machine, with its laboratory centers of experimentation, and its far-flung organs of mass production… can never consent to peace. (8)

With this rhetoric of progress at its back, Ransom continues, “Industrialism is an insidious spirit, full of false promises and generally fatal to establishments” (15). The Southerner, it was hoped, would respond to this rallying cry. Ransom seeks to appeal to Southerners who feel they have formed powerful attachments to their land and their establishments. He fears that without these traditions and institutions, the Southerner will not only lose his roots, but his voice as well. “American progressive principle,” Ransom writes, “has developed into a pure industrialism without any check from a Southern minority whose voice ceased to make itself heard” (21). Sensing a threat to the very concept of this regional identity, “the South” which “at last, looking defensively about
her in all directions upon an industrial world, fingers the weapons of industrialism… It is the village South and the rural South which supply the resistance” (20). However, even at the drawing of battle lines, Ransom sees little optimism in the plight of the American South. “The further survival of the Southern tradition as a detached local remnant is now unlikely” (21). “The question at issue,” Ransom writes, “is whether the South will permit herself to be so industrialized as to lose entirely her historic identity” (22). These words denote the late hour at which these pleas for action were taken down. The desperation expressed in I’ll Take My Stand is one rooted in an understanding that the odds are stacked against the resistance movement. Rubin’s introduction to the 1976 edition concludes with a strangely ominous tone.

For, in conclusion, this much is clear: If a community, or a section, or a race, or an age, is groaning under industrialism, and well aware that it is an evil dispensation, it must find the way to throw it off. To think that this cannot be done is pusillanimous. And if the whole community, section, race, or age thinks it cannot be done, then it has simply lost its political genius and doomed itself to impotence. (Rubin, “Introduction” xxx)

**Identity and Place: The Literal and Ideological Connection**

Ransom’s words allude to yet another important component of the Southern identity. The rhetoric of the Agrarians, as their name suggests, was also heavily tied to an association with the very land they meant to defend. Frank Lawrence Owsley, his
contribution to *I’ll Take My Stand* titled “The Irrepressible Conflict”, nostalgically infuses the Agrarian movement with a mythical vision of its being rooted in nature’s soil. “When American was settled,” he writes, wishing to validate his ideas through a historical perspective, “the tradition of the soil found hospitable root-bed in the Southern colonies, where climate and land combined to multiply the richness of an agrarian economy… Thoughts, words, ideas, concepts, life itself, grew from the soil.” Where this holy communion between man and earth had ceased to exist, it was “the industrial revolution which whipped up the multiplication of populations and tore their roots from the soil” (Owsley 69-70). “It is in fact impossible,” Lytle adds, “for any culture to be sound and healthy without a proper respect and proper regard for the soil” (203). The contributors to *I’ll Take My Stand* make constant use of the term “soil”, which in association with the “roots” of man and his tradition, fully depicts the literal ties between the Southerner and the very land that makes up the American South. Once this bond is broken and man loses his “rootedness,” his physical tie to the land, Lytle writes, the “tenants who formerly owned the land” will exist as nothing more than “abstract selves” (243). It is with this in mind that Martyn Bone discusses “the opposition between ‘abstraction’ and ‘place’ in the specific form that the Agrarians themselves conceived it in the 1930s.” The “agricultural real property that guarantees (as [Robert Penn] Warren once stated it) ‘the relation of man to place’” is threatened by “the abstract property relations of finance-capitalism” (Bone 39). The fear of becoming “abstract selves” is a fear of losing one’s individuality, one’s identity; and that which had given Southerners this sense of self was largely reliant on the “Southern tradition as a detached local
remnant” to which Ransom refers. Sense of self therefore becomes the “sense of place” – a phrase frequently used when discussing this distinct Southern identity.

In his thusly named essay, “Sense of Place”, Frederick J. Hoffman provides a historical analysis of the Southerner’s identification with the region and its history.

Even when there is no explicit reference to its history, the Southern character is assumed in terms of a sectional history. The Civil War is of course crucial, but it is significant as a defeat, as a war – followed by a bitter thirty-year struggle against change – that forever fixed the value of a status quo ante and heightened the desirability of maintaining a devotion to what was imagined to be precious and inviolable. On one level, the Civil War enforced the Southerner’s love of place by strengthening – perhaps even, in a sense, creating – platitudes of loyalty to it. Vicissitudes of regional difference became fixed emotional habits… There is an abundance of place metaphors [in Southern literature] which, mainly in consequence of the psychological impact of defeat, emphasize the virtues of scene, atmosphere, climate, and landscape. The Southern scene is heavily charged with the task of communicating a special quality of atmosphere. Far more important than any of these is the literary analysis of the South’s psychological and symbolic inheritance. We may describe this as the “burden of the past.” In large part, the errors and enormities of
Reconstruction years are responsible for the overemphasis upon the Southerner’s unique, independent, special fate and responsibility. (63-4)

Hoffman continues to note that “It is impossible to speak of the South as a place without discussing it as a region possessing a uniquely clear and responsible memory of its past” (65). But one has to wonder how responsible that memory was. The collective memory of the South (particularly that of the Agrarians) seems to have been more focused on a mythical recollection of the region’s history than one that was “rooted” in much reality.

Identity in Resistance to Industrialism: A Contradiction in Terms

The establishment of an identity through a “sense of place” can have serious repercussions if that “place” is in many ways a nostalgic re-creation. The stubborn adherence to some fictionalized regional situation causes problems for those who seek to define themselves by it. In the event that the “Old South” was never really located in the South or anywhere else, and yet there are those who seek to discover an identity through an association with it, that person’s identity will be constantly defined through an attempt to grasp an intangible ideal. Noting this contradiction, Bone writes that “The southerness of place, it seems, is always in danger of expiring. Always in danger – yet ‘sense of place’ has endured as an organizing, even foundational idea of southern literary studies” (24). Kreyling, in agreement, further explicates the repercussions of this phenomenon:
Although *I'll Take My Stand* has, since its publication, been taken as a kind of sacred text and its message a kind of revelation, in fact it serves as a script for inventing southern identity through anxiety. The identity the Agrarians unconsciously dramatized (as opposed, perhaps, to the one they consciously outlined) is an identity of anxious doubt. This is not to say that each was equally ravaged by the same identity crisis; it is to say, though, that the essays by those whom we tend to quote most frequently (Ransom, Davidson, Tate, Warren) register self-doubt. (*Inventing* 171).

In aligning oneself with the fictionalized Old South and responding to a rallying call to restore it, one’s identity becomes itself a falsehood. With regard to this mythical “sense of place” that has become so central to the American Southern identity, Stephen Flinn Young admits that “we may have even become prisoners of our own fascination, for when change overtakes us and place, even the place we call the South, is not the place it used to be, anxiety strikes” (41). When one considers that it may well be that the “place we call the South” only became central to Southern identity at a time when the South was “not the place it used to be,” that Southern identity is inevitably tied to and imprisoned by anxiety over that loss. Similarly stated, though still written at a time when all of the finger-pointing was still being directed at the North (before the real futility of the Southern plight was fully realized), W. J. Cash wrote in 1941 that “so far from having reconstructed the Southern mind in the large and in its essential character, it was this Yankee’s fate to have strengthened it almost beyond reckoning, and to have made it one of the most solidly established, one of the least *reconstructible* ever developed” (107).
Whether it results from the “fascination” of the Southerners or the “strengthening” that resulted from efforts at reconstruction by the Northerners, a stubbornness developed in the Southern mindset. Southern identity becomes characterized by anxiety over loss in that it was forged from an adherence to something that never existed.

An additional problem begins to surface when one considers that a regional identity unified in resistance will forever remain tied to that thing which it seeks to resist. Bone quotes John Crowe Ransom who, in his 1932 essay “Land! An Answer to the Unemployment Problem”, writes that it is tempting to write “about the aesthetic and spiritual deliverance that will come when the industrial laborers with their specialized and routine jobs and the business men with their offices and abstract preoccupations become translated into people handling the soil with their fingers and coming into direct contact with nature” (Bone 14). Even the sought-after, idealized future (a “return” to a myth of the past) that would result from a successful Southern resistance to the evil and abstracting forces of industrial capitalism cannot even be conceived as a return at all. Rather, some post-capitalist Utopia is the desired end result, not the homecoming of a pre-capitalist agrarianism. Despite the vigor with which the Agrarians sought to unify the American South against industrial capitalism, the simple fact is that if there ever was the opportunity to identify with this type of resistance (which is highly doubtful), by 1930, it was already too late. The world could no longer even be dreamt of without a capitalist bent. In truth, the very fact that there was such a resistance movement signified the futility of its own plight. The Agrarians sought to return the American South to a precapitalist past; but such an idealized South was a political concoction of the movement
itself. There could be no victory because the desired reward had never been real to begin
with. It was a dream that was only conjured in an attempt to solidify an identity. There
was no referent – no truthful, historical image to which to return. The resulting identity,
one stubbornly bound to a “sense of place,” was from the start doomed by an
impossibility of realization; and what some have called Southern “temper” or “outrage” is
the end result (more on this in the next chapter).

Turning its blame-seeking gaze to Northern industrial capitalism which it viewed
as the cause for the change in the landscape, this outrage sought definition by way of
opposition to the encroaching economics of the North. Southern identity, then, is
irreversibly and doubly tied to Northern industrial capitalism. On the one hand, it is an
identity of resistance and opposition that was unified to fight against the changes that
were already taking place or had already taken place. Consequently, the perceived
enemy that was Northern industrial capitalism had essentially created the concept of a
Southern identity to begin with as defined through a falsely-historic and mythologized
ideal that as Faulkner himself said “perhaps never existed” (Hobson 3). This
contradiction is at the heart of a Southern antipathy that had been growing for years by
the time William Faulkner was composing *The Sound and the Fury*, a novel championed
by the “The Twelve Southerners.” But, as the quote that serves as the epigraph for this
chapter indicates, Faulkner’s depiction of the invasion of Northern industrial capitalism
into the South justly functions as a sufficient lens by which to critique the mythologizing
of the Old South even more so than the Northern economic structure itself. It is a tactic
not lost on Hoffman who writes that “Faulkner’s brilliant analyses of the burden of the
past emphasizes again and again the risks of hardening any emotion with respect to
history. They are at once a criticism of Southern truculence and of superficial Northern
pieties” (64).
Chapter 1

Jason Compson Gambles a Past Against a Future and Tries to Take Home Both

“To be a white Southerner in the mid-twentieth century is to realize the full bafflement and complexity of the human condition. It is not only to see parts of one’s world fall irrevocably away, but to feel some of them, tenaciously remaining, take on an accusing cast that one would not have thought possible, and long-familiar situations assume a fathomless, symbolic, and threatening weight. It is also to feel the resentment, the old sense of outrage rise up again toward all those who are not Southerners – against those who would change the world which one’s people have made, insisting that it conform to a number of principles with which no one could possibly argue, but which the social situation as it exists must be radically altered to fit.”

– James Dickey (76)

Philip J. Hanson provides an appropriate frame for the following analysis of The Sound and the Fury in stating that William Faulkner’s first great experimental novel opens up a period of fiction that will be marked by its anxiety over a traditionalist Southern socioeconomic system in the process of disintegrating, a system which had long regarded itself as opposed – and superior – to capitalist marketplace values… The Sound and the Fury’s symbols, constituting a regionally and historically situated
semio-system, and its connection to its central ‘generic myth,’ the loss of a family female, make sense only if one recognizes those aspects of capitalist production and logic that the Southern economy’s dominant class disdained and resisted… To understand the semio-system of The Sound and the Fury, we need to understand how the Compson household, the novel, and the socioeconomic system share a logic. (4-6)

It is with this in mind that this discussion adopts an angle that is unusual – though not unique – in the context of Faulknerian criticism. Where so many critics are quick to make sweeping generalizations about all three Compson brothers before focusing their microscope on little more than the Quentin section, this analysis seeks to make few claims about the predicaments of Benjy or Quentin. Instead, the following pages will mainly focus a lens on Jason Compson as he is situated in the third and fourth sections of the novel. In the relatively rare event that Jason is discussed in criticism, often it is the case that he is painted, as Cleanth Brooks has done, as “one… of Faulkner’s most accomplished villains”: a “brutal and cold-hearted man” whose behavior toward his family “shows studied cruelty that is unmatched by any of Faulkner’s villains” (294). Such a reading is rather short-sighted in that it ignores, as Hanson points out, the shifting socio-economic system from which the novel springs. In truth, Faulkner himself has called Jason “the first sane Compson… and (as a childless bachelor)... the last” (“Appendix”, 212). Jason is the last to carry the family name, because the world in which the Compsons thrived is deteriorating into nonexistence at this moment. Born, by no fault of his own, during the last gasps of a Southern culture resistant to change, Jason
Compson’s predicament is manifested through his struggle to balance the demands of opposing forces: one, the obligation to family and custom that had come to represent the plantation lifestyle of his ancestors; and two, the need as the head of a family to fulfill as best he can the financial demands of a household at a moment when the economic situation of the South is undergoing rapid and uncomfortable change. Throughout the final two sections of the novel, Jason is pulled in (at least) these two directions, causing him to lead a life without leisure in which his every decision is dictated by a clock ticking ever away from an identity connected to a bygone era, and towards a future in which identity is little more than the name printed on a timecard.

The Compson Household

In order to “understand how the Compson household, the novel, and the socioeconomic system share a logic,” as Hanson insists, one must first understand the Compson household (Hanson’s remaining two criteria will each have a section in this chapter devoted to them). During or before the third section of the novel (the “Jason section”), the reader has already become aware of the following: that Jason’s father has passed away (as he refused to stop drinking despite his failing health); that Jason’s older brother Quentin has been sent to school at Harvard and then drowned himself; that Jason’s older sister Caddy has been abandoned by her fiancé after her pregnancy (by another man) was discovered; that the resulting illegitimate child (named Quentin in memory of the drowned brother) has come to live at the Compson house although Caddy remains barred; that Jason’s mother Caroline is probably a hypochondriac and is often
bedridden; that Jason’s younger brother Benjy has a developmental disorder that has left him with the brain of a dysfunctional toddler (and was castrated after approaching a girl that he probably thought was his sister); and that the Compsons have owned and/or employed multiple generations of a black family (of which Dilsey is the oldest living representative), members of whom still work in and around the family estate. Furthermore, this estate has been diminishing as the family has been forced to sell some land due to dwindling finances; though at an earlier time, the proud family boasted multiple Confederate officers. Thus, the third section of *The Sound and the Fury* places Jason at the end of a systematic decline in family prestige. To make matters worse, Jason is the first to inherit a financial situation that will require him to work for an hourly wage in order to support the household.

Despite these recent circumstances, the Compson name is one with a history, and Jason has been raised with an understanding of this history and the expectation of certain associated privileges – an expectation made by his tirades about the changing world around him. Responding to ridicule he perceives concerning his niece’s behavior, Jason snaps back, “I says my people owned slaves here when you all were running little shirt tail country stores and farming land no nigger would look at on shares” (239). For generations the Compsons had held a respectable position in the community. They owned land. They owned slaves. They held office. Theirs was a sustained legacy. But the world of the South is changing; and Jason’s knowledge of how to carry on in that world has been pieced together by mixed signals. Godden reports on some of this confusion.
To Jason, Mr. Compson always and paradoxically faced a northern future. Jason’s father is primarily he who sold the pasture so that Quentin might go to Harvard – a figure who turns immovable property (Compson land) into movable property (a sum of money) and who further dictates that the sum be expended to gain northern credit in the form of status, a prestige that would promote the Compson name even as it diminished Compson substance. Jason’s Mr. Compson tells the truth about the southern economy… For Mr. Compson [dependencies of blood (familial and racial)] have a variable price… Seen from Jason’s perspective and from 1928, the sale of the “pasture” becomes part of a revolution in southern land use. The pasture is turned into a golf course, leisure resource to a new mercantile class emerging from the old and persistent planter class. (Godden, *Fictions of Labor* 46)

The “northern credit in the form of status” that Godden mentions is what Mr. Compson hopes to gain for the family by sending his eldest son to Harvard. Jason continually reminds both the reader and his mother that this opportunity was never extended to him. Financially, the family could simply not afford to do so, for multiple reasons. First, the tuition at Harvard is well beyond the family’s means at this moment. Second, due to Caroline Compson’s forever fading health, Jason must assume the responsibilities of earning a wage and maintaining the estate after his father’s death. Caroline thus pulls Jason in the opposite direction from Mr. Compson’s life lessons about “facing a northern future”.
As the oldest living male Compson, Jason’s familial duty is to assume responsibility for the household. As the “father of the house”, Jason must provide financial stability; and with this he feels he deserves to hold authority over those who live under “his” roof. Caroline appears to agree. “You’d better do as he says,” she tells Dilsey, the worker who has been with the family for generations and helped raise Jason, “He’s head of the house now. It’s his right to require us to respect his wishes. I try to do it, and if I can, you can too” (278). All of this seems appropriate to the paternal power structure outlined in the previous chapter. However, Caroline Compson does not behave in accordance with her own words. Young Quentin, Jason’s niece, consistently shows disrespect for both the family name and her uncle. The teenager’s behavior leads her grandmother to constantly worry about the reputation of the Compson name throughout the town. However, when Jason seeks to reprimand the girl, either Caroline or Dilsey steps in and interferes with Jason’s authority. “If you want me to control her,” Jason spouts to his mother, “just say so and keep your hands off. Everytime I try to, you come butting in and then she gives us both the laugh” (181). According to Jason, young Quentin has learned that she can behave any way she wishes because when the time comes for her to be reprimanded, Jason has not been allowed to assert his authority. It is a decision that Caroline had made the very first day that the baby Quentin had arrived at the house. “I have never interfered with the way you brought them up,” Caroline had told her husband, “But now I cannot stand it anymore.” She demands that she be more involved with making child-rearing decisions or she will leave (199).
Despite the pressures Mrs. Compson places on Jason to conform to the role of the omnipotent Southern father, she actively seeks to maintain some overriding power herself. She maintains control over the key to every door in the house, and it is no accident that the third person narrator of the final section refers to them as “a huge bunch of rusted keys on an iron ring like a medieval jailer’s” (281). Nor should it be overlooked that Caroline insists that she burn Caddy’s checks herself despite her deteriorating ability to see them very well. Perhaps Caroline is smarter than she lets on, as it has certainly been implied that were Jason to possess the ability to open any door in the house, something violent or inappropriate might well take place; and the reader knows that even her insistence on handling the checks is not enough to keep Jason from pocketing the money. Whatever her reasons, and no matter her condition, Mrs. Compson does possess a good deal of overriding power in the Compson household. Regardless of how often she tells Jason that he’s the one who needs to support the family, the resolve she displays in subtle reminders of her authority continuously sends mixed signals. In doing so, she functionally prevents Jason from realizing his role as the controlling patriarch, a concept powerfully central to the idea of Southern identity. The Southern man, at this moment in history, sought to reclaim the position of “supreme father” over both his family and his workers.

However, Dilsey is also guilty of interfering with Jason’s authority. She always manages to put herself between young Quentin and Jason when things get heated. “Now, now,” she assures young Quentin, “He aint gwine so much as lay his hand on you while Ise here” (185). John T. Matthews, in his essay “The Rhetoric of Containment in
Faulkner", asserts that “Jason’s doom as head of this house could not be more certain. The belated defense of aristocratic privilege evokes the uncompromising authority of a patriarchal, racist ideology, but Caddy’s and her daughter’s escapes weaken the patriarchy just as [the black workers’] relative independence signals a new age” (Matthews, “Rhetoric” 61). Dilsey’s brave defense of young Quentin goes a long way in exposing the loss of patriarchal power that is taking place at this time in the South. It is a trend against which Jason reacts with occasional violence, although he never dares to strike Dilsey herself. These outbursts, along with his desperate attempts to rein in young Quentin, display Jason’s desire to reinstate the paternal power that he feels he should have inherited. As it stands, however, the only thing he has truly inherited is a contradictory understanding of how to exist in this cultural moment. Does he live facing forward, as his father had begun to do, or attempt to reclaim something in a fading past, as his mother seems to be insisting? Matthews comments on this very issue. “Jason acts the part of the declined aristocrat,” he writes, “hoping to evade the paradox that in order to recover what he has lost, he must work like the dispossessed while behaving like the ruling class” (65). In doing so, Donald Kartiganer suggests that Jason “is quite unaware of the way he arranges his own punishment” (336).

Socioeconomic System: The Unveiling of a Contradiction

There are additional curiosities in the lessons Jason receives from his father about what it means to be a Southern man. Some critics, like the esteemed Cleanth Brooks,
have suggested that “Jason, if he could, would reduce all relationships to commercial
transactions” (Brooks 290). This aspect of his character is central to Brooks’ dismissal of
Jason as an “unmatched villain.” However, Godden’s comments on Jason’s view of his
father may well account for some of these behaviors. As the father of the (Southern)
household, Mr. Compson’s actions may serve as lessons in the eyes of his children about
the ways a man in the “new South” should behave.

This father agreed that his wife should take their daughter to the marriage
market, so that the second son might receive his financial inheritance. The
fact that the contract between southern property and northern capital
breaks down, voiding Jason’s promised job at the heart of northern finance
(Herbert Head’s bank), does not alter the point that neither land nor person
lies outside the liquidities of the market. It is only apt that the father,
according to Jason, should be claimed by liquid. (Godden, Fictions of
Labor 46)

Here, Godden brings to the surface multiple issues which are pertinent to this discussion.
First, one wonders if Mr. Compson had himself given up on the resistant Southern
identity. Could Mr. Compson have seen the writing on the wall? His pregnant and
unmarried daughter seems to have become something of a commodity in his mind, a
bargaining chip with which he might secure a comfortable life for his son. However, that
life, much like the one he wanted Quentin to pursue was one that sought out Northern
prestige, not a continuation of the Southern family tradition. As it turned out, Mr.
Compson was likely in the right in attempting to free his sons from the containment of a decomposing Southern lifestyle. The effect, however, was to create even further confusion for the adult life of Jason. He developed an ambition to seek out a means for himself and the family through a Northern capitalism that would do him no favors. The bank job had fallen through, and soon enough the stock market would take him for a good deal more (Westbrook 57). Jason learned how to be a new Southern man from his father. As for his responsibilities to be a man of the Old South, Jason tries to obey his mother and the demands that the family places on him. In doing so, he becomes the first Compson to take a position as a wage laborer.

Unlike the Compsons of generations past, Jason cannot support his family by farming the land that has since been sold. The selling of the family land disallows Jason to earn a living in connection with the soil, thereby removing the physical bonds to his “sense of place”. Farming, as the Agrarians saw it, was crucial to maintaining the sense of “otherness” and opposition on which a Southern identity was forged. It was also the path by which Andrew Lytle sought to return the South to her former (perceived) glory (244). But the Compsons sold their land, in an attempt to gain prestige through the Northern institutions. As a result, Jason is forced to earn a living by way of the hourly wage, a convention that to this point had largely been relegated to the industrial North. It is an uncomfortable situation for the last of the Compsons, as Jason frequently finds himself bickering with the owner of the supply store over the details of the timeclock and the attitude that has come to represent commercial relations in the new South. When prodded about his extended absence from the store, Jason bristles at the questioning.
“I had to go to the dentist,” I says because it’s not any of his business where I eat but I’ve got to be in the store with him all afternoon… You take a little two by four country storekeeper like I says it takes a man with just five hundred dollars to worry about it fifty thousand dollars’ worth.

When I came in Earl looked at his watch. But he didn’t say anything until the customer was gone. Then he says,

“You go home to dinner?”

[…]

“You might have told me,” he says. “I expected you back right away.”

… “Our agreement was an hour for dinner,” I says, “and if you don’t like the way I do, you know what you can do about it.”

“I’ve known that some time,” he says. “If it hadn’t been for your mother I’d have done it before now, too. She’s a lady I’ve got a lot of sympathy for, Jason. Too bad some other folks I know can’t say as much.”

Fortunately for Jason, the abuse of his hourly position hasn’t earned him a dismissal from his job. The reason, as Earl admits, is that he knows the Compsons enough to know that Jason needs to work in order to support them. He also knows that his leniency is a
special favor that he is extending. In *Capital, Volume 1*, Karl Marx discusses the process by which the laborers under a capitalist system lose their individuality. “They can no longer be distinguished,” Marx claims, “but are all together reduced to the same kind of labour, human labor in the abstract” (Marx 128). Jason is therefore fortunate that he has maintained at least enough of his individuality that Earl considers him more than just a worker the abstract. He knows Jason as a Southerner and as a man who bears a responsibility to provide for his family. The “other folks” to whom Earl refers are those who have completely adopted the philosophy of hourly-wage capitalism and know their workers as only that. Jason’s resistance to fully participate in the power relations of the supply store pushes Earl to the brink of forgetting these sympathies, however.

“I don’t know why you are trying to make me fire you,” he says.

“You know you could quit anytime and there wouldn’t be any hard feelings between us.”

“Maybe that’s why I don’t quit,” I says. “As long as I tend to my job, that’s what you are paying me for.” (246)

But both men know why Jason can’t quit or be fired. Where earlier Jason had asserted his independence in spite of his agreement to work for Earl, he now accepts that he must perform his work duties in order to get paid. He needs the money, and thus he is constantly and painfully aware of the time as it dictates what his daily actions are and when he can do them. “Along toward ten oclock I went up front. There was a drummer there. It was a couple minutes to ten…” (191). Jason continually complains about Earl
watching the door, looking at his watch to make sure Jason is on time (227). Jason is
disappointed that he has had to spend his days like this, noting that during his younger
years he remembers seeing “other boys with the afternoon off and all day Saturday and
me working in a store.” He also finds some pride in fulfilling his duties, however. “I
may not be sitting with my feet on a mahogany desk,” he admits, “but I am being paid for
what I do inside this building and if I can’t manage to live a civilized life outside of it I’ll
go where I can. I can stand on my own feet; I don’t need any man’s mahogany desk to
prop me up” (211). However, even in his pride, there are remnants of a masculine
Southern identity in him. His prideful insistence that he can “stand on his own feet” are
echoed in the Southern male bravado he spouts when claims to not need to bank job that
he often bemoans losing, saying “Do you think I need any man’s help to stand on my
feet?... Let alone a woman that can’t name the father of her own child” (262). Matthews
remarks on these instances in the novel that “underscore [Jason’s] outrage that the
Compsons have fallen into the laboring class” (65). But due to his position in that class,
he does require another man’s help, as Earl overlooks every reason to fire him; and he
has also become dependent on that same woman whose checks he secretly cashes and
hoards under lock and key.

Anxiety and Outrage

In the previous, introductory chapter Stephen Flinn Young and Michael Kreyling
were quoted with regard to the “anxiety” that is inherent in the very make-up of a
Southern identity during the time *The Sound and the Fury* was written. The fact that anxiety is a defining characteristic in the construction of this identity is more proof that this concept was an invention of those who sought to identify with something that had already disappeared. The anxiety that the Southerner felt is rooted in loss and change. It is an anxiety that can be at least partially credited for the angry and violent reactions that Jason has towards his job, the stock market, his family, and the employees at his house. If Jason is to be read as a pure villain, these are the outbursts which would point to such a reading, but Jason is not a pure villain, he is a man caught at an uncomfortable moment in history. If he is violent, that violence is the manifestation of his struggle to come to terms with the fact that he cannot exercise the authority (familial, social, and financial) that he feels was his birthright as a Southern man. Jason feels in many ways cheated.

James Dickey, in his essay “Notes on the Decline of Outrage,” comments that the Southerner “knows that with the increase of industry and ‘business,’ with their attendant influx of thousands of people each month from other parts of the country, the ‘solidarity’ of the South… is breaking down more and more rapidly, and that when the older patterns of behavior are gone, there will be nothing to put in their place save the empty money-grubbing and soul-killing competitive drives of the Northern industrial concerns” (81). It is from this awareness that the Southerner feels threatened and anxious; and this is the origin of the Southern “outrage”. The ways of the Southern male and a Southern identity are becoming quickly outdated. Jason represents this through his loss of authority at home, and his need to work side-by-side with the one-time lower class and race. Dickey’s essay is largely about the declining outrage felt by Southern whites toward
blacks during in the early 1960s. However, it is an outrage still in full bloom for Jason in 1928. Although Jason never strikes Dilsey, he frequently threatens to; and he does beat Luster, Dilsey’s grandson and Benjy’s supervisor. Jason’s disgust with the changing social landscape is tied as much to watching the blacks of the South grow in their independence as it is to watching his own autonomy shrivel.

Like I say the only place for them is in the field, where they’d have to work from sunup to sundown. They can’t stand prosperity or an easy job. Let one stay around white people for a while and he’s not worth killing. They get so they can outguess you about work before your very eyes, like Roskus [one of the Compson’s old black employees] the only mistake he ever made was he got careless one day and died. Shirking and stealing and giving you a little more lip and a little more lip until some day you have to lay them out with a scantling or something. (250-1)

Jason prefers the relationship his family had had with Roskus who Jason recalls as having accepted his oppression without resistance, as this system presupposed the white Southern authority. The contradiction that Jason chooses to ignore is that the emerging power structure of dominance that has turned his family from the “haves” to the “have-nots” is structured the same way as the system that is fading. “The Sound and the Fury represses this process on two fronts,” Matthews writes. “In the first place it pretends that the old order, a South in which class, rank, and race were ‘natural’ and uncomplicated, has disappeared forever. In fact, however, the ruling families of the old South busily
occupy themselves… with the restoration of past fortune and privilege” (66). Matthews refers to this theme in the novel as “the spectre of violent recovery” and its manifestation in the Jason section is the fury with which Jason reproaches all of those who seem to adapt better than he.

The more Jason feels his patriarchal power slipping, which includes his encounters with young Quentin, the more outraged Jason becomes, and the more violently he attempts to assert that power. He does so at every opportunity. He bellows that his every demand be met, no matter how petty they may seem to the reader. “You may think you can run over me like you do your grandmother and everyone else,” he shouts at young Quentin, “But you’ll find out different. I’ll give you ten seconds to put that cup down like I told you” (183). Jason demands this respect with increasing aggression due to his anxiety over the fact that the respect that he should “naturally” deserve was based on an ideology that is disappearing. These are desperate attempts to assert some power that he simply does not possess. He has lost the agency that comes with being a member of the ruling class. Even his attempts to gather financial power are efforts to reclaim rather than adapt. He chases his niece to recapture the money that she took with her, but also to try to reclaim a potential underling. This is why he viciously attacks Luster at the end of the novel (320). Jason continues to search for someone or something over which he “ought” to have control. His problems with the stock market are based in a similar misunderstanding.
Attempts to Manipulate the System

Frustrated by his lack of authority, which is largely tied to the changing economic environment around him, Jason seeks financial security that he hopes will return him to the position of power that his ancestors had held. His tirades about the stock market display the ambivalence that Jason feels towards Northern capital: he wishes and attempts to increase his earnings, all the while barking loudly and often about the sham he views the system to be. The paradox that Matthews cites continues. “By adopting Yankee ways,” Matthews notes, “the South hoped to reconstitute the prosperity and dream that the North had destroyed” (62).

“There’s nothing to it,” I says. “Cotton is a speculator’s crop. They fill the farmer full of hot air and get him to raise a big crop for them to whipsaw on the market, to trim the suckers with. Do you think the farmer gets anything out of it except a red neck and a hump in his back?... And what for? So a bunch of dam eastern jews… Now what I’m talking about is the fellers that sit up there in New York and trim the sucker gamblers… The farmer catches it coming and going… I know I’m right,” I says. “It’s a suckers game, unless a man gets inside information from somebody that knows what’s going on… It’s the fellow that thinks he knows it all and is trying to make a killing with three dollars that they’re laying for. That’s why they are in business.” Then it struck ten. (191-2)
Jason is, of course, one of those same suckers that he is belittling. But it isn’t until he loses a substantial sum that his anger at the system boils over.

I don’t see how a city no bigger than New York can hold enough people to take the money away from us country suckers. Work like hell all day every day, send them your money and get a little piece of paper back. Your account closed at 20.62. Teasing you along, letting you pile up a little paper profit, then bang! Your account closed at 20.62. And if it wasn’t enough, paying ten dollars a month to somebody to tell you how to lose it fast… Well I just want to hit them one time and get my money back. I don’t want a killing; only these small town gamblers are out for that, I just want my money back that these dam jews have gotten with all their guaranteed inside dope. Then I’m through. (234-5)

The blatant contradictions in Jason’s tirades are obvious as he continually claims to be finished and immediately wishes to do that for which he condemn others – namely, to make his money back with one big killing. Wayne W. Westbrook has written an article which details the ups and downs of Jason’s stock market escapades, determining a final count of the losing investment. “Speculative excitement was high in the United States in the late 1920s,” He writes.

Stock and commodity markets set new records in 1928, with volume on the New York Stock Exchange the highest in its history. Faulkner was sensitive to this feverish atmosphere – particularly how it infected even
rural pockets in Mississippi – and wove its effects into not only a burlesque of Jason Compson’s risk-be-damned style of speculation but also a realistic portrayal of the populist distrust of Wall Street and northeastern finance that lingered on in the South until long after the Depression. (62)

Stock market speculation had worked its way into a South that was looking to regain the wealth it had lost during the complete turnover in its economy. But as Westbrook and Jason note, the South was hesitant to fully buy into the philosophy of the system.

Hence, the issue of Jason’s stock market adventures perfectly depicts the position of the South with regard to the North at this moment in history. Hanson reminds us that “the socioeconomic history of the South from 1865 to 1910 is that of a slow buildup of pressure to change along Northern lines” (7). Jason feels this pressure as he sees the accompanying negative effects firsthand. “In this regard,” Atkinson adds, “Jason emerges as the novel’s most powerful agent for critiquing the totalizing power of the capitalist state. Through Jason’s experiences and state of mind, Faulkner exposes the adverse effects of the market on the subject of capitalism who feels overwhelmed and robbed of individual identity and initiative by the destabilizing and often dehumanizing forces of consumer culture” (225). That being said, Southerners like Jason who were seeking a way to regain their stature had little choice but to participate in the very system that they sought to resist.
The Novel’s Structure and the Loss of Individual Identity

To return to Hanson’s earlier assertion that one must understand how the novel “shares a logic” with the Compson household and the socioeconomic system, this chapter will now investigate how the structure of the novel itself adds to the topics mentioned above. It is often argued that the lost notion of the Old South is represented in the novel through the “loss” of Caddy (the loss of her virginity, her child out of wedlock, and her departure from the family home). It is a loss that many critics cite as the chief factor in the neuroses of her brothers. While many of these arguments center their interpretations on Benjy and Quentin, the occasional interpretation extends the strong desire to incestuously capture, reclaim, and possess Caddy to Jason as well – although, as is the case with Godden’s analysis, the interpretations that attribute this same desire to Jason only lightly touch on the subject and quickly returns to the more credible evidence of Benjy and Quentin’s incestuous fixations (Fictions of Labor 48). And though it is a widely-held and certainly (in many cases) viable reading that these characters demonstrate a psychologically stunted development due to their obsession with their sister, Ted Atkinson warns that the process of delving into the minds of the Compson brothers to develop psychological profiles… runs the risk of neglecting the novel’s engagement with issues and concerns beyond the page of the text – in particular, the ways that The Sound and the Fury responds ideologically to the formation of the modern
capitalist state by exposing the toll it takes on the life and mind of the individual citizen. (223)

Such a danger is evident in the numerous commentaries that never mention the economically tumultuous times in which the novel is situated.

Throughout the novel, Jason seeks ways to regain power and have his agency restored. However, due to the shifting economic environment, he doesn’t make enough money to achieve these ends; and as this is his chief concern, one should not overlook this central aspect of the novel. He can in no way control the outcome of his stock market adventures. And the changing social relations have stripped him of any real power at home. No matter his methods, he is continually reminded that he does not possess the power that should have been his “inherited way of life”. As for his Southern “sense of place”, any inheritance of land (and the control that comes with its ownership) that is supposed to bear the deep roots of his Southern identity has been sold in an attempt to realize a position in the new Northern class structure. Jason has been sufficiently stripped of his identity as there is no longer any relationship with the soil by which the Agrarians sought definition. Any attempts to continue to hold onto an existence associated with the Southern way of life have shown themselves to be completely futile. He is in very real danger of losing his individuality, of becoming that “abstract self” of which Andrew Lytle had warned in the last chapter.

The unusual structure of the novel is a manifestation of this loss, this transformation from individuality into abstraction. To represent this, the narration of the
third section of the novel, Jason’s section, is the last to have a specific tie to a particular individual. The first of the novel’s four sections takes place in Benjy’s head. Each sentence is filtered through Benjy’s memory and therefore come out of chronological order. Benjy has no real connection to the world around him. Therefore, the individual experiences of this section are cut off from the anxieties rapidly changing South (or if they are affected, Benjy himself remains unaware of it). Benjy is almost entirely unaffected by anything beyond the loss of his sister (which may be the only way that a changing social environment makes its way into Benjy’s consciousness). The second section, belonging to his brother Quentin, also takes place entirely in its narrator’s thoughts. However, Quentin is aware of the world around him, and intensely aware of the unavoidable shift from the present to the future. The narration in this second section is obsessed with this shift, as it begins with Quentin hearing the ticking of his watch, which (despite his efforts to break it and stop time) haunts him until his death. This watch, and its curse, is Quentin’s inheritance. “It was Grandfather’s and when Father gave it to me he said I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire” (76). Time itself, in its very progression, marks the grave of hope for the South and for individual identity. It is why the clock in the Compson’s kitchen doesn’t display the proper time (274). The historical moment of the Compson’s way has passed. Only Dilsey can decipher the kitchen clock, as she is aware that this era has ended. “I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin,” she says (297).

Jason’s section is the last one written in the first person; and, has been argued above, is immediately and constantly attempting to assert the existence of the individual
that pens it. “Besides, like I say I guess I don’t need any man’s help to get along I can stand on my own feet like I always have” (206). Jason insists that he still possesses some semblance of an individual identity with his continual use of the first-person “I”. However, his story is overwhelmed by his gradual inability to hold onto it. Jason’s preoccupation with time is unlike his brother’s. Time is not Jason’s enemy, it is his occupation. He has an hour for dinner, he visits the Western Union for his mail and stock tips during his scheduled break throughout the day (227, 192). His life has become regimented by the cultural realities of the industrial labor process. As such he has ceased to be the Jason Compson that he may once may have been; he has certainly ceased to be the Compson that his ancestors had been. Again, however, the problem is that Jason was never truly given the chance to share in this identity. His land (“sense of place”) was sold which means his financial and controller-of-production position was sold. The hope for the family’s survival on these terms was placed exclusively on Quentin’s shoulders. It was a responsibility that the older Compson was obviously unable to bear; and thus, Jason’s quest for identity on these terms was futile before it truly began.

The fourth section, typically referred to as the “Dilsey section”, is written in the third-person and in its objectivity has lost all connection to a particular individual. In it are included the last gasps of Jason’s struggle for authority. In this way, stylistically, the reader can witness the gradual removal of the possibility for individual consciousness throughout the novel, which by the end has lost all connection to any personal identity and is told by some overseer – perhaps some Northern industrial abstracting power. It is in this last section that Jason’s final display of violence and outrage take place. They are
shocking in their frantic cruelty, as he backhands and punches Luster for disobeying orders that he is never explicitly given. He hits Benjy, breaking the flower he was taking to his grandmother’s grave (320). As Luster disrupts Benjy’s well-rehearsed way through the town square, it is obvious to all that things can no longer be the same.

Dilsey, in seeing the end, as she puts it, has alerted the reader to the inevitable conclusion of an historically conditioned and distinctly Southern way of life. Only to a mind that’s been “three years old [for] thirty years” can things appear “each in its ordered place” (17, 321).
Chapter 2

Cass Kinsolving, Seeking a Southern Past in a European Future, Returns with Neither

“Just as the South itself has changed until it has lost much of its old, closely knit, small-town and rural character, so its most recent novelists have lost their sense of community, of involvement within a limited, bounded universe... Now the fixed center is gone, and the younger Southern writers, as Walter Sullivan declares must look for something to take its place... The novels of William Styron [among others] remain ‘Southern’ by virtue of their attitude toward language, their conception of man as a limited, dependent being. Only the memory, fading, distant, of the old community remains. That, and an attitude. The historical sense, the idea of community-as-all, are nearly gone, and the protagonists of the recent Southern novel are moderns who live in a fluid, changing world.” – Louis Rubin, Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs (Jacobs 25)

William Styron’s Set This House on Fire, published in 1960, depicts an American South in which the futility of Jason Compson’s struggle has come to be fully realized. The post-World War II setting of Styron’s novel displays an American South that is much changed from the Mississippi of the Compsons. The novel’s protagonist, Cass Kinsolving, is nonetheless engaged in recapturing some semblance of Southern identity. However, due to the impossibility of this kind of existence in the American South, Cass
heads to Europe in an effort to find a surrogate for the lost “sense of place” on which to base an identity. The anxiety he feels over the loss of the South leaves him endlessly grasping for the sense of self of generations that are now even more distantly in the past. For Cass, the search for identity is represented by his struggle to paint, which he commonly ties to the spread of “Americanism”. This “Americanism” is the name he gives to the spread of finance capital which was born in the North but has overcome the American South to the point where the whole country is defined by it. Cass continues to seek a “place” that has resisted this increasingly global phenomenon and as a result clings to Sambuco, Italy which he envisions as an “untouched” last bastion in the fight. The events that take place there (culminating in a violent rape and vengeful murder) lead him to accept the futility in a way that Jason Compson never could. Cass, accepting this fate, returns to the American South. It is a “settling” that marks the true end of a Southern identity; and as the next chapter will show, the early signs of a postmodern existence.

The narrative of Set This House on Fire does not follow any chronological succession of events. The novel opens in the present tense some time after the majority of the story’s events have taken place. As a result, most of the novel is written from the characters’ memories of the past; and much of the textual evidence that will be quoted in this chapter is therefore subject to this narrative choice. An effort to conduct this discussion along the chronology of the story will therefore create some unavoidable confusion. On some occasions, though attempts will be made to counter this problem, references within the text will allude to topics that will be discussed in subsequent sections. That being said, this analysis will begin at a different point than the text of Set
This House on Fire. This discussion begins with an analysis of the anxiety which sends Cass beyond the American shores in search of fulfillment.

**Anxiety and the Altered South**

Cass Kinsolving is a trained and talented painter. However, he has never been able to fully realize this talent. As a younger man he had left his home in North Carolina to attend an art school in New York; and he had grown jealous of his colleagues, whom he deems to have less talent, because they seem to be able to “produce something” where he is unable. He would later recall the feeling of seeing others succeed where he could not.

Godalmighty, the rationalizations I used, and the lies! I told myself I had no talent, you see; that was the first evasion. Yet, hell, I knew I had talent, knew it in my soul, knew it as well as I know my own name. I had it, there was not getting around it, and the knowledge that I had it and wouldn’t use it or was afraid to use it or refused to use it just made my misery that much worse. Hell, I knew I could paint rings around anyone—at least of my own age and experience. Anyone! Yet in front of a sketch pad or a canvas I was… Completely paralyzed… deep down I was hurting; boy, I was hurting! For at least they had produced something, and I was still a mean little cesspool of bitter, pent-up, frustrated, hopeless
Cass, in reminiscing over his “dreary battle” realizes that at the root of his problem were general identity issues. He refers to feeling as though he was pitted against himself; that the New York “society” was opposed to his success; and that time didn’t seem to be functioning properly. Recalling that each of these confusions were at the heart of Jason Compson’s difficulty with his position in life, one becomes aware of the similarities between these two Southern crises. Jason’s “dam eastern jews” are Cass’ fellow art students. They don’t seem to be as anxious as the Southern protagonists about finding success at this moment in history. Cass’ anxieties are Jason’s anxieties. Neither can find the appropriate balance between the changing world around them and their desired connection to the past. Where Jason, still living on the land of his ancestors, was at least rooted in the very ground of the past in his attempts to withstand the changing atmosphere, Cass’ move to New York has robbed him of that luxury. However, even were he to have remained in North Carolina, there is considerable doubt as to whether the landscape would have given him the same grounding that Jason had felt a generation or two before.

Peter Leverett, the novel’s principal narrator, remarks on the cause for the loss that is at the heart of a Southern identity.
In America our landmarks and our boundaries merge, shift, and change quicker than we can tell: one day we feel rooted, and the carpet of our experience is a familiar thing upon which we securely stand. Then as if by some conjuring trick, it is all yanked out from beneath us… and although we are obscurely moved by intimations of growth, of advancement, we feel hollow and downcast. (11)

One recalls the rhetoric of progress that the Agrarians rigorously sought to oppose. By the time of Cass and Peter’s childhood, the “carpet of experience” that was the very landscape of the South had shifted completely. The transformation of the region had become nearly complete, and the “new South” of Styron’s novel would appear as something very alien to Jason or Caroline Compson. No longer was the region represented by its pastoral purity or a self-sustaining economy. Instead, the transformation into a site of capitalist consumer culture has drastically warped the landscape. The Port Warwick, Virginia of Peter’s childhood “had grown vaster and more streamlined and clownish-looking than I thought a decent southern town could ever become.” He recalls that “as a boy I had known its gentle seaside charm, and had smelled the ocean wind, and had lolled underneath giant magnolias.” However, his return as an adult leaves him “smitten with a sense of dislocation” as “now the magnolias had been hacked down to make room for a highway along the shore; there were noisy shopping plazas everywhere, blue with exhaust and rimmed with supermarkets” (10). It is now much too late to hope of resisting these changes. They have become reality.
In 1962, Styron was asked by Hubert Juin “Is the opposition between North and South still that strong?” The French journalist was trying to determine if the South of Styron’s 60’s possessed the same determination to hold onto the values of generations past that was located at the heart of Faulkner’s early fiction. Styron’s response of “Yes and no! Currently the South is becoming day by day more like the North” hinted that although the resistance had faded some, and the process of assimilation was still underway, the now inevitable loss of the Old South remained a sore spot for many who still had longstanding roots in the area (West 21). This is the social background from which Set This House on Fire springs. Despite the near complete transformation, the desire for a Southern identity via opposition remains, and Peter’s father provides the feeling that this late hour entails.

What this country needs… what this great land of ours needs is something to happen to it. Something ferocious and tragic, like what happened to Jericho or the cities of the plain – something terrible I mean, son, so that when the people have been through hellfire and the crucible, and have suffered agony enough and grief, they’ll be men again, human beings, not a bunch of smug contented hogs rooting at the trough. (15)

Wanderlust: Why Cass Can’t Find His “Place”

Cass, devastated by the influx of finance capital and consumer culture that has shifted from a Northern influence to an American one, is driven abroad in search of a
new locus of resistance. It is here – in a place that is just as imagined and mythologized as the “Old South” – where Cass feels he will finally be able to paint. He begins his search in Paris, the place of legendary artistic production. Yet “There I was,” Cass says of the French capitol, “…all in a sweat and fever to capture something, to get it down, to crystallize it, to preserve it, leave a record or something, and I had no more ability to do it than some blind old dropsical eunuch of ninety-five” (251). Here, Cass likens his inability to perform on canvas with an inability to perform in the bedroom. This should not be read as suggesting that Cass is sexually impotent, however, as he has two children with his wife, Poppy, and partakes in numerous infidelities along the way. Cass later returns to the eunuch metaphor when contemplating giving up his fight to forge his own sense of self in the face of capitalist oppression (297). As the spread of this economy quickly becomes a global phenomenon, it is no surprise that Cass cannot fully realize this identity even in European cities. He further discusses his crisis of identity as he lived in Paris. “Self. Self! God, I was a regular puddle of self… God, I was a mess. Of self. Conscious of nothing in the world so much as my own miserable ambulating corpuscles” (254).

Cass associates his inability to “capture something” artistically with his inability to define himself. The text provides numerous evidences that Cass commences his journey into Europe due to his inability to paint – and that certainly this inability is in some way tied to his feelings about the South. In a later discussion with Peter, Cass recalls, “when I was in Paris there, trying to be a painter, and in Rome too, the chorus of this wonderful old hillbilly song used to come back to me… this here song was called
‘The Dying Paper Boy,’ and the chorus went: ‘I never had the chance that other boys had, I never had no mom nor no dad’” (55). One has to look no further than these lines to understand that Cass’ struggle to produce great art is not bound to the cities in which he attempts to paint. Instead, the concepts represented here are bound to Cass’ concept of a self. Himself an orphan, Cass lacks the familial associations from which so many develop an identity – it is no coincidence that Styron has Cass’ parents “run down by this train in Rich Square, North Carolina” as trains are commonly used to symbolize the quickness and efficiency with which Northern industrial capitalism penetrated the South (252). Jason Compson, for instance, despite struggling with the identity his lineage sought to produce in him, was fully aware of what the demands of that identity were. It is not unthinkable, then, that Cass should attempt to turn to his regional heritage as a North Carolina native in order to carve out an idea of the self. However, the South has been a long time changing and the typical Southern identity of resistance no longer seems a viable option, as Peter’s depiction of Virginia denotes. “Trying to be a painter,” Cass is constantly reminded of a “hillbilly song” that he – knowingly or not – associates with the South. Separated from the deeply-rooted history that had come to define the region, the South has now been ripped apart by the ever-increasing presence of the North. It has become the dying paper boy in the song, which as was argued in the last chapter, “never had the chance” of maintaining its autonomy once the “mom” and “dad” of its history and lineage had been shattered by a rapidly encroaching economic system. Cass associates this song with the death of the Old South, the futility that came to characterize
its identity-via-resistance, and also the creation of his art – the attempts of which trigger the song to echo in his memory.

Cass is seeking a way to assuage this feeling of loss through art. Even his moments of inspiration (which are quite few and most-often fleeting) are bound to his being “trapped” by this anxiety. Cass has something bordering on a religious experience that is triggered by the view of a spider-web outside of his Paris window. “A big golden spider had built a web in the crotch of one of the vines,” he relates to Peter, “and I wondered why she hadn’t trapped any of the ladybugs, until I remembered that ladybugs are supposed to secrete a smell or something that’s repulsive to spiders… And then finally, in sort of a doze, and with all my hatred and poison lost for the moment, or forgotten, I looked up” (256). Cass grabs his pad and sets out to make something of this epiphany. The ladybugs, Cass realizes, possess something special about them that saves them from being consumed by the golden spider. There is something unique in them that keeps them safe, that allows them to live on despite the fully-spun and all-encompassing web of the spider. It is, of course, no accident that the spider shares a hue with the precious metal upon which the American dollar was based. Interestingly, this novel takes place during a postwar period beginning in 1946 when the American gold standard was becoming utilized by many countries in order to ensure that their own currency could maintain a consistent exchange rate with the American dollar (Lipsey 690). It is through this realization that Cass feels some hope for a continuing resistance to the growing and oppressive reach of capitalism. The resulting elation would stay with Cass during his trip into the Paris streets in search of something to paint. “I was aware, just as I had been
aware of the beauty in that shabby little Paris street below, of the – well of the beauty, the beauty and the *decency* in my own life which was continuing and indestructible in time… since it existed not just in the past but now and for all time, [and which] could surely conquer over my momentary sordidness and selfishness and meanness…” (267). Still, Cass cannot find an ability to paint, and as the elation begins to leave him, and he begins to tumble back into despair, he recalls being “still determined to draw something. I was still determined to prove to myself that I could, that all this crazy passion and glory I’d felt hadn’t been a fraud, a hoax” (270). Cass seeks to use his art to fortify himself: if he could only put something down on canvas, something sincere and meaningful, his revelation would somehow be justified. However, after the events that would later transpire, and after Cass would see the futility of the “good” fight and subsequently settle into a life within the capitalist framework, he would rebuke himself for having believed and hoped. “And, God, how stupid I was not to realize that the whole thing was a fraud! That I was in real danger… But I didn’t know it then” (267). Fraud or not, Cass had been inspired by the promise of the ladybugs’ defiance of the golden spider. “You remember I told you how I’d been unable to work for so long,” he would tell Peter. “Well, right then in the midst of all this phony euphoria I felt I could even give a lesson to Piero della Francesca” (267-8).

Cass’ euphoria does not last long, however, as he cannot turn his temporary inspiration into any artistic production. He decides that he and his family must move again, the news of which leaves his wife Poppy distressed and confused. “Oh why, Cass?” Poppy implores, “If we’ve got to go somewhere, why can’t we go back to the
U.S.A.? Why, Cass? Oh why are you so anti-U.S.A.?” Cass responds with a tirade that speaks to his distaste for American capitalist culture.

You want to know why? Because it’s the land where the soul gets poisoned out of pure ugliness. It’s because in the U.S.A. everything looks like a side street near the bus station in Poughkeepsie, New York! Lord love me, Poppy, do I have to go through all this again? It’s because whenever I think of stateside I can’t picture nothing else but a side street in Poughkeepsie, New York, where I got lost one night when I came to see you, and whenever I think of it I get consumed with such despair over its sheer ugliness that I feel great waves of anguish rolling over me, and I want to cry… there was a woman I saw from Racine, Wisconsin… and this woman, Poppy, I’ll swear, when I gazed into her eyes she had dollar signs there, as if they’d been glazed on in twin shining symbols of avarice and venality and greed. (282-3)

On their way to Italy, the Kinsolvings stop at Toulon, France. “The port city of Toulon,” Peter informs the reader, “… is almost identical in size to Norfolk, Virginia, presenting to the eye a similar unsightly waterfront of jagged cranes and shipyards and an oily harbor and a general atmosphere of transient and maritime busyness. It is no place to take a vacation” (287). This industrial town comes to represent the America that Cass claims not to be running from. Nonetheless, one must note how Toulon is reminiscent of a Virginia town that has been overrun by commerce. Instead of the pastoral scenery that Cass is chasing, Toulon seems to be the meeting place of “several hundred Buick
dealers.” “This place is NOT the dream,” Cass is quick to assert, “I must approach P. calmly but firmly telling her that mans only salvation lies in Rome” (292). This salvation, the art that lies at the end of a search for the “dream,” cannot be found in Toulon, a money-driven economy of “busyness.” Cass, however, pauses to contemplate the way of life here. “I kept wondering if it is really true as I’ve heard it said, if a man at thirty has not through his own blood & sweat & toil seen the first glimmering light of success & achievement he never will. Suspect that there’s more than a little truth to that – especially in regards to the world outside of affairs & business – art that is – but again literally to Hell with it” (293). The world of art, so Cass at the moment believes, exists beyond the boundaries of capitalism. It is an attitude that will show itself reversed by the end. “I’m getting better,” Cass writes in preparation for departure, “& some day will be able to shore up my foundations if not for my own glory then for the sake of those gentler & sweeter & dearer who have already come after. So tomorrow or the next day I’ll tell Poppy that we are going to Italy where the earth is milk & honey...” (296).

**Italy: North and South**

Michael Kreyling’s article “Italy and the United States: The Politics and Poetics of the ‘Southern Problem’” discusses the similarities between the two countries that make Italy a very apt surrogate for the United States at this particular moment in history. “Parallels in Italian and U.S. literature and history suggest strong possibilities for further comparative study of the evolving ‘place’ of the South in national discourse” (287). “At
virtually the same moment [of Reconstruction in the U.S. South], Italy was undergoing a similar nationalization (‘Risorgimento’) of sectional differences along a north/south axis” (289). Kreyling gives a list of remarkable similarities between the two. The list, too long to include here in its entirety, includes many significant items for this discussion. One is particularly intriguing and is echoed in the novel. Kreyling writes that in Italy’s south “the primary organization of land for agricultural use was a large holding, usually owned by one family, and rented to peasants: latifundia.” He is correct to note how reminiscent this is of the American South in which “the primary organization of land for agricultural use was a large holding, usually owned by one family, and worked by slave labor: plantations” (285). This particular relationship, the comparison between the Italian southern peasant class and the slaves of the American South, does not go unnoticed by Cass either. Upon approaching the outskirts of the town of Sambuco and viewing the living conditions of the abused working class, Cass is immediately shocked in witnessing something all too familiar about the place. “It is niggers. The same thing, by God,” he exclaims, “It is the smell of a black sharecropper’s cabin in Sussex, Virginia. It is the bleeding stink of wretchedness” (416).

This is neither the first nor the last occurrence in the novel in which Italy comes to represent Cass’ fondness for, anxiety about, detachment from, or reminiscence of his native country. Before he ever makes it to Sambuco, however, Cass and his family attempt to make a home in the northern Italian city of Rome – which will come to represent the American North. During their seven months there, Cass temporarily tastes the same sober and settled life that he will eventually lead upon his return to Charleston,
South Carolina. It is a life that conforms itself to the consumer culture that he has
dreaded to this point. This comfortable existence, fully complimented with name-brand
mouthwash and shoe polish, is nevertheless viewed as a daily and ceaseless defeat.

He seemed destined forever to lose. When, for instance, by force of
determination, or out of desperation or whatever, he made himself play
safe… and in a dozen other ways became a good family man… removing
himself from the seductive world of the night and from erotic daydreams
and sour semi-suicidal moods, brushing his teeth twice a day and polishing
his shoes and cleansing his breath with Listerine – when he did all this
there were indeed manifest benefits and blessings, the most important one
being simply that he began to function at least biologically as a human.

(296)

Biologically, perhaps, but there is a certain individuality or identity that the methodical
twice-a-day ritual of Cass’ settled life has forced from the forefront. Not only does this
“baffle” and “enrage” Cass, as Peter relates, but despite his new lifestyle, the absence of
Cass’ sense of self carries with it his inability to produce any defining art. As Peter’s
narration continues, the other side of the coin is revealed.

Yet this state in itself had its drastic shortcomings. Chief among them was
the fact that the closer he approached this condition of palmy beatitude…
the closer, paradoxically, he saw himself coming to be a nice fellow with a
blurred grin, a kind of emotional eunuch in which that necessary part of
the self which saw the world with passion and recklessness, and which had to be flayed and exacerbated and even maddened to retain its vision, had been cut away. Nor was this theory, upon reflection even a romantic one: the simple truth of the matter was that he had become dull… he began for the first time in a year to work in earnest, but his work, he knew inescapably, was flat, stupid, sterile, with all the hollowness about it of the art school, the academy. (296-7)

This life of monotonous predictability, although more sober and healthy, is no life for Cass; and “with all of it he felt that, long before he reached any ripe old age, he might perish of health, good intentions, and dullness.” It is a life that in no way would have required him to flee from the conquered South, just as the un-extraordinary art he now produces is reminiscent of the art he produced as an art student in the North. Cass begins to wonder if he should simply adopt the values and lifestyle of a New Yorker. “Sometimes, he thought, sometimes I think I should have stayed in New York. I could have become an abstract expressionist… and I’d be a bleeding Eisenhower success. It wouldn’t take anything out of me, and I’d be chic as hell, and I’d make a mint…” (297). This is reminiscent of Jason Compson’s fantasies about the life he would’ve had if he could only have taken that bank job. And just as Jason detests the “dam New York jew” for taking advantage of Southerners and being constantly in search of a dollar, Cass spends much of the novel chastising Americans for the very lifestyle and materialism that he briefly contemplates while in Rome. Perhaps it is the lack of an American tourist contingent during the winter season in Rome that has led him to forget those qualities he
detests in them enough to even temporarily desire their acceptance. Still, Cass remains aware that with such a lifestyle, he is “bound to lose” and will presently return to his search for a self through a resistance to American capitalism. Styron, however, takes the opportunity to briefly suggest that many of those with non-capitalist ideologies tend to share in Cass’ “the grass is always greener” philosophy. Cass has at this point largely fallen out of contact with Americans, and some of his European friends are “a group of noisy young Communists who, each one, longed to go to America yet loved Cass because he loathed the place” (298). Life beyond affluent American economic realities has left those who remain outside with a yearning and an ambition to participate in such a consumer culture. Cass quickly thinks better of his brief contemplation of participating in the American dream, as he reprimands Poppy for inviting a New York couple home for dinner and cards. Nevertheless, the McCabes accept the invitation and serve to remind Cass what he despises about that culture. It is an evening that sends Cass spiraling back into drunkenness as he loses the last of their savings over poker and stumbles out into the arms of a prostitute who robs him of everything else. Poppy must come retrieve him from the soiled hotel room which had housed his indiscretions and promptly Cass determines to leave Rome. “One thing he knew,” Peter omnisciently states, “was that he must head south again, and so he did…” (314).

Rome, now proven an unsuccessful locale for Cass’ desired discovery of self, has become just another resting place in a stammer through Europe that has been marked by increasingly bleary and dangerous turns. He recalls these adventures, remarking also on a hostility and violence that is reminiscent of Jason’s. “So I travelled blindly down
across that continent,” a sober Cass would later tell Peter, “full of booze and blind as a bat, abusing my family and abusing myself – teetering on an edge between life and death that wasn’t much thicker than a hair, you might say, until I got to Sambuco. I thought I might pull out of it there for a while, but I was deluded” (55). Cass doesn’t spend much time in Sambuco before events will conspire to alert him to this delusion. The novel opens with a depiction of Sambuco taken from the pages of a travel guide for Italy.

“Sambuco, indeed, is no longer prosperous,” Nagel’s Italy reads, “although because of its geographical position it is undoubtedly better off than most Italian villages. Aloof upon its precipice, remote and beautifully difficult of access, it is a model of invulnerability and it is certainly one of the few towns in Italy which remain untouched by recent bombs and invasions” (4). Certainly this is how Cass’ view of the town is constructed. The ideal that he projects onto Sambuco bears the same characteristics – namely that it is “aloof,” “remote,” “difficult to access,” and most importantly a “model of invulnerability.” However, despite the impenetrability that has kept the mountain-side village “untouched,” Cass does not reside here long before he is witness to an event that, though not military, is an invasion nonetheless as the arrival of Mason Flagg and his entourage comes quickly on the heels of Cass’ own discovery of the “untouched” and virgin Sambuco.

**Sambuco: “A Bleeding Paradise”**

The south of Italy comes to represent that untouched and pastoral landscape that Cass feels will bring his salvation, but the family’s first residence is foolishly set in the
capitol city and metropolis of Rome. Although he has made it to Italy, Cass’ dream remains from here out of reach. So, leaving his wife and children in Rome, he continues on his search ever southward until he reaches Sambuco. Here he becomes drunk and destructive, landing him under arrest and in the custody of the local police. Cass gives the fake name of Domenico Scarlatti to the officers – a pseudonym that suggests that he is an American of Italian lineage. The officer scolds his prisoner for the behavior of a whole group of “Italo-Americans”:

It is the case with such people as you. It is your stock of people which has gone to America and made a fortune, only to come back to the land of your ancestry and flaunt your money and your uncouth ways. It is a great pity that we do not have Mussolini now. The Duce would enforce laws against the likes of you. Well, let me tell you something, Scarlatti. Here in Sambuco we will not tolerate your type of behavior, do you understand? (321-2)

The sergeant’s bitter chastisement speaks to a firm resistance to both outsiders and those who have abandoned their native country in a driving desire for the American dollar. However, Sambuco’s current situation is not what it once was, and the surly sergeant must acknowledge an existing inability to retaliate against such transgressors.

We do not like to arrest Americans. Not because we have any qualms about it, see? But only because you now are strong and we are weak, and your country brings – how would you say it? – pressure to bear. When the principles of the Duce are restored” – and here the dimmest facsimile of a
smile appeared on his porcine face – “all that might change. But at the present we do not relish arresting Americans.” He paused and looked down, drumming his fingers on the desk. “But we cannot tolerate your kind of behavior. And we will arrest you! It is emigrants like you, bearing an Italian name, who give Italy a bad smell all over the world.

(322)

What is present in this speech is an attitude with which Cass feels a connection. Sambuco, in everything and everyone that it is and was, wishes to resist American money and the Americanization that accompanies it. The citizens here yearn for a past existence represented by a strength sufficient enough to stand up to the pressures of a swiftly modernizing industrial capital and to maintain a way of life that was unique to the region. That time has passed or is passing, however, and the sergeant admits that, at the moment, Sambuco’s weakened position must acquiesce to the wishes of those who hold a position of power. These Americans, empowered by financial status, have begun to assert control over the region, even the laws by which the local population lives. Cass is familiar with such a plight and will become determined that Sambuco is that place for which he has been searching. Cass’ view of the American – either from the North or the New South – is the same as the sergeant’s view of the Italo-American who flaunts his riches and status in such a way as to make all Americans appear as one, a money-grubbing and dominating oppressor. But it is the hope that is witnessed in the sergeant’s “dimmest facsimile of a smile” that truly inspires Cass; it is the same hope that Southerners of recent generations held before the plight of futility had befallen them.
This romantic vision sends Cass back to his family as he urges his wife to once again pack up their belongings for yet another relocation. “My God,” he recalls, urging her, “it’s a bleeding paradise!” It might help to add parenthetically that if it is a paradise, it is certainly bleeding and on its way to death. “I’ve got to get some new paints, new brushes,” Cass continues, “I’ve got to stock up because I’m going to do a lot of work down there.” For the reader, however, even if Cass doesn’t immediately realize it, his excitement is hampered by the new way of the capital-driven world. Like Jason, his goals are contingent on a little start-up capital. “I’ll need some dough...” he continues, “Speaking of which, how about telling me where our little kitty has gone to?” (333).

Cass believes that he has discovered and rekindled his identity as a struggling artist and a resistant Southerner, but in order to challenge the system from within, Cass (like Jason) is bound to the very necessities he opposes. This particular contradiction becomes even more problematic throughout the novel, as the world of finance capital continues to close in around Cass. Much to his dismay, Cass has barely moved his family into the lower level of a luxurious boarding house when the spacious upper levels become occupied by an American movie producer. The relationship between this producer (Mason Flagg) and Cass is not one that is beneficial to the latter. When Peter arrives to Sambuco, Poppy’s frustration about her husband’s position comes to the surface. “But if you could just see how he’s dominated Cass,” she tells Peter, “and taken advantage of his condition and all” (40). The effect of this domination is the very thing that has haunted Cass in his sleep. It is the very reason why he had to leave the American South: the loss of individuality.
“Americanism” at the Door of Paradise

Peter’s arrival in Sambuco, and subsequent introduction to Cass, is the result of his presence being requested by the recently arrived Mason Flagg. By the time Peter’s dying car makes it up the mountainside in order to get to the town – a demonstration, again, of Sambuco’s suggested “impenetrability” – the town has already been essentially taken over by the American consumer culture that local officials had been attempting to fight off during Cass’ first visit. In fact, the whole village seems to have undergone a swift and all-encompassing change. The first impression Peter has is that the town has a beauty that is “theatrical and romantic,” but as he takes it all in, he drives directly onto the set of a film that Mason has brought a whole crew to shoot (56-7). Mason, in a bastardization of the reason Cass has sought out this Italian village, is also here to produce art. However, Mason and his Hollywood entourage are not producing the kind of art that Cass struggles throughout the novel to produce. Instead, the film seems more an excuse to waste money and exploit the pastoral southern Italy than anything else. Mason describes the process by which the crew had come to Sambuco to film this particular masterpiece (as capital remains in close contact with each step in the lamentable process):

I don’t know what the exact pitch is, financially, except there’s something about blocked-up lire, around a million dollars’ worth, that the company had to play with, and so they dug up this horrible old costume novel about Beatrice Cenci and then assembled this half-American, half-Italian cast, and then found that the wardrobe and properties strained the budget all out
of whack and so they decided to do it as a farce, in modern dress. I don’t know. Anyway they’ve been all over Italy messing around with the story and hiring writers and firing them, or they quit, because the whole thing finally became such a colossal mess that Kirschorn, the producer… told Alonzo to get the outfit out of his sight and just finish the goddam thing… Alonzo had been to Sambuco before and decided it would be a fine place to booze it up and look at the view while there were getting the abortion over with. (60)

Again, this scene is not what the mind conjures when one imagines an artist’s trip to Italy to produce something (anything) of artistic merit or substance. Even before filming has begun, Cass bears witness to the unloading of the laundry list of commodities that Mason has purchased for his associates. What Cass describes as “the damndest pile of boxes you ever saw” reveals itself, upon further investigation, to be a chronicling of the brand-name cavalcade that has colored each section of the film crew’s stay in Italy. The list is emblematic of the rampant consumer culture that has come to characterize America at the time and is becoming a global phenomenon. There were “cartons of Maxwell House and Campbell’s soup cans and catchup and Kleenex, this and that, anything you can name.” Cass also recalls seeing “Crisco, I believe it was, or maybe Fluffo – anyway, it was some kind of fancy American lard…” (396). The requirements necessary to maintain these Hollywood “artists” stands in stark contrast to those things that Cass finds as necessary to live.
Much to his dismay, the consumer culture that had successfully destroyed the American South has followed Cass to Sambuco. However, broke and hungry, Cass eventually comes to depend on Mason and everything that he represents to supply him with food, housing, and perhaps most importantly, medicine. During that first, fateful night in Sambuco, Cass had seen a woman who would also play a role in his need to return to the town. A peasant girl named Francesca, in being accused of theft, had interrupted Cass’ conversation with a detective. Cass fell instantly under the power of her beauty and offered to pay for the stolen merchandise and subsequent fine, unknowingly making use of his (albeit slimly) higher financial standing and asserting a position of power over her. Here, again, one can recall Jason’s perceived attack on his masculine identity when financial assistance had been offered. “Do you think I need any man’s help to stand on my feet?” (262). In his love for Francesca, and in another effort to assert such a high position as to lend aid, Cass will assume the responsibility of trying to save her father who is dying of tuberculosis. Cass ultimately desires to free himself from the clutches of Mason and American capitalism but he also feels an undeniable urge to aid Francesca and her father. “There is a paradox here,” Robert Phillips notes, “Cass has to remain tied to Mason in order to gain the financial means to save Michele… There is additional irony in that the medicine which saves Michele is a product of and made possible by the American influence Cass so disdains” (Phillips 194). Never mind, for now, that the medicine does not save Michele. What is important is that Cass is faced with an important decision. Cass wishes to save Michele because of his love for Francesca. He simultaneously seeks redemption for his past and for the Old South by
resisting the “benefits” of capitalism. Cass makes his decision to, for the meantime, cease his resistance against the new Americanism due to the lack of time Michele has left. In doing so, Cass becomes all the more dependent on the wrestling of resources from the bourgeoisie – a characteristic of the underclass in any capitalist society. This increased dependency places him further under the thumb of Mason; and the drinking which Cass has struggled to control throughout the novel only worsens as he must accept his place in the system – no matter how temporarily he plans to remain there – and operate under the guidelines that the bourgeois Mason determines for him. It leads to a relationship that exemplifies the dependence of the laboring class on the class that owns and controls capital. Mason purchases the medicine and supplies the liquor that Cass needs to stomach his strengthened ties to Mason. In return, Cass becomes a prisoner to Mason’s wishes.

Through this developing “closeness,” however, Cass begins to truly discover something in Mason that lies buried behind all the pleasantries and free liquor and celebrity acquaintances that had initially enticed him. Through the literally blurry vision resulting from Mason’s booze, Cass begins to notice a symptom of the expanding materialism that America has come to embody.

In this haze I was getting into, all these things added up to something, and that something didn’t seem to be much more than the man I had come to Europe to escape, the man in all those car advertisements – you know, the guy waving there – he looks so beautiful and educated and everything, and he’s got it made, Penn State and a blonde there, and a smile as big as a

The explosion of the advertisement industry in America, its car ads and its roadside placards, is emblematic of the present state of art. It has been commodified. And this realization, as Mason comes to be the poster boy for that destruction of pure creativity, the “death of art” that Mason always claims has somehow made its way to the Italian coast and Sambuco. Mason had once told his childhood friend that “Art is dead, Peter… Well, if not dead yet, then put it this way – the dear old Muse is slowly dying, and in a couple more decades we’ll watch her as she gasps her last” (145). There is only one avenue left for art, Mason continues, “In art as in life, Peter, sex is the only area left where men can find full expression of their individuality, full freedom.” Mason is aware of the power of art, despite the fact that he no longer allows for its survival. It is a place “where men can cast off the constrictions and conventions of society and regain their identity as humans” (151). While Cass shares Mason’s views about the possibility for art to free an individual from his surroundings, he detests Mason’s suggestion that sex is the sole remaining avenue for that type of freedom. In return for food, shelter and procuring the medicine that Michele needs, Mason requires that Cass paint for him a pornographic picture, which both understand to be a contamination of Cass’ artistry. Cass gives in, but on the way to the military exchange to obtain the drug, he demands that Mason give the painting back as he knows that the existence of the painting offers evidence to his exploitation by Mason.
Cass begins to violently abhor Mason Flagg. However, it is not merely the destruction of art that Cass associates with Mason. It is a hatred that truly begins with a brief history of Peter’s relationship with the Flaggs that will paint a picture of Mason as the very usurping presence against which the South had for generations resisted. Peter introduces Mason’s family by saying that “The Flaggs were the only people I ever knew who were millionaires. Mason’s father was a New Yorker, an investor who had made some sort of fabulous killing in the distributing end of the movie industry… and had come down to the fashionable part of Gloucester County to set himself up as a Virginia gentleman” (75). In this way, Mason’s family come to perfectly represent the flow of Northern wealth into the South, and with them came a culture that sought to exploit the “fashionable” aspects of Southernness without any true understanding of how deeply rooted in history that region had always been. Cass would later ponder those qualities that make Mason such a representative of this kind of world.

Here was some swine, some blackguard, some devil. But what made him tick? What made him do the things he did? What was his history? … All the time I spent with Mason, I felt I never know him, never could put my hands on him… here was a creature so strange, so new – so remote from the depths of your own experience, your own life, your own past… For him there was no history, or if there was, it began on the day he was born. Before that there was nothing, and out of that nothing sprang this creature… And it was impossible to understand a creature like that… (446)
With no sense of history, a characteristic of life under the reign of capitalism (to which this discussion will return in the next chapter), Mason’s exploitation of those people and places with rich, and defining histories becomes all the more appalling to Cass. It is in this vein that many critics like Jane Flanders associate Mason’s behavior and representation through the novel with the ways in which the North behaved toward the South.

Mason Flagg brings in another dimension to Styron’s view of the contemporary South. He is an “ugly American,” so identified by his connections with Madison Avenue and Hollywood, his hedonism, wastefulness, and dishonesty. But he is a southerner too, an adoptive one, having moved to Virginia after his millionaire parents bought a colonial estate, placed their son in a select private school, and set themselves up in society. In this way Flagg represents the corruption of the South by alien sophistication and materialism which, in the form of rapid urbanization and commercialism, threaten to undermine the values of the plain people and what remains of an already weakened social tradition. (113)

In this way, Mason, according to many critics “stands for everything meretricious in American society which Cass has tried to escape” (Flanders, 112). Robert Phillips spells it out further. “I suggest,” he writes, “that when Cass strikes out against Flagg, he is also striking out against the flag – the American flag” (Phillips 195). But it is Mason’s father that served to “corrupt” the South in this way; and as has already been shown, this
“corruption” is largely complete. Cass’ task will be to search for a something like a new Old South, then, a place where he can (re)connect and (re)locate the struggle against these forces where it is not too late. And to that end, Mason’s task, as a member of the next generation of American capitalists, has become to find new territory to convert with the economic system (Foster 59).

Abstraction and the Blending of Narratives

This conversion of the American South and now of southern Italy has been a source of horrific visions for Cass. These visions are not limited to his delirious visions of golden spiders or bleeding paradises, but include crippling nightmares that continue to haunt him in his waking hours. In Paris, one particular nightmare had hinted both at Cass’ greatest fear and his most desperate wish. The first such specter speaks to his anxiety over the plight of the Southerner. In it, Cass is being taken by his uncle (who had raised him following the death of his parents) to be incarcerated in a North Carolina state prison. He continually asserts that he does not know what crime he has committed, but he expresses an understanding that he “had been sentenced not to death or to life imprisonment but to this indefinite term which might be several hours or might be decades. Or centuries.” In this dream, he is surrounded by all of the other prisoners of the South, and Cass’ individual “voice got all lost in the shouts and the cursing of the other prisoners.” He envisions himself surrounded by “not even the companionate misery, but only the loathing and the hatred, of my fellow-damned” (273). Cass’ dream
denotes the imprisonment, the damnation to an indefinite term of confinement that is the fate of the Southern identity. Each voice becomes lost in a sea of abstraction and homogeneity. This is the fate he seeks to avoid, to fight against. It is why he left America, and it is why he incessantly staggers through European cities, ever venturing south in an effort to regain what’s been lost. Resulting from the despair that such visions have afforded him, Cass contemplates killing himself and his family in an effort to save them from the world that was barreling toward certain doom. One thinks here of Quentin Compson’s similarly-inspired suicide. But unlike Quentin, Cass resists the urge and is saved by another vision.

Then, before I knew it, something strange seemed to come to me: it seemed as if I were reliving that nightmare again, only this time it was not the part that was so soul-ruining… but the other part, the good part, the heart-breaking and lovely part that had been hidden to me before, and it all seemed to be beckoning me toward it. And I saw some southern land with olive trees and orange blossoms… this smell of perfume and pines and orange blossoms and girls, all mixed up in one sweet blissful fragrance of peace and repose and joy. And over all of it, somehow, vague and indistinct but possessing the whole scene: a girl’s sweet voice calling, some southern Lorelei calling me and beckoning me on… I’d hear the voice of the girl again, and I knew I had to go there. (276-7)

Cass is being beckoned by his concept of the Old South, the place of magnolias and ocean winds that Peter had remembered. He has seen the fate of the Southerner who,
locked in a prison with his “fellow-damned” loses every last remnant of individuality down to his singular voice. However, Cass’ second vision denotes how trapped that same sense of individuality is in the “place” of the American South. The terrain that itself calls to him is at once “soul-ruining” and “vague and indistinct” – which is to say, abstract –, but also possessing “peace and repose and joy”.

This landscape, of pines and orange blossoms, is very much like Peter’s recollection of the American South in that it is tangible by smell, sight, and taste. However, it must here be addressed that there is a danger in assuming that the Compsons’ Mississippi, the Warwick’s Virginia, and the Kinsolving’s North Carolina are a part of some vast and homogenous “South,” or that the lessons Peter had been taught as a youth should be the same as those on which Cass was raised. This is an issue with Styron’s novel as the North Carolina landscape of Cass’ childhood history is barely described. Louis Rubin, Jr., in suggesting that this is the “the major structural defect” of the novel, seeks to address this difficulty by analyzing the unusual narrative structure of the novel (“Notes” 95). In fact, what many critics have noted as a crippling weakness of the text is the bizarre blending of first and third-person narration that begins to manifest itself in the second half of the Set This House on Fire. Peter is the novel’s chief narrator and throughout the first half of the novel refers to himself and his experiences with the first-person “I” and the experiences of others with third-person pronouns. This is an appropriate format as the events detailed in the first half of the novel are entirely depicted through Peter’s personal lens. However, as the second half transitions into Cass’ story and version of the events, this trouble in narration develops. Here exists a detailed
retelling of Cass’ adventures in Europe and his understanding of the tragic events that take place in Sambuco, Italy. However, even in this second section, Peter remains the narrator. The suggestion is that he is relating what has been told to him by Cass during a visit to Charleston, South Carolina (where Cass lives in the present tense of the story). However, Peter’s narration seems strangely omniscient as he frequently details thoughts that are going on in Cass’ head. Some of this difficulty is assuaged by the understanding that Cass has given Peter his diary from the trip. Occasionally full chapters are excerpted from this journal and therefore bear Cass’ first-person “I”. However there are other instances in which the novel shifts suddenly and seemingly without cause between Peter’s third-person and Cass’ first person and back again.

In a 1960 letter to Publisher’s Weekly, Styron addresses this peculiarity.

I had never seen the welding of two points of view attempted in a work of fiction before: I had never seen a narrator who, beginning in the first person, could, convincingly, end up in the third person, the story so merging and mingling that one might accept without hesitation the fact that the narrator himself knew the uttermost nuances of another man’s thought; and it was the fight to achieve this new dimension – involving over three and a half years of more tearing apart and putting back together than I care to think about – which gives the book whatever power and tension it has. (Casciato 43-4)

The question remains, however, how could one accept or expect that Peter “himself knew the uttermost nuances of another man’s thought”? It is here where Rubin, Jr. claims to
have spotted “the major structural defect of *Set This House on Fire.*” He sees “the principal questions it proposes is why Cass was for so long in bondage, unable to paint and unable to receive and return the love of his wife and children” (“Notes” 95). Rubin, like many critics, determines that Cass views his “creative limitations” as caused by outside forces. He “look[s] outside of himself, to the society, the people, the institutions surrounding him,” and in doing so, centers his frustration upon Mason Flagg. Insofar as Cass must, then, feel the materialism he associates with Mason in *his* hometown in North Carolina, Rubin pinpoints what he regards as a structural flaw. “For it was Peter, not Cass, who grew up with Mason Flagg,” he writes; and furthermore points out that the earliest stories in the novel about Cass take place in Paris after he had already begun his search for a Flagg-free environment (“Notes” 94-96). The question at which he arrives is this: “What is Cass Kinsolving’s relationship to Peter Leverett?” His italicized answer: “They are one and the same person. It is Peter Leverett’s past history, not Cass’, that explains why Cass cannot paint. Peter Leverett, in other words, becomes Cass Kinsolving” (“Notes” 97).

This transformation might be better characterized as Peter and Cass becoming *indistinguishable* from each other. The moment when Cass demands that Mason return the pornographic painting is crucial for understanding why this should be the preferred term.

Mason said now: “*Really,* why do you want it back so bad, dollbaby? If you’d just give me one honestly logical reason I’d –” But it was his turn to
remain silent, thinking: Because of the bleeding abyss. Because I feel how close I am now. Because even in futility’s supremest futility I cannot let my last and only creation be a perineum, a moist membrane and a bunch of pulsing veins, in short, a screw... (406)

Here, with the blending of first and third-person narration, one can see how Peter and Cass have effectively become indistinguishable. Under the power of the ruling-class Mason, both Peter and Cass have become dominated to such a degree that they simply become blended. In Capital, Volume 1, Karl Marx discusses the process by which the laborers under a Capitalist system lose their individuality. “They can no longer be distinguished,” Marx claims, in discussing the different types of labor, “but are all together reduced to the same kind of labour, human labor in the abstract” (Marx 128). This homogenization of varying forms of labor and of individual laborers becomes extended to the entirety of the laboring class; and it is in this light that a further discussion of the blending of narrators is required. Cass and Peter, as has been previously mentioned, share nothing – outside their being raised in the South – other than an association with Mason, representative of the capital. It is through this association that they begin to become confused with each other.

What is also important about this last block quotation is how during an occasion where their narrations become blurred (and their individual identities become lost) Cass feels how close he is to the “bleeding abyss”. The last paragraph of chapter VIII ends with Cass discussing the events that led up to Mason’s murder.
I guess I’ve died a thousand deaths since I killed him. But never as long
as I live will I forget standing down there in the courtyard, with that bottle
like a big warm cow turd in my hand, and him hanging over the
balustrade, so lean and so American, with the hungry look of a man who
knew he could own you, if you’d only let him. (402)

This acknowledgement marks the beginning of the very subtle blurring of the narration
that adds such an important dimension for the novel. As Gavin Colognes-Brookes points
out, “where Cass appears to become the dominant narrator, the key is that Cass’ narration
is always filtered through Peter” (Colognes-Brookes 450). But in this moment of
globalized capitalism, Peter and Cass are effectively one. Peter recalls watching in horror
as Mason had once placed a drunken Cass in front of his Hollywood entourage and
demanded that he entertain them with a song. “Mason had Cass, had him securely in
hand, just as in an entirely different but no less impregnable way – up until this night at
least – he had had me” (190). Once they’ve come completely under Mason’s control,
they share a history in that they have lost their history; it doesn’t matter anymore. This is
the “abyss” that Cass has been staring into: is the abyss of losing his individuality and
humanity altogether and becoming nothing more than an abstraction.

It is the abyss of the “dehumanizing abstraction” the Agrarians had warned
against; the abyss where all the separate voices of the “fellow-damned” get lost. Cass’
Attempts to avoid this “dehumanizing abstraction” and save the world of Sambuco (the
surrogate for the Old South) rest in attempting to manipulate the world of capitalism.

Where Jason had attempted to wrestle his sense of self back by way of manipulating the
stock market with “inside” information, Cass seeks to utilize Mason’s power to secure medicine for Michele (and in saving the man, save the laborer and the dying region).

And also like Jason, the further Cass becomes involved in this scheme, the worse his own condition becomes. Jason Compson may never have himself understood the true hopelessness of these actions. Cass, on the other hand, does. The benefits do not trickle down to Michele in time, and Mason’s attempts to rape Francesca lead to her eventual rape and murder at the hands of her own oppressed countryman. It is at this moment that Cass realizes he has irrecoverably fallen into that abyss. The futile situation of the American South has reached him here in the Italy that had been for him the last bastion of defense and resistance. His reaction is frantic and violent as it sends him into a blind rage that results in the bludgeoning to death of Mason, throwing his body off a cliff in a final act of furious desperation. Cass is never convicted of this crime, however. He is saved by his friend Luigi, a detective in Sambuco who reports that Mason had killed himself. Luigi recalls the day he lied so that Cass would not be charged with murder. It was because he “understood something,” he says.

That understanding was that this existence itself is an imprisonment… we are serving our sentences in solitary confinement, unable to speak. All of us. Once we were able to talk with our Jailer, but now ever He has gone away, leaving us alone with the knowledge of insufferable loss… I do not know why this happened, but it has happened, that is our condition. In the meantime we do what we can. Some day perhaps the jails will be empty.
Luigi’s use of the capital letters for “Jailer” and “He” are significant. They do not refer to any deity. They have literally and figuratively been *capitalized*. The “Jailer” is capital itself, trapping its nameless prisoners to indefinite terms. Luigi instructs Cass to accept the futility of trying to break free from this prison, this “condition”. Like the Southerners that remained, and like everyone who has accepted their abstraction, Luigi hopes that someday they will be let free. Luigi urges that he and Cass simply “do what we can” in the meantime.

After Cass hears these words, he silently gathers his family and disappears. He will not be heard from again until Peter sees a cartoon of his in a newspaper. When Peter makes it to Charleston, South Carolina to visit him, Cass offers his reasoning for coming back to the South to live under the thumb of the American capitalism he had fought against. His language is rich with settling and acceptance. His words also hold out some vague and distant hope of a temporariness of this “condition”.

But to be truthful, you see, I can only tell you this: that as for being and nothingness, the one thing I did know was that to choose between them was simply to choose being, not for the sake of being, or even the love of being, much less the desire to be forever – but in the hope of being what I could be for a time. This would be an ecstasy. God knows, it would. As for the rest, I had come back. And that for a while would do, that would suffice. (500-1)
Conclusion

“No matter what period his narratives represent, his fictional worlds are saturated with the traces of past times, and he seems phenomenally attuned to accretion, the process by which the past – as a collection of conflicts and outcomes, choices and (more often) compulsive actions – produces the present. But the fame accorded this aspect of his work tends to obscure how these fictions record a past and present already sedimenting into a future. Many of Faulkner’s texts explore early stages in phenomena considered endemic to our contemporary era, particularly the way in which the mobility of capital transforms local worlds.” – Leigh Anne Duck (24)

In order to evaluate the theoretical shift from The Sound and the Fury to Set This House on Fire, one might first consider whether Cass’ return to the American South should be read as “redemption” or “defeat”. The above quote from Leigh Anne Duck gives an appropriate introduction to this question as the answer lies in “the way in which the mobility of capital transforms local worlds” (Duck 24). After both sides of the question have been analyzed, and Duck’s “transformation” has been discussed, this paper will conclude by examining whether the possibility for critique is even available in this transformed world. Statements by the Agrarians referred to in the first chapter were certainly founded in a critique of industrialism. It is a critique echoed by Jason and by
Cass as they seek to define themselves through this opposition. However, by the end of Styron’s novel, Cass has shed this identity. Has he also given up on this critique; and if so, why? These curiosities will be examined in this conclusion. But first, to the initial question.

Can Cass be Criticized?

Many critics read Cass’ return to South Carolina as a redemption. As will be presently discussed, they see the events in *Set This House on Fire* as an optimistic portrayal of the future of the Southern man. John L. Cobbs, however, disagrees. He believes that “the image of Cass happily fishing in South Carolina seems to deny the importance of his struggle; it is certainly not a resolution of it.” In his view Cass’ decision simply to settle, to accept his “imprisonment,” and even to find it to be “an ecstasy” comes as a disappointment. “This is unfortunate, because the power of *Set This House on Fire*,” continues Cobbs, “lies in the picture of Cass, like some self-destructive Don Quixote, pitching himself grandly against some very dreadful windmills, even if he is a fool to do so” (20). This is an attitude that Cass himself had once embraced. He tells Peter that he “felt like one of those gallant cowboys who, pinned to the edge of an abyss by Indians, must turn around to face a storm of arrows or plunge horse and all into the horrendous gully” (318). The quotation indicates Cass’ willingness to identify with an American myth (the idea of the American cowboy, with its ideal tie to the land, is not unlike that of the Southerner), however, Cass’ association with the cowboy displays his
confusion about what the Southern myth symbolizes. It is the Indian with whom Cass should feel a stronger connection, being pushed off their land by an insurmountable foe. Nonetheless, by the end of the novel, it appears that he has chosen to plunge. The fight has lost its gallantry, and the horrendous gully has become in Cass’ mind a fishing boat docked somewhere on the Charleston coast. One wonders what accounts for this transformation; but as to this, Cass can give only little insight.

Now I suppose I should tell you that through some sort of suffering I had reached grace, and how at that moment I knew it, but this would not be true, because at that moment I didn’t really know what I had reached or found. I wish I could tell you that I had found some belief, some rock… that here madness might become reason, and grief joy, and no yes. And even death itself death on longer, but a resurrection. But to be truthful, you see, I can only tell you this: that as for being and nothingness, the one thing I did know was that to choose between them was simply to choose being… in the hope of being what I could be for a time. This would be an ecstasy. (500-1).

Cobbs has difficulty in taking a positive message from these lines. In this speech, Cass appears to have adopted Luigi’s understanding of the world “that this existence itself in an imprisonment” (497). This is the imprisonment that comes from the contradiction mentioned in the first chapter – that to identify with a resistance to an idea (in this case, industrial capitalism) is to be forever bound to that idea. However, one remembers Cass
continuing his fight despite an awareness of his chances. Knowing how close he was to “the bleeding abyss,” Cass was determined to produce something, to give himself an identity “even in futility’s supremest futility” through his art (406). The surrender of this ideal – the shift from Cass’ “gallant cowboy” to Lytle’s “abstract self” – is the source of Cobb’s disappointment.

Jane Flanders, on the other hand, insists that the novel “affirms the power of a hero to lift the curse, exorcise the devil and master himself – and so in doing, it ventures an optimistic prediction for the future of southern society” (115). This is a troubling claim for the reading of the novel presented in the previous chapter. If the devil and master himself is industrial capitalism (Flanders calls it “the encroachments of alien commercialism and vulgarity into the South”) then it is unclear if and how Cass has managed such an exorcism (Flanders 112). “Cass’ defeat of Flagg,” she argues, “asserts the power of the native southerner… Perhaps, it is implied, the South can resist the commercial despoliation and moral shabbiness of the mid-twentieth century…” (Flanders 113). However, it does seem that Cass has given up that resistance, as he turns his art into a commodity. Rubin, Jr. overlooks this fact as well, stating that upon his return, Cass in finally able “to paint the pictures he wanted to paint” (“Artist” 177). This is, however, simply not the case. Cass himself admits that “these cartoons are gravy and not my actual métier.” Furthermore, the rationale he gives for producing them does not suggest anything like a resistance to commercialism. Rather, Cass’ admission that he “get[s] 35 bucks a piece & sometimes more, which as they say is not sparrow food” sounds undeniably like an adoption of capitalist principles (8). Rubin, Jr.’s dismissal of
this textual evidence makes his analysis difficult to accept. Like Flanders, he views Cass’
decision to return to the American South as “an examination of the validity of certain
precepts by which people live: an examination conducted on southern terms” (“Notes”
101). To read Cass’ eventual sobriety and life as comic-strip artist as a redemption is one
thing; but to read this choice as some kind of redemption for the South is wholly another.

Southern to Postsouthern

Tara McLellan argues that “William Styron’s second novel, Set This House on
Fire… should be critically accepted as a postsouthern novel” that “clearly addresses new
ways of looking at the South, both from a transnational perspective and as a rapidly
changing region due to the influence of capitalism” (143). One of the ways in which
Styron’s novel plays with the idea of the postsouthern is that as a phenomenon that
presupposes the turbulences that make up the Southern novel, the postsouthern must
account for the very loss of a “sense of place” that marks the end of the modernist,
Southern novel. Robert Jacobs and Louis Rubin, Jr. had written in 1961 that

The kind of community that was [Faulkner’s] Yoknapatawpha County,
created by a known and felt history, marked off into distinct, recognizable
parts, each with its proper function and its proper relationship to the
others, is gone. Towns have become cities, cities have become huge
metropolises… Now the fixed center is gone, and the younger Southern
writers, as Walter Sullivan declares, must look for something else to take its place. (Jacobs 24-5).

Styron, being one of those “younger Southern writers,” was faced with the task of finding something to “take the place” of place, as the concept central to the definition of Southerness. It is with this in mind that one recalls Kreyling’s article concerning Italy as an appropriate metaphor for the American South. Styron certainly uses it this way, as an attempted substitute for the Southern “sense of place” that Cass is seeking. It is through the use of Italy as a surrogate modernist South that Styron is able to juxtapose the presence of modernism and postmodernism within the same present tense and function as a perfect display of the transition between the two.

So, to return to a working definition of the “postsouthern,” theorists are charged with the task of filling the void of a Southern “place” after late capitalism had removed it from the equation. The “postsouthern” novel must serve to remedy this issue if it strives to claim any ties to Southern literature. Michael Kreyling’s discussion of the postsouthern is an attempt to realize this association. He does so by utilizing the concept of postmodern parody – “the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style” (Jameson 17). A postsouthern novel, Kreyling writes, “is built on parody; its relation to its South runs through literary representation…These coded representations of the South, always already there, occupy cultural space where the ‘real South’ is thought to be” (Inventing 159). Scott Romine adds that “because parody takes as its primary object not a thing but a style or system of representations, the postsouthern writer has… no place,
no South, there to imitate, only previous imitations of place there to parody” (40). The postsouthern novelist, then, is limited in his representations of the South to previous such depictions. “History still exists,” Kreyling adds, “but we now acknowledge that we know it through a system of representations rather than in an unmediated, direct way” (Inventing 155). This may be one reason why Cass has very little of his own history to relate. Readers must instead rely on someone else’s depictions of the South, someone else’s history. This leads Bone to ask “whether postsouthern literature can ever refer to, let alone try to represent, the ‘real South’” (44). All of what Bone calls this “ingenious intertextuality” is established in an effort to allow for the existence of the postsouthern that is in some way distinct from (or at least a subcategory of) the postmodern. All of this is necessary because the South, as has been discussed, has ceased to exist in its pre-postmodern state. With attention to Lyotard, Romine recalls that “capitalism inherently possesses the power to derealize familiar objects, social roles, and institutions to such a degree that the so-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery, as an occasion for suffering rather than satisfaction” (41). As a result, there is a serious doubt as to whether the concepts of “southern” and “place” can be at the postmodern/postsouthern moment utilized as a referent upon which to establish any concept of the Southern identity, new or old.

“Faulkner,” Jameson writes “… inherited a social and historical raw material, a popular memory” (405). Lewis Simpson comments on the ways in which Faulkner’s closeness to the development of the Southern concept of self allows him to write a different Southern novel than the likes of Styron.
Those who had known the [Civil] War, the Surrender, and Reconstruction at first hand were followed by those who had known these who had experienced these events. Writers, like Tate, in other words, possessed a close contact with both an individual and a collective southern memory. But in the third and fourth generations after the war the resource of memory began to dissipate. (21)

It is not only this proximity that allows Faulkner to write of the Southern condition, but also his existence during the era of modernism. The dawning of the postmodern moment will not only arrive two generations after Faulkner, but will also be accompanied by an erasure of history.

Modern to Postmodern

Jameson, throughout his analysis detailing the transition from the modern to the postmodern, comments on certain works of art that are an “expression of the great modernist thematic of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation” which exist as a “virtually programmatic emblem of what used to be called the age of anxiety.” Munch’s *The Scream*, an example of this type of art can “be read as an embodiment not merely of the expression of that kind of affect but, even more, as a virtual deconstruction of the very aesthetic of expression itself, which seems to have dominated much of what we call high modernism but to have vanished away … in the world of the postmodern” (11). A Southern identity (of resistance, of isolation, of
mythologized historical roots) – because it depends on expression, on affect – is therefore a purely “modern” condition. Therefore, Cass’ struggle is an attempt to exist in the modernist sense at the dawning of a totalizing postmodern era. It is the fate of the modernist (isolated and regional) identity to fade and fail at the moment of globalized and late capital. Bone states that “for Jameson, late capitalism’s hegemonic expansion into previously residual or resistant loci (including natural and agricultural spaces) is a defining feature of postmodernity” (48).

The Southern novels of the late modern period, essentially the time-span from early Faulkner to Styron, display the very struggle of fighting off this globalizing effect and facing the realities that accompany this transition. They are largely the realities of loss – of some thing or things lost – hence the innumerable articles which discuss the presence of loss in Faulkner’s and other modernist novels. And for the purposes of the argument presented here, that essential missing thing is the essence of the self – the isolated and individual self that identifies with a specific place. And thus we have arrived at the very heart of Set This House on Fire and the condition of Cass Kinsolving. Cass’ story is one of recognition of the futility that Jason could not see. The evolution of Cass’ story is one from anxiety to comfort, from struggling to settling, from modernist to postmodernist:

Concepts such as anxiety and alienation… are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern… Postmodernism presumably signals the end of this dilemma, which it replaces with a new one. The end of the bourgeois
ego, or monad, no doubt brings with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ago – what I have been calling the waning of affect. But it means the end of much more – the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke (as symbolized by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction. (Jameson 14-15)

And could there be a better symbol for the end of Cass’ desire for a manifestation of his “individual brush stroke” than the decision to alter (and commodify) his “art” into a form more fitting for mechanical reproduction and distribution in newspapers? Cass’ new, comic-strip art serves a different purpose than the “high modern” art (as Jameson would call it) that he had sought to produce – in fact, was anxious to produce – during the years leading up to his return to the American South. This is due to his acceptance of this particular moment in history – that he can no longer exist in the same individual sense that he had been seeking. The “waning of affect” in Cass is tied to this loss. He is no longer imprisoned by his anxiety because no emotion (anxiety or other) can any longer be his anxiety. “As for expression and feelings or emotions,” Jameson writes, “the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older anomie of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling” (15).
The Loss of Anxiety, The Emergence of Euphoria

Cass’ epiphany – his acceptance of existence of a fully changed world and the futility of fighting against it – comes after the realization that neither Mason’s nor Francesca’s nor Michele’s death has brought about the betterment of his condition. Cass has not found himself so much as realized that his former ideas of a self cannot be found. That sense of self, he begins to realize, has been lost in the same way that the Old South has been lost: neither can be returned to their passed existence.

I thought of Francesca and Michele, and all that I had lost, and the grief came back in a wave, then it went away. I thought of Mason, too, but nothing happened. I was past all rage now, and grief… Then you know, something as I sat there – something about the dawn made me think of America and how the light would come up slowly over the eastern coast… all of a sudden I realized that the anxiety and the anguish – most of it, anyway – had passed. And I kept thinking of the new sun coming up over the coast of Virginia and the Carolinas, and how it must have looked from those galleons, centuries ago, when after black night dawn broke like a trumpet blast, and there it was, immense and green and glistening against the crashing seas. (499-500)

Cass, realizing his fight is over and lost, can now look back to a time of Southern resistance not longingly, but with reassurance. However, Cass now sees the American South of the past as a successful stronghold against the crashing seas. He views it as
though it had been the very “trumpet blast” that Peter’s father had yearned for, “ferocious and tragic, like what happened to Jericho.” The South that Cass describes here is an amalgamation of recycled images and wishful thinking. Somehow, in Cass’ view, the South is the place of Bible stories from thousands of years ago, some invented war from hundreds of years ago (perhaps a confusion of the American Revolution but seen as somehow more distant), and either an invented ideal of the South standing firm against capitalist interference or a hope for some future resistance. However this vision came to be, it serves to deliver Cass from the depths of his despair. Cass’ anxiety, as Jameson notes, has given way to a new, postmodern definition of emotion. For Jameson’s theory does allow for Cass, even after he shrugs off his modernist life, to have some feelings, sensations or what he calls “intensities” after Lyotard. The feelings of the postmodern period, in their dissociation from the individual, “are now free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria,” Jameson continues (16). This “euphoria” is the other side of the “loss of anxiety” coin. Cass’ new picture of the South provides him with this sense of euphoria.

For Jameson, the loss of individuality, emotions, anxiety, etc. (the waning of affect) results from a loss of a sense of temporality. During modernism, he argues, individual experience was measured by “categories of time” – hence the Agrarian’s desire to identify with and reclaim a moment in their regional history. Postmodernism is characterized by a lack of connection to any historical reality. Cass, therefore, cannot view the past with any chronology. To the postmodern individual (or “subject”), history becomes a “vast collection of images” or “simulacra” (“identical cop[ies] for which no
original[s] ha[ve] ever existed); and “the past is thereby itself modified.” The postmodern moment “cannibalizes” all the images “of the past and combines them in overstimulating ensembles” (18-19). The result can be seen in Cass’ desire “to go back there” where “to go back” no longer means to return in any retrieving or historical context (as the Agrarians had meant it) but a physical return rooted in something like a misplaced nostalgia. However, Jameson continues, “Nostalgia does not strike one as an altogether satisfactory word for such fascination (particularly when one thinks of the pain of a properly modernist nostalgia with a past beyond all but aesthetic retrieval)” (19).

Cass sees the South not as it was during his childhood (which caused him to leave in the first place) but as a collection of images of not only the American South but also of Jericho and of trumpets that speak to a triumph, a standing tall against “the crashing seas.”

This overwhelming collection of images exists in the present as simulacra, and can exist in no other time. Without any real historical connection, the subject can only experience a present that is an isolated and constant present which “comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect, here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity” (Jameson 28). This intoxication in Set This House on Fire is what serves to replace Cass’ dependence on alcohol and violence (which were manifestations of his anxiety and crisis of self). What was before called Cass’ “settling” can now be seen through Jameson as Cass’ “euphoria” that is at the postmodern moment “displacing the older affects of
anxiety and alienation” (Jameson 29). His choice of “being over nothingness” was a choice between the postmodern and modern existence. For at this moment, the modern existence cannot be located or lived. It has ceased to “be” and is therefore nothing. The only option for “being” is existing in this ever-present present. There can be no resistance. There can be no regional history or any regional identity that would be tied to one. Cass is no longer a Southerner, therefore. His choice to simply “be” signifies that loss. Truly, Cass’ struggle throughout the novel is an attempt to identify himself by way of an identification that is no longer available.

Can Anything Be Criticized Anymore?

At this moment when all hope of “otherness” is lost, one must wonder if there is any longer a capacity for critique in the world of global capital. As Jameson’s theory has stated, there exists no reality beyond the present. Therefore, without the history or the memory of a different time, the subject is imprisoned and overwhelmed by the present. If criticism demands a view from the outside, and no true outside any longer exists, has the capacity for critique faded with individual self? Jameson’s theory allows for no such capacity.

… the attempt to conceptualize [postmodernism] in terms of moral or moralizing judgments must finally be identified as a category mistake. All of which becomes more obvious when we interrogate the position of the cultural critic and moralist; the latter, along with the rest of us, is now so
deeply immersed in postmodernist space, so deeply suffused and infected by its new cultural categories that the luxury of the old-fashioned ideological critique, the indignant moral denunciation of the other, becomes unavailable. (Jameson 46)

The possibility of Agrarianism has fallen by the wayside, a casualty and victim of the battle that it lost. Capitalism is now, as it was feared to be becoming, all encompassing. There is no outside; and as a result, no “critical distance,” Jameson writes (48). The realization of this – “that this existence itself in an imprisonment” – is what causes Cass to give in and move back to what is geographically the South even if it is not the Southern “place” it once was. Not only can he no longer fight; Cass cannot even critique the way of the postmodern world. Better to “get 35 bucks a piece & sometimes more” for your cartoons than attempt in vain an artwork that grasps at some kind of individual identity. The art that Cass sought to create throughout exemplifies those forms of “cultural resistance” that “are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it” (Jameson 49). The postmodern moment is exactly as Luigi had said: a prison. No true vision of history can display any reality that was anterior to it, and no shockingly contrasting future can be envisioned by those within it.
Works Cited:

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**Chapter II**


**Conclusion**


