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The Psychological Grotesque in Modern American Literature

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of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Liberal Studies*

by

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The History of the Grotesque: An Introduction

The study of modern American literature is necessarily a study of the rise of the grotesque.¹ Hints of the grotesque in American writing can be seen among the earliest recordings of the American experience by William Bradford and Mary Rowlandson, showing the sense of alienation felt by early settlers in a land they found to be far different than expected (Balkun 824).² This inclusion of the grotesque in American literature continues through the romances of Hawthorne and the gothic tales of Poe, but during the modern era in American literature, authors begin to utilize a distinct form of psychological grotesque, articulated in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, that serves to represent the unresolvable conflicts and discrepancies presented by both the modern era in general and the American experience in particular.³ Some modern authors such as William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor are frequently associated with forms of the grotesque, while others, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, are not. Critics agree that while depictions of the grotesque may vary from one era to the next, the grotesque is consistently used to "explore the anxieties of a given period" (Balkan 825). Thus, a close examination of the similarities among these psychologically grotesque characters helps to shed light on the social and psychological difficulties and maladjustments common to the modern American experience and addressed in many modern American works. *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner, and *The Violent Bear It Away* by Flannery O'Connor serve as representative works to bring to light a few of the many novels during this era that use the psychological grotesque as a tool to capture and examine facets of the paradoxical nature of the modern American experience.

When artists invoke the grotesque, they cause us to reexamine the way we seek to understand and organize the world around us, calling into question previous assumptions (Harpham 3). The use of the grotesque in the visual arts can be traced back to Roman grotto caves,⁴ but the notion of the grotesque as an artistic representation of the darker and more unexplainable elements of ourselves and our world has likely existed far longer. While critics disagree on an exact definition or set of traits belonging to the grotesque, they do agree upon a general list of qualifications that include “disharmony” or paradox, a combination of “the comic and the terrifying,” an “extravagance and exaggeration” of reality, the “ambivalently abnormal,” and a sense of alienation where something once understood and expected becomes foreign and threatening (Thompson 27; Balkun 826).⁵ In art and literature, the grotesque facilitates the “coexistence of two opposing principles without subordination,” and so the grotesque’s central characteristic is “self-contradiction” (Meindl 18). From its place on the margins of society, the grotesque forces a reexamination of the mainstream and reminds readers or viewers that not everything in the world is easily comprehended or categorized (Harpham xxvii; Thompson 59).⁶ The grotesque arises to acknowledge the places where the world appears out of joint, but through this process it calls into question even the parts that still seem whole. Therefore, though the concept of the grotesque is not tied to a particular culture or time, each individual grotesque is shaped by the cultural conventions and assumptions the grotesque seeks to challenge or examine (Harpham xxvi; MacRae 11).

An understanding of the inherited meaning of the grotesque and the evolution of that meaning throughout history is central to understanding the context in which modern writers invoke the grotesque. Many cultures have invoked the grotesque, and examples

can be found from the ruins of Pompeii to the gargoyles of Medieval cathedrals. These figures that combine human characteristics with those of animals and monsters served as a recognition of the presence of evil in the world and thus attempted to keep it at bay. As the Romantic writers began to emphasize gothic elements in their literature, representations of the grotesque increasingly moved from the threatening external world to the unknown internal landscape. While these threats in Romantic literature still manifested primarily in the “other”— a crazed wife locked away in the attic, for example— this shift marked an important recognition of the perils of the inner psychological world in addition to those of the external, physical, or even spiritual world. As Enlightenment philosophers taught that humans are rational creatures who can improve themselves through rational means, the grotesque increasingly served as a counterpoint to that notion, reminding readers and viewers that the unexplainable elements of our world, and of ourselves, still exist, despite our very best attempts at explanation.

The experiences of world wars and financial depression ushered in during the modern era introduced an environment ripe for the continued evolution of the depiction of the grotesque in art. And yet, while these world events transcend American experience, modern American literature invokes the grotesque more prevalently, and in a more singular fashion, than other literature of the time. While the era itself seemed to demand a reexamination of understandings and assumptions, modern American literature, in particular, builds upon the introduction of the psychological grotesque in Romantic literature, and in the wake of Freud and Jung,⁷ delves even deeper into human psychology to consider the ways in which these grotesque elements universally threaten us all. In the

same way the first grotesque illustrations on the grotto caves of Pompeii combined startling elements of plant, animal, and human parts, so the psychological grotesque joins ideologies and motivations that are not easily mixed.

The American identity is full of contradictions, shaped by a tension between our idealistic and pragmatic roots, and when this paradoxical national identity meets the trauma of the modern era, the grotesque becomes a perfect representation of the resulting cultural and individual experience. Paula Uruburu has written the most comprehensive study of the roots of the grotesque in American history and culture, and she posits that like other grotesques, the American grotesque is shaped by and representative of the paradoxes of our American culture. She points to what she calls a “national schizophrenia” in the American identity: the pull between our romantic, idealistic pursuit of a dream and our pragmatic, realistic search for facts (Uruburu 20). Tracing this as far back as the first Puritan settlers, Uruburu cites the Puritan rhetoric of the Divine Mission as an origin point for the American Dream as we know it as well as the American grotesque.⁸ With successive generations, the Puritan pursuit of a religious ideal was gradually supplanted by or mingled with the pursuit of wealth and earthly success, inspired by the “Puritan work ethic,” but the tension between the ideal and the real, the spiritual and the secular, remained (Uruburu 38). Additionally, Uruburu cites the conflicting drive for Romantic expansionism- physically and mentally, individually and collectively- and the Enlightenment search for scientific objectivity and rationality, both of which simultaneously reside at the core of the American value system (Uruburu 27). The pursuit of the American Dream itself, therefore, because of its conflicting sources, manifests in a split between an idealistic quest for happiness and well-being and the

materialistic and pragmatic search for wealth, success, and power. From our founding to the present, the American identity particularly lends itself to a grotesque expression because of the paradox that lies at the heart of our American identity.

Not only do these contradictions exist throughout the early ideology of American society, but they continued as America developed. They are particularly recognized in the South where the grotesque is used to represent the fracturing of the Southern landscape after the Civil War, the lingering effects of socioeconomic and racial tensions and dysfunction in the region, and the additional layer of paradox at the heart of an economic and social structure built by those enslaved in “the land of the free.” Writers during the modern era do not simply expose these inconsistencies; they also seek to show the impact on the individual who attempts to live by these conflicting cultural values. The psychological grotesque demonstrates that when these paradoxical facets of the American identity are enacted upon, there are two possible outcomes: one can either become single-minded in the pursuit of one’s own dream, running the risk of becoming a grotesque, or become the unsuspecting victim of grotesqueness in others (Uruburu 20).

All these sources combine in modern American literature to support the use of a grotesque who speaks particularly to the struggles, distortions, and dysfunctions of modern American experience. The invoking of the grotesque in American literature represents a search for identity in a fragmented, paradoxical culture (Uruburu 3). While historically the grotesque arises from the distortions or disfigurements of rules and boundaries the writer or artist assumes, the American grotesque is distinguished in that it relies upon America’s lack of regulations and boundaries, its acceptance of a variety of ideas and perspectives, which makes distinguishing the normal from the abnormal

particularly difficult (Uruburu 10). American grotesques, therefore, blend into their surroundings, remaining misfits but retaining the individualism prized in American culture. In order to force the questioning of American values, each American grotesque represents a facet of the American identity and value system taken to an unhealthy extreme.

The Psychological Grotesque: A Definition

The concept of the American grotesque can be found in many literary works, but Sherwood Anderson gives the notion of the psychological grotesque special attention in the opening story of *Winesburg, Ohio*. Here, an old writer reflecting on the people he has known in his life realizes that “all the men and all the women [he] had ever known had become grotesques” (23). While he asserts that the grotesqueness in these figures does not always manifest in a hideous physical form, some grotesques even striking him as “almost beautiful,” the old writer instead defines a grotesque as someone who has “snatched up” a “truth,” “called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it” (23-4). He emphasizes that this holding tight to “a truth” disfigures not only the person, but the truth itself, turning the truth “into a falsehood” (24). The defining characteristic of Anderson’s grotesques is the snatching of a truth that comes to define the lives of those who hold onto this truth too tightly.

The variety of grotesques present in *Winesburg, Ohio* demonstrates the fact that Anderson is not condoning a particular ideology, construct, or narrative that should be followed, but is instead revealing the distorting effects on the human psyche of rigidly ascribing to any one of these (Lindsay xviii). It is, therefore, not actually the “truth” that Anderson is ultimately concerned with, but the human response to something one

perceives as a “truth” and adopts so fully as to contort or arrest his or her internal landscape and further development. The grotesques in *Winesburg* are, in essence and to varying degrees, fanatics, having concentrated “all truths into one” (Hassan 50). While some of Anderson’s characters such as Wing Biddlebaum and Wash Williams respond more to external forces and traumas, and others, such as Enoch Robinson and Jesse Bentley, to internal conflicts and desires, it is important to identify that more than their traumas or dreams, it is “the fanatical desire to cling to those dreams despite the dehumanizing effects this desire begets” that creates the grotesque (Ciancio 996-7). Grotesqueness, then, is the result of that single-minded pursuit and leads to an arrested development, a “narrowness of vision,” and the “willful denial of experience” (Ciancio 1001).

This form of grotesque, defined by Anderson, represents the particularly American version of the grotesque shaped by our own cultural identity. Flannery O’Connor asserts that “when we talk about a writer’s country, we are liable to forget that no matter what particular country it is, it is inside as well as outside him” (“Fiction Writer” 34). The grotesque in American literature, therefore, represents an attempt by American authors to identify and examine unresolvable tensions and discrepancies within their own American experience. The American grotesque shares the universal feature of all grotesques in reminding us that we can no more escape the “reality of the monsters of the mind than we can the people and situations we face everyday,” but it also uniquely engages the disparity between our ideals and our reality (Uruburu 26). Thus, the myth of the self-reliant hero and the nation’s “frontier mentality,” which asserts that boundaries and physical restrictions can be overcome, combine to produce a uniquely American

grotesque, a “privileged singularity” that is “defined in relation to larger social configurations” (Uruburu 24-25; Lindsay xv). These grotesques, each manifesting his or her grotesqueness in a unique way, all reveal similar tendencies: fanaticism and singularity of vision, a denial of reality, an arresting of development resulting from a moment of insight or injury, a cycle of victimization in which one grotesque creates another, a hyper-reflectivity that leads to isolation and turning in upon oneself, and a loss of the ability to narrate one’s own story. While the authors who invoke this kind of American grotesque do not always acknowledge doing so, their work reveals a repetition of these same features and an exploration of the “inescapable, terrible realities of our amorphous American culture” (Uruburu 25).

The Psychological Grotesque: Representative Works

The characters included in this study each, to varying degrees, contain all of the notable traits of the psychological grotesque mentioned above. However, some of these traits can be more prevalent than others in an individual character in order to allow the author to draw attention to the particular cultural discrepancies explored in that work. Therefore, each novel in this study will be used to reveal and explore two of the most prevalent grotesque traits in its characters and will use these traits as a platform to discuss the cultural elements considered by the author.

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* focuses on the American Dream itself, and so Fitzgerald creates in Gatsby a psychological grotesque who is simultaneously repulsive and beautiful, alluring and deeply flawed. This study will focus on Gatsby’s fanaticism and singularity of vision as well as his denial of reality because these traits are central to Fitzgerald’s commentary on the pursuit of the American Dream. Gatsby’s

obsession with his dream, represented by the green light and embodied in Daisy, becomes his sole focus, and in the single-mindedness with which he pursues that dream, he replaces his actual identity with a created self. His commitment to realizing his dream requires a denial of reality, however, and as a result, it perpetually eludes his grasp.

The study of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* considers the characters of both Thomas Sutpen and Rosa Coldfield because in representing the fractures and dysfunction in the Civil War-era south, Faulkner not only conveys the paradox within a singular character, but he also holds those characters up against other grotesque characters. The variety of grotesque characters in the novel saturates the story with grotesqueness and reveals the cyclical nature of the grotesque- the way one grotesque creates another. Additionally, while Rosa and Sutpen appear to be very unique characters from one another, they share a kind of deformed innocence, each the victim of the broken societal construct in which they live.

Given her strong Catholic beliefs, Flannery O'Connor presents a narrative in *The Violent Bear It Away* that considers the conflict between faith and rationality. While this is not a particularly American struggle, O'Connor gives it an American context by showing the ways in which the American rational, self-reliant hero clashes with Christianity, particularly that of the Old Testament. Young Francis Tarwater is presented with two flawed and polarizing father figures in his life: Mason Tarwater, who embodies fanatical religious belief, and George Rayber, the modern, enlightened man. Through the course of the novel, O'Connor shows both of these figures to be grotesques, each clinging to his beliefs to the exclusion of other realities. Both of these characters are extremely isolated and reveal the grotesque traits of a hyper-reflexivity and turning in upon oneself.

Francis Tarwater must choose between these two figures in his life, and O'Connor demonstrates that his choice is not whether or not to become grotesque, that seems a foregone conclusion in her worldview, but, assuming he has any choice at all, whether to become a fanatical prophet or an empty rational. Through all of this grotesqueness, O'Connor demonstrates her belief that moderation, another American value, is not actually an option; rather, one must choose between the extremes of faith and emptiness.

While each of these works seeks to explore slightly different elements and paradoxes in the American experience, overlaps become apparent. Interestingly, for example, the dominant character in each of the three works- Jay Gatsby, Thomas Sutpen, and Mason Tarwater- are dead when their novel begins, and their stories must be told by others. All three works consider the values and pursuits of American life, including wealth, power, and rationality, and the price that must be paid when pursuing those values. And most significantly, all three demonstrate features of the psychological grotesque in order to address larger struggles and incongruities within the American experience, showing that each of these writers found that "the elusiveness of the [American] character was like the chimerical and enigmatic figures on the grotto walls of Pompeii" and must be explored and revealed in a manner equal to the complexity of our national identity (Uruburu 72).

Chapter 1: Living too Long with a Single Dream: Gatsby and the Grotesque

While psychological grotesques throughout modern American literature reflect the same central features, each grotesque demonstrates certain characteristics that serve to highlight the cultural dysfunction the author seeks to examine. In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald explores the beauty and corruption of the American Dream. Through Gatsby's pure and undiluted allegiance to his dream, Fitzgerald predominantly displays the fanaticism and denial of reality present in the psychological grotesque. Gatsby's fidelity to his dream and his "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" make him "gorgeous," but his fanaticism in making his dream material produces a singularity of vision and a denial of reality that arrest his development and introduce a corruption that lurks behind his "incorruptible dream" (Fitzgerald 6, 162). Flannery O'Connor asserts that modern grotesques "seem to carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity" (45). Fitzgerald clearly demonstrates this reproach, showing that the capacity that makes Gatsby beautiful, when pursued to the exclusion of all else, makes him grotesque. Fitzgerald uses Gatsby's grotesqueness to explore the American version of the human struggle to live with the tension between our dreams and reality. Gatsby is the consummate dreamer, a true romantic, but his allegiance to his dream is so thorough that it ultimately becomes the only real thing about him. In attempting to master time itself, Gatsby is psychologically frozen in time, so absorbed by his dream that he loses his substance. While Gatsby never seems to acknowledge these traits in himself, Nick's recognition of the cost of Gatsby's single-mindedness makes the reader aware of the dangers of the unchecked pursuit of a dream and the difficulty and limitations inherent in making any dream a reality.

In order to establish Gatsby as representative of the whole-hearted pursuit of the American Dream, Fitzgerald draws parallels between Gatsby's past and many of the myths valued in American culture. Understanding the connection between Gatsby and the paradoxical elements present within the American Dream is central to understanding the way Gatsby's grotesqueness reveals itself throughout the novel. Initially, Gatsby's story seems to resemble a typical American tale of rising from modest means to success. Though Gatsby's history proves somewhat difficult to piece together given all the mystery and rumor that surrounds him, Nick presents elements of a classic American rags-to-riches story in the tradition of Horatio Alger. Nick claims that Gatsby came from "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people" (Fitzgerald 104), and Gatsby's father corroborates this later in the novel. Mr. Gatz produces a book that includes a daily schedule and a list of resolves written by a young Gatsby. This approach to achieving success through self-discipline closely resembles parts of Benjamin Franklin's autobiography and reflects the Enlightenment value of self-improvement. In this way, Gatsby's rise from a poor farmer's son to a wealthy businessman represents the kind of opportunity expected by ambitious, hard-working Americans.

And yet, this rags-to-riches, pull-one's-self-up-by-the-bootstraps narrative proves to be an incomplete or misleading insight into Gatsby's character and rise to success, and Fitzgerald uses the disparity between Gatsby's estimable wealth and his means of attaining it to suggest a corruption within the Dream itself. Gatsby's rise departs from the Horatio Alger story because Gatsby does not achieve affluence through honest hard work or discipline; rather, his fortune results from illegal and shadowy business dealings with connections like Meyer Wolfsheim. Importantly, Gatsby's parties are well-attended in

spite of, or perhaps even because of, the rumors that circulate around him accusing him of a wide array of criminal activities from murder (Fitzgerald 48), to bootlegging (65), to spying for Germany during the war (48). Nick claims that the gossip surrounding Gatsby is a testament to Gatsby's ability to stir "romantic speculation" (Fitzgerald 48), but it is worth noting that all these rumors recognize or hint at a darker side to Gatsby's story, a quality that many of Gatsby's partiers seem to find attractive, and even Nick wonders if there might be "something a little sinister about [Gatsby] after all" (Fitzgerald 69). The reader, therefore, is left in state of tension throughout the novel about Gatsby's identity, and the dissonance between who Gatsby claims to be and who he could be keeps the reader from fully knowing or condoning the character of Gatsby, calling into question the dream Gatsby represents and the values of those who pursue or esteem a similar dream. Gatsby's dreams and his willingness to dream them might be beautiful, but there is a dark side to Gatsby's rise to wealth and status, and Nick recognizes this as the "foul dust" that "floats in the wake of" Gatsby's dreams (Fitzgerald 6).

Gatsby's story is a twist on the Horatio Alger form, therefore, but Fitzgerald includes an additional layer of irony in the fact that a rags-to-riches tale is not the story Gatsby intends to claim for himself, in spite of the way Americans celebrate this kind of origin story, and this too suggests a failure within the ideology of the American Dream. Gatsby has amassed his wealth using any means necessary, but this is not the primary reason he remains secretive about his rise to the uppermost tiers of the rich and famous. At the heart of Gatsby's dream lies the desire to never have needed to rise at all; instead, Gatsby claims an "old money" narrative for himself. When he first tells Nick about himself, Gatsby alleges he is "the son of some wealthy people in the middle-west" who

died and left him “a good deal of money” (Fitzgerald 69, 70). Gatsby hopes to overcome the barrier that keeps him from the green light, the bay that separates the new money of West Egg from the old money of East Egg, and simply stockpiling wealth fails to accomplish that for him. He needs to have come *from* money to reach that social status. An old money narrative is the only past that will put Gatsby on par with Tom, and more importantly, with Daisy, “gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (Fitzgerald 157). In addition to the rags-to-riches narrative present in the story, another American myth central to Gatsby’s story is that of “a distinguished class aloof from the strivings of the marketplace” (Giltrow 482). This elitist narrative stands in opposition to the rags-to-riches tale and suggests that while one might make something of himself in America, he cannot *climb* all the way to the top; he must be *born* there. The kind of tension Fitzgerald presents between Gatsby’s own history and his desired narrative, and more largely between the possibilities hoped for by an American dreamer and the reality of achieving those possibilities, is the birthplace of the grotesque, and certainly Gatsby’s dream is the foundation of his own grotesqueness. In order to achieve the narrative he desires for himself, Gatsby must cross more than physical or moral boundaries; an old money past requires Gatsby to step over the boundaries of reality and rewrite his own history.

Gatsby’s act of self-creation places him in line with yet another American myth, that of the self-made man. However, as there is a caveat to Gatsby’s rise to wealth, Gatsby’s effort at rewriting his own narrative also requires additional explanation. Gatsby is not merely the self-reliant American hero; he exceeds this mark, as do a host of other American grotesques, by being a self-created protagonist who “construct[s] a narrative of

identity” (Lindsay xiii). This truly reveals Gatsby’s grotesqueness because his attempt to recreate himself denies the reality around him. This central feature of the American grotesque highlights the American tendency to “hunger for a special identity,” and, as a result of the character’s self-reliance, to set out to create that identity (Lindsay xv). While many grotesques in American literature develop their narrated identity as the result of a trauma or a catalytic event, it is merely the insignificance of Gatsby’s own history, his desire to make sure he is not “just some nobody,” that prompts his self-creation (Fitzgerald 71). When he sees the opportunity to escape his true parentage, which “his imagination had never really accepted,” he seizes it, and though his persona doesn’t change until he approaches Dan Cody’s yacht, Nick surmises that Gatsby had already constructed his new identity long before that moment (Fitzgerald 104). While Daisy helps to shape the realization of Gatsby’s constructed self, Gatsby’s desire to recreate himself speaks to his own grotesqueness, his desire for a special identity within the crowd, and not only to his desire to win Daisy back.

Like the contradiction that exists between Gatsby’s rags-to-riches past and his desired old-money narrative, Gatsby’s new self also speaks to a contradiction within Gatsby’s perception of himself. “Jay Gatsby” emerges from James Gatz’s “Platonic conception of himself” as “a son of God” (Fitzgerald 104). Fitzgerald utilizes two allusions in this brief description of the source of Gatsby’s created identity, and both serve to demonstrate the way Gatsby confuses spiritual idealism with the secular, materialistic realization of these ideals (Gunn 175). Gatsby’s conception of himself rises above the material, but his vision becomes tied to and must be realized through material means, causing him to both rely on and discount the material world. Fitzgerald goes on to

use Biblical language to describe Gatsby's vision, saying that he "must be about His Father's Business," in the "service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty," once again intentionally muddling the religious with the secular (Fitzgerald 104). Giles Gunn calls Gatsby "a grotesque parody of some high priest or shaman" who, having turned his dream into a religion, "is continually dispensing holy waters, consecrated food, and other elements of sanctified life to whatever aspirants he can gather around him" (174). The irony here is heightened, of course, by the fact that Gatsby's followers are ultimately "faithless" (Gunn 174). This conflict between the spiritual and material, the ideal and the real, the religious and the secular, continues throughout Gatsby's story, and like the other contradictions within Gatsby's tale, this too speaks to the contradictions within the American Dream itself. Gatsby's conflagration of the spiritual and material harkens back to the transition in the American Dream itself from the Puritan pursuit of a religious ideal to the value placed on earthly, material success. Gatsby pursues what he worships and idealizes through material means, and he denies reality in favor of his dream version of himself and his past. While Daisy furthers the confusion between the ideal and the real, becoming the "incarnation" of his vision of himself (Fitzgerald 117), Gatsby's inability to distinguish between these contradictory elements in his pursuit ultimately brings about his demise.

These elements of the American myth serve to characterize Gatsby as quintessentially American, suggesting dysfunction within the central elements of the American identity and the American Dream, while also quantifying and revealing Gatsby's grotesqueness. While many Americans set out to self-promote and project a carefully crafted image of themselves, Gatsby's act of self-creation defines him in a way

that arrests his further development. In spite of Gatsby's grandiose self-perception, he can only draw upon his teenaged naiveté to create his new persona, so he constructs "just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent" and "to this conception he was faithful to the end" (Fitzgerald 104). Though Gatsby continues to add to his illusion over time, "decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way," he never matures or outgrows his original conception of himself (Fitzgerald 101). Arrested development is another key trait of the grotesque because the grotesque's fidelity to his "truth" does not allow room for change. In Gatsby's nervousness to reunite with Daisy for the first time, Nick accuses him of "acting like a little boy," and this is perhaps far more accurate than Nick realizes because Gatsby's actions result from his faithfulness to a seventeen-year-old's created identity (Fitzgerald 93). This self-constructed identity lies at the heart of Gatsby's dream, and his unwavering commitment to it is nothing short of fanatical.

While Gatsby's constructed narrative reveals his refusal to accept the reality of his own past, it also reveals Gatsby's pattern of refusing to accept the boundaries of linear history. Gatsby feels he lost something of himself when he lost Daisy, "some idea of himself...that had gone into loving [her]," and so she is required to make his dream a reality and to restore his conception of himself (Fitzgerald 117). His desire, however, is not simply to confirm her love for him or reunite with her, both of which he accomplishes, but to correct the path of history that has not played out as he had envisioned (Steinbrink 164). Gatsby hopes to have Daisy "obliterate three years" of marriage by telling Tom she has never loved him, and to return to her home in Louisville to get married "just as if it were five years ago" (Fitzgerald 116). Even Daisy tries to

assert that Gatsby “want[s] too much” and that she “can’t help what’s past,” but Gatsby is unaffected by her appeals (Fitzgerald 139-40). He believes that history is a “tangible commodity,” one that can be manipulated as easily as he has manipulated his own story (Steinbrink 162). When Nick asserts that the past cannot be repeated, Gatsby “look[s] around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand” (Fitzgerald 116-17). Gatsby has become accustomed to crafting the intangible, and his belief in his ability to do so knows no bounds.

Gatsby overcomes much with his ability to dream, very nearly succeeding in his grandiose plans, but ultimately the reality of the passage of time proves to be his biggest obstacle. Gatsby’s dreaming does not make him a grotesque, but his refusal to acknowledge the material world, most clearly represented by the events that occur within the linear timeline, stunt his growth and make his dream impossible to realize. The concepts of “lost youth and an irretrievable past” are central to *The Great Gatsby*, and Gatsby’s “splendidly American response” to that kind of loss is “to invent [his] past and harness desire as the very reality principle itself” (Weinstein 36). Gatsby, from the beginning, is set on creating his own version of the past, and his success in rewriting his own history convinces him of his ability to recreate his lost time with Daisy. He has overcome so many realities that he comes to believe no reality is as substantial as his singular dream. Like other American grotesques such as Melville’s Captain Ahab and Faulkner’s Thomas Sutpen, Gatsby pledges his future to “what has already become a symbol of his own reinterpreted and idealized past” (Gunn 176). Thus, when Nick rather off-handedly comments that the past cannot be repeated, a reality he likely takes for granted, he assaults the core of Gatsby’s dream, and thus Gatsby exclaims, “Why of

course you can!” (Fitzgerald 116). Gatsby longs to believe in “the unreality of reality,” and to his surprise, time itself proves to be one of the greatest challenges in actualizing his dream (Fitzgerald 105).

Fitzgerald symbolically reinforces Gatsby’s struggle with the passage of time throughout the novel by frequently showing the juxtaposition of Gatsby’s dreams and the ticking clock. As Gatsby lays in bed at night spinning “a universe of ineffable gaudiness...out in his brain” the “clock on the wash-stand” ticks, demonstrating the tension between his grandiose aspirations and the slow but steady progression of time (Fitzgerald 105). The afternoon Gatsby reunites with Daisy, Nick notes that Gatsby had “been full of the idea so long, dreamed it right through to the end, waited with his teeth set, so to speak, at an inconceivable pitch of intensity” that now in Daisy’s presence “he was running down like an overwound clock” (Fitzgerald 97). We do not go far in the novel without a reminder about the passage of time, the steadiness with which it progresses, and Gatsby’s dependence on it. The most central of these juxtapositions takes place in Nick’s cottage when Gatsby and Daisy reunite. In the moment of greatest tension, after Gatsby has both deserted the room and then returned to it to see Daisy for the first time, he rests his head against “the face of a defunct mantelpiece clock and from this position his distraught eyes stared down at Daisy” (Fitzgerald 91). Gatsby and the “defunct” clock share the same point of view. Then, as Gatsby tries to laugh and reclines in a “strained counterfeit of perfect ease,” Nick tells us that “the clock took this moment to tilt dangerously under the pressure of his head,” but Gatsby catches it and sets it back into place (Fitzgerald 91). Gatsby cannot avoid the clock, and he cannot master the passage of time. When he puts too much pressure on it, the clock itself “[takes] the

moment to tilt” as though time has just the amount of corporeality Gatsby assumes it to have. Though Gatsby does not break the clock and restores it to its rightful place, he still says to Nick, “I’m sorry about the clock” (Fitzgerald 92). These simple words are poignant and profound in their summary of Gatsby’s struggle, because it does seem to be the clock that Gatsby cannot overcome in his determination to master and rewrite his past.

In addition to Gatsby’s struggle with time, other elements of the material and physical world also take Gatsby off guard; the hold Daisy has on Gatsby, for example, comes as a surprise to him because before meeting her he moved around in the world unhindered by external constraints. Gatsby’s unimpeded dreaming requires isolation, and he recognizes this before he kisses Daisy. He acknowledges that though he could climb to a “secret place above the trees,” “suck on the pap of life,” and “gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder,” he must “clim[b] alone” (Fitzgerald 117). Nick surmises that Gatsby probably intended to “take what he could” from Daisy “and go,” but instead Gatsby is shocked to discover he loves Daisy (Fitzgerald 156-7). While Gatsby believes in the possibility of his glorious future, he is also aware that only his uniform protects his lower social status, and “at any moment the invisible cloak of his uniform might slip from his shoulders” (Fitzgerald 156). He believes in the greatness within himself, but he is also aware that Daisy occupies a social sphere to which he does not belong. Though he leads Daisy to believe in the successful Jay Gatsby, it is Gatsby “who was somehow betrayed” because, to his surprise, he realizes that in falling in love with Daisy he “ha[s] committed himself to the following of a grail” (Fitzgerald 156-7). He does not expect to be caught in material world, but Daisy becomes the “incarnation” of Gatsby’s dream, and in kissing

her, he “weds his unutterable visions to her perishable breath” (Fitzgerald 117). This connection to the material world is a death knell for Gatsby’s dream, as his created self now relies on external factors outside of his control. Though he attempts to reverse the process, creating an illusion of Daisy in his mind, Gatsby can no more manipulate the reality of who Daisy is than he can the time that has passed.

While Gatsby’s encounter with Daisy redefines his dream by linking the ideal and the material, it is ultimately in Gatsby’s confrontation with the physicality of Tom Buchanan that Nick sees the unavoidable failure of Gatsby’s dream. The people in Gatsby’s life prove to be less moveable and more substantial than he realizes, but Gatsby’s grotesqueness causes him to deny the reality around him; instead, Nick must reveal Gatsby’s shortsightedness. In spite of Nick’s recognition of the garish nature of Gatsby’s dream, he does not seem to fully anticipate its inevitable failure until the encounter at the Plaza Hotel. This battle between the “hulking physical specimen” of Tom and the immaterial Gatsby is another representation in the novel of the tension between the material and the ideal, and in Nick’s estimation, Gatsby loses the battle (Fitzgerald 16). After a tense confrontation and Tom’s assertive pronouncement that Gatsby’s “presumptuous little flirtation is over,” Gatsby and Daisy are “gone, without a word, snapped out, made accidental, isolated like ghosts” (Fitzgerald 142). Nick asserts, “[o]nly the dead dream fought on,” and in this juxtaposition between Gatsby and Tom, it becomes clear that whatever Gatsby has been in the past, his dream has become the defining and most substantial element about him (Fitzgerald 142). Gatsby’s grotesqueness has pushed him so far into his idealism that he almost ceases to exist in the material world. Nick further explains the encounter between Tom and Gatsby by

asserting, “‘Jay Gatsby’ had broken up like glass against Tom’s hard malice,” again separating the substantial, physical nature of Tom and the fragile, immaterial nature of ‘Jay Gatsby’ (Fitzgerald 155). Importantly, while Nick may see the final shattering of Gatsby’s dream, Gatsby himself still clings to “some last hope,” asserting to Nick, “I suppose Daisy’ll call” (Fitzgerald 155, 161). Nick may see Gatsby’s dream as dead, but Gatsby still clings to the dream that defines him as only a fanatic does.

In spite of all evidence to the contrary, Gatsby remains a true believer to the end, confirming his grotesqueness through the extent of his fanaticism and his ultimate denial of reality. Once again, Nick attests to the failure of Gatsby’s dream and demonstrates the painful disparity between Gatsby’s consuming belief and the reality around him. Gatsby has become so fused with his dream he is inseparable from it, and he is therefore willing to overlook any evidence that proves it to be a failure. Nick hypothesizes that Gatsby didn’t truly believe Daisy would call and that “[i]f that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid too high a price for living too long with a single dream” (Fitzgerald 169). Nick qualifies each of his statements in this reflection in a way he refrains from doing elsewhere in the novel, and though he puts himself in Gatsby’s shoes, he seems to misunderstand how thoroughly Gatsby is invested in his dream. It is Nick who recognizes the foreign and alien nature of the world, though he assigns the recognition to Gatsby, saying he “must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass” (Fitzgerald 169). This “new world” that Gatsby would see were he able to separate himself from his dream would appear “material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted

fortuitously about” (Fitzgerald 169). But only Nick has an adequate distance and enough insight to evaluate Gatsby’s dream, and his recognition of the loss and despair he has felt and witnessed results in a sense of alienation. The world Nick lives in is “material without being real,” still substantial but now lacking Gatsby’s idealism, but it is Gatsby who has become a “ghost,” intangible and dream-like, “breathing dreams like air.” Gatsby refuses to recognize that his dream is impossible, thus solidifying his grotesque status; it is Nick who recognizes this loss and must face the modern, material world without the romantic possibilities presented by Gatsby’s dream.

It makes sense that in challenging the core of the American Dream Fitzgerald would use a singularly American grotesque to do so, one who clings to his own dream so tightly that any real sense of who he is or has been is consumed by the pursuit of the dream itself. Gatsby’s dreaming creates an ambivalent feeling in the reader because it is one of the most prized abilities in American culture. While at some point dreaming becomes obsession and belief becomes fanaticism, Nick chooses to call Gatsby’s allegiance to his dream an “extraordinary gift for hope” and a “romantic readiness” he has “never found in any other person and which it is not likely [he] shall find again” (Fitzgerald 6). This is a very positive interpretation of a very negative pattern in Gatsby’s life, but Nick cannot help but recognize the appeal of Gatsby’s ability to imagine the future and identity he wants for himself, and through this portrayal, the reader is both sympathetic to and judgmental of Gatsby’s fanatical dreaming. Gatsby indeed does seem to be “worth the whole damn bunch put together,” and if the choice lies between the indifferent, materialistic, elitist position represented by Tom and Daisy and the fanatical, idealistic optimism presented by Gatsby, Nick recognizes that there is far more beauty in

what Gatsby offers than in anything represented elsewhere (Fitzgerald 162). However, in spite of the beauty in Gatsby's capacity to dream, the real tragedy of Gatsby's story lies in the fact that Gatsby's vision exists in a past that he cannot recover or rewrite, and thus his pursuit is doomed from the start. Gatsby's commitment to this dream, both in the form of his fanatical quest and denial of reality, reveals his grotesqueness. It is no stretch to say that Gatsby becomes his dream, or the dream becomes Gatsby, as the "truth" Gatsby grasps and clings to dehumanizes him and arrests his development (Ciancio 996-7). Americans value the ability to dream- the romantic, idealistic belief that anything is possible- and through Gatsby's grotesqueness Fitzgerald conveys that the pursuit of the American Dream itself, in both its romantic and materialistic elements, is simultaneously beautiful and deeply flawed.

Chapter 2: Grotesque Moments and Thwarted Dreams: Rosa Coldfield and Thomas Sutpen in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

In his "Nobel Prize Banquet Speech," William Faulkner asserted that the only things "worth writing about" are "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself." His characterization of the grotesque in *Absalom, Absalom!* demonstrates that very struggle. Where Fitzgerald uses the grotesque to display the paradox of the American Dream, Faulkner employs the grotesque to demonstrate the crippling dysfunction at the center of Civil War-Era Southern culture. Faulkner explores the racial inequality and effects of slavery on the South, specifically demonstrating through his use of the grotesque that the dysfunction that allowed and perpetuated slavery and a social caste system warped the Southern social and economic landscape at every level. Thus, each character in the novel inherits something from this culture that he or she must learn to live with, but the process of living with such brokenness results in grotesqueness. Despite occupying very different roles in this flawed society, Rosa Coldfield and Thomas Sutpen each experience a defining moment that arrests their psychological development and isolates them from any connection with those around them. They share with most of Sherwood Anderson's grotesques the pairing of victimization or insult alongside a personal choice to define themselves by this moment and thus repeat the traumas of the past. For both Rosa and Sutpen, this moment of insult is one of complete objectification in which they are forced to see themselves as they are being seen by a more powerful, higher-ranking entity; they both react decisively to this experience by narrowly defining the scope of their lives to come, a decision which isolates them, defines their means of communication with those around them, and perpetuates the cycle of victimization within the novel. While Faulkner's characters demonstrate many of the characteristics common

to other American grotesques, Rosa and Sutpen both notably display an arrested development caused by the fixation on their own traumatic moment, perpetuating the cycle of victimization in the novel by creating traumatic moments for others, and revealing through their struggle the cultural dysfunction around them.

Thomas Sutpen represents the Southern plantation owner, and while he is perhaps an exaggerated or distilled version of this stereotype, his journey from being unaware of the caste system in which he lives to being a master of it reveals the distorting effects of the plantation lifestyle on those who most benefit from it. Many grotesques, notably Jay Gatsby as well as Thomas Sutpen, begin their journeys in a state of innocence, but a moment of insult or injury initiates the process of turning the innocent into the grotesque as the “innocence [becomes] deformed and prey[s] upon itself” (Ciancio 997).⁹ Thomas Sutpen asserts that before he knocked on Pettibone’s mansion door “he was innocent” but was unaware of his innocence, and in many ways Sutpen’s story is the story of a lost innocence that can never be regained and instead becomes grotesquely distorted (Faulkner 185). Although it is the moment that he is turned away from the mansion door by Pettibone’s slave that the truth about the caste system in which Sutpen lives becomes illuminated for him, Sutpen admits that during the family’s voyage from the mountains to the flat land he “had learned the difference not only between white men and black ones, but he was learning that there was a difference between white men and white men” (Faulkner 183). However, he never considers that the objects a person owns might speak to the person’s value as a human being, and using the illustration of a rifle owner, he asserts that while he might “covet” a “fine rifle” owned by another man, he would simultaneously be happy for that man, never assuming the man might think “[b]ecause I

own this rifle, my arms and legs and blood and bones are superior to yours" (Faulkner 185). It is not until he reaches the door and sees how Pettibone's slave, and by extension Pettibone himself, sees him that he experiences a moment of complete self-consciousness (Cunningham 571). While he never evaluated the appearance of his worn, patched clothes before, Sutpen sees the slave "barring [the front door] and looking down at him," and he realizes how the slave sees and judges him (Faulkner 188).¹⁰ He also recognizes in this moment the way Pettibone himself must have been seeing and judging him and his family without him being aware: "as cattle, creatures heavy and without grace" (Faulkner 190). The lessons Sutpen has been learning about racial and social divisions congeal for him in this moment of insult and judgment, and he recognizes his place outside of a social construct that he has only now come to recognize but cannot fully understand (Matthews 589). In this sense, the innocence ascribed to Sutpen, by himself and General Compson, represents Sutpen's naiveté about his own standing within the Southern social structure, and the insights he has gathered come together for him.

After Sutpen's experience of being turned away at the door, he sets out to become a self-made man, creating a design for himself in order to re-write his moment of injury and hold tightly to his innocence. While his skin color may allow him access to some privilege, his social standing bars him from entering this coveted world, and through this experience Faulkner examines the deeply ingrained socioeconomic prejudice surrounding Sutpen. Sutpen has become a victim of the social order in which he lives, assessed objectively based on what he does and does not own, and after he is forbidden from entering Pettibone's front door, he retreats into a cave to try to understand his experience. The slave's actions offend and confuse Sutpen, but he has no experience to instruct him

on what has just happened, so his innocence instructs him instead (Faulkner 188). However, it is not the innocent naiveté he had before his front door experience, because he now recognizes the social construct around him, and his original innocence is lost. Instead, his innocence becomes a disfigured version of his former naiveté, driving him toward a pursuit of his own design. Determined to never again be the boy turned away from the front door, Sutpen concludes that “to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what he did” (Faulkner 192). Sutpen decides Pettibone’s ownership of land, houses, and slaves gives him his power, and rather than attempting to change or retreat from the warped social construct that has hurt him, Sutpen instead resolves to become a master of it (Kartiganer 294). Though Rosa objects that Sutpen does not qualify as a member of the upper tier of Southern culture due to his lack of respectability, Sutpen becomes the essence and logical outcome of the Southern plantation owner because his design is built on the assumption that “some men are born to dominate others,” and thus, for Faulkner, Sutpen becomes the symbol of “social oppression itself” (Kartiganer 292). Pursuing land and people alike to fit his design with a “childlike singlemindedness,” Sutpen assumes that the right design will cause his life to play out exactly as he expects, much like “the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measure them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out” (Matthews 591; Faulkner 211-12). Sutpen’s development is therefore arrested and his innocence is frozen in time by his response to his moment of insult, and like Anderson’s grotesques or Fitzgerald’s Gatsby, Sutpen remains committed to a lifetime of trying to rewrite or set right his own history, trapped in the past because he “continually reacts against [it]” (Cullick 53).

Like many of Anderson's grotesques, Sutpen's single-minded approach to his design isolates him from everyone around him and makes communication difficult for him, for having once been objectified, he in turn objectifies all others. Sutpen's original moment of insult centers, in part, on his inability to communicate a message (Cullick 51). He asserts that while he didn't expect to be invited into the mansion, he "did expect to be listened to," and he continually repeats his disbelief over the fact that the slave, "*never even gave me a chance to say it. Not even to tell it...*" (Faulkner 189, 192). However, instead of recognizing the significance of the slave's dismissal of his personhood and message and seeking to avoid repeating that transgression, he instead chooses to embody the source of his insult. In creating a distinct persona for himself in the form of his "design," Sutpen becomes fragmented and detached from himself, and this split causes him to be equally detached from others (Cunningham 570; Bassett 283). Like Gatsby, Sutpen's voice is only relayed second-hand throughout the novel, but even in telling his story to General Compson, Sutpen is as disconnected from his own narrative as he is from anyone else's. General Compson says that in telling his history Sutpen "was not talking about himself...he was just telling a story about something a man named Thomas Sutpen had experienced..." (Faulkner 199). Sutpen takes ownership of his story only in the crafting of his design. Because he is isolated and detached from his own inner self, he cannot decipher the significance of the events in his life, thus he cannot later identify the "mistake" he has made (Faulkner 41, 212, 215); his single-minded, action-oriented, and rational approach to his design excludes the significance of events, particularly his original moment of insult (Cullick 55).

Significantly, it is Sutpen's tendency toward objectification that leads to Rosa's moment of insult, though like Sutpen, Rosa's past experiences heighten the impact this moment of objectification has upon her. Rosa too is a victim of her culture, never having found her place in a patriarchal system that only acknowledges a woman's value in her ability to fit prescribed gender roles. Rosa's young life is a series of traumas and rejections to an even greater extent than Sutpen's: "born, at the price of her mother's life and never to be permitted to forget it;" raised by a vindictive aunt who eventually abandons her; forced to not only witness, but provide food to her father when he nails himself in the attic "to starve to death rather than look upon his native land in the throes of repelling an invading army;" compelled to help bury a man she does not know but with whom she has vicariously fallen in love; and asked by her older sister to protect her niece when Rosa herself is "a child...four years younger than the very niece [she] was asked to save" and without any protection of her own (Faulkner 47, 10). Rosa never has the luxury of a childhood. She is "doomed to contemplate all human behavior through the complex and needless follies of adults" with "an air Cassandralike and humorless and profoundly and sternly prophetic out of all proportion to the actual years even of a child who had never been young" (Faulkner 15). For the first twenty years of her life, Rosa is isolated for reasons beyond her own control, but she continues to strive to connect and "endure and then endure" (Faulkner 116). If Sutpen is frozen in his development as an early adolescent, a forever child himself, Rosa is a notchild, never having experienced a childhood at all. However, though she never has a child's experience, neither has she fully experienced adulthood when Sutpen returns from the war; she has "*turned twenty and yet [is] still a child*" (Faulkner 131). Rosa's previous experiences have kept her

frozen between childhood and adulthood, failing to prepare her to deal with Sutpen and his fanatical bent on his design, but making her particularly vulnerable to Sutpen's dismissal of her.

Like Sutpen's moment of insult, Rosa's is a simultaneous destruction of innocence and arresting of further development. Despite her awareness of Sutpen's ways, it is Rosa's innocence that leads her to believe that Sutpen may become a legitimate husband for her. Rosa has watched Sutpen's actions for twenty years. She recognizes that Sutpen has not ever really seen her, asserting that she had never considered a marriage to him because she "*never for one instant imagined that he would look at me...since he never had*" (Faulkner 124). However, one afternoon she looks up to find Sutpen looking at her. Rosa knows that Sutpen does not love her, and she admits that his look "*was just a sudden over-burst of light, illumination*" (Faulkner 131). Furthermore, Rosa is not surprised that after she accepts his proposal he goes back to disregarding her because she admits, "*having accomplished his engagement...he did not need to see me*" (Faulkner 133-34). Rosa is used to not being seen. She has lived her life "*listening beyond closed doors, [and] lurking in dim halls*" (Faulkner 47). She does not expect much from others. However, in spite of her awareness of Sutpen's ways and her life lived without affection, Rosa's innocence causes her to "*believ[e] that he...was not oblivious of [her] but only unconscious and receptive...*" and that "*there was that magic in unkin blood which we call by the pallid name of love that could be*" (Faulkner 135). While she knows that Sutpen does not love her and does not see her, she still dreams that their marriage will allow her access to a world she has never been able to enter, legitimizing her role in society through marriage (Edenfield 63). Figuratively speaking, Rosa stands at a door like

Sutpen did once, attempting to gain entrance into a segment of life she has never experienced. Therefore, when Sutpen approaches Rosa and “suggest[s] they breed like a couple of dogs together,” bypassing marriage altogether to carry out Sutpen’s plan, Rosa realizes the extent to which she is simply an object in Sutpen’s design (Faulkner 147). She asserts that what hits her “*like thunderclap*” isn’t just his indecent suggestion to her, but that this thought “*must have been in his mind for a day, a week, even a month maybe, he looking at her daily with that in his mind and she not even knowing it*” (Faulkner 138). While the suggestion itself is horrifying to Rosa, it is the recognition of how she has been seen by Sutpen that leaves Rosa outraged. Her illusions of the possibility of marriage are destroyed in this moment of objectification. While Sutpen’s moment of objectification drives him to fully embrace the social construct he is faced with in an attempt to conquer it and rewrite his own injury, Rosa fully rejects the terms on which her entry is based (Porter 108). Like so many other grotesques, she too is frozen in time: she is a “warped chrysalis” (Faulkner 116), “a crucified child” (4), her “female old flesh long embattled in virginity” (4), growing old but never maturing.

Rosa’s grotesqueness also impacts her communication with others, but where Sutpen lacks the words to subjectively tell his story and understand its significance, Rosa is characterized by an abundance of words, all of which are subjective and burdened with meaning. Rosa resembles Anderson’s grotesques in telling her story to Quentin, a young man heading to college who, like George Willard, is too young to fully understand or bear the weight of the story he is being told (Howe 104). While Quentin cannot understand at first why Rosa chooses to tell her story to him, realizing that she wouldn’t need anyone else to publicize her story because she is “the country’s poetess laureate,”

his father tells him she has not chosen Quentin only because he will listen, but also because “she will need someone to go with her—a man, a gentleman, yet one still young enough to do what she wants” (Faulkner 6, 8). Rather than just wanting Quentin to hear or write her story, Rosa intends to make Quentin “an active player in it” (Lazure 487). In contrast to Sutpen’s absent voice, Quentin asserts that Rosa’s voice “would not cease” (Faulkner 4), and while Sutpen constructs his identity in his design, refraining from self-expression, Rosa’s “narrative—as it voices her desire and articulates its objects—does not merely express her identity; rather, her language constitutes her selfhood” (Matthews 586). Rosa’s voice and narrative seem more real than she does. Her voice has enough substance that Quentin imagines that it is haunted by Sutpen’s ghost (Faulkner 4). However, while Rosa does succeed in making Quentin a part of her story, she also acknowledges the limitations of language asserting, “*there are some things for which three words are three too many, and three thousand words that many words too less*” (Faulkner 134). Even with Rosa’s “Cassandralike” gift of prophetic speech, she struggles to communicate her deepest hurts, and her subjective demonizing of Sutpen leaves Quentin and Shreve to speculate on the reality of the events she describes (Faulkner 15, 47).

The similarities in the elements that lead to Thomas’s and Rosa’s grotesqueness, along with the fact that it is Thomas’s fanatical obsession with his design that leads to Rosa’s forty-three-year period of mourning and outrage, emphasize the repetitive and cyclical nature of the victimization that takes place within the novel and is key to novels that portray grotesque characters. These impacts and repetitions are captured in a central image in which Quentin muses:

Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds...the pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm... (210)

As grotesques who narrowly define their world, Rosa and Sutpen are caught in repetitious cycles themselves, like the ripples on the water: Sutpen continually attempts to carry out his design no matter the failures or the cost, and Rosa, “the old lady that died young of outrage” repeatedly “ask[s] herself *Why and Why and Why...for forty-three years*” (Faulkner 142, 137). Rosa and Sutpen both refuse to place their traumas in history, so instead their insults “hover like an echo, continually reproducing itself” (Gwin 23). Rosa uses this terminology as she climbs the stairs after Bon’s murder, “...*rising into the dim upper hallway where an echo spoke which was not mine but rather that of the lost irrevocable might-have-been which haunts all houses*” (Faulkner 109). As much as the novel is haunted by the actualities that have taken place, the events which have turned its characters into grotesques, and the characters themselves who are grotesques and then ghosts, it is haunted as well by the things that could have been. In their repetitious cycles of trying to recapture the “might-have-been” (Faulkner 115), Rosa and Sutpen are frozen in the nonexistent. Like Gatsby, Sutpen and Rosa are both fixated on setting right something that once seemed to go so wrong. They share with Anderson’s grotesques the quality of thwarted dreamers who upon “*waking, sa[y] not ‘Did I but dream?’ but rather sa[y], indic[t] high Heaven’s very self with: ‘Why did I wake since waking I shall never*

sleep again?” (Faulkner 115). Caught in their cycles of recapturing what they hoped would be, Sutpen and Rosa also impact those around them, making others a part of their narrative and, like the ripples spreading into the next pool, setting them on their own cycle of victimization and repetition. Sutpen injures and objectifies nearly every character he encounters in the novel, and Rosa involves Quentin in a tale that leaves him “violently and uncontrollably” shaking as he tries to understand the events (Faulkner 288). Thus, the victimization reverberates throughout the novel, never ceasing, but continuing to produce more victims.

The cycle of victimization in the novel and the continued theme of inheritance reinforce Faulkner’s central argument that Southern culture passes on a dysfunctional and crippling heritage to its offspring. *Absalom, Absalom!* is a story about heritability, as much as it is a ghost story, where the living and dead haunt the space between what is and what could have been, always looking backward towards defeat. The novel opens with one Southern son, Quentin Compson, through whom the reader gains access to both the telling and analysis of Rosa’s and Sutpen’s experiences, and it closes with another Southern son, the cast-off and abandoned Jim Bond who “lurk[s]” and “howls[s]” among the “ashes” he has inherited (Faulkner 301). Much like the character of Nick Carraway, Quentin is both “within and without,” simultaneously only loosely aware of Rosa’s story while also being the grandson of Sutpen’s only friend. More significantly, Quentin is a product of the deep South, and this inheritance alone aligns him with Rosa’s plight. Thus, when Quentin’s father remarks that Rosa may hold Quentin “partly responsible through heredity for what happened to her and her family,” there is a sense in which both Quentin’s Southern heritage and his ancestor’s connection to Rosa’s family could be his

reason for culpability (Faulkner 8). Quentin is thus “still too young yet to deserve to be a ghost but nevertheless [has] to be one...since he was born and bred in the deep South” (Faulkner 4). Faulkner repeats throughout the novel the ghost-making tendencies of Southern culture, and while Rosa and Sutpen are the most thoroughly developed characters, and thus the most grotesque in the novel, it is through Quentin, and the later revelation of the lurking existence of Jim Bond, that the reader most clearly understands the scope of dysfunction in the story and the universal elements that apply to the South as a whole.¹¹ These sons who have inherited the sins of their fathers bookend the stories of Rosa and Sutpen in the novel, revealing the heritage passed on by the grotesques who come before them and the culture that has allowed and perpetuated grotesqueness as a result of its distorted practices.

In his portrayal of Rosa Coldfield and Thomas Sutpen, Faulkner joins Anderson in creating characters who, in spite of their significant differences, share the defining features of a grotesque. Like Anderson’s grotesques, Sutpen and Rosa are very different from one another in their grotesqueness; they have chosen different “truths” to “snatch up.” But Rosa and Sutpen both “address a social trauma that menaces their own legitimacy” and react with an “attempt to transform an age-old wound” with a single-mindedness that defines the rest of their lives (Lazure 485). For both characters, the moment of insult threatens their personhood, objectifying them, but it also brings them into full awareness of a cultural context from which they are excluded, highlighting the brokenness of the culture around them. Sutpen’s experience of being turned away at the mansion door awakens him to his position within a class system based on slavery (Porter 109). Likewise, Sutpen’s insult causes Rosa to recognize that she will never have a role

in the patriarchal system she has struggled all her life to find a place within (Porter 109). This realization results in a loss of innocence and an arrested development as both characters try to recapture what they have lost. Rosa perfectly describes the effects of such an experience when she asserts, "*There are some things which happen to us which the intelligence and the senses refuse..., leaving us immobile, impotent, helpless; fixed until we can die*" (Faulkner 122). Rosa and Sutpen both experience such a moment and ruminate on the dream of righting the wrong done to them, but their fixation on the past prevents them from ever truly escaping, or healing, the traumas they experience.

Chapter 3: The One-Notion Man: Faith and Emptiness in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*

Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away* is a complex novel that pulls the reader into the grotesque inner landscapes of its characters at an uncomfortable level of intensity. If Fitzgerald's use of the grotesque must be considered in the context of the flawed pursuit of the American Dream and Faulkner's in the wake of the Civil War in the deep South, O'Connor's use of the grotesque can only be understood in the context of her Catholic belief system. O'Connor's use of the grotesque highlights a number of distortions she sees in the world around her, but most importantly she utilizes the grotesque to emphasize the mystery, central to faith, that defies our ability to fully comprehend and categorize the world around us. Therefore, the psychological grotesqueness of Mason Tarwater and George Rayber illustrates O'Connor's central consideration: the struggle between faith and rationality. Through Francis's battle to choose between the two extreme and conflicting father figures in his life, each of whom is a grotesque in his own right, O'Connor demonstrates that regardless of the direction Francis follows, he will end up in the territory of the grotesque. Similar to Anderson, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner, O'Connor suggests that surrounding elements, in this case a flawed and sinful world, make the possibility of avoiding the grotesque unlikely for the central character. O'Connor refrains from giving clear or easy answers in her novel, leaving the reader to determine whether Francis ultimately ends up lost in madness or saved by grace, but through the grotesque characters of Mason and Rayber, O'Connor presents the conflicting paradigms of fanatical belief and rational nonbelief, demonstrating through Francis's choice that faithful fanaticism leads to a more fulfilling path than empty rationalism.

Understanding O'Connor's view of faith in the modern world is central to understanding both her extreme characters and her use of the grotesque. Brought up very literally in the shadow of the Catholic Church in Milledgeville, Georgia, O'Connor adheres to orthodox Catholic theology, and her work reflects her depth of study in this area. Her central concern, throughout her fiction, is to present the extreme contrast between the world's values and those of God's kingdom, and due to the general lack of belief present in her modern audience and her belief that the Protestant South in which she lived practiced a more cultural than spiritual Christianity, she asserts that she must make her "vision apparent by shock" because "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" (*Mystery* 48; Zornado 32).¹² O'Connor accomplishes this shock value through the use of many grotesque elements, particularly evident in the extremity of her characters' personalities, features, and experiences, as well as through the violence that marks her work. She acknowledges that her work will appear foreign to a modern audience, but she asserts that a Christian novelist will "find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural" (*Mystery* 34). O'Connor utilizes the grotesque pervasively, therefore, to emphasize these distortions and discrepancies that exist in the modern world in order to force the reader to confront them. In this way, though her particular concerns differ to some extent from those of Anderson, Fitzgerald, or Faulkner, her purpose for employing the grotesque very much aligns with theirs.

More specifically, O'Connor uses the psychological grotesqueness of her central characters in *The Violent Bear It Away* to emphasize the clash between the modern value

placed on reason and intellect and the mystery O'Connor believes lies at the heart of the human experience. In her essay "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," O'Connor writes that all novelists are "seekers and describers of the real, but the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality" (*Mystery* 41). She goes on to explain that popular belief continues to champion the idea that mystery will eventually give way to scientific discovery, and if a writer believes this he or she will likely focus on "an accurate reproduction of the things that most immediately concern man" (*Mystery* 41). However, a writer like O'Connor who believes that "life is and will remain essentially mysterious" will continue to push forward finding "what he sees on the surface...of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself" (*Mystery* 41). Therefore, this writer is "interested in what we don't understand rather than in what we do" (*Mystery* 42). In a culture that particularly values self-sufficiency and self-reliance and finds stability and comfort in progress and reason, O'Connor's "startling figures" defy reason, and their experiences push them to recognize the presence of a mystery that stands outside of their own intellect. These characters must recognize the limits of their own capabilities and either step out into the realm of faith or willfully deny it. O'Connor's use of the psychological grotesque pulls her reader into this confrontation as well because her fiction "revels in the paradoxical, the contradictory, the clash of opposite notions that the human mind cannot reconcile" (Zornado 29).¹³

Therefore, in order to demonstrate the flaws and discrepancies in the modern world, O'Connor forces her characters and readers alike to confront those areas where we feel least sure of our own abilities.

Mason Tarwater represents a single-minded approach to life, and he embraces the mystery O'Connor champions to the exclusion of all else.¹⁴ Though he is dead at the start of the novel, Mason's character casts the longest shadow across the action of the novel as he maintains the strength of his fanatical presence in the lives of both Francis and Rayber in death as he did in life (Schloss 87). He considers himself a prophet, and in her letters, O'Connor asserts her intention for interpretation stating that Mason is a "prophet in the true sense"—cut from the same mold as the prophets in the Old Testament (*Habit* 407). Society has deemed old Tarwater mad, leaving him to spend four years in an asylum after being declared "not only crazy but dangerous" (*Violent* 61). Similarly, Mason asserts that his calling came "in his early youth" and that he "set out for the city to proclaim the destruction awaiting a world that had abandoned its Savior;" however, after "rag[ing] and wait[ing]," he finally sees a "finger of fire" coming out of the sun, but instead of turning on the world, "the finger touch[es] him" and he discovers that "the destruction he had been waiting for ha[s] fallen on his own brain and his own body" (*Violent* 5-6). Mason's only source of insight is his prophetic vision, and in the modern world, his experiences appear to indicate madness.¹⁵ Regardless of, or perhaps because of, the intensity of his experience, his role as a prophet remains his singular concern. Mason shares this single-mindedness of vision with other grotesques such as Gatsby and Sutpen, and Francis's "voice" asserts that if Mason "[i]sn't actually crazy, he [i]s the same thing in a different way... He [i]s a one-notion man" (*Violent* 39). All grotesques deny elements of reality and focus singularly on their "truth," and though some are more socially acceptable than others, perhaps these tendencies reveal an element of madness in all grotesques. Francis senses that Mason's conviction of his role and his unappeasable hunger for the Bread of

Life are at “the heart of his ... madness” (*Violent* 21), and in this sense Mason is certainly a prophet because his only concern is proclaiming his interpretation of God’s intentions. Mason, in his single-minded, obsessive approach to life is without moderation or rationality of any kind. He is consumed by passion alone.

Mason, like other grotesques, is a fanatic in the truest sense of the word.¹⁶ During the Enlightenment era, fanaticism was linked with a passion in opposition to reason (Cavanaugh 230). For Immanuel Kant, as for John Locke, fanaticism deliberately oversteps the bounds of reason, providing cause enough for it to be avoided (Cavanaugh 232). Voltaire describes fanaticism as “an impassioned state of madness that injures one to reason,” and sees reason itself as the only hope for a cure (Cavanaugh 233). It is within this kind of Enlightenment inheritance that O’Connor sets her character of Mason, and while she claims to identify with him and to distrust those who put all their faith in reason, she maintains Mason’s place among the fanatics, refraining from making him either easily understood or dismissed.¹⁷ O’Connor claims that “mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind,” and Mason represents a mystery opposed to post-Enlightenment, modern rationality (*Mystery* 124). Francis recalls that sometimes after the old man returned from the woods during one of his fits of “thrash[ing] out his peace with the Lord,” he would look as Francis believed a prophet should look, like Mason had been “wrestling with a wildcat, as if his head were still full of the visions he had seen in its eyes, wheels of light and strange beasts with giant wings of fire and four heads turned to the four points of the universe” (*Violent* 8). Francis’s descriptions of the visions he imagines his uncle to have clearly allude to those of John in The Book of Revelation, and many critics have noted the apocalyptic flavor of Mason’s convictions, thus Mason

reflects the tendencies of Old Testament prophets whose sanity seems questionable given their reliance on revelation over reason. In this way, the old man's visions, while aligning with the prophets of old, also clearly reflect a passion that overtakes his reason.

If Mason is a fanatic by the terms of the Enlightenment philosophers, George Rayber is their progeny; where Mason represents the prophets of the Old Testament, embracing mystery to the exclusion of reason, Rayber represents the modern, post-Enlightenment man, and thus he follows Voltaire's prescription, attempting to fight any tendency toward fanaticism through the cultivation of his rational side alone. It may seem that moderation is the antidote to the extremism of characters like Mason, and O'Connor speaks to this notion through Rayber's character. In contrast to the single-minded passions of Mason, Rayber trusts his reason alone, but it requires him to be a divided self, a man who lives a very calculated life in order to avoid the sometimes overwhelming pull of his passions (*Violent* 139).¹⁸ Like young Tarwater, Rayber was also kidnapped during his childhood by Mason. Although the seven-year-old Rayber only spends four days with Mason before his father comes to get him, Rayber claims that Mason's impact on him has been a central struggle of his life. Mason's influence on Rayber results from both the extreme nature of Mason's beliefs as well as a madness or "affliction" that Rayber claims runs through the family bloodline, "flowing from some ancient source...until, its power unabated, it appeared in the old man and him and, he surmised, in [Francis]" (*Violent* 114). For the most part, Rayber has learned to control his violent or passionate self by living a carefully disciplined life: he denies his senses rather than indulging them, he relies on testing rather than intuition, and rather than making spontaneous decisions, his "professional decisions [are] prefabricated and [do] not involve his participation" (*Violent*

114). Rayber maintains control of his life through “a rigid ascetic discipline” (*Violent* 114), and while he realizes this is not “a whole or a full life,” he also recognizes that “he was the stuff of which fanatics and madmen are made” and he walks “a very narrow line between madness and emptiness” (*Violent* 115). He feels he has been able to make a choice, and he asserts that if the time comes for him to “lose his balance,” he plans to avoid the path his uncle has taken and instead “lurch toward emptiness” (*Violent* 115). O’Connor lays the groundwork for Rayber to be the modern antidote to the fanaticism of Mason, but instead, Rayber becomes the opposite side of the same coin: he clings to moderation and self-reliance to the exclusion of all else.

It is through Rayber’s struggle to relate to his handicapped son that O’Connor most poignantly reveals the way in which Rayber’s approach to life has left him a grotesque. Through his rational, utilitarian approach to life, Rayber perhaps appears to be a model of self-control, having overcome the pull toward grotesque fanaticism his uncle represents in nearly every way, but he has not “conquered the problem of Bishop” (*Violent* 112). Rayber’s struggle and the division within himself between the rational and the irrational is personified in his handicapped son, Bishop. Because Rayber has used rationality to find his footing, he has no way to understand his son, who represents simultaneously a “mistake of nature” and “the general hideousness of fate” as well as a source of irrational and all-consuming love (*Violent* 117;113). Rayber asserts that for the most part he can live with Bishop without being “painfully aware of his presence,” but at times he feels a love for Bishop that is “so outrageous that he would be left shocked and depressed for days, and trembling for his sanity” (*Violent* 112-113). He blames this “love without reason” on “the curse that lay in his blood” (*Violent* 113). Rayber’s rationality

does not allow him to indulge a love for a son who will be “five years old for all eternity” because Bishop serves no clear purpose, and his condition is without scientific explanation (*Violent* 39). The fact that Rayber cannot fully control his love for his son threatens his measured existence. His love for Bishop represents merely a starting point for this irrational love that he knows, if left unchecked, would soon extend beyond Bishop and cover “everything his reason hated” (*Violent* 114). He is caught between the pull of love for his “idiot” son, something too mysterious for his reason alone to explain, and his desire to be purely rational and carefully moderated. He tells Francis to “forget Bishop exists” and to “try not even to be aware of him,” an approach he has taken himself (*Violent* 117). He even takes Bishop on a trip to the beach two hundred miles away and attempts to drown him, an act that Francis will later replicate, but at the last moment, as Bishop goes limp under the water, Rayber changes his mind and pulls him back. While society would consider Rayber sane, he is not at peace, and what awaits him as a result of his struggle for moderation is not wholeness but division. Unable to live with this tension, Rayber continues to dismiss his love for his son, but he does not realize the extent of the emptiness he has fostered within himself until his son is gone.

Rayber represents the modern man, and perhaps even more specifically the modern American man, and through him O’Connor demonstrates that extreme rationality and self-reliance lead to emptiness and isolation, both of which are hallmarks of the psychological grotesque. Rayber’s response to his strong feelings is to dismiss them.¹⁹ When his love for Bishop begins to build, he believes that if he can “face it and with a supreme effort of his will refuse to feel it, he [will] be a free man” (*Violent* 141). He tells Francis to “avoid extremes,” and he feels satisfied believing that he has sufficiently

controlled Mason's influence over him through his own intelligence and willpower (*Violent* 145). He tells Francis that his "guts are in [his] head," and where Mason seeks a finger of fire for inspiration, Rayber looks within himself for balance and temperance, believing they are key to his freedom (*Violent* 172). The problem with his approach, as O'Connor demonstrates, is that Rayber is "full of nothing" and his obsession with moderation confines him more than it frees him (*Violent* 56). Rayber may avoid the fanaticism of his uncle, but he also lacks the insight his uncle has, demonstrated through the fact that he is both blind and deaf and requires technological interventions to allow him to see and hear. Without these modern conveniences, he cannot interact with the world around him. Not only does he lack the ability to interact with the outside world, Rayber's careful moderation and dismissal of his own feelings has cut him off from himself as well, and he dismisses his feelings so many times he is unable to feel when the time comes to do so. In the moment he realizes that Francis has simultaneously drowned and baptized Bishop, Rayber waits for "the intolerable hurt that was his due, to begin, so that he could ignore it, but he continue[s] to feel nothing" (*Violent* 203). It is ultimately his realization that "there would be no pain" that causes his collapse and reveals the hollowness and numbness that result from his excessively moderated mode of living (*Violent* 203). Rayber's careful rationality requires as much of his focus as Mason's fanaticism does, and therefore, while he avoids the flavor of extremity Mason represents, he is a fanatic disciple of rationality and self-reliance as much as Mason is a prophet of God. He reacts against Mason, trying, like other grotesques, to correct an encounter from his past, and in his overcorrection, he becomes as grotesque as his uncle.

While they are very different from one another, Mason and Rayber share many grotesque traits, including a hyper-reflectivity. This tendency toward an extreme form of inward focus, a trait that is also common in narratives of madness, can be consistently noted in psychologically grotesque characters and is the root of other grotesque traits such as a denial of reality and isolation from others. In his study on madness in modern art and literature, Louis Sass proposes that, while madness has historically been viewed as either a deficit in the power of reason or an excess of passion overwhelming reason, perhaps the process is more paradoxical and the result of “something turning in upon itself until, finally, it collapses of its own accord” (Sass 8). Ihab Hassan calls this tendency in grotesques “a kind of inwardness gone sour” (50), and Thomas Yingling notes that a tragedy of this tendency lies in the fact that “this utter isolation in interiority offers none of the supposed consolations of self-knowledge” (105). While Mason clearly demonstrates this grotesque trait, Rayber does as well because his careful avoidance of his uncle’s fanaticism never allows him to look outside himself. In order to cultivate his rational side and dismiss his emotional side, Rayber must continually turn inward. Where Mason relies solely on revelation and his own subjective interpretation of it, Rayber denies the existence of anything his intellect cannot explain, including his own son. Francis, in feeling he must choose between these two extremes, also demonstrates this hyper-reflexivity, finally seeming to succumb to internal forces that are stronger than he can resist. O’Connor’s novel certainly presents the reader with the difficulty of interpreting the fanatical and seemingly mad insights of Mason and Francis Tarwater, but through the shared trait of extreme inward focus, O’Connor uses Rayber to show that secular autonomy leads to an equally grotesque conclusion.

Upon the death of his great-uncle, Francis feels that he must choose between these two extreme paths, represented by Mason and Rayber, and he is painfully aware that both lead him toward grotesque outcomes; though he tries desperately to avoid either and instead carve his own path, his choices prove to be reactionary and rebellious in nature, and because of this they are actually shaped by the very influences he is trying to escape.²⁰ O'Connor uses Francis's father figures to demonstrate the two directions Francis might take, one towards fanatical belief and the other decisively away from it. Immediately after his uncle's death, Francis feels the tremor that passes over his uncle "transfer itself and run lightly over him," and certainly from this point on he either feels the presence of his great-uncle or responds to situations in a manner like his great-uncle (*Violent* 11). Even in the extremity and passion of his rebellion, young Tarwater matches his great-uncle's intensity (Schloss 84). He rejects his uncle Rayber who chooses thought and moderation, continually asserting, "you can't just say NO... You got to do NO," and he chastises his uncle's inability to act (*Violent* 157). However, his bent toward extreme action places him in line with his great-uncle's fanaticism, even if he attempts to pull in the opposite direction from both parental figures.

Francis's tendency to replicate his great-uncle's mental intensity seems to emerge from a strong inheritance from his great-uncle, and this heritage seems pervasive. Francis begins the struggle for his future with all the biological inheritance claimed by Rayber and a lifetime of indoctrination by Mason. Critics have debated whether Francis truly has the freedom to choose his own path, and while O'Connor asserts that he is "certainly free and meant to be," the novel does not seem to conclusively support her claim (*Mystery* 116). Rayber, while embracing a different form of the grotesque, has been able to make

his own choice, but Mason's influence over Francis seems inescapable, and Francis's natural tendencies seem to push him toward Mason's form of extremism. Rayber contends that even as a toddler Francis carried the fanatical bent of his great-uncle, recalling that the day he and his wife, Bernice, attempted to take Francis from old Tarwater Bernice was repulsed by the face of the baby because, rather than looking like a child, Francis looked like "an adult with immovable insane convictions," and his face resembled that of a martyr in a medieval painting "where the martyr's limbs are being sawed off and his expression says he is being deprived of nothing essential" (*Violent* 181). Francis's face is continually described as "cross-shaped," and this physical marker seems to reflect a strong psychological pull toward the faith and fanaticism of his great-uncle (*Violent* 165).²¹ If Francis already tended toward a fanatical approach to life, his great-uncle has fostered this tendency to an extreme. Francis acknowledges the depth of his indoctrination when he recalls that at times during his uncle's frenetic ranting he would feel that "the old man's words had been dropping one by one into him and now, silent, hidden in his bloodstream, were moving toward some secret goal of their own" (*Violent* 61). With this kind of predisposition and childhood, Tarwater's future seems more a path toward an "inevitable destiny" due to psychological determinism than a path toward potential freedom (Katz 63). However free O'Connor's characters are meant to be, the grotesque seems unavoidable for them, and whether pulling away from or towards Mason's influence, both Rayber and Francis mirror other grotesque works in which one grotesque begets another.

Young Tarwater's psychological experiences very much follow the trajectory of his great-uncle's fanaticism, and this struggle is seen most clearly through Francis's

relationship to the voice who materializes soon after his great-uncle's death (Paulson 121). As soon as his uncle dies, Francis remarks that his own voice sounds strange to him, "as if the death had changed him instead of his great-uncle," but as he begins to dig his great-uncle's grave, the strange voice becomes a decidedly separate entity (*Violent* 11). O'Connor asserts that she means for the voice to be that of the Devil, and as such it clarifies the epic nature of Francis's spiritual struggle, but the voice can also be seen as representative of a psychic split within Francis, a magnified version of his uncle Rayber's struggle between two selves (Paulson 133).²² This second voice is reminiscent of Sutpen's conversations with himself after he is turned away from Petibone's front door, and while this second voice can take many forms, it is common among grotesque characters. Both Sutpen and Francis experience this second voice while they struggle to make sense of a traumatic event that has left them unsure of their own identity.²³ Once Sutpen and Francis resolve this question of identity and set out on a path of singular focus, the voice disappears. During his return to Powderhead, Tarwater seems to come to almost inhabit the voice itself, and, as the voice, he takes stock of himself, "a gaunt stranger, born in a wreck," declaring that it is "apparent...that this person...was mad" (*Violent* 222). It is not until Francis sets fire to the ground between him and the voice and fully accepts his role as a prophet that the voice finally vanishes. This speaks to O'Connor's claim that the voice represents the Devil and thus disappears once Francis has made his choice. However, it is also at this point that Francis feels "a crater opening inside him," just as his great-uncle had warned him it might, and he realizes that his hunger "is the same as the old man's" (*Violent* 239; 241). Francis resolves the split within

himself, but in doing so he fully aligns with his great-uncle as a grotesque with a singular obsession.

The ambiguity of O'Connor's message lies in the fact that the reader, like Francis, must choose his or her own interpretation of the novel's events, and O'Connor offers no easy answers here. Doing so would resolve the tension and mystery she forces her reader to confront. For nearly every potentially spiritual event in the novel, O'Connor provides a believable natural explanation: for example, the boy's unappeasable hunger could be caused by the infestation of worms he claims to have, the burning tree he finally sees has actually been lit by his own hand, and his vision at the end of the novel follows closely on the heels of him drowning his cousin, going four days without food, and being drugged and raped by a stranger (Schloss 100, 97). He undoubtedly believes himself to be a prophet, but the reader must determine if he or she is willing to make that leap of faith alongside Francis. O'Connor asserts that people do not like the ending of her novel because they assume that young Tarwater's "mind has been warped by the old man and he's off to make a fool or martyr of himself;" however, she says, these people are forgetting that "the old man has taught him the truth and that now he's doing what is right, however crazy" (*Habit* 536). When it comes to salvation, O'Connor seems to take sanity with a grain of salt. In fact, she seems to suggest that sanity, particularly in the form of the pure rationality shown by Rayber, can be a barrier to belief because ultimately it is Tarwater's recognition of his powerlessness that allows him to experience the moment of grace so emphasized by O'Connor. She asserts that in order to know oneself, one must be aware of what one is lacking, and it is to the point of surrender that she takes Tarwater, even at the cost of his sanity (*Mystery* 35; Fowler 130).²⁴ In this light,

perhaps fanaticism that oversteps reason does not impede Tarwater's role as a prophet; perhaps all prophets have been a bit mad and grotesque themselves. O'Connor leaves the reader to determine whether Francis has indeed learned the truth and fulfilled his calling or collapsed into the madness fostered by his great uncle; the grotesqueness of each path seems a foregone conclusion.

The Violent Bear It Away is steeped in the grotesque, but O'Connor's use of the psychological grotesque in this context demonstrates the defects that lie in our cultural values and the battle O'Connor believes we all face as a part of the human condition. While Francis feels he must navigate a binary choice in which both of his options are flawed, Mason's path leads towards belief whereas Rayber's leads towards emptiness, and belief is O'Connor's central concern. Interestingly, while many grotesques such as *Gatsby*, *Sutpen*, and *Rayber* narrate and create their own identities, Francis proves unable to carve out his own path and instead follows closely in his great uncle's footsteps. In speaking out against the American tendency toward self-reliance and secular rationalism, O'Connor champions following more closely to the path of the prophet, making her central character simultaneously a replica of his great uncle and, like all other grotesques, a foreign entity in the world around him. While Rayber represents the self-reliant man, Mason and Francis reach back to an older archetype, and instead of finding themselves seem to lose themselves. It is here that O'Connor's Catholicism is most notable, echoing Christ's words that "whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it" (Luke 9:24).²⁵ Like Fitzgerald, O'Connor recognizes elements of the American identity that are disfiguring, and like Faulkner, she is a resident of the deep South and incorporates that inheritance into her writing. However, her Catholic influence

inspires her to push her characters even deeper into the territory of the grotesque, exploring the paradox of the Christian worldview and the difficulty of faith and submission in a culture that values extreme self-reliance, and through her characters' loss and distortion, she sees the opportunity for surrender and salvation.²⁶

Conclusion

In spite of the differences in narrative style among these authors, the distinguishing characteristics of the psychological grotesque emerge through the characters of *Gatsby*, Thomas and Rosa, and Rayber and Mason. While Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and O'Connor focus specifically on a variety of concerns that they consider to be psychologically disfiguring, their messages come into alignment as they use the grotesque to address consistently harmful elements present within our cultural identity. Harpham asserts that each age has redefined the grotesque according to "what threatens its sense of essential humanity" (463), and these are the elements of the modern American identity addressed by writers of the grotesque. By exploring the paradoxical nature of the American Dream, the damaging inheritance of slavery and the Southern caste system, and the struggle for faith in the modern world, these authors dissect some of the most fundamental values of American culture—the self-made man, the dreamer, the self-reliant man, and the intellectual man—and the dangers present in rigidly ascribing to these American identities.

This rigidness, or singlemindedness, is the central feature from which other grotesque traits emerge as each grotesque seeks to occupy "singular roles in relation to larger groups" (Lindsay xiii). Each of these characters single-mindedly pursues his or her "truth" to the exclusion of all else. In his letters and autobiographies, Sherwood Anderson identifies "this hunger for special identity to be something peculiar, for better or worse, to Americans" (Lindsay xv). The initial grotesques in each work—Jay Gatsby, Thomas Sutpen, and Mason Tarwater—each pursue a pure version of a grandiose dream or design constructed around a desirable, singular identity. Gatsby forms his new persona in order

to avoid being a “nobody,” and in contrast to James Gatz who comes from a hard-working, lower-class background, Jay Gatsby is an old money aristocrat who “must be about his Father’s business in the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty” (Fitzgerald 104). Sutpen’s “design” is based on his desire to be the man that bars others from his front door and never again the one who is barred (Faulkner 212). Mason’s “one notion” is his calling to be a prophet of God (O’Connor 39), and he too must be about his Father’s business, an interesting parallel to Gatsby’s secular version of this calling. Therefore, each author specifically and overtly identifies the single-mindedness of these characters through their grand visions of their identities and their denial of all other realities. By contrast, the secondary grotesques in these works, most notably Rosa and Rayber, are also single-minded in their fixations, but their grotesqueness results from an overcorrection of their encounters with other grotesques, and their dream/design/vision is qualified and shaped in terms of their reactions to these primary grotesques. While each grotesque is a fanatic, therefore, these characters demonstrate a pattern that shows that the paradoxical facets of the American identity lead to two possible outcomes: grotesques who become single-minded in the pursuit of their own dreams, or grotesques who become the unsuspecting victims of the grotesqueness in others (Uruburu 20).

The two-tiered structure of grotesques in these works also demonstrates the way one grotesque begets another and illustrates the way that continually turning inward compounds the grotesque’s isolation. Not only is this cycle of victimization clear in *Absalom, Absalom!*, but O’Connor also establishes it in *The Violent Shall Bear It Away*. While she asserts that Mason has taught both Rayber and Francis the truth, Mason’s interactions with these characters and his kidnapping of them in childhood are often

described in violent terms. The hyper-reflectivity, a pattern notable in all grotesques, is particularly evident in characters who have been victimized by other grotesques. Gatsby, Sutpen, and Mason turn inward in order to strictly adhere to their own designs, but Rosa and Rayber turn inward to make sense of their interactions with Sutpen and Mason. This process isolates them from the outside world, but it also isolates them from themselves as they fixate on their moment of trauma. Likewise, Quentin and Francis must navigate the influence of Rosa and Rayber, and thus the cyclical nature of grotesqueness is perpetuated.

As the grotesque consistently turns inward, cut off from his community and himself, communication becomes difficult, and he struggles to express his “truth” and relate to others. In this way, psychologically grotesque characters represent the movement during the modern era away from “collectivity” and toward fragmentation (Yingling 103). As modern society shifted away from finding meaning in institutions and communities, the “loss of collective identity place[d] a terrible burden on interiority, on how the individual may fashion the meaning of his or her life” (Yingling 103). This burden of meaning sends the grotesque once again searching inside himself because he is unable to find meaning in the world around him. Furthermore, as the grotesque seeks to make meaning out of his trauma, he struggles to communicate the meaning of that trauma to the community he is both within and without. Some grotesques may be largely or completely silent, signified in these works by the fact that the primary grotesques—Gatsby, Sutpen, and Mason—are dead at the start of each novel and never express their narratives directly. The telling of each of their stories relies on an interpreter who has witnessed or heard about their lives, and so these characters have lost the ability to

narrate their own stories. At the other end of the spectrum, grotesques can be characterized by a profusion of words, as in the case of Rosa whose abundance of language overwhelms Quinten. In either case, the words, however few or many, fail to adequately convey the experiences of the grotesque. The grotesque's narratives, told either by themselves or others, are marked by subjectivity, calling into question the nature of the human experience and the possibility of ever adequately expressing it. Furthermore, the nature of truth itself, something the grotesques have sought but twisted, becomes questionable as the grotesques seek meaning and connection but are instead isolated and defined by their past.

Interestingly, nearly one hundred years after Anderson so succinctly defined the psychological grotesque in *Winesburg, Ohio*, his vision of the grotesque remains poignantly applicable. American heroes continue to be those who rise from nothing and abandon all else in their pursuit of singular notability. As a culture, our stories are emphatically subjective, bereft of history and a broader, more objective context. We fail to hear one another because we focus almost solely on expressing our own perspective. The American grotesque writers warn that these tendencies, common to the American experience, further fragment and isolate us from the world around us. If we have the eyes to see it, these modern authors demonstrate for their readers the incongruities in American values calling us to recognize them in order that we might place our sins and traumas in the past rather than continuing to repeat them (Uruburu 3).

Notes

¹ While much has been written on the grotesque in Western literature by authors such as Wolfgang Kayser, Mikhail Bakhtin, Philip Thompson, Arthur Clayborough, and Geoffrey Harpham, most of the work done to study and trace the history and expression of the grotesque was done during the mid to late 20th century and focuses on European literature. Paula Uruburu in *The Gruesome Doorway: An Analysis of the American Grotesque* (1987) and Dieter Meindl in *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque* (1996) each build upon these earlier works, and these authors write the most comprehensive studies considering the rise of the grotesque in American literature in particular. Both agree that the grotesque is not only pervasive throughout American literature but that it also constitutes a unique and central expression of the American character and worldview. While Uruburu proposes that the use of the grotesque in American literature results from a conflict in the American psyche, pointing particularly to the split between romanticism and pragmatism in American ideology, Meindl defines a “metaphysical grotesque,” based on the existential metaphysics of Heidegger, and posits that the growth of the grotesque in American literature results from “a fundamental transformation in thinking about the phenomenon of *life*” (5). While my work incorporates these ideas, my study also varies from previous works by considering the way the psychological grotesque presented in Anderson’s “Book of the Grotesque” continually reappears in American literature throughout the modern era.

² Balkan notes Bradford's description of the new world in *Of Plymouth Plantation* as "a hideous and desolate wilderness full of wild beasts and wild men" and a "whole country, full of woods and thickets" that holds "a wild and savage hue" (228-9). The contrast between the expectation of the settlement as a new Eden and its reality as a "savage" environment with threatening inhabitants creates a disharmony and sense of alienation for these early settlers that is central to the grotesque. Additionally, in her narrative outlining her capture and imprisonment by Narragansett Indians in 1676, Mary Rowlandson describes her journey as one "into a vast and howling wilderness" where she has "no Christian soul near [her]" (313). It is these early descriptions of a terrifying, alienating wilderness that Balkan claims are the "nascent elements of a tradition that would emerge with full force in the early nineteenth century with writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville" (825). Bradford, William. *Of Plymouth Plantation. Early American Writings*. Eds. Carla Mulford, Angela Vietto, and Amy E. Winans. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2002. Rowlandson, Mary White. *Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson. Early American Writings*. Eds. Carla Mulford, Angela Vietto, and Amy E. Winans. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2002.

³ Uruburu pinpoints the distinguishing feature of the American grotesque, the element that separates its "subject matter and point of voice" from its European counterparts, to the "simultaneous existence in the American character, both individually and collectively, between the drive for facts and the belief in the American Dream" (19-20).

⁴ As many critics have noted, the word ‘grotesque’ comes from the Italian *la grottesca* and *il grottesco* to describe the ornate decorations discovered on the walls of the grotto caves in Pompeii and Herculaneum (Uruburu 7). These drawings combined plant, animal, and human forms in alarming ways and paved the way for other forms of the grotesque to combine dissimilar or discordant elements.

⁵ Thompson also comes to the interesting conclusion that “the essential paradox of the grotesque” is that “it is both liberating and tension-producing at the same time” (61). This insight also touches upon the common idea of paradox in relation to the grotesque and the idea that the grotesque, in order to address the elements of paradox present in human experience, is itself a paradox as well.

⁶ Leonard Cassuto communicates this point by stating that the grotesque questions or challenges “the system of knowledge by virtue of its liminal position within that system” (xvii).

⁷ MacRae acknowledges the connection of the grotesque to Freud’s *Unheimlich*, “the uncanny or ‘unhomely’, that which arouses dread and horror...certain things which lie within the class of what is frightening.” Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny.” 1919. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. Strachey, James, Anna Freud, Alix Tyson, and Alan Tyson. Vol. 17. London: Hogarth Press, 1973. 219-252.

⁸ While tracing the evolution of the American identity is outside the scope of this paper, understanding the conflicting elements inherent in the ideology of the earliest American settlers is important to understanding the paradoxical nature of the American

experience the grotesque comes to represent. Central to the Puritans' views on their role in the new world is the contrasting idealism of their belief that theirs was a sacred mission and a covenant with God- a unique and holy calling- as well as the need to prove their calling/election and set an example for Europe to follow (32). Uruburu notes that what the Puritans did not understand or acknowledge was that they were destined to fail in their mission because "no human being could sustain the spiritual, physical, and emotional strain of such an errand" (32). For more on her exploration of the Puritan mission see p. 31-40. She also cites Perry Miller's *Errand Into the Wilderness* as a study of the evolving American identity.

⁹ A number of critics have noted the similarities between Jay Gatsby and Thomas Sutpen, and the comparison is important to this discussion because these characters share a very similar form of grotesqueness. Gatsby and Sutpen have a multitude of overlapping characteristics: both men rise from an obscure background, are impacted by a moment in which they determine they will not be insignificant and unremarkable, develop self-made identities, become financially successful men as the result of a combination of hard work and shady business dealings, and in spite of their financial success, both men remain outsiders and fail to fully obtain the respectability and social standing they pursue. Most importantly, both men are driven by a singular dream or design that is simultaneously grandiose and overly simplistic. While Gatsby's dream is more romantic at its core and Sutpen's is driven by a kind of rigid rationality, both men are ultimately destroyed by a fixation on their dream and their resulting denial of the reality around them. Rosa states, "If [Sutpen] was mad, it was only his compelling dream which was insane" (Faulkner

134). Ultimately, both Gatsby and Sutpen share this madness surrounding a singular pursuit.

¹⁰ In his article “Absalom, Absalom! and the Semiotic Other,” J.G. Brister notes the importance of the fact that the slave bars the door in this scene rather than Pettibone himself. He notes that Sutpen’s moment of self-consciousness “is the result of his feeling of racial ‘otherness’” (44). This compounds the lesson that Sutpen is learning about the distinctions between classes and races of men. Brister asserts that the black servant, therefore, becomes “the dialect between oppressor and oppressed, ... between rich and poor, between self and other” (44). Not only does Sutpen’s sudden awareness of race solidify the kind of man he will become, Brister asserts that “‘blackness’ is what both facilitates and destroys Sutpen’s design” (44). While the focus on race alone seems to account for only a part of what Faulkner considers in Sutpen’s rise and fall, it certainly is an important element in his indictment of the pre-Civil War South.

¹¹ Quentin continually comments, as does Shreve at the end of the narrative, that Sutpen sounds “like [Quentin’s] old man,” and this assertion further connects the universal elements of Southern culture throughout the narrative (Faulkner 210).

¹² O’Connor calls the “religion of the South” a “do-it-yourself” religion, saying “they have nothing to correct their practical heresies and so they work them out dramatically” (*Habit* 350).

¹³ O’Connor acknowledges that the kind of fiction that embraces mystery as the ultimate reality “is going to look wild, that it is almost of necessity going to be violent

and comic, because of the discrepancies it seeks to combine” (*Mystery* 43). Here she clearly defines the nature of the grotesque.

¹⁴ It is important to note that while O’Connor will claim to side with Mason, he in no way represents a hero or a ‘good’ character. O’Connor’s fiction lacks such figures, and instead, her most common type of protagonist is the “rebel-prophet.” While Francis fits this description most clearly in this novel, Mason does as well, as the hallmark of these figures (like Haze Motes in *Wise Blood* and The Misfit in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,”) is “that the ‘ultimate concern’ seems to be his only concern. The great religious and moral questions are his obsessions, his prime movers. He is a man seized and possessed by God and the devil: his mind and soul are a battleground in which the eternal powers are endlessly at war” (Kieft 338). Kieft goes on to explain that this “religious fanatic, the rebel-prophet, is in every received sense a bad man” (341). And yet, in O’Connor’s view, this rebel-prophet knows the truth and bears a calling, and this is what distinguishes him from those around him.

¹⁵ Importantly, Mason’s extremity of character comes in part from the fact that he relies on revelation alone without the influence of the Church’s teaching so valued by Catholic theologians. O’Connor comments on this stating, “There is one very dominant Protestant trait which old Tarwater exhibits. When a Protestant hears what he supposes to be the voice of the Lord, he follows it regardless of whether it runs counter to his church’s teaching. The Catholic believes any voice he may hear comes from the Devil unless it is in accordance with the teachings of the Church... The prophets were Jews and old Tarwater is a protestant and his being a Protestant allows him to follow the voice he

hears which speaks a truth held by Catholics” (*Habit* 410- 411). While O’Connor sides with Mason rather than Rayber, she still shows him to be extreme in his sensibilities and beliefs.

¹⁶ O’Connor comments on her use of fanatics in one of her letters to Sister Mariella Gable stating, “About the fanatics. People make a judgement of fanaticism by what they are themselves. To a lot of Protestants I know, monks and nuns are fanatics, none greater. And to a lot of the monks and nuns I know, my Protestant prophets are fanatics. For my part, I think the only difference between them is that if you are a Catholic and have this intensity of belief you join the convent and are heard from no more; whereas if you are a Protestant and have it there is no convent for you to join, and you go about in the world getting into all sorts of trouble and drawing the wrath of people who don’t believe anything much at all down on your head” (*Habit* 517).

¹⁷ In a letter to writer John Hawkes, with whom she corresponded quite a bit, O’Connor wrote, “The modern reader will identify himself with the schoolteacher [Rayber], but it is the old man who speaks for me” (*Habit* 350).

¹⁸ Rayber claims to see himself as a man “divided in two—a violent and a rational self” (*Violent* 139).

¹⁹ Rayber’s occupation as a schoolteacher is also important to O’Connor’s message. Throughout her fiction, she frequently criticizes intellectuals for their dependence on their own intellectual abilities. Rayber attempts to explain Mason’s calling in psychological terms, and he attempts to understand Francis in the same way. He presents the boy with tests such as “intelligence and aptitude, and...some he had perfected himself

dealing with emotional factors” (*Violent* 111). Mason passionately objects to his belief system being reduced to words on a page, and likewise, Francis refuses to take the tests presented to him stating, “I’m outside your head. I ain’t in it. I ain’t in it and I ain’t about to be” (*Violent* 111). This contrast further emphasizes the action-oriented, emotion-based responses of Mason and Francis, and the categorical, rational thinking of Rayber.

²⁰ Many critics have applied a Freudian reading to O’Connor’s work and have made a convincing argument for his influence on her writing. Claire Katz argues that in *The Violent Bear It Away* O’Connor “draws us into the agonizing world of childhood anxiety,” explaining much of the novel in terms of the common childhood tendency to rage against the limits imposed on us, though we are eventually forced to submit to those limits and to “turn the rage back on ourselves” (Katz 67). Paulson also recognizes many Freudian elements in O’Connor’s fiction such as the divided self, extreme narcissism, and regressive behavior. See Susan Marrow Paulson, *Flannery O’Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988): 5-7. O’Connor asserts that she is familiar with Freud’s work and that it contains many truthful insights, but that it ultimately is “not an adequate instrument for the understanding of the religious encounter or the fiction that describes it” (*Mystery* 165).

²¹ O’Connor wrote that she meant Francis’s “cross-shaped face” to mean that “he was marked for the Lord- or at least marked out as one who will have the struggle, who will know what the choice is” (*Habit* 350).

²² O’Connor asserts that the voice is “the Tempter, the Devil, the same as suggests possibilities to all of us” (*Habit* 375).

²³ In literature, this creation of a second voice represents a divided character, a character who is uncertain and senses a lack of completeness (Paulson, *Study*, 5). The creation of a second voice is also well documented in narratives of madness, as in the work of E.T.A. Hoffman and Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Tarwater's split can be seen in terms of his evolving relationship to this second voice (Paulson, *Apocalypse*, 133).

²⁴ O'Connor defines the Devil as "an evil intelligence determined on its own supremacy," and thus grace works to dissolve the human drive toward supremacy (*Mystery* 168).

²⁵ This verse is also found in Matthew 10:39 and John 12:25.

²⁶ O'Connor writes frequently about the violence she uses to force her characters into their moment of choice. She says, "I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world" (*Mystery* 112).

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