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Seeing Whiteness: the Progression and Regression of White Identity in Four Post-Civil War
Literary Generations

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Introduction

On August 11 and 12, 2017, a rally took place in Charlottesville, Virginia under the name, “Unite the Right.” The guise was a right-wing political demonstration but the crowd was conspicuously absent of people of color. That absence quickly took on meaning as the seemingly typical conservative group gave way to chants of “you will not replace us,” and “Jew will not replace us.” It resulted in violence and several deaths (Ruiz). The rioting group claimed they represented all middle-, working-, and lower-class white Americans.

The Charlottesville event doesn’t stand alone. In the summer of 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, on the outskirts of St. Louis, the shooting by a white police officer of an unarmed young black man resulted in massive riots and the involvement of the National Guard. This, as well as other shootings, led to the rise of the civil rights group Black Lives Matter. In 2015, the white Dylann Roof made a statement by opening fire on an all-black meeting of churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina. Upon the election of the far right-wing Republican, Donald Trump, polls and research reflected a deep divide between white voters and people of color. In his essay, “The First White President,” Ta Nehisi Coates details and analyzes this research and suggests that the president’s election was reactionary to white defensiveness against his predecessor, the first black president (Coates).

In between Dylann Roof and the founders of Black Lives Matter is a whole nation of people being exposed to and taking part in conversations about race. The social media platform, Twitter, has been integral in the conversation and with its hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter, and has helped turn the hashtag into a movement. Starting in 2013, however, the Twitter tag received backlash in the form of another tag: #AllLivesMatter. The particular exchange, engaged in by millions of Americans, was addressed by journalists and writers like Jesse Damiani of the

Huffington Post, and Ta Nehisi Coates, who attempted to explain that Black Lives Matter was not a threat against white Americans (Damiani). The persistence of All Lives Matter suggested a threat to white identity was felt by white Americans nonetheless.

This prompts a question: why should white Americans interpret that their identity is threatened by the promotion of equality of other races? This question falls to sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, politicians, philosophers, each field providing clues to the explanation of this perceived threat. The threat is also taken up by writers of fiction and memoir. J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* addresses the identity crisis taking place in lower class white communities in Appalachia, and its status as a *New York Times* bestseller suggests there's a contemporary interest in such a topic. While no one field can provide all answers, literature may be able to provide a clear image of questions embedded in the question above: what *is* white identity? Is it under threat, and, if so, is that threat a bad thing? Literature about whiteness shows an interesting contrast to the history that takes place alongside it. In spite of hundreds of years of white political dominance, leading up to 2017's government, which was more than 80% white (Lardieri), the literary imagination has provided white characters who feel deeply insecure.

These are not new questions. From the nation's origin to the Civil War, white identity meant one clear thing: a white person was a person. Everyone else was a slave or a savage. This is not to say that this belief was foundational to all white people. It did play a role, however, in the suppression of the above questions. White abolitionists, for example, could argue about black identity and black equality without feeling a need to question their own whiteness. It was understood that they were people. After the Civil War and emancipation this core foundation vanished, and white identity has been a tumultuous thing ever since.

Understanding white identity requires an understanding of the meaning of identity as a whole. Identity refers to, according to Merriam-Webster, “sameness of essential or generic character in different instances” or “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual.” In this argument, identity is perceived as composed of all the traits of a character or individual. This is derived from ideas about identity founded in Modernism and growing in popularity in the 20th century. These ideas are evaluated in works of contemporary philosophy including Donald Davidson’s *Truth, Language, and History* (2005) and André Gallois’s *The Metaphysics of Identity* (2016). Identity is built from race, ethnicity, country, city, or town of origin, social class, economic class, gender, family relations, etc. This definition suggests that the functionality of a character or individual is dependent on their ability to incorporate each feature of their identity into their self-image.

Mark Twain documented this collapse of white identity in real time. He experienced the Mississippi River as one of its own residents, a steamboat pilot, but also with the perspective of an educated and well traveled middle-class man. He was simultaneously an outsider and a member of this group of the white middle and lower classes of the Midwest and South. His memoir, *Life on the Mississippi*, recounts his experience among these people and interprets their words and actions while his novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, seeks to more deliberately make a statement about their hypocrisy, disloyalty, and ultimate self-destruction. It is in critical work surrounding Twain that an absence exists concerning conversation about whiteness. Whiteness is presented indirectly by Twain, who lived in a society where whiteness, unlike blackness, wasn’t part of discussion. A white person was a person, and all other races were defined differently. Contemporary criticism of Twain tends to fall into the same pattern, and race-based focus of his work tends to focus on black characters and how their race effects

their portrayal. However, how whiteness effects white character portrayal also provides enlightening insights, including to the character of Mark Twain himself.

Following the first World War, the roaring twenties with its hollow morality and the Great Depression erased any foundation for white identity that the War's soldier identity might have provided. Whites were no longer unanimously economically superior, and in the struggle of maintaining their ancestors' plantation standard of living, an identity vacuum formed. In this vacuum, William Faulkner created the Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, and traced the destructive history of generations that followed the fall of plantations. In *The Sound and the Fury* he tightens his scope and explores the psychological profiles of three individuals effected by their family's social and economic downfall, due largely to their father's descent into depression and drinking. In addressing the question, What is white identity?, Faulkner presents three characters in particular for whom whiteness has ceased to support their self-image, and as a result that self-image descends into chaos, depression, and violence. Unlike their setting in the periphery of Twain's work, black characters are actively part of conflict in Faulkner's work and critical analysis of the interactions and contrasts between white and black characters is extensive. However, the lapse into a Boston setting provides evidence that even when taken from the race dynamics of the South, white identity carries its internal, character-driven conflict with it.

The second World War and the prosperity that followed briefly put white individuals at ease in America. For white communities, however, only omnipotent authority was acceptable, and in spite of the continued domination of whites in America, white literature shows that white people felt undermined beginning in the 1950s and progressing through the '60s and '70s by the Civil Rights movement. If black identity was perceived as threatening to white Americans when blacks were only symbolically equal, it became a huge threat when blacks sought actual equal

agency. This threat is recounted by Kurt Vonnegut, a native of working class Indianapolis. Vonnegut's work is largely influenced by the copious historical events he witnessed, most famously discussing the behavior of Americans in World War II in his most widely read novel, *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969). After the major events of the Civil Rights movement, Vonnegut wrote of events closer to home in *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), when he describes the downfall of a white upper-middle class car salesman and a poor white science fiction writer. In spite of the blatant analysis of the white race taken up by Vonnegut in this novel, race has eluded criticism of the work, and *Breakfast of Champions* has remained out of critical focus in general.

The following thesis examines each of these writers in turn, and from their representation of white identity attempts to discern how they interpret the identity changes they witness. It is founded, in part, on certain character repetitions; for example, Faulkner's character Quentin Compson has a life that closely follows Mark Twain's, but ends in tragedy. Faulkner's own life is represented in the life of Jason Compson, though Jason's story also ends in tragedy as he develops into an abominable and racist character. A convoluted relationship with reality repeats itself in Benjy Compson's cognitive disability and Vonnegut's mentally ill Dwayne Hoover. This repetition of character is not a coincidence, but a result of the limitations of white identity and writers' interrogation of it.

The argument concludes with an examination of contemporary race relations as they relate to the identity conflicts that take place in the work of these three writers, and particularly contemporary racial writings. That word, "writings," is in place of "fiction" because storytelling has taken a vastly different form in the rise of the internet. *Hillbilly Elegy* exists alongside live tweets of race riots, and discussions of the Trump presidency (such as that of Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The First White President"). Nonfictional writings in fields like sociology, psychology, history,

and philosophy have also taken up the subject of race and influence the following argument about white identity and its decay. This includes books such as *What Was African American Literature* (2012), in which Kenneth W. Warren discusses a similar progression of black identity in literature from the Civil War to the present. In *Radical Hope* (2006) by Jonathan Lear, he discusses identity philosophically using a Native American example. As these books, essays, and tweets spread ideas about race, they compete for attention against the daily news stories about race relations. Black Lives Matter remains active in the presence of police violence against black men, and the tag All Lives Matter remains as prominent.

To the questions, what is white identity? Why should it be threatened?, there are no simple answers. The following argument seeks only to understand the complexity of white identity and to understand the extent to which it is threatened by a greater establishment or threatened by a self-destructive tendency of those who carry it like a burden. Most importantly, the argument seeks to show that the riots of Charlottesville are in no way a new phenomenon, and the reaction to the end of Barack Obama's presidency is the conclusion to a long legacy of racism that is, rather than being coincidental or accidental, embedded in the essential foundation of white identity.

Chapter 1: Mark Twain's Grim Prophecy and Post-Civil War Deterioration of White Lower-Class Identity

On his first night apprenticing as a steamboat pilot, Mark Twain was forcibly awakened after just a few hours of sleep. His pilot, Mr. Bixby, told him it was time to go to work. Steamboat pilots worked in shifts throughout the night. Twain remarks, "It was a detail in piloting that hadn't occurred to me at all. I knew that boats ran all night, but somehow I had never happened to reflect that somebody had to get up out of a warm bed to run them" (*Life* 263). This experience is an emblematic start to Twain's steamboat career. It shows his youthful naivety and its gradual decay. It shows his surprise that a steamboatman can't simply exist, but must work for his value, and that the needs of the occupation usurp the needs of the individual. It becomes more significant for the steamboatmen in retrospect, as all their sleepless nights couldn't save their sinking industry.

In his memoir *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) and his novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Twain uses these experiences on the Mississippi River to illustrate the identity of steamboatmen, and to portray that identity as representative of the white lower classes in the Midwest and South. Twain observes the steamboatman identity's reliance on occupation, which was entangled with race. This reliance created identity crises during the decline of steamboats, and Twain uses the death of the steamboatman's identity to analyze the post-Civil War decay of white working-class identity.

Twain first became a steamboat pilot and wrote of his adventures before the Civil War. He concluded his memoir after the war, and he traces the changes in the industry across his career, and the effects of those changes on the identities of steamboatmen. Twain ultimately

shows the fragility of those identities. The deterioration of identity is also apparent in *Huck Finn*, which takes place before the Civil War but was written during Reconstruction. Twain concludes that he has witnessed the end of steamboat identity, and that the failure of steamboatmen to adapt to this change suggests a partially self-induced death to white lower class identity as a whole. Ironically, Twain is himself a survivor, using his writings on steamboatmen to escape their fate.

Identity in this and the following analyses refers to the whole composition of an individual, both as they perceive themselves and as they are perceived by others. It is made up both from their given traits—their gender, race, and class of birth, for example—and of the their chosen traits, such as occupation. Twain composes his characters' identities as much with information given about them as with information withheld. Their identity can only be perceived by what is known, so the omission of education, genealogy, and other foundational features shapes a character's identity by putting weight on other features. By this definition a character may seem more or less functional or healthy based on their ability to create harmony between contrasting features of their identity.

Mark Twain's identity started as Samuel Clemens, a middle-class and well-educated son of a justice of the peace in the town of Florida, Missouri. His upbringing was primarily in rural Missouri. He has a classic white, middle-class foundation (*Life* 255). His memoir begins when he starts work on the Mississippi River, the main subject of his book. He starts with a wide scope and gradually approaches and focuses on specific stretches of the Mississippi. He describes the Mississippi and all its sources and branches, which stretch from the East coast as far as west Montana. His descriptions gradually narrow to the main body of the river, then focus specifically on the stretch of the Mississippi from St. Louis, Missouri to New Orleans, Louisiana. This particular stretch of river was once one of the country's most important routes of commerce,

inhabited by the triumph of transportation technology, the steamboat. Twain describes the social impact of the steamboat from a rural child's perspective: "When I was a boy, there was but one permanent ambition among my comrades.... That was, to be a steamboatman" (*Life*, 253).

Steamboat pilots were revered for their authority and ability to travel. Twain's origins give his shared interest in steamboats additional significance, as he was descended from a "justice of the peace" (255) and had more opportunities available to him than most of his steamboat peers. In spite of this, his interest in the industry persisted.

In addition to its scope in space, Twain's memoir has an important scope in time, as it not only records his steamboat experience, but the gradual death of the industry, which declined rapidly after the Civil War. In her historical analysis of *Life*, Rolena Adorno illustrates the split of the memoir across the Civil War, with its early chapters written and serially published more than a decade before the work's completion (Adorno 62). Twain chronicles the writing in relation to his time on the Mississippi River. The first part of his story, his maturation into a steamboat pilot, is cut off in chapter 21. In this chapter, Twain chronicles in a single page the extensive growth of his career in other areas: "a silver miner...a newspaper reporter...a gold miner...a reporter...a special correspondent...an instructional torch-bearer on the lecture platform...a scribbler of books, and an immovable fixture among the other rocks of New England" (360). He then returns to the Mississippi River, this time under the alias Mark Twain (361) a name derived from a steamboat signaling term (272). This memoir's time span gives it an advantageous view of shifts that affected the regions most involved in the Civil War.

The journey from Samuel Clemens to Mark Twain starts with his growth from a young, naïve, romantic admirer of the steamboatman to a mature and realistic steamboat pilot. This growth involves a transformation in his own identity and worldview that serves as a motivating

force for the first third of the book. Brian McCammack, in his essay “Competence, Power, and the Nostalgic Romance of Piloting” (2006), reads this transformation as a death of romanticism and the birth of a new romanticism. In many ways that death and birth are represented in the coming-of-age structure of the story. That argument is reductive, though, as it lacks Twain’s scope. When Twain discusses the steamboat industry, he does so in the greater context of 19th century lower class Midwest and South. The shift taking place isn’t just one of perspectives—there are very real economic changes happening. From the steamboat Twain sees the death of cities, the decline of plantation industry (443), and the unemployment caused by the increase in train industry (367). Twain wasn’t creating a less romanticized narrative, but rather a narrative that was honest about a less romanticized world. It wasn’t just a less romanticized perspective but a less romanticized world. The loss of innocence that shapes Twain’s personal journey in the first third of the novel serves as a model for the loss of innocence experienced by an entire class of people in the final third, as the reality of their economic world changed.

The coalescence of Twain’s personal experience and his wide scope of steamboat history reveals the cultural significance of steamboatman identity and the intimate details of that identity’s composition. Twain admires the capabilities of the steamboatmen. His choice of writing about them over Eastern or urban whites is in part illustrated in his comparison of the river to urban streets. He describes the difficulty of navigating the river versus navigating a city street at night. The river proves the more difficult, especially because its signals, posts, and points of reference “*change their places* once a month” (305). Twain’s memoir reveals a close bond with the river and the occupations in transportation it created, and as his historical account of those occupations unfold he reveals that the bond was one of dependence. He shows the ways

in which the other components of identity were stripped away for steamboatmen and lower class whites as a whole, until occupation was all that remained.

Steamboatmen rely on occupation for their identity and in the height of the steamboat industry this was entangled with race and class. In *Life*, race is present primarily through omission. The presence of black Americans, both slaves and, later, freedmen, is made known in just a few places—in naming possible careers for black men on steamboats (*Life* 315), or by recognizing a “darky’s voice” (266), for example. Twain captures that “voice” and the voices of other races, ethnicities, and nationalities through dialect. He describes these tells through the chapter of *Huck Finn* he includes in the memoir, in chapter three (239). For example, he attributes to words fully containing their consonants to the white character, including Huck, but they use specific expressions, such as splitting a watermelon (245) and small world replacements like “tetch” for touch and “warn’t” for wasn’t (247). Meanwhile Jim, who is a black slave, has clipped words and frequent missing consonants and fragments (*Huck Finn*, chapter 4, 20). White characters are distinguished by their superior, though still imperfect, grammar. It’s by making people of color known where they appear that Twain creates a majority white group of steamboatmen. The racial voices of Twain’s novel have been dissected since its publication. In his essay, “The Nigger Huck,” John Alberti recounts the history of the book’s racial analysis in American pedagogy (Alberti 922). Part of Alberti’s analysis touches on the inextricably linked paths of white and black Mississippi River history, a relationship that proves just as important in Twain’s memoir when the paths of the two groups ultimately diverge.

The role of class in the composition of steamboatman identity is more complicated as there were a wide array of economic classes, and a wide range of available salaries to steamboatmen. In his description of the unionization of steamboat pilots, one of the highest paid

positions, Twain gives enough financial detail to make it clear that whether middle class or extremely poor, steamboat workers were of a financial class that required work for survival (*Life* 319), as opposed to those wealthier whites who depended on inheritance and property ownership.

A more distinguishing feature of the steamboatman and the larger group to which they belonged is a lack of identification with European origins. This is made apparent through an absence of reference to origins as well as through dialects that define only what part of the US an individual is from. This is in contrast to a common trait of New England novels that grouped individuals, neighborhoods, and cities by their genealogies, such as in the works of Stephen Crane and Herman Melville. Twain shows an awareness of the potential use of European origins as a stabilizing feature in identity through characters such as the “Irishmen” of chapter 22, or the “vendor” who was an “Irishman” who’d lived in St. Louis for “thirty-five years” and yet is still the Irishman, defined by origin but not by name. There is also an anecdote told by Twain that provides a symbolic death to European heritage. The anecdote reinforces the death of romanticism and segues Twain’s story into the collapse of steamboat identity.

Twain’s anecdote starts with a story related to him by a German, that Twain titles “A Dying Man’s Confession” (422). There are several foreign aspects of the story. It’s told by a German, heard by Twain while he’s travelling Europe, and takes place, in part, in Germany. It’s tone and genre are different from the whole of Twain’s memoir. It involves grotesque scenes of corpses in a morgue, a brutal murder, and a revenge plot. The German’s story concludes in the failure of his revenge attempts, and a treasure hidden in Napoleon, Arkansas. At this point, Twain’s anecdote returns to him, on a steamboat, seeking the treasure. He spends a full chapter building up tension as other steamboatmen hear of the treasure and debate what should be done with it (433-436), but when the moment to find the treasure comes, Twain is told by his pilot:

““Why, hang it, don’t you know? There *is n’t* any Napoleon any more. Has n’t been for years and years. The Arkansas River burst through it, tore it all to rags, and emptied it into the Mississippi!”” (436). The pilot’s robust reaction comes like a comical hammer down on the absurd romantic dreams of a hidden treasure. Twain’s brief involvement in the German’s story ends because of the force of the Mississippi River and its sources. It’s the closest the men of this steamboat come to a tie to European origins and it ends in the face of their economic reality, leaving them with one less foundation to stand on when their steamboat identity comes under threat.

The Civil War was one threat to white identity, in the same way the shifting of the Mississippi was a threat to the German’s story. In Michael Eckman’s dissection of Twain’s lack of involvement in the war, he cites both a fear of warfare (Eckman 89) and a lack of identification with either the Union or the Confederacy. He suggests this sentiment is representative of his peers, who also failed to identify with a side or who were prone to switching sides (87). In spite of Twain’s strong bond to river characters, he claims to have no notion of who might politically represent these characters. Some of Twain’s motivation here is also represented in *Huck Finn* by Huck’s skepticism of authority and the morality of his and Jim’s illegal act of running away. The privilege of Twain’s family origins leaks through here, as he had more options during wartime and a greater educational knowledge of politics than his peers. In spite of this he remains attached to the river, and returns to it after the war. He is aware that many of the foundations of white identity on the Mississippi River are also restrictions that come under fire during and after Reconstruction. The war’s end coupled with technological advances, threatened the identity Twain sought to isolate and revere.

Twain approaches the identity decay experienced by steamboatmen with gravity. He writes:

The absence of the pervading and jocund steamboatman from the billiard-saloon was explained. He was absent because he is no more. His occupation is gone, his power has passed away, he is absorbed into the common herd, he grinds at the mill, a shorn Sampson and inconspicuous. (366).

Twain approaches the steamboatman's condemnation to "the common herd" as though it's akin to death. To give this gravity context, aside from metaphorical death, Twain also witnessed literal death on the river, due to explosions, wrecks, and fires. Twain's brother, also a steamboatman, was killed in the explosion of the *Pennsylvania*. Twain describes receiving the news of the *Pennsylvania*'s fate and his brother's death in a dramatic fashion, emphasizing the severity of his emotional reaction: "The sight I saw when I entered the large hall was new and strange to me. Two long rows of prostrate forms—more than forty, in all—and every faceless head a shapeless wad of loose raw cotton. It was a gruesome spectacle" (*Life* 354). In Twain's memoir he mourns the white identity dissolving with steamboats with the same intensity as he mourns the lives taken by steamboat tragedies. He writes of the demise of the steamboat the *Gold Dust*, which he builds a relationship with throughout his memoir, as he rides it through several ports (chapters 23, 29, and 35). Chapter 37, "The End of the Gold Dust" is a brief lament to this relationship, as though it was a relationship with a person. Similar to the tension between his abolitionist sentiment but lack of war involvement, as exhibited in McCammack's work, this conflict shows that the fixation on white lower class identity is not romanticization, but an attempt to show the value of the steamboatman's career and the death-like risk of eliminating that career.

If Twain's memoir serves as an observation of the conflict arising in white identity amongst Twain's peers, *Huck Finn* provides a fictional sketch of that conflict. While the novel has the structure of a coming-of-age story, the titular character struggles to grow into an adult identity because of the conflicts Twain sees in the steamboatmen. His foundation is unstable, due to his family's low class status. In her introduction to the 1996 Oxford edition of the novel, Toni Morrison remarks on this aspect of Huck. She identifies the hopelessness in Huck's life and surroundings, and how it contributes to his lack of identity and suicidal tendencies (Morrison xxxv). Like the steamboatmen, Huck has an anchor for his identity that proves troubled—he has a bond with and commitment to Jim. In spite of that bond, he's often skeptical of the relationship due to its contrast to how society has taught him to perceive white and black relations. This conflict shows most clearly in Huck's contemplation of turning Jim in to slave hunters (chapter 16, 104). The novel concludes with a conflict between Huck, who is hardened and a realist, and Tom Sawyer, who is privileged and naïve. Tom, who has not faced the struggle that Huck has faced, approaches Jim's very real problem of getting caught as a romanticized adventure. Tom's role in this conflict seals Huck's fate as an outsider, as he is incompatible not with the strange adults on the river but with one of his own peers, and separated from that peer by a class division. Huck cannot fall back on an identity founded in the security that wealth provides. His identity at the novel's end is in no better shape than its beginning, when he left his more civilized foster home to return to his drunken father outside of town.

The steamboatman's fate, and the fate of the white lower classes, was intertwined with the changing fate of black Americans during Reconstruction, and that context may show the motivation in Twain's approach to white identity decay as in part self-induced. The relationship between these two groups and their changing social roles is complicated, especially because of

the discrepancy between how black social status actually changed and how poor whites perceived that change. It's an oversimplification to say that black lives improved during Reconstruction. In Eric Foner's book, *Reconstruction: American's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (1988), he provides a historical recounting of Reconstruction and the years after. Foner traces the improvement in black lives and how that improvement came from the inner strengthening of black communities. Foner describes in the black poor a skepticism and mistrust of the government very similar to that traced by Eckman in his historical approach to Twain (Foner 99). Ultimately the picture of black lives is one of unity and motivation (Foner 281). Returning to John Alberti's racial and pedagogical history of Twain's work, he shows the ways in which Twain's work reflects an absence of this motivated identity for white characters, and highlights the way their identification as white is dependent on their separation from, and perceived superiority to, blacks (Alberti 924).

Twain handles his interpretation of this historical discrepancy delicately in *Life* and explicitly in *Huck Finn*. In *Life*, Twain leaves the reader to wonder, if the white steamboatmen faced such losses during the decline of the industry, what about the people of color who couldn't even carry the higher steamboat positions but had to work in kitchens? What about the people of color encountered on plantations? He doesn't seek to compare their fate to that of whites but does touch on some of the small details of their successes in a more absent or remote way, such as in Twain's description of a start to "negro labor" in chapter 33, under a white authority but a start nonetheless (*Life*, chapter 23). Twain doesn't leave black characters in the background of *Huck Finn* but provides Jim as a moral compass and the only adult main character in the novel. He is a strong contrast to the many satirical white characters he and Huck encounter, and maintains his morality in spite of having fewer advantages than those characters. It is specifically

in this contrast that Twain appears to argue for the self-infliction of white cultural wounds. Examples like the King and his audience, and the Grangerford and Shepherdson families show the harm in an absent coherent identity, as these characters struggle in their relationships in spite of evidence that the struggle isn't necessary. With Huck as its main subject, the novel also suggests that through introspection this sort of self-destruction might be averted, though it's an introspection that Huck finds impossible in his dangerous and violent world.

A peculiar passage concludes this story of identity decay, one that comes from the storytelling snippets from Twain's return to the river:

Going into Cairo, we came near killing a steamboat which paid no attention to our whistle and then tried to cross our bows. By doing some strong backing, we saved him; which was a great loss, for he would have made good literature. (382)

Here Twain's voice resembles Tom Sawyer's at the conclusion of *Huck Finn*, wanting to make a fun story out of someone else's tragedy. Twain lost friends in fiery steamboat explosions and still expresses an awareness of the immortalizing effects of a dramatic death in a dying industry. The tone is in conflict with his empathetic and compassionate approach to his peers. It highlights the irony that for these individuals, continued life is more like death, and the men of this steamboat will go on to lose their identity, to be nothing. Rather than dying and freezing their identity in history, they will fail to become "good literature," and will sink into oblivion. The words "good literature" suggest some self-awareness on Twain's part of the irony of this lament. After all, he escaped, built a life as a writer and is now using that life to preserve the steamboatmen in history. This regret doesn't reflect a threat that Twain experiences, but rather his awareness of the oblivion awaiting the identities of whole generations of white Mississippi River valley dwellers. It's the first result of the shifting nature of white identity in the post-Civil War era.

In spite of his membership in the dying group, Twain himself achieved immortality, and helped to immortalize the experience of his peers. He claims that “When I find a well-drawn character in fiction or biography, I generally take a warm personal interest in him, for the reason that I have known him before – met him on the river” (344). This quote can be said especially of Twain’s own characters. It suggests art as a possible weapon against oblivion, one that will prove to be important in the coming years. What in Twain’s memoir is just a start to oblivion will develop over the following decades and when the excitement of World War I and the prosperousness of the roaring ‘20s comes to an end, that oblivion will loom again for the white lower classes, represented next by William Faulkner.

Chapter 2: Restricted Identity and Character Limitations in *The Sound and the Fury*

Faulkner, like Mark Twain, writes about the world he comes from—for Faulkner, this is a deeper South, and an educated but lower middle class. Mark Twain's early life has a model in Faulkner's books through Quentin Compson, the son who escapes to a New England writing career, and Faulkner includes his own young adult self in the form of one of his most blatantly hateful and racist characters, Jason Compson. While still a struggling writer, Faulkner carried the financial burdens of his and his wife's families, and not without bitterness (Folks 35). In spite of his eventual success, Faulkner's similarities to Jason, and Twain's to Quentin, may be a telling result of the limitations of identities dependent on the illusion of white supremacy. Faulkner's novel, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), is a character study in these limitations.

In this novel, Faulkner shows that there limitations to the maturation and development of white individuals with identities that have been stripped of certain privileges. He builds a relationship between race and dysfunction, showing that certain destructive traits inevitably arise in white people who have faced trauma or controversy, and his characters can only mature into sound and function adults if they overcome these traits.

The narrative is guided by the three sons of the elder Jason and Caroline Compson, each of whom provides an insight into the destructive nature of the Southern white patriarchy. The overall external plot, supported by the third-person final section, provides the battlefield on which the three men fight. Benjy's battle is unique in that he's an unwilling participant, a character without agency but nonetheless subjected to the white patriarchy's expectations and, particularly unable to meet them, the punishment that comes with social failure. The damage of these expectations are explored more internally in Quentin, whose character arc peaks before the

family's financial and social fall, and who thus has every reason to succeed. His gradual descent into depression and self-destruction are linked, through his inner monologues, to his dependence on the white patriarchy for his own self-concept. As the family's last spokesperson, Jason Compson isn't subtle about his dependence on the concept of white superiority. His downfall reveals the truth neither Benjy nor Quentin develop enough to reach: to succeed on the battlefield of white identity is still to fail in a world where more than racial superiority is required of a man.

In terms of race, Benjy is a genuinely neutral character. Not only does he have no awareness of the concept of race, but he is either incapable or unwilling to describe the appearance of his surroundings. He knows that Caddy "smells like trees" and identifies her by that smell (43), but doesn't visually describe her, or anyone else around him. This approach shows the ways race sharply defines the world of the Compsons, as it's not difficult to determine the race of the characters in spite of Benjy's refusal to do so—the characters reveal it in how they speak to each other, or Faulkner reveals it through dialect. Benjy, who, while white, spends most of his time around the family's black servants, reports conversations around race without understanding or offering opinion. For example, he reports a conversation between Luster, Benjy's personal servant, and the other servants as they discuss Luster's desire to find money to go to a travelling show:

"Be enough niggers there without me. Was last night."

"Nigger's money good as white folks, I reckon."

"White folks gives nigger money because know first white man comes along with a band going to get it all back, so nigger can go to work for some more"

...

"What you got against white folks."

“Aint got nothing against them. I goes my way and lets white folks go theirs....”
(15).

This dialogue shows a total separation between black and white race and culture. It identifies the white hold on income, and the dependence of the white-black relationship on labor. Luster asks “What you got against white folks,” which is a peculiar question considering he works for the racist and violent Jason Compson, and the sincerity of the answer, “Aint got nothing against them,” is ambiguous. It could be sarcastic bitterness or it could be the speaker’s way of claiming agency over his life, by not giving white people the credit for its quality.

Critical interpretations of Faulkner’s work deal especially with the race conflicts that Benjy witnesses among the servants. Race is typically evaluated as a broad topic, with emphasis on how white narrators represent black characters. Anna Hartnell provides such an analysis, and gives Faulkner’s race relations more context by comparing Faulkner’s work to that of W.E.B. DuBois (Hartnell 528). Specifically, she compares the black and white uses of the Exodus narrative, in which the users of the narrative identify with the historical oppressed people and their journey to the promised land. Hartnell highlights the way the black community channels the Exodus story as a triumph for the black South (527-528), identifying with the freed slaves’ independence and agency, which the above speaker shows with quiet grace. He could speak out against the Compson family but doesn’t. This is seen more explicitly in Dilsey’s character in the last section. Meanwhile, the white characters channel the Exodus story as though they are still the oppressed slaves, their power usurped by freed black people and the white North. Benjy witnesses the Compson family’s rage against their servants, which Hartnell ties to their belief that they have been deprived of a promised land. Benjy reports the disrespectful way the young Compson children talk to their servants (27) with a similar absence of tone or context. This raw

objectivity reveals much about the speakers, but also provides an understanding of how race functions in Faulkner's world. There is a clear divide between white and black, and a clear superiority of white over black that is seen as fair to the white characters and unavoidable to the black characters. Other writers, including Eric J. Sundquist, also analyze the influence of race through the broad comparison of white and black, characters, or closely analyze individual characters psychologically, like Greg Forter. Combining these forms of analysis by approaching race conflict in a deeper, more character-driven analysis also has its merits as seen in Benjy and his brothers.

Aside from this neutral, if distressed, presentation of the family, Benjy's personal trauma represents what's at stake for his generation, starting in their childhood and progressing in the decades that follow. Benjy literally experiences the castration that exists metaphorically for his brothers. He experiences the abandonment of the family by Caddy, something Quentin could only experience figuratively through Caddy's marriage. Benjy's trips to the gate to wait for the sister who isn't returning (51) show his inability to comprehend the loss of her. Benjy's disability is sometimes attributed to punishment (5), and sometimes to bad luck or fate (29). It's fitting, though, that it's treated by his family as an unanswerable problem or question (or one that can only be answered with institutionalization, by Jason), as this is one of the illustrations of Benjy's complete lack of control over his life or future. This shows in minor things, like whether or not he gets to be appeased with a slipper (65), or with going outside (9). Benjy is dependent on Caddy for these things, and once she's gone he loses his autonomy entirely.

As his life progresses, though, so does the severity of his lack of control. He has no control over whether or not he sees Caddy after she's banished by the family (51). This causes Benjy great distress. He has no control over the way his family handles his supposed attack on neighboring

girls, and is thus castrated, a memory that is traumatizing for him and that comes up when he sees himself naked (73). He has no control over who cares for him and is thus paired with the devious Luster, who intentionally upsets him (55). Even in times of financial struggle, the Compson family has the means to care for Benjy, as Jason laments (189), but neither his mother nor Jason seeks to ensure his happiness, and he's miserable as a result. This absence of agency and the damnation that it leads to is simple and obvious when caused by a disability, but it becomes more important as the lives of his siblings, only glimpsed through Benjy, are unraveled in more detail. The hell that is unavoidable for him is also the ending to his able-bodied, able-minded, and even privileged parents and siblings.

Quentin's section is at times as difficult to read as Benjy's because the discrepancy between how Quentin thinks and how he believes he thinks is a consistently significant detail throughout his section, and contributes to its form. If the significance of race can be inferred from Benjy, it's inescapable with Quentin, who lives in Boston as an adult, and where he goes from thinking "You've got to remember to think of them as colored people not niggers" to thinking "that a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among" (86). Quentin claims his theory about race is that "the best way to take all people, black or white, is to take them for what they think they are, then leave them alone" (86). If true, this would uphold Quentin as character comparable to Mark Twain, one who, in spite of awareness of race, values people based on behavior. This theory of race isn't an accurate reflection of Quentin, though, or his behavior towards others; instead, it's just another thought in Quentin's ramblings, which are ceaseless right up until his suicide. Quentin's section takes the form of a normal walk around Boston that is continuously distorted by his own actions. This format is a model of his psychological journey, which Greg Forster examines in his

essay, "Freud, Faulkner, Caruth" (2007). Forter says of all three brothers that through them Faulkner "dramatizes the construction of Southern manhood as the inassimilable, traumatic incursion of the histories of white supremacy and misogyny upon the psyche" (Forter 61). Quentin's walk is an intimate journey through Forter's broad construction. This intimate approach shows how Quentin causes trouble through his negligence towards his surroundings and the people whose lives he effects. Each of his bad turns, both internal and external, reveals more about Quentin's Southern manhood and its instability.

Quentin's first misstep is his reaction, on his walk, to the three young boys. Quentin encounters the boys more than 40 pages into his section, after rambling around town, talking to acquaintances and strangers, looking into a broken watch, getting a message about a picnic, and reminiscing about his childhood with Caddy. Those memories are torn open by memories of her marriage proposal and his discovery that she's had several lovers. Interacting with the three boys in Boston is the first time in the day that Quentin acts spontaneously, without thought or aim, neither making the appropriate plans for his suicide, nor going through the motions of a normal day. He asks them about factories, showing enough of an awareness of his goals to know he needs to keep a clock nearby, to not lose track of time. When Quentin walks toward the clock the boys point out, he leaves an intended path entirely, using only a desire for a clock face as a reason to move forward in any direction. The boys provide a special contrast in Quentin's identity. When he discusses his upper class Boston acquaintances earlier in the section, he remarks that he's approved of because he "revealed a blundering sense of noblesse oblige by getting myself born below Mason and Dixon" (91). The upper class acquaintances perceive his identity as Southern and thus refined. These boys, who don't know him at all, hear him speak and suggest he "talks like a colored man" (120). Quentin doesn't react to the comment but does

move away from the boys after that. The narrative starts to break down, with interruptions by Quentin's memories, including his question for Caddy, "Why must you marry somebody" (122). Quentin reveals a problem in his own understanding of himself. The boys negate his Southern respectability by pointing out that Southern accents are prominent in black men, and Quentin resists the comparison. In spite of this, he's still troubled by his question for Caddy, but the answer is in his own self-awareness. Quentin fails to understand that he can't reap the benefits of a hierarchical Southern white patriarchy while also opposing Caddy's forced marriage, a direct result of that hierarchy.

Quentin's next misstep is the nearly comical accidental kidnapping of a young Italian girl. The girl is silent when Quentin encounters her in a bakery and asks her questions, and Quentin fills that silence with made-up answers in his own mind. She doesn't tell him she's lost, or that there's any reason to follow him, but he interprets her actions according to his own whim of being the authority figure Greg Forter describes as emerging from the inescapable onslaught of repetition of family experiences (261). The sequence starts with a little more than three pages of narration of the present moment before Quentin lingers in the past again, this time preoccupied with the "odor of honeysuckle" (128) which he associates with Caddy. He says "Goodbye" to the girl three times before asking, "Which way do you live?" (129). When Quentin asks some men if they know her they direct him to "Anse," a marshal. Quentin doesn't seek Anse, though, and gets distracted instead, knocking on random doors. He asks her if one of the houses is hers, and she doesn't respond, and Quentin says he "discerned something affirmative, acquiescent even if it wasn't eager, in her air" (131). A second later he asks her, "'This look like your house?'" (131) and the girl nods. Quentin has the opportunity to realize the girl understands his English and her lack of response thus doesn't necessarily infer a lack of understanding. He

still chooses to interpret her silence as some kind of encouragement in finding her house, even though she gives him no indication that she wants him to go down a particular road. Quentin gives up briefly and as he runs away from the girl he falls into a long onslaught of memories. He is entangled in thoughts of Caddy. He describes his reaction when she kisses a boy, hitting her hard enough to leave a “Red print” of his hand (133). Quentin explains his anger to Caddy: “*It’s not for kissing I slapped you.... It’s for letting it be some darn town squirt*” (133-134). His thoughts turn sexual, and the interruptions of his present moment with the Italian girl emphasize the perverseness of his attraction to the stranger and supposed desire to help her: “ ‘If you don’t get home pretty soon you’re going to wear that loaf out. And then what’ll your mamma say?’ *I bet I can lift you up*” (134). He associates the girl with the act of sex and specifically with the role of his masculine strength in that act. He continues to lead the girl further from civilization, even leaving the road (136) before falling into a memory of a fight with Caddy about sex. Quentin comes across the swimming boys who are taken aback as they’re swimming naked. They tell Quentin to “ ‘Take that girl away!’ ” (137), their harsh reaction highlighting how Quentin, in his thoughts of sex and his sister, has subconsciously brought this strange girl to a group of naked boys. There’s no malicious intent on Quentin’s part, but this supposed accident is a direct reflection of his cyclical thinking and his carelessness.

What follows is a legal entanglement that concludes with Quentin’s lapse into an eighteen page torrent of memory, in which both he and the reader lose track of what’s actually happening around him. Quentin’s next inward movement starts with a burst of emotion in the car with his acquaintances: “I could feel it in my throat.... But still I couldn’t stop it and then I knew that if I tried too hard to stop it I’d be crying and I thought about how I’d thought about I could not be a virgin, with so many of them walking along in the shadows...” (147). The “it” is a fit of

laughter, but more than the hysterical laughter, Quentin can't stop the onslaught of memories. Where the Italian girl, triggering memories of Caddy, led to Quentin's submission to emotional tumult, the legal entanglement evokes memories that reduce Quentin to a child's level of self control. He returns to the memory of telling his father that he had committed incest with Caddy, and his father's refusal to react. Quentin then jumps to the memory of asking Caddy if she loved the men she had sex with, and she responds "*When they touched me I died*" (149). In spite of this clue to Caddy's lack of agency in her romantic relationships, Quentin attacks her for her behavior and even threatens to rape her. Quentin then goes into a memory of sitting by a stream with Caddy after she has a confrontation with Benjy, who is emotionally distraught over her emergence into adulthood. Quentin holds a knife to Caddy's throat and threatens to kill her then himself. Caddy's response is to say "all right" (152), but Quentin hesitates, bringing up memories within the memory: "Caddy do you remember how Dilsey fussed at you because your drawers were muddy" (152). Just as Quentin can't stay present now, in the car in Boston, he couldn't stay present that day with Caddy, and let his emotions control his actions. Caddy's neutral reactions to Quentin suggest she is aware of the childishness manipulation behind his actions, and later tells him, "its late you go on home" (156). Though he is the next patriarch, she asserts control in their relationship.

The last memory Quentin visits in his internal ramblings is a classic Southern scene: a brother, challenging his sister's suitor. Caddy is pregnant out of wedlock and Quentin arranges a clandestine meeting with her lover, Dalton Ames (158). They meet on a bridge over a stream, near the Compson home, and while Quentin behaves like a dominant figure in arranging the meeting, and takes control from its start with "I came to tell you to leave town" (159), the moment devolves from there. The suitor is unconcerned about Quentin's anger, and only

expresses concern for Caddy: “I want to know if shes all right have they been bothering her up there” (159). The suitor then seems to pity Quentin, saying “no good taking it so hard its not your fault kid” and that women are “all bitches” (160). He’s empathizing with Caddy first, then Quentin, and when Quentin turns violent the suitor fires a shot into the river with his pistol, not harming Quentin but showing him that he could. This emotional control enables the suitor to claim dominance in the conversation. This is an important moment in the development of Quentin’s identity as a masculine figure. He needs this because his identity is founded on white dominance. This is evident in his behavior towards his black peers, his insistence on saving the Italian girl, and his threats against Caddy. His father shows influence here. The elder Jason Compson reared Quentin in a household where bloodlines were irrevocably tied to worth, teasing about the mother’s bloodline and the changing of Benjy’s name to keep the family name Maury from shame. Where the elder Jason’s commitment to tradition is only talk, Quentin turns it into action when he tries to run Caddy’s suitor out of town. The truth behind this shallow act is revealed when Quentin faints from the emotional pressure of the encounter and the suitor tries to help him. When Caddy is later berating him for his actions, he states, “stop it Im stronger than you stop it now” (16). Attempting to assert his authority only draws attention to its absence: he claims he can stop Caddy but only says it and takes no action. Caddy triumphs in this confrontation. The solution to this family conflict is for Caddy to get married and Quentin to move to Boston but once there he continues to struggle with his identity and descends into depression and suicide.

Quentin’s final misstep, which is also his first is the turning on his companions and acquaintances, and Shreve, in particular. Thus far Quentin’s claim that he takes people “for what they think they are” (86) has proven consistently untrue. He claims he accepts the identities

people project of themselves but instead he projects his own identity of weakness and failure to live up to his family name onto others. He doesn't see Caddy's strength over him, or hear the concern her suitor expresses. He hears the comment about "bitches" and tunes the rest out. He projects violence onto the suitor, claiming that the suitor must have hit him before accepting that he fainted. He projects a lost soul onto the Italian girl. Onto Roskus, and the other black characters of Boston, Quentin projects his own damnation, but this also applies to his apparent equal but, in Quentin's opinion, moral inferior, Shreve. When Quentin sees that Shreve has accepted an invitation originally meant for him, he thinks of Shreve as something of a thief (141). Shreve does seem to overstep some social bounds at times, but shows no maliciousness. At the end of the section, Quentin gives Shreve his watch, and takes some of Shreve's toothpaste, showing an exchange very different from what he supposedly had set up before. Shreve defends Quentin after Quentin's explosion at the picnic—he tries to make light of the fight: " 'I'll be damned if you don't go to a lot of trouble to have your fun. Kidnapping, then fighting. What do you do on your holidays? burn houses?'" (165). Shreve is an important ally but Quentin remains guarded against him. Concluding thoughts on Shreve bring the section full circle and invoke the foundation Quentin builds for his thoughts on social power, which is a reflection of his thoughts on race. In spite of his philosophy of taking black people as they are, he remarks, "I never knew even a working nigger that you could find when you wanted him, let alone one that lived off the fat of the land" (83). Quentin's perception of opportunity, his expectations of success, and his application of ideological terms are all altered by race. With no depth beyond his perception of race, it's easy to see how there's nothing left when his family pride is stripped away.

Jason has an identity conflict similar to Quentin's, with a dependence on achieving the height of Southern patriarchy, but where Quentin retreats inward and self destructs quietly and alone, Jason explodes outwards, attempting to bring the world down with him. Both the young Quentin and Dilsey tell Jason that he's the reason that young Quentin has grown into a rebellious teenage girl, skipping school and running off with boys, looking for a way out of the family. As the only member of the next generation of Compsons, young Quentin has the potential to be the only hope for the family's future, and Jason deliberately crushes that hope. Furthermore, he crushes his own personal financial hopes by stealing from his employer, investing poorly, and foolishly hiding his money. Jason isn't subtle about his dependence on his own whiteness as the sole foundation of his identity and the source of his power. In an analysis of Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*, Stephen Weisenburger describes the mentality that founds this obsession of Jason's. Weisenburger relates Faulkner's work to American fears about sovereignty, fears that he describes as "raced and gendered" (740). Jason shows the result not only of reacting to these fears with anger and violence, but of attempting to fight back against the perceived threat against his sovereignty and to reassert white power. This leads to Jason's failure in his endeavors, and to his failure to maintain a functional identity and psyche.

Jason's section lacks much self-reflection, in part due to his inability to perceive himself as a subjective individual. His identity is fully dependent on his abrasive external encounters. The way Jason perceives himself is revealed in an internal monologue that opens with, "Well, Jason likes work" (196). The statement that opens this monologue is untrue, coming after Jason's rants about working in a store instead of in the bank job he could have had if Caddy had stayed married. He continues: "Then when she sent Quentin home for me to feed too I says I guess that's right too, instead of me having to go way up north for a job they sent the job down here to

me and then Mother begun to cry and I says it's not that I have any objection to having it here" (196). This sentence, reflecting on the memory of Caddy's surrender of her daughter to her mother's and Jason's care, includes a denser version of Jason's passage's repetition. Just as he repeatedly brings up the same bitter memories of perceived slights against him, he repeats "I", "too", "job", and "I" again. The frequent use of "me" and "I" turns the sentence inward, and detracts from the other people it brings up—Caddy, Mother, and Quentin—making it appear subtle that he refers to Quentin as "it". The repetition of "job" drowns out the fact that the job itself or the nature of the job are made unclear. Jason is refusing to take responsibility over his career, and puts all job prospects in Caddy's hands, and it's just a "job", not a defined career. The centripetal and vague address makes Jason into an image more abstract than a character—he perceives himself in broader terms, as though he is representative of the nation and thus personal slights or even accidents that effect him are interpreted as attacks on his sovereignty. Weisenberger describes the aggrandizing of white identity both in Faulkner's work and other works of Americana (762). The use of "too" shows Jason's tendency to compile complaints, crowding his own self-awareness in the burdens of others. This egocentric inner monologue continues until the end of the passage, when Jason reveals: "Mother stopped crying then. She pulled her veil down and we went down stairs" (196). This confrontation Jason's remembering took place the day of his father's funeral. It's clear from this that Jason is incapable of perceiving reality except through his own shallow martyrdom.

Shortly after this inner monologue, Jason remembers a conversation with his mother, when she obsesses over the idea that it's fate, sin, or heritage that has brought down her family, which ironically both implicates white supremacy and expunges her and Jason's guilt over their own reliance on white supremacy for identity. She tells the infant Quentin, " 'You will never

know the suffering you've caused'" (199), putting blame on anyone but herself. Moments before the mother's ranting an exchange takes place, quick but significant:

...and Father says 'No she shall not touch is money not one cent of it' and Mother says 'He can be forced to by law. He can prove nothing, unless——Jason Compson,' she says. 'Were you fool enough to tell——'

'Hush, Caroline,' Father says, then he sent me to help Disley get that old cradle out of the attic and I says,

'Well, they brought my job home tonight' (198).

It's revealed here that much of the conflict caused by the infant Quentin's rejection by Caddy's husband is the fact that he's not the father. Jason's mother's lament, "Jason Compson," could be spoken to her husband, but later in the conversation when Dilsey asks, " 'What you want to go on like that fo Jason fer?'" (199) and Mother responds, " 'I've always tried to protect him from it'" (199), suggesting her earlier lament was for her son, who carelessly let slip to Caddy's husband that he wasn't the child's father. All the evidence is here in Jason's mind that he is responsible for his own downfall, but he wholly rejects the notion. He relies on the construct described by Forter, creating a model of himself based on his knowledge of white masculine identity that doesn't have room for error (Forter 258-261).

Jason easily finds scapegoats for his outrage over his perceived inferior life. This is evident in his interactions with his servants but also outside of his home, in his encounters with "Old man Job" (249), a black man that works for Jason's employer, Earl. Jason has every opportunity to assert his white identity, and to challenge any perceived threats to it, and at the store he reveals how that approach to the perceived threats. When Jason's employer is looking for Job, Jason suggests, " 'Gone to the show, I imagine'" and Earl says, " 'He doesn't slip off....

I can depend on him” (248). This is as opposed to Jason, who has thus far slipped off several times. In spite of this interaction, when Job reappears, Jason asks, “ ‘Well,’ I says. ‘Was it a good show?’” (249). Then Job speaks the most honest truth about Jason in the section: “ ‘You’s too smart fer me. Aint a man in dis town kin keep up wid you fer smartness. You fools a man whut so smart he cant even keep up wid himself” (250). Jason isn’t fooling anyone in town, in spite of his control over his household. While they still allow him to sit in the role of patriarch at home, forcing Quentin to the dinner table when he’s there, even coworkers who work below Jason are aware of his deviancy. In attempting to reassert his authority, he has only succeeded in fooling himself.

Jason’s need to be a strong patriarch and the destruction it causes him links white power and male power. This is more thoroughly explored in Weisenberg’s work. Female voices are missing from the novel, even in the last section which switches between Dilsey, mother Compson, Luster, Benjy, and Jason, and the absence shows the ways in which white identity is, essentially, male identity. This shows in Mark Twain’s work in a more subtle way—there are few female characters because in a world where career is the sole contributor to identity, women, who cannot have the careers of men, can have neither independent identities nor a general presence. While Faulkner’s characters hearken back to the Civil War and the loss of their family’s honor, they also omit the fact that World War I is in their recent memory. Masculinity was challenged by the changing nature of warfare, and challenged further as the industrial revolution both opened up careers for women and changed the nature of work for men. Caddy isn’t given a voice because her dependence is first on her father, then on her brothers, then on her husband. Ironically, her silence speaks to her avoidance of the same identity self-destruction as her brothers. Jason fails to admit that much of his hidden income is from Caddy. He is, in fact,

dependent on her, and using her honesty for his own shallow deception. This is not to say Caddy is necessarily healthier than her brothers, but she does evade the specifically white crisis they experience.

The final section of the novel serves two main purposes: it confirms that the way the Compson family members perceive themselves is a subjective fiction by providing a comparatively objective narrator, and it eradicates the family's hope by providing a tragic end to young Quentin's story. Jason's encounter with the Sheriff, for example, shows his lack of credibility in the town. The Sheriff even reasserts the hints that Jason attempts to bury in his section concerning his use of his position at the store to steal: " 'I have some suspicions about who that money belongs to that I dont reckon I'll ever know for certain'" (304). Mrs. Compson is most clearly illuminated in this section, as her dialogue is stilted and reduced to her repetitions throughout the thoughts of her three sons. Early in the section, Mrs. Compson and Dilsey have a confrontation. Dilsey is responsible for cooking breakfast, ensuring Mrs. Compson has her hot water bottle and any other needs, and ensuring that Luster is caring for Benjy. Mrs. Compson is agitated, trying to get Dilsey to care for Benjy herself, but then worried about breakfast, as Dilsey points out, " 'I cant do but one thing at a time'" (271). When it's revealed that Benjy isn't even awake, and Mrs. Compson is fretting over nothing, Dilsey responds with silent composure, and Mrs. Compson reacts to her silence:

"You're not the one who has to bear it," Mrs Compson said. "It's not your responsibility. You can go away. You don't have to bear the brunt of it day in and day out. You owe nothing to them, to Mr Comspon's memory. I know you have never had any tenderness for Jason. You've never tried to conceal it." (272)

On this morning alone it's clear that Dilsey's burden is likely the greatest in the family. She can't "go away" as Mrs. Compson suggests, as her race, gender, and class leave her with limited options. When the four children are young, Dilsey shows the same behavior towards Jason as the other children, and it's Jason who is hateful towards the others, even destroying Benjy's dolls just to upset him. Mrs. Compson also bears the brunt of nothing, as she keeps herself constantly confined to her room, even as a young woman, and in spite of claiming she has to honor her husband's memory, she makes the same mistakes with her granddaughter as she made with her children, leading to the novel's end when Quentin runs away with Jason's stolen money and a man from the travelling show. Mrs. Compson, as a woman, has no real solutions to the ongoing tragedy enacted by her alcoholic husband and her three sons, and is a stark contrast to Dilsey, who is black, a woman, and the strongest character in the book. The final section takes the three tragedies attempting to be individual and shows they aren't separate but part of an institutional white problem.

Whether it's the recent memory of World War I, the looming Great Depression and increasing financial pressures, or the distant heritage of plantations, the three men of the younger Compson generation fall together into their separate destructive and self-destructive tendencies. Benjy, with no agency or control, provides the ultimate fate that can't be avoided for him, and any hope he could've had to live a fair life in spite of his disability is erased. Meanwhile, his brothers self-inflict a similar fate by living without their own hope and leaning instead on the fragile identity whose structure is built solely on whiteness. The upcoming Great Depression is a likely extreme tragedy for the family, but afterwards the second World War and the wealth it created also created a new identity opportunity for men and women. These crutches held up

families like the Compsons until their reliance on white supremacy faced the threat of the civil rights movement.

Chapter 3: The Racial Climate of Midland and the Unhinging of the White Male

Twain and Faulkner each find indirect and even sometimes labyrinthine ways to approach race, whereas Kurt Vonnegut's approach is made plain from the beginning of his novel, *Breakfast of Champions*: "This is a tale of a meeting of two lonely, skinny, fairly old white men" (7). In an interview, Vonnegut describes his straightforward approach to race and other details that compose identity. He says his readers have "a right, and a need to learn immediately" about characters, a trait he drew from journalism (Reilly 2). This is one of the many features that grant Vonnegut's work such unique conceits, presenting the absurd in a way that feels exact and the real world in a way that feels absurd. Like Twain, Vonnegut's life ended with an artist's and scholar's reputation in the highest establishments of New England, but it began with a job in General Electric, and, before that, a childhood in Indianapolis, Indiana which was one of the last states to end segregation (Moore 2). This is the environment that shaped Vonnegut's worldview, and which he explores in *Breakfast of Champions* in the aptly named fictional Midland City, Ohio.

In this novel, Vonnegut mixes metafiction and absurdity, to create a satire of white middle- and lower-class America. His hero, Kilgore Trout, proves a hero only by accident, after triggering the downfall of Dwayne Hoover, a successful white American. Vonnegut writes in third person but turns the narrator into a character, using metafiction to warp notions of a narrator's or writer's control over their characters' identities. Vonnegut proposes an inevitable moral downfall for white society, visible through Hoover's mental decline, and the accidental nature of Trout's rise.

For all Vonnegut's frequent reminders of race and status in America, to fully understand the statement he's making requires both an understanding of his narrative techniques and his characters. His narrative techniques show how the novel functions as a whole, thus opening up inquisition into how characters and race specifically function. As one of the characters who appears in several of Vonnegut's novels, Kilgore Trout provides a foundation for character analysis, while Dwayne Hoover, upper-middle-class car salesman, will show the moral downfall of white America through a personal downfall.

The novel is a satire, and its satirical elements have been its most popular in recent criticism, and in the reviews of Vonnegut's contemporaries. This satire is explained in Sharon Lynn Sieber's work, where she refers to Vonnegut's narrative technique. Sieber says that Vonnegut uses American "tradition and reader expectation to undermine the reader's desire for an ordered universe" (Sieber 127). What Sieber sees is that Vonnegut points out the small pieces of absurdity in normalcy that have been missed by the general public, making normalcy the repulsive option and planets like *Slaughterhouse Five's* Tralfamadore the preferable option. What neither Sieber nor nearly any other critic has noticed quite so well as Vonnegut himself is the dependence of American culture's absurdity on race.

Vonnegut illustrates absurdity using a narrator that starts out as the controlling force of the story but that gradually becomes an agent of the troubled setting of Midland, Ohio. Vonnegut's narrator uses a comically literal narrative style, creating tension between involvement and distance, to build varied and complex relationships that guide the text. The complexity of these relationships is built in part on the shifting metafictional shape of the narrator. The role of the narrator forces the novel to waver between an omniscient, third-person narrative and a first-person narrative told by a particularly powerful yet vulnerable character,

operating unnamed. As the novel progresses, the narrator gets increasingly involved directly in its action. Mention of biographical ties to Vonnegut, such as his mother's suicide, first suggest Vonnegut *is* the narrator, but this shifts increasingly as he gets more involved with the text. The unspoken character here seems to be the reader, onto whom Vonnegut projects several possible identities. At the story's beginning, Vonnegut explains to the reader where the story takes place, starting with the "a planet which was dying fast" and narrowing it down to America (7) as though the reader may not know what the Earth is. This projection of an alien reader is reinforced as the narrator tries to explain to the reader everything from "where babies came from" (23) to what an apple looks like (201) to how guns kill people, by putting holes in them (50). The narrator also suggests that the reader might be the Creator of the Universe, making the reader either a knowing creator responsible for the narrator's nihilistic sadism, or an oblivious creator simply receiving a report from a subject. When the narrator states, "Sometimes I wonder about the Creator of the Universe" (160) the relationship destabilizes. The narrator doesn't know if he trusts the reader, yet the reader must trust him as the only access to the story.

The style and form effect each subject or idea that Vonnegut addresses, including morality, mental health, identity, and race. Race proves to be a pivotal and unstable foundation to the identities of the novel's white protagonists. Just as Vonnegut destabilizes yet controls the narrator-reader relationship, he controls the relationships between these themes. In particular, he controls what information is given about a character and when, and the first piece of information given about almost every character is their race. Like many things about the narrator, he wavers in his approach to race between distance and involvement with the text, sometimes providing anecdotes that show that white people are responsible for the problems of people of color, such as in the death of the unnamed "nigger family" man that tried to move to nearby Shepherdstown

(240), sometimes stating statistics that suggest this in a cold and matter-of-fact manner, such as the statistics on the white-black police force and prisoner ratios. He sometimes approaches black people using neutral language, and sometimes adopts “nigger” as either a noun or adjective, from his racist characters. This shows the narrator’s fallibility, as he has no objection to racial slurs due to a lack of subjective morality. These relationships provide clues as to what race means to the narrator, to the characters, and to Vonnegut and his audience.

The main protagonist of this book, and a character in several others, is Kilgore Trout, who the reader knows, before anything else, is a “lonesome, skinny, fairly old” and “white” “science-fiction writer”, and who “did not expect to be believed (15). He starts as a nobody and, after a climactic meeting with Dwayne Hoover, becomes “a great artist and scientist” (16). Trout’s character arc starts in a state of nihilistic bitterness that is set off when he’s invited to attend an arts festival. He tells an attendant at the festival his reason for coming: “ ‘Would a man nourished by beauty look like this? You have nothing but desolation and desperation here, you say? I bring you more of the same!’ ” (234). At the novel’s end, Trout is the most successful character. Dwayne Hoover acts as a kind of foil to Trout. Hoover starts the novel as a successful, wealthy car salesman with “oodles of charm” (20). Dwayne Hoover ends the novel as “one more withered balloon of an old man on Midland City’s Skid Row” (280). Trout owes to his success the vapid, shallow, idol-worship of his readership, which he despises, and Hoover owes to his failure bad “chemicals” (14), Vonnegut’s most common nomenclature for mental illness. In both cases, agency is seemingly stripped from the individuals and either biology or popular society decide their fates. The narrator, meanwhile, attempts to maintain control of his characters’ actions in spite of the ways his exposure to his characters’ ways of thinking undermine his authority.

Trout is Vonnegut's model lower class white man, complete with World War II experience and boring job. Vonnegut writes of him in *Slaughterhouse Five*, *Jailbird*, and mentions him in other work (Reilly 15) and he uses Trout to bind this book to his most influential novel, *Slaughterhouse Five*. While that novel gives Trout the opportunity to represent a wider American experience, *Breakfast* specifically focuses on the white middle American experience. The term "nihilist," thrown around in many reviews of Vonnegut's work (Lehmann-Haupt), applies especially to Trout, who finds no joy in the idea that someone read one of his many science-fiction stories and loved it. He's self-destructive in the same way as Faulkner's characters, but intentionally. He visits New York on his way to the Midland arts festival and in spite of having enough money to stay in a cheap hotel he tries to sleep in an adult film theater instead, because he wants to mock the arts festival he was invited to and to show up saying only, "I know what it's like to spend the night with a lot of other dirty old men in a movie theater in New York City. Could we talk about that?" (55). He wants to experience the decay of the white male and to forcibly project it onto his readership. His stories have deep but unattainable messages in the metaphors of science-fiction, with frequent warnings about global warming (such as in *Plague on Wheels*, 26), or the submission to lust and gluttony (such as in the unnamed story thought up in the movie theater, 59). The messages are unattainable in several ways. First, they are published in pornographic magazines where even if they're bought, they're not read. Second, they aren't supported by Trout himself, who discusses environmentalism with a truck driver: "I used to be a conservationist.... but I gave it up" (84). Finally, they are cloaked in absurdity that the only people for whom they resonate are the deeply insane Hoover, who only understands them because he reads them as truth, and Eliot Rosewater, the man who

discovers Trout, who is so rich that concerns about the real, everyday lives of Americans don't reach him.

In spite of Trout's nihilism and hopelessness, the wealthy Eliot Rosewater is able to lift him to great heights by providing an audience who equates Trout's "desolation and desperation" (234) with "greatness" (230). This twist is rich with satire, as Vonnegut embraces the irony that the nihilistic, unsuccessful, impractical Trout is "discovered" (230), and will eventually win a Nobel Prize. Trout is perhaps most suited to lead as he is fully aware of the dangers and absurdities in the ruling white male class, and knows that these dangers and absurdities are missed entirely by his ruling white male audience, particularly the people of Midland. That audience requires Trout's unhappiness to consider him accomplished. He shows up to the art festival injured from a mugging (75), wearing a decades-old tuxedo (232), and with plastic coated feet. The mugging is a combination of the inescapable violence that comes with poverty, as well as Trout's embracing of that violence, and the decades-old tuxedo speaks to the unchanging nature of poverty and the difficulty found in leaving it. The plastic is the strangest feature of Trout's appearance, however. He acquired it wading in Sugar Creek, which has a liquid plastic surface created by pollution from the Barrytron plant, a weapons manufacturer (224). Trout is literally fused with the residue of an imperial white society. He hopes he'll leave footprints, wanting to upset the guests of the art festival, but the plastic dries quickly to his feet. He wishes that "somebody would be outraged by the footprints" (226) but the filth and violence sticks to him and becomes part of the artist the world comes to admire.

Trout's whiteness has made this ironic and fought-against rise to greatness possible. This appears in the plot in many indirect ways, one of which is parallel encounters with the police. Trout is caught by the police in New York after being mugged, and while the police are initially

suspicious, they eventually see him to a hospital (75). They also take his plight so seriously that his absurd and offhand comment about the muggers possibly being “ ‘an intelligent gas from Pluto’ ” (76) spawns a wide search for a nonexistent gang that eventually becomes a real gang. His words are assumed true to such a great extent that they become true. Wayne Hoobler, a black character who comes into occasional contact with both protagonists, also has an encounter with the police, in which he’s picked up for simply standing near some trash cans. The police assume the worst about him in spite of a total lack of comments by him, and even after his fingerprints prove him innocent (205). Trout’s absurd writing is published in pornographic books, but still considered art, and Hoobler is considered a criminal based solely on his possession of a Playboy Club of America card (206). Trout is filthy, barefoot, and welcomed into the arts festival while Hoobler, in a suit, watches through a peephole (213). Meanwhile, the narrator adopts the perspective of other black characters that is provided by mainstream American society without question, just as he adopts every other detail of the world. He neutrally presents the “hundred-nigger machine” (146) or, in a particularly odd case by Hoover’s progressive business partner, Harry LeSabre, the referral to black people as “reindeer” (164). Trout is apparently incapable of failing despite his efforts to do so, while black characters have no chance of success. The narrator, who is only incidentally white in the beginning due to his biographical ties to Vonnegut, becomes an embodiment of whiteness.

The link between absurdity and identity that gives Trout this freedom is also true for the narrator, who becomes an increasingly volatile and absurd agent of Midland’s flaws. As the novel progresses he begins to lose control over his characters. The shift begins early, and in terms of race specifically starts when Dwayne Hoover’s partner, Harry LeSabre, starts to realize that Dwayne is going insane. The narrator describes Hoover and LeSabre’s relationship: “He

came to work for him when the agency was right on the edge of the Nigger part of town. A Nigger was a human being who was black” (41). At this point, the narrator has given the race for every character, and has discussed black characters without using this offensive term. The narrator continues to switch back and forth between “black” and “nigger” to describe black people and culture, and while this may seem like carelessness on Vonnegut’s part (using Dwayne Hoover’s or Harry LeSabre’s word for black people, even when those characters aren’t present) it actually shows the results of the narrator’s naivety. As an alien force who perceives the world without judgement, he becomes subject to the same racism as his characters. He describes the history of slavery, what he calls human “agricultural machinery” (72) with the same directness as every other subject, seemingly neutral. The narrator isn’t corrupt in the same way that the racist characters are, but his yielding to white characters shows that by not critiquing their racism he becomes a passive agent of that racism.

The results of this incorporation of the world’s racism show in the narrator’s treatment of the black Wayne Hoobler. The narrator’s insecurity and need to control eventually causes him to inject himself into the story by attending the arts festival with his protagonists (192). He discusses his power over the characters, how he controls them by making a telephone ring (203), or simply stating “I had” before providing a character’s actions (209). He introduces this power in regards to the black Wayne Hoobler, describing himself as someone “who had created all Wayne’s misery to date, who could kill him or make him a millionaire or send him back to prison or do whatever he damn well pleased with Wayne” (192). The irony here is that the narrator thinks of himself as this powerful person because he’s telling the story, but he’s also this powerful person because he’s white, and Wayne’s black. In fact, the power of his whiteness is not entirely separate from his power as a storyteller—Vonnegut represents a long line of white

storytellers, writing less than a hundred years after emancipation when black stories were first allowed to be told in the United States. This is a fact Vonnegut was familiar with and expresses through the black characters he specifically describes as descended from slaves (the old woman, 63, and the two prostitutes, 72). The fact that Vonnegut doesn't give his narrator a separate name, in spite of his having some separate world views, ties that narrator to Vonnegut's history of success in a city where, at the time the novel was written, more than 30% percent of black people lived in poverty (*Data*).

The narrator's story eventually dissolves in absurdity after he first reaches a "spiritual climax" (18) caused by one of his own characters that he despises, and that is offset by the climax of his meeting his character, Kilgore Trout, and generally being dismissed by that character. Vonnegut goes out of the way to show his distaste for the wealthy white painter, Rabo Karabekian (208), but allows the narrator to become enraptured with him, even though the narrator claims to control everything Karabekian says. The narrator, then, either actually does not have control, or he does have control and is simply vapidly claiming an epiphany based on an idea he made up anyway. Both possibilities yield the same shallow deity that, in the book's epilogue, jumps out at Kilgore Trout as Trout tries to go about his day. He tells Trout that he's freeing him, like "Tolstoi freed his serfs" and "Thomas Jefferson freed his slaves" (293). He equates himself with a slave owner, even though Trout is one of the least maliciously treated characters. The narrator doesn't free Hoobler. Furthermore, the narrator claims he's freeing Trout at the same time as he's unexpectedly attacked by "a Doberman pinscher" who was "a leading character in an earlier version of this book" (285). In an interview, Vonnegut explains his reason for eliminating the Doberman pinscher, saying he didn't want to introduce violence too early in the book (Reilly 5). This possibly tongue-in-cheek comment highlights how Vonnegut

has control over the dog, but the narrator doesn't and can't escape the violence that Vonnegut provides. He claims to be freeing Trout from his control while simultaneously revealing that he doesn't actually have control. He isn't omnipotent, but simply controlling and destructive, an agent of his race.

The most deeply changed character of the story is the model of a successful white American, the wealthy but seemingly practical, generous, and charitable Dwayne Hoover who was a victim to bad chemicals. By using this vague euphemism, Vonnegut can ascribe symptoms to Hoover without definition, including hallucinations (96), echolalia (138), and a general disconnect from reality. Vonnegut experienced mental illness, and with a mother who committed suicide (Shields 53), he could diagnose Hoover but chooses to instead focus on the symptoms. Instead of carrying those symptoms back to their source, one illness or another, this highlights the relationship between those symptoms and the story, showing the way the symptoms reflect Hoover's increasing lack of control over the world around him and the anxiety it inspires. For example, he hallucinates the ground turning into a spongy texture, making it difficult for him to move forward and limiting his freedom. Hoover isn't from a background of limitations. The narrator gives a thorough genealogy of Hoover, who has experienced the white American dream. His family received the land he grew up on in a lawsuit with another white man, who bought the land after a bank foreclosed on the man who first owned it, a freed slave. Hoover's white American dream makes a mockery of a black American dream (118). The dream ended first when Hoover's son turned out to be a homosexual, and then again when his wife committed suicide by eating Drano. His secretary and lover, Francine Pefko, reports that, as Hoover's insanity worsens, he seems happier (40) and this seeming happiness could be attributed to an

increasing distance from the reality that had betrayed him. This character arc reaches a climax when Hoover meets Trout and is offered an exit from that reality altogether.

All of the benefits of Hoover's life he acquired through his superior status, and not only could these not save him, but when he faced a real moral crisis, he failed and lost everything. The climax of the novel, as the narrator tells the reader from the first chapter, occurs when Hoover meets Trout and Trout gives him a book to read, unknowingly triggering his mental illness and causing him to go on a rampage. It's the beginning of Trout's success, as the incident inspires him to change the world, but it's the end of Hoover's. The detail reserved for the novel's end is that Hoover received the book from Trout because he demanded it. He approaches Trout while already disconnected from reality because fluorescent lights hit Trout's tuxedo and caught Hoover's attention. Hoover demands " 'Give me the message' " and rests his chin on Trout's shoulder (252-253). Trout, feeling alarmed, gives Hoover the only thing he has—a copy of his book, *Now it Can Be Told* (253). Early in the novel the narrator describes the book as one in which the creator of the universe lets it be known to the only subject on the planet with free will that he is the only one and everyone else is a robot. The story goes on to describe all the chaos the man with free will creates. Ironically, Hoover begins the novel with more free will than any character, save the narrator. With his wealth and his status in the town he can have nearly anything he wants, and even commands his business partner to dress in more color (46) and his secretary to leave work in the middle of the day to have sex in a hotel in the middle of town (148). In spite of this, his sanity degrades and furthermore, because of his favorable status, Hoover's peers fail to notice that he's gone insane (40). Of all the separate pieces of his identity, only the white salesman is visible to them.

In the end, Hoover is reduced to a decrepit and insane homeless man (280). By including several other mentally ill characters, Vonnegut provides alternatives to this fate, including institutionalization and suicide, but instead Hoover is absorbed into the background of his world. This is typically the setting for black characters, such as Harry LeSabre's servants, referred to as "reindeer" (164), or the other servants to wealthy characters, or the many unnamed black prisoners or unemployed people around town. In an interview, Vonnegut describes some of the visual features he wanted to see in a film adaptation of the book, including a large group of black people milling constantly in the background with nothing to do (Reilly 10). This is a visual reflection of the real 1970s Indianapolis. Just as white society holds these people down, as evident from the treatment of Wayne Hoobler, the treatment of Dwayne Hoover shows that the normal status of black people is considered a punishment to white people, and one given to Hoover when he abandons the one part of his identity that mattered—his social status.

In spite of the fact that the book takes place in 1972, the narrator, who provides most of the world in sharp relief, fails to report on the civil rights movement. Vonnegut's comment about black people in the background with nothing to do speaks to his awareness about the race statistics around him during his upbringing. He shows interest in black identity, even speaking on the subject in 2007, in a speech that opens his collection, *Armageddon in Retrospect*:
The most spiritually splendid American phenomenon in my lifetime is how African-American citizens have maintained their dignity and self-respect, despite their having been treated by white Americans...as though they were contemptible and loathsome, and even diseased. (257-279)
Vonnegut doesn't speak of identity specifically, but his mapping out of the construction of his characters shows an understanding of the ways in which people are shaped by their inheritance, experiences, and ultimately their choices, and the construction of his black characters shows the

discrepancy between a person's inheritance and social status and their opportunity to make sound moral decisions. Wayne Hoobler, with a name imitative of his idol and counter, Dwayne Hoover, is the black character most closely examined by the narrator, and while the narrator doesn't find a perfect moral model in Hoobler, he doesn't find a human as or more morally corrupt than his protagonists. Hoobler doesn't get to fall into Trout's accidental success, though. His last appearance in the novel is being attacked by Hoover. Hoover perhaps shows the first awareness of the Civil Rights Movement when, in his madness, he rushes out into the night, "calling for Niggers to come talk to him" (260). Hoover hasn't shown overt racism before this, but reveals it as part of his mental disintegration. During a bad episode with Francine he refers to Kentucky Fried Chicken as a "nigger joint" (129), which repulses her. Now that he feels he finally has free will one of his first moral choices is to assault a black man (261). His call to black people, as though he knows they're gathering out in the night somewhere, shows an awareness of their separate and increasingly strong culture and his need to attack that culture shows his insecurity. He feels he has the social freedom to finally express himself as the superior and, much like Jason Compson, it results in his downfall.

Vonnegut builds a world of moral white characters with the possibility to have a positive impact, then shows their failure and degradation across the span of just a few days. His ironically literal portrayal of the segregated Midwest provides an environment of racial conflict so severe that the narrator, taking it in objectively, succumbs to it as an agent of chaos. In his other work Vonnegut takes on the events of World War II, the Vietnam War, and hypothetical revolutions, and in *Breakfast of Champions* he shows the heart of violence that inspires such events.

Chapter 4: White Identity in the Face of White Nationalism and Literature of the 21st Century

If any symbol is appropriate for the white nationalist groups that supported the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, it's the tiki torch. Carried aloft by the rioters, the intent was likely to impress the public with the serious-mindedness of the group as they attempted to evoke images of riots from the past, but rather than using legitimate torches, the group used a kind of lawn decor. This symbol is consistent with white identity as it appears in the works of Twain, Faulkner, and Vonnegut—it's a thin veneer of strength and dominance over a hollow and unstable reality. It shows that the identity conflicts captured by these past writers are still present today, and influence the work of today's white writers.

Since the Civil Rights movement conversation about race has changed, namely in that it has diversified, involving not only all races and genders competing more (though not perfectly) equally in publication, but involving a wide new host of media, including 24-hour broadcast news, social media like Facebook and twitter, public forums like Reddit, and personal and corporate websites and blogs. With smartphones, widespread filming and photography ensures that acts perceived as unjust are documented and broadcast, and people committing acts of prejudice are more often held accountable for their work. In the midst of all this, there still emerge successful careers of white, middle- and lower-class writers, whose work is significant to their field. This is especially true for writers who come from the Midwest and South, where there survives the most evidence that the image of a post-racial America is an illusion. Not only does the isolation of white, male, literature illuminate the identity component of racism, but that illumination may be more important than ever in a time when conversation about race risks

creation of the illusion that racism is either dead or exclusively exists in overt, self-proclaimed white supremacists with tiki torches.

This conversation opens with Jonathan Franzen, of rural Illinois and Brooklyn, New York, who writes the all-American novel about middle-class, middle-American white families. Franzen shows the reduction of white identity to a few fragile components, similar to both Twain and Faulkner, and the obliteration of those components in the digital age. He is echoed by JD Vance, of rural Ohio and Yale, who tells the nonfiction account of that obliteration in his own lower-class white Appalachian family. George Saunders, of rural Texas and Chicago, offers a Vonnegut-style objectively absurd presentation of the 21st century white lower classes.

Franzen's 2001 novel, *The Corrections*, shows the deterioration of identity dependent on occupation and the illusion of dominance. The deterioration he describes is most clearly linked to whiteness in the two married couples of the book, patriarch Alfred Lambert and his wife Enid, and their eldest son Gary and his wife Caroline. Alfred and Enid Lambert live in the whitewashed world of the fictional Midwestern town, St. Jude. Alfred's fate has an ironic tie to Mark Twain's. Twain's steamboatmen met their end when faced with the blooming railroad industry, and Alfred is a railroad engineer who, after his retirement, sees his career fade into meaninglessness in the digital age. His sons, a banker, Gary, and a writer, Chip, have careers in fields that have usurped Alfred's. This, coupled with Alfred's physical decline due to Parkinson's disease, shows his dependence on dominance for a secure identity. Alfred copes with his fate in a solitary way, but his wife Enid provides the connection to the white society to which they belong. She is obsessed with their neighbors, and makes a show about being pregnant because it's the passive-aggressive way she can compare her marriage to the other marriages in their community (loc 4457). Her social need to be the sexual object of her husband reinforces

Alfred's social need to be a conqueror. Her identity as a wife is only meaningful if it's validated by the white community around her. As Albert loses his sense of self through his career and the decline of his health, both of their identities lose meaning.

The eldest son, Gary Lambert, inherits some of these conflicts, especially the sense that without an identity through a classically white, male occupation there is nothing left to constitute his sense of self. As a banker, Gary measures his success in money, and his chapter, "The More He Thought About It, the Angrier He Got," is laden with references to corporate incomes, stocks, and financial jargon. It disrupts the story of his family life in a way emblematic of its disruption of his sense of self. In spite of the fact that both he and his parents are old fashioned, Gary has a modern marriage, one over which he's conflicted. For him, the husband and wife must be equal, but the husband must be more equal than the wife. His relationship is fraught with paranoia and power struggles, spurred on by Enid Lambert who points out that Caroline doesn't cook (loc 3003). This seems on the surface like Gary is insecure with his gender identity, but each of his conflicts is also wrapped up in his race. He didn't care about Caroline's choice to not cook until it was pointed out to him by a superior in his community. He doesn't care about money so much as his standing with the corporations he encounters. His obsession with the company Axon in particular shows that without a high standing in a classically white environment. As of 2017, almost two decades after *The Corrections* was written, tech companies were 95% white, and finance companies are more than 80% white (Bass).

The source of obsessiveness and paranoia in the members of the Lambert family also affected the careers of Jonathan Franzen and Mark Twain themselves, to a lesser degree. Both writers are intimately connected to the white-dominated worlds they describe, Twain because of slavery and Jim Crow laws, and Franzen through his bond to high art. Franzen was part of a

social scandal that ensued after Oprah Winfrey endorsed *The Corrections* in 2001, and he reacted with disgust, suggesting the businesswoman and entertainer was not aligned with “the high-art literary tradition” (Kirkpatrick). Franzen’s fellow white male author, Andre Dubus III, reacted by saying: “It is so elitist it offends me deeply.... The assumption that high art is not for the masses, that they won’t understand it and they don’t deserve it—I find that reprehensible” (Kirkpatrick). Other writers’ reflections on this conflict have taken gender into account, but race remains an almost completely unspoken subject. This is again because of the tendency of whiteness to only be seen through the absence of blackness, such as seen in the uncritically all-white world of Twain’s steamboatmen. Franzen doesn’t call “the high-art literary tradition” an exclusively white establishment, but it is just that, as shown by Kenneth Warren in his book, *What Was African American Literature?* Franzen writes about the white middle class for the white upper class. Twain writes for a white audience more accidentally, as 76% of black people were illiterate at the time of *Life*’s publication (Margo).

Franzen reacted to the proliferation of his portrayal of white identity among the general mixed-race public with disgust. Ultimately Franzen was apologetic for his actions and Twain opened himself to black identity in *Huck Finn* but there’s still much of their own fragile white identities found in their texts, and as the post-9/11 evolves these fragile white identities seem to become part of a new norm. An extreme example of this is the self-titled journalist, Alex Jones. The disturbingly non-fiction Alex Jones is a radio and online self-promoted news show host with a deep fear of the feminization of men and the perceived decline of white power. Jones today is a generally discredited conspiracy theorist, but he maintains a wide convinced audience. His website, Infowars.com, which promotes conspiracy theories and fake news, reacted to the election of a black president like it was a booster shot for hate. It was the white, male nightmare

come true, for if white identity was dependent on dominance, the first loss of the position of the most powerful American to a black person was deeply unsettling on a surface level for Jones, but also on a subconscious level for the Gary Lamberts of the world. Alex Jones is part of the non-fiction world captured in 2017 by author J.D. Vance.

Vance prefaces his memoir with a statement about the relationship between his experience and race. He is young for a memoir writer, and not an author in any other respect, but he gives his motivation for telling his story: “as surveys have found, working-class whites are the most pessimistic group in America. More pessimistic than Latino immigrants, many of whom suffer unthinkable poverty. More pessimistic than black Americans, whose material prospects continue to lag behind those of whites” (4). In this pessimistic group are the deluded attendees of the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally, who, at the time of their protest, were of the same race as 81% of congressional seats (Bialik), but still felt threatened. Vance expresses no deep, psychological interest in identity, but presents its components anyway: family, wealth, occupation, community, health, and, of course, race. The subject most intriguing to Vance is the failure of poor white communities to care for themselves and their children. He describes the poor diets of his peers and the detrimental health effects which, later in life, effected his ability to develop a healthy career (such as struggling with his weight at the start of this military career, 163). He attributes this to a lack of involvement in older generations with the future of younger generations. Not only do many adults in his life, including his parents, fail to encourage Vance’s education and career, but the people of the poor white communities make him feel abashed about his success (205). These features Vance provides form a portrait of the lower-class Appalachian whiteness that is dependent on bitterness, as though something was owed that has not been

gained. This sentiment echoes Faulkner's Compson family, who imagine themselves as the Israelites of the Exodus narrative, deprived of a promised land.

Vance plays a careful game with race by coupling a Faulknerian family with an objective narrative style like Twain's. His work has neither direct accusations of racism, nor overtly racist remarks by his characters and, as said before, only foregrounds the whiteness of its subjects in Vance's announcement at the book's beginning. In fact, if it was not specifically described as a book about "hillbillies," or white Appalachians, the race-related nature of the book could go almost unnoticed. This is due largely to the absence of Faulkner's first-person, stream-of-conscious narrative form that doesn't allow a single thought about "niggers" to go unmissed. Vance's choice to withhold overt racism is somewhat dishonest. It allows Vance to portray people in lower-class white communities, which have historically exhibited the most racism in the country, without indicting any specific individuals as racists. This is especially suspicious in his loving portrayal of his mother's parents. Vance describes two sets of individuals: the loving influential moral figures who were his guardians for long stretches of his childhood, and the dysfunctional lower-class white couple that raised his troubled mother. They appear almost as two separate sets of people, though they are the same couple. Vance leans towards empathy, admitting the flaws of his cultural peers from the beginning that he might help the reader understand them without an instinctual moral rejection. Faulkner portrays the detestable Mrs. Compson, but also portrays Jason Compson so blatantly that he is unforgiven by the reader in spite of the flaws in his upbringing. Vance portrays Mamaw and Pawpaw Blanton with enough distance that the reader might give them a chance.

While Vance's work may be somewhat flawed in its dishonesty, it does provide some important insights into the world of white Appalachia. Vance focuses on the importance of

opening a productive conversation between this self-segregated community and the larger world. He explains the mixed honesty by describing the reaction of his subjects to previous analysis: “The people are physically unhealthy, and without government assistance they lack treatment for the most basic problems. Most important, they’re *mean* about it—they will hesitate to open their lives up to others for the simple reason that they don’t wish to be judged” (19). The same disconnect between white Appalachia and government-based medicinal aid that results in poor physical health exists between white Appalachia and national race conversation, and in this case results in an Appalachian identity that has only race as a foundation. Vance proposes conversations and corrections that may expand white identity beyond the confines of race.

The bond between this desire and identity is clear as Vance recounts his adult life and how he not only escaped his family’s prejudice and poverty but thrived in an East coast career. There were three steps in this escape: the military, an undergraduate education, and law school. Each of these steps isolates a part of Vance’s one-dimensional identity and provides alternatives to his hopeless Appalachian dependence. As a character, he grows morally and intellectually. This begins with the forceful integration of the military. Vance describes his choice to join the military in spite of being capable of attending a university, and repeatedly states that the equality that existed in spite of race or class was an influential impact from that experience. The soldier identity wasn’t merely a placeholder though—Vance expresses that for the first time he realized both that he had agency over his decisions and actions and that his worth was determined by those decisions and actions rather than by a superficial and unchosen trait (189). This is the sort of complex and functional self-image that creates an identity founded on more than just whiteness. From his undergraduate education Vance strengthened these new features of his self-image. He describes his experience with wealthy and upper-middle class white students who had

one-dimensional world views due to lack of the experiences of the masses (188). The coupling of his academic aptitude and his former experiences allows him to be critical of both worlds. This shows again the significance of communication between social groups to create diverse identities that thrive independently of race. The third step challenged Vance's self-image and Vance exhibits that challenge in one of his closer, more intimate scenes.

In this scene, Vance describes the challenge of attending an "infamous dinner at one of New Haven's fanciest restaurants" (210), which he describes with more trepidation than his wartime experiences in the Middle East. The evening has a number of high-society moments to which Vance reacts in very Appalachian ways. It begins when he requests white wine and, when the waitress asks "'sauvignon blanc or chardonnay'", Vance "thought she was screwing with me" (211). The language Vance uses is striking, with his lower-class slang a stark contrast to the upper class, east-coast atmosphere. This shows his reaction to the clash of cultures is as much a struggle as the actual clash. His instinct is to assume the woman must have something against him, and he imagines himself as the victim of her attack. This same moment repeats itself throughout the dinner as Vance attempts to understand silverware and sparkling water. In the end, however, it's a successful evening. By moving past his instincts and presenting himself in an honest and communicative way, his capabilities lead to a smooth incorporation into this seemingly separate world. Vance describes how this moment proved emblematic of his Yale career as he continued to struggle emotionally with this integration of worlds, and ultimately he reinforces that his goal is not conflict or blame but conversation and understanding.

Vance explores the mixed worlds of races and classes with a gracefulness that is palatable to his readers, but, as said before, not entirely honest. For unpleasantly pure honesty, there is the work of George Saunders, who has in common with Kurt Vonnegut that he portrays the world so

objectively that all its absurdity, including the absurdity in race relations, comes to dominate his style. He includes critiques of culture, gender, sexuality, mental health, and race in his 2006 short story collection, *In Persuasion Nation*. In this collection, the short story “Christmas” most aggressively discusses race. It tells the story of a young, white, Midwestern dreamer who imagines himself to be a museum curator in the making but who flounders in the real world of finances, labor, and income. The narrator, named only as The Great White Dope (89), gets a temporary job working for a roofing company and discusses an exchange between one of his black coworkers, John, and the white supervisor, Rick. The exchange reveals a great deal about the racial climate in which the Great White Dope is working, and how he handles that exchange reveals a great deal about his own identity as a white man.

The exchange the narrator witnesses is an example of the perpetuation of black poverty in labor environments. John is a middle-aged black man who claims to have a great deal of roofing experience, a fact challenged by his white superiors, Rick and Terry. No evidence for or against John’s capabilities is provided. The conversations between John, Rick, and Terry are presented objectively to a degree that where the men are joking, and where they are genuinely hostile is difficult to discern. Terry mocks John, saying he “has fourteen kids and lets the welfare pay” (91). He mocks John for his use of welfare but when John attempts to make more money through the roofing business. The mocking seems cruel, though it’s true that John has fourteen children, one of the sources of his economic problems. The narrator meets John’s family and finds that it’s a loving, if complicated, family and that John has a strong bond to his children. The overall portrait of John is that of a complex and complicated individual, though it is unclear whether the narrator himself perceives this. The exchange between John and Rick happens at the roofing company’s Christmas party, where the men are allowed to gamble and John gambles away his

entire week's pay and his entire Christmas bonus to Rick, in an attempt to make enough money to give his children a real Christmas. The narrator realizes this has everything to do with capital: "Rick could lose and lose and never really lose. Once John dipped below four hundred, he was dead" (95). The exchange has nothing to do with gambling ability, just as John's reliance on welfare has nothing to do with roofing skills. He begins with unequal opportunity and thus inevitably fails.

This depiction of white and black conflict says a great deal about the racist mentality of Rick and Terry, but the Great White Dope's reaction also shows a lack of understanding reflected by his dependence on his white identity. His poverty is more chosen than John's, as he has many opportunities but is reticent about each. He seeks a career as a museum curator but is unwilling to work up to it, or to do more than call the local Field Museum periodically to see if there's an opening (97). He lives off the kindness of his Aunt and desires to keep his current girlfriend happy, but is unwilling to put in any work to do so. At 26 years old, this is not an entirely unsuitable place for the narrator to be, but his capabilities are reflected poorly less by his lack of career and more by his interpretation of the exchange between John and Rick. The narrator attempts to stop him from gambling, and even tries to convince Rick to stop gambling with John. Rick's combination of racism and elitism cause him to brush off the narrator, but Rick also makes a point that's unusually poignant: "He's a man, right? He wants to play. Ain't nobody forcing him" (95). The fact is that Rick is forcing John to play but not in the way that Rick and the narrator think. John plays because he has so little to lose. His best-case scenario, given that he can't beat Rick's thousands of dollars of slack, is to go home with seven hundred dollars from his check and bonus. After payments for rent, food, utilities, and transportation for himself and his fourteen children, that money is practically meaningless. The narrator seems to

want John to realize that the money is better than nothing, but the narrator, who has an education, a desire to write poetry or curate, and no children to support, has more money and accomplishes nothing.

The narrator is so dependent on his identity as a white man that he cannot see John as an independent, unique, complex agent of his own choices. He perceives none of the subtle nuances in the gambling exchange. To him, John is the classic poor black victim of poverty and racism and he, the Great White Dope, can save John's Christmas, and John turns into the flat black victim found in much of white literature. The narrator's final reflection on the encounter happens in his future, long after he has abandoned any hope of keeping his girlfriend or paying back his aunt. He has moved on to another unnamed Midwestern town, has grown and matured emotionally, but still fantasizes about what it would have been like to get a curatorship at the Field Museum, and to then reflect on the time when he was "a joke of a roofer so beat down he once stood by watching as a nice man got cheated out of his Christmas" (100). He has matured in every way but still can't see the flaws in his perception of John. The narrator takes away any of John's agency, suggesting he could've acted as the white savior if he'd only been motivated to do so. He then blames being "beat down" on his lack of motivation, so he first takes away John's agency, then eradicates himself of responsibility for that agency. He has a hollow white identity that fails to fulfill even its fantastical and fictional ideal.

As though partaking in the absurdity of a Vonnegut or Saunders story, the white nationalist reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement was the All Lives Matter movement, a reflection of the same misunderstanding naivety of the "Christmas" narrator. All Lives Matter started as a reactive social media response, but gained the support of such alt-right groups as the Tea Party. It is a refusal to acknowledge the role of racism in current events and contemporary

inequality, and an attempt to take agency away from the oppressed group and to suggest that the white majority has the solution. This social media narrative progresses alongside contemporary writers, simultaneously influencing those writers and offering commentary on their interpretations of white identity in a rapidly-changing America.

Conclusion

Each character assessed in these works of Twain, Faulkner, Vonnegut, and contemporary writers could be part of today's All Lives Matter movement in one way or another. There aren't any heroes in these stories. Still, their creators shape them with some degree of empathy and understanding. In this case, to empathize with these white characters is not to condone their choices, but rather to better understand the source of the turmoil they experience and the turmoil they cause.

In the introduction the question was posed, what is white identity? Through the generations, white identity has surfaced not just as the self-image of white individuals, but as the identities of those for whom whiteness is integral to their validation. Before the Civil War, this was an easy, if immoral, validation, reaffirmed by each reminder that people of color were devoid of the basic human rights that white Americans had. It was an identity built without concern about cultural capital or community involvement, and so each step forward in racial equality came as a blow. While many white individuals coped with that blow by moving forward with the rest of the country and finding ways to validate their identity without dependence on their race, many others stayed stagnant, particularly in the Midwest and South.

Mark Twain witnessed the beginning of white identity decay with emancipation, and his interpretation of the decline and death of the steamboat industry shows a generation whose existence has been invalidated through loss of occupation. In spite of being part of a new and changing world, they sulk over what they remember as the once-great South. In both *Life* and *Huck Finn*, Twain realizes the irony of this reaction, given that many of these people came from

working class or poverty and hadn't flourished in that South. His was the generation that founded the Jim Crow laws, which stayed strong through Faulkner's lifetime.

Unlike Twain's laborers, Faulkner's middle-class Compson family can remember a time when their race alone was the foundation of all pride, and where there is still room for a strong and close family, each child and parent turns on the others and creates a household of hate and violence. Twain's work stops at oblivion, but Faulkner writes of what comes after, and the dysfunctional individuals who spring from a world where identity is founded solely on prejudice.

Vonnegut meanwhile leaves no aspect of race to the imagination. He instead constructs a world where the reader is constantly aware of whiteness, and thus forces it to have a definition. At the close of the civil rights movement, Vonnegut lays the foundation for a future where the dependence on whiteness for an identity is accepted as the weakness it is, and where individuals can seek an identity beyond the white Midwest.

Through Tom Sawyer, Jason Compson, and Dwayne Hoover, it's clear that the solution to an insecure white identity is not a stronger version of that identity, but a whole new way of thinking about identity. It isn't easy to force the white readership to transform the self-perception that has been ingrained in them. This involves perceiving whiteness as something other than an intrinsic norm. These writers promote this idea, none more than Kurt Vonnegut and George Saunders, who ensure that whiteness is as acknowledged as other races. It's an important conversation they're starting, given that much of the dialogue of identity is founded in whiteness. Aside from the government statistics mentioned in previous chapters, 83% of university professors are white, almost 80% of journalists are white, and white authors dominate the world of published fiction (*NCES, White*).

One such step, which this study has mentioned but not brought into sharp relief, is how these writers came to influence the portrayal of white identity. From Twain who became “an immovable fixture among the other rocks of New England” to JD Vance and Jonathan Franzen who have also joined the Northeast’s literary culture, there’s a general migration for those who write about Midwestern and Southern race politics out of the Midwest and South. The antidote for weak white identity for these writers was higher education, career opportunities, or personal connections in a post-racial but conspicuously white elite. Further study on this topic of migration could serve as a next step in understanding white identity in American literature, both where it is now, and where it’s going in an increasingly globalized world.

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