The Anxiety of Obsolescence

Pessimistic Depictions of the Artist in the Modern American Novels of Kate Chopin, William Faulkner, and Nathanael West

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Educated in the Humanities,
They headed for the City, their beliefs
Implicit in the eyes and arteries
Of each, and their sincerity displayed
In notes, in smiles, in sheaves
Of decimal etecetera. Made,
They counted themselves free. These were the hours
Of self-belief, and the slow accolade
Of pieces clattering into a well…

--Glyn Maxwell, from "The High Achievers"

Introduction: Art in the Permanent New

The stereotype of the modern artist is the figure of the elite aesthete, a figure elevated above the mass of humanity in pursuit of the ideal of high aestheticism; he or she "dares and defies" as Kate Chopin's Mlle. Reisz puts it. Yet, in *The Awakening* (1899), in which Mlle. Reisz appears, Chopin ultimately presents the artist not as powerful or triumphant but, rather, as doomed, at best, to insignificance or to complete emotional and physical destruction at worst. Though the novel carries with it a deep admiration for the role of the artist, in the final analysis, it reveals a deeper pessimism, even unto despair, toward the artist's actual prospects for success, or even survival, in the human world. This anxiety is not restricted to Chopin. Indeed, the fate of Chopin's protagonist, the artist Edna Pontellier, pre-figures the later and ultimate defeat of artist figures in both William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* (1936) and Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*(1933) and *Day of the Locust* (1939).

This study will present the existence of a strand of artistic despair running through modernist American fiction. The consistent failure to positively present the high modern ideal comes about as a result of what I call "the anxiety of obsolescence". The anxiety of

obsolescence is the result of recognition on the part of the artist of the ultimate fate of any created work, of art or otherwise, in replacement to the point of oblivion. This provides particular anxiety for the modernist due to, as I will establish, the central position for that figure of the self. Simultaneously, the "modernist artist" functions in a period of history marked by an increasingly obvious and rapid action of the system of replacement, the period of the establishment of technological modernity. As the rate and efficiency of replacement increases, the artist's awareness of, and resultant anxiety toward, the impending state of obsolescence commensurately increases.

In formulating this theory I have drawn on Harold Bloom's exploration of artistic influence and the aesthetic ideal of literary modernism and on Philip Fisher's examination of the idea of "democratic social space" and the ideology of creative destruction, the permanent new, within American literary history. These theorists are tied together by their common exploration of the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Theory

Harold Bloom's chief concern in his 1973 work, *The Anxiety of Influence*, is the development of the triumphant artist figure of the High Modern ideal. Bloom terms his figure the "strong poet", who "fight[s] nature on nature's own ground, and suffers a great defeat, even as it retains its greater dream… the human refusal wholly to sublimate" (Bloom 10). The "strong poet" refuses to accept the necessity of his or her own death and creates art, not as a consolation, but in an effort to resist death itself. Artistically, the act of rejection directs toward the influence of previous strong artists, from whom the developing artist must emerge to find a distinct vision and voice. Such rejection of origin

occurs through acts of reinterpretation, "poetic misprision", a willful misreading (7). Bloom evokes the image of Milton's Satan as artist in Satan's rejection of the authority of God:

> Why call Satan a modern poet? Because he shadows forth gigantically a trouble at the core of Milton and of Pope, a sorrow that purifies by isolation...The incarnation of the Poetic Character in Satan begins when Milton's story truly begins, with the Incarnation of God's Son and Satan's rejection of *that* incarnation. Modern poetry begins in two declarations of Satan: "We know no time when we were not as now" and "To be weak is miserable, doing or suffering." (Bloom 20)

Satan rejects the investment of authority in the Son by the Father, that is to say, he moves away from the prior artist, God, by rejection of that artist's creation, the Son. Satan favors a move toward a distinctly modernist vision of art and the artist in his alternate presentation of artistic creation; he rejects both the status of the work of the previous artist and also his position in relation to that artist so that "we know no time when we were not as now". Satan's creation is his "self", his existence and status as an artist. In his desire for self-creation, Satan illustrates Bloom's conception of the strong poet as paragon of will and the self, yet without solipsism. The artist creates the self distinctly, but the act of creation radiates outward to all existence so that the self-created artist is "exactly on the border of solipsism"; the creation of the self is the creation of an entire world (22). The act of self creation is necessary for any birth necessitates death, a beginning requires an end, but, by rejecting the limits of prior creation, Bloom's strong poet denies the inevitability of destruction. Fiction and reality, art and artist, fold into each other as the creation alters its creator.

The later artist takes the work of the earlier strong artist or artists and alters it in one of six phases, or "revisionary ratios", as identified by Bloom. In following this path,

he or she creates great art and becomes a strong artist in his or her own right. To fail to revise the strong artist's work is to be overwhelmed by the "anxiety of influence" and remain a weak, derivative artist, whose artistic output sublimates the fear of death rather than rejecting it (9-10). However, complete success is impossible, for the artistic quest for immortality "encompasses necessarily the diminishment of poetry…The great poets of the English Renaissance are not matched by their Enlightened descendents, and the whole tradition of the post-Enlightenment, which is romanticism, shows a further decline in its Modernist and post-Modernist heirs" (Bloom 10). For Bloom, then, the artist always operates "late in history" (24).

Philip Fisher in his book, *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction* (1999), explicitly rejects such language:

> Intellectuals in the nineteenth century too easily believed the tired claim… that we live near the end of time. For European pessimists like Schopenhauer, we find ourselves born tired in the last days of the world… We moderns are lesser beings living on an exhausted earth. (Fisher 17)

Instead, he postulates the existence of a uniquely American "ideology of the new". Fisher presents an American culture that revolves around a state of permanent newness, not by a progress of linear development from an original state through stages to a final conclusion but within a system of complete, constant, and multiple replacement of old by new, a "genuine permanent revolution, that of competitive technological capitalism" (Fisher 3).

The American situation, with a populace composed of immigrants from a variety of dissimilar locations and located within a landmass whose size and diversity of environment encourages constant internal migration, results in an aesthetic culture without a shared heritage or the stability to build a common one (Fisher 38). The system

perpetuates itself; so that, disinclined toward a general traditionalism, it has no incentive to develop one. Fractured, it fractures itself and pursues the "next-on" at the exclusion of all else.

Fisher uses circles as an illustration of the process of replacement. Each period of reality is a "perfect circle"; it is "complete" so that "any change [is] a destruction" of the entire previous system (Fisher 16). Fisher draws this image from Emerson's 1839 essay "Circles". Emerson, also appears in *the Anxiety of Influence.* In each case, Emerson becomes emblematic of characteristics limited to the American scene. Bloom regards Emerson as an influential figure in American literature, in the anxiety-inducing sense. Bloom's Emerson, in the role of "Great Original of a genuinely American poetry" descends into solipsism through the "revisionary ratio" of *askesis*. *Askesis* is "a movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude" so as to curtail influence, but "in Emerson, the power of the eye and the power of the mind endeavor to become one, which makes *askesis* impossible… the eye declines to be purged. Reality reduces to the Emersonian Me and the Not-Me… and excludes all others" (Bloom 15,132-133). The poet focuses on the final isolation as a state rather than the process and the escape from influence. Bloom's account of the Emersonian imagination equates with Fisher's Emersonian circles; the Me is the current circle and the Not-Me the future and the past. When the current circle breaks, the Me that the solipsistic poet creates of and around him or herself vanishes.

For our purposes, both Bloom and Fisher's failure lies in focusing on the product of this uniquely American experience, the replacer rather than the replaced. Thus, Fisher sees the emergence of constant new modes of being as positive, and, for the being who

seems excluded from the old circle, for whom it "seems at first [that there is] no place for us within this circle or for the activity of our minds" the destruction of the old is a genuinely freeing experience (Fisher 16).

However, our own focus is on the earlier poet, or rather, the poet in the present who sees the individual self as the current "Me" while possessing a capacity for awareness of the coming replacement, the transition from "Me" to the next poet's "Not-Me". It is for this perspective that the American system of replacement of ideas causes the anxiety of obsolescence and gives birth to modernist despair. The contention is that the method of replacement by "encirclement" resulting in complete destruction of the old, will appear to our solipsistic artist as a complete destruction of the constructions of the self, resulting in obsolescence. This idea of obsolescence as the ultimate American fate appears in Fisher's image of the elderly grandparent, unable to transmit knowledge that has become obsolete, "who must go to school to the young", the power in the relationship of teacher to student reverses generational bounds with the young now powerful over the old (Fisher 5). In our terms this becomes a replacement of the prior artist on such a scale so as to remove the possibility of relevance even in the form of Bloom's influence. The result is the anxiety of obsolescence, the artistic despair caused by the looming replacement.

In the chapters that follow, we will observe various recognitions and reactions to the anxiety of obsolescence. We will be examining four novels from the period of American modernism. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*, and Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *Day of the Locust*. These particular novels allow an excellent opportunity for examination as each presents a

narrative concerned with a figure explicitly identified with art. Each of these figures undergoes a process of "awakening" to an awareness of the failure of the role of "artist" and a reaction to this awareness. The novels are arranged so as to demonstrate the increase in modernist despair relative to chronological advancement, both because replacement increases in speed with the accumulation of technological advancement over time and because, as the modernist period moves toward its own replacement, the threat of obsolescence becomes more apparent to the modernist author. As such, the late novels of West display a greater anxiety than do early novels of Chopin. Though therefore chronologically arranged, this is done in terms of the career of the author, rather than strictly in terms of dates of publication, so as to highlight the progression of obsolescence within the modernist period as a function of a system of replacement, which moves faster as technology and commerce develop. As a result in areas of highly concentrated population and highly developed technological modernity (cities), obsolescence becomes more of a threat than in rural, less modern areas. As such, though *Miss Lonelyhearts* is actually published prior to *Absalom, Absalom,* because its author is born and lives within the very modern city of New York and the novel itself is set in this city, the world it portrays occurs later in modernity than does the other novel, set largely in rural Mississippi and written by William Faulkner, who is born and lives, primarily, in rural Mississippi. We will see how these factors of technology and chronology combined with gender and power, both political and economic, operate in relation to and diverge from the artistic despair caused by the anxiety of obsolescence.

Chapter 1
Kate Chopin: Except Children...

In her critical biography, *Kate Chopin* (1990), Emily Toth relates a peculiar episode from the writer's literary career, an 1894 review of a book of essays, *Crumbling Idols*, published by her contemporary Hamlin Garland. Her review was not favorable:

> Garland's ideas were true, if not new, she wrote, and no one would dispute his claims that "the youthful artist should free himself from the hold of conventionalism; that he should go direct to those puissant sources, Life and Nature, for inspiration and turn his back upon models furnished by man; in a word that he should be creative and not imitative." But Garland overdid his argument, Kate Chopin felt: He "undervalues the importance of the past in art and exaggerates the significance of the present." She was not persuaded by an angry young man, ten years her junior, who wanted to tear down the past. (Toth 249)

Initially, such an opinion appears odd coming from the pen of a writer who, within four years, will receive harsh reviews for her own book, *The Awakening* (1899), whose primary offence, in the eyes of its reviewers, is its deviation from the conventions of the past. What Chopin reveals in this review is the strong poet's anxiety of obsolescence resulting from the threat the future. Toth senses this, consciously or not, stressing Garland's youth in relation to Chopin. For Chopin, Garland is the ravenous future and she the past. This is a pattern that will emerge in *The Awakening*, itself an assault on convention, but not necessarily on "the past" itself; the figure of the past in Mlle. Reisz appears benign in contrast with a distinctly threatening future.

Edna Pontellier's artistic development and death in *The Awakening* can be read as a symbolized account of Chopin's artistic fear. In this reading, Edna's rejection of a position of subjugation within the confines of marriage, the source of her contemporary critics' distress, becomes secondary to the subjugation and sacrifice of her selfhood to the

future embodied in her children. Motherhood serves to advance the demands of the future into the present, accelerating the process of replacement in such a manner that it cannot be escaped. The demands of the present, figured in the husband and male lovers, or of the past, figured in the father, appear inherently powerless for the developed artist.

The presence of a threat appears at the beginning of the novel in the form of warning cries: "A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over: '*Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!* That's all right!'" (Chopin 521). This translates as "Get out! Get out! Damn it!" (1065). This is a threat that necessitates both curse (violent words) and escape. The scene essentially pre-figures the action of the narrative, as the English words "that's all right" imply that the earlier violent words achieve a reclamation of the situation where later an apparent escape will manifest itself in the form of artistic development. Yet, the repetition here, in the descriptive phrase "repeating over and over", containing its own repetition of "over", and in the actual repetition of speech in the phrase "get out" establishes a cyclical pattern of attempt and failure. This cycle, and the inherent threat, become linked to the motherhood-role, which eventually overcomes Edna's artistry, in the repetition of the image of the parrot.

The parrot reappears in the ninth of thirty-nine sections, during a performance by children for the adults staying at Madame Lebrun's:

> Music, dancing, and a recitation or two were the entertainments furnished, or rather, offered. But there was nothing systematic about the programme, no appearance of prearrangement nor even premeditation.
>
> At an early hour in the evening the Farival twins were prevailed upon to play the piano. They were... always clad in the Virgin's colors, blue and white, having been dedicated to the Blessed Virgin at their baptism. (546)

The audience receives their playing well; the narrative appears to present the twins, their art, and the gathering generally in a positive light. The parrot, however, intervenes, repeating its earlier phrase. Its presence here undercuts the previous positive reading of the Farival twins. The undercutting becomes explicit: "[the parrot] was the only being present who possessed sufficient candor that he was not listening to these gracious performances for the first time that summer" (547). This view of the performance as so repetitive as to enter into the realm of the offensive, contrasts it with the description of the previous performances as "unpremeditated", as spontaneous. The next performance, a brother and sister, "gave recitations, which everyone present had heard many times at winter evening entertainments in the city" (547). This doubling of siblings both stresses the repetitiveness and doubles the Farival twins' association with the Virgin Mary, the archetypal mother of the Catholic religion, whose colors they wear. This forces comparison with the next performance, a solitary little girl dressed entirely in black, the color of mourning, whose performance, unlike the previous, is "bewildering" in its artistry. It also demands comparison with the parrot, who, solitary in person though double in speech, presents the option of "damnation" as an alternative to the doubled colors of the Virgin, mother of the Savior.

The girl's identity as a completely-contained self, which Chopin establishes by the obvious contrast of her solitariness with the repetition of and the doubling of performers within the other performances, is realized as the girl achieves the modernist ideal of self-creation and replacement of the parent. Her mother watches with "greedy admiration" but the narrator deems this attitude unnecessary as the girl becomes "mistress of the situation" (547). The use of the passive voice in the description of the black

clothing in which she "had been properly dressed" stresses that the agency of the selection of the color emblematic of death lies with someone else and that both the death itself and the emotions of mourning associated with it belong to others. The death is that of the absent father whose authority the child replaces with her command of the situation. The greed and admiration of the mother transfer from their original focus in the person of the now-dead father to that of the daughter who assumes his role.

As biographical evidence for this reading of the daughter as a figure replacing parental authority, Chopin's father dies in a train accident when she is five years old,[1] an event which she re-imagines elsewhere in her fiction, most notably in "The Story of an Hour" (1894). In this story the apparent death of her husband leads a woman to a realization of freedom. When the reports of the husband's death prove false, the woman, deprived of her new freedom, dies of a heart attack. Toth, explicitly linking Chopin's biography with her fiction, examines the similarities between the names in the story and those of Chopin's family members (Toth 32-33). Likewise the character Edna has suffered the death of a parent. She is motherless, but this condition does not lead her to experience the apparent freedom of the dancing girl. Edna must bring about the defeat of her father to attain a similar (apparent) freedom.

For his figurative death to bring her freedom, "the Colonel" first explicitly becomes linked with authority; he informs Edna's husband that his treatment of her is "too lenient, too lenient by far...Authority, coercion are what is needed...the only way to manage a wife" (Chopin 603). Thus, Edna reacts, in part, against the authority of the father-figure. Initially, she co-opts him, aligning herself with him to acquire the strengths

[1] Chopin's date of birth is traditionally given as February 8, 1851, a date which she seems to claim in her diaries, but Toth, using baptismal records, identifies the actual date one year earlier.

he possesses. She does this by employing his knowledge of horse-racing to win the money she uses to move out of her husband's house (Chopin 613). On this initial occasion she sides with the Colonel to undermine the weaker authority of her husband, gaining a new authority of the self that she later uses in direct "almost violent" conflict with her father (its source) on the subject of her sister's marriage. She triumphs over his now "labored and unconvincing" arguments, finally getting "rid of her father" (601-603). The father is dead and replaced by the daughter. With no spouse, the procreative role of "mother" and the submissive role of "wife" become "unnecessary". The procreative, generational system disappears in favor of a one-time, complete replacement of the multiple parts by a single, self-creative whole, reminiscent of Fisher's perfect circles. This is what occurs with the dancing girl, who celebrates the rejection of everything outside the new circle with the self-creative dance. She reclaims the old color imagery, turning black, "properly" intended by the mother as a mourning of the absent father, into the color of dance and celebration in the creation of the self.

Mademoiselle Reisz also wears black, linking her to the artistry of the parentless, spouseless little girl. She wears "black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair" (549). The lace implies a veil, black either as the distorted garb of a bride or as a funereal covering. The violets as dark, artificial flowers mock both the wedding bouquet and the image of fertility which flowers ordinarily imply. When she first appears, she occupies herself, "dragging a chair in and out of her room, and at intervals objecting to the crying of a baby" (548). The repetition of apparently useless and futile behavior calls to mind the cry of the parrot more than the repeated performances of the two sets of siblings. She acts willfully, obsessively, to resist, as the

parrot does, not to please, as the siblings do. The objection to the baby reinforces the other anti-maternal imagery she bears. Further, she establishes the connection between the Farival twins and the mosquitoes that plague Edna throughout the summer (577). The mosquitoes make their first appearance the night Edna retreats from the "indescribable oppression" of her family obligation to weep on the porch:

> The mosquitoes made merry over her, biting her firm, round arms and nipping at her bare insteps.
>
> The little stinging, buzzing imps succeeded in dispelling a mood which might have held her there in the darkness half the night longer. (527)

The children feed on their mother as well: "They had only come to investigate the contents of the bonbon box. They accepted without murmuring what she chose to give them, each holding out two chubby-hands scoop-like". Additionally they speak in "high and penetrating" voices reminiscent of the whining buzz and penetrating bite of the mosquito (533). The extension, from the Farival twins to Edna's own children, of the mosquito imagery implies a general conception of the younger generation as parasites. This is the anxiety of obsolescence: the artist fears the threat of a gradual wasting away for the convenience of those who come later.

Mlle Reisz replaces maternal fertility with artistic creativity that, though self-directed, affects others. It "stamps" Edna, and enables her own self-exploration, culminating in apparent artistic expression and personal freedom. Indeed, the narrator here, speculating on Edna's response to the music, uses the metaphor of metal receiving a pressing, an image of offering and reception that belies the earlier rhetoric of the artist alone: "Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress" (549). The language of preparation stresses the mutuality of

the action. Edna's response moves the imagery away from the mechanical and back into the context of fertility and impregnation, resulting in a mutually participatory metaphorical sex act. As such, Chopin presents a progressive view of an active female sexuality, which includes the possibility of liberation through a lesbian encounter. Indeed, Edna responds to the "impress", on both physical and emotional levels, with language evoking orgasm:

> But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her.
>
> Mademoiselle had finished. She arose... "Well, how did you like my music?" she asked. The young woman was unable to answer; she pressed the hand of the pianist convulsively. Mademoiselle perceived her agitation... "You are the only one worth playing for." (549-550)

Edna experiences an interaction with Mlle. Reisz that portrays the operation of influence between artists in a manner more positive than that described by Bloom. It is a departure from the expectations of that theory of pernicious interaction, offering instead a distinctly feminist depiction of artistic influence. The positive and mutual interaction between the two women becomes a source of liberation from the original and oppressive power structures which bind art and force the transmission of influence into an exercise of oppressive power. This idea of artistic transmission through an implicitly lesbian interaction as a form of feminist resistance will reappear later in out discussion.

Here, the transmission is positive while still presenting an ideal of high aestheticism as essential to the process. It will also retain the elitism associated with this ideal as Edna's reaction differs from that of the others. It is the distinct and individual "quality" of the previous work of art, the music that Mlle. Reisz plays, that causes it to "impress" itself on the younger artist, figuratively creating her anew in the inspiration to

create art of her own. She and the previous creation merge into one being, which appears in the language of stamping, in the sensual focus on Edna's "splendid body", and in the physical contact between the two characters. Though Edna is initially "unable to answer," she will eventually create art of her own. This is foreshadowed as the agency of contact reverses; Edna now "presses" the hands of Mlle. Reisz that create the music which initially "impresses".

While influence here does not appear pernicious, the language does reveal an inherent danger in powerfully affective art. This is apparent in Edna's reaction and in the lesser reactions of the other audience members. Though Mlle. Reisz proclaims the rest of the audience unfit even to observe her playing, their collective response belies this attitude: "Her playing had aroused a fever of enthusiasm… 'That last prelude! Bon Dieu! It shakes a man!'" (550). All of these descriptions of response to art employ language of apprehension and discomfort. Mademoiselle Reisz's playing causes Edna to "tremble", "convulse", and "shake". The dancing girl is "bewildering". Even the parrot is "maddening" and deprives Mr. Pontellier of "comfort" (521). Art fully realized disturbs. This very modernist attitude thus retains the elitist element; in addition to Mlle. Reisz's assessment of the audience and despite the narration's apparent rejection of it, the reactions to the music present a hierarchy of artistic awareness. While all present react to the music, it affects Edna more than any other present. Here, art requires a certain innate, unlearned capacity in order to elicit a proper response. While artistic appreciation may be discomfiting for those with only a partial capacity for understanding, it presents real danger for those able to truly comprehend:

> A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her,—the light which, showing the way, forbids it.

> At that early period it served but to bewilder her. It moved her to dreams, to thoughtfulness, to the shadowy anguish...Mrs. Pontellier was beginning... to recognize her relations as an individual... the beginnings of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such a beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult! (534-535)

The inherent danger of artistic exploration appears as an explicit warning, couched in heroic language that suggests a form of superiority in the one who "dares and defies". Simultaneously, this language reinforces and explicates the threat of the future embodied in the mosquito-children; they will not simply replace the artist in the future, the "merry imps" threaten to consume the artistic impulse in the present by offering a pleasant distraction from the "exceedingly disturbing" business of artistic exploration.

This sense of the power of the modernist artist also manifests itself in Edna's discovery of her ability to swim. The party sets out, after Mlle. Reisz's performance, toward the beach. They encounter a new world, freshly planted and blossoming; it has been altered through the action of art:

> There were strange, rare odors abroad—a tangle of the sea smell and of weeds and damp, new-plowed earth, mingled with the heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms somewhere near... there were no shadows. The white light of the moon had fallen upon the world like the mystery and the softness of sleep. (551)

The sea and the land combine, suggesting a singularity of existence within the person of the artist. At the same time, the linking of the a field and the sea recall Edna's childhood memory of walking through "a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean" where "[s]he threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in water." Edna further recalls that she "was running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by [her] father" (538). The image invokes rejection of and escape from both parental and religious authority, movement wholly self-

motivated and "unguided" (539). Though the scene echoes Edna's childhood, it remains unfamiliar and "strange". The alteration of the familiar maintains the sense of disturbance inherent within this powerful art. Further, by concluding the passage with sleep falling onto the new world, Chopin acknowledges the presence of death within the sphere of art. While art cannot overcome death, the altered moment does soften it. In this moment, death is not the source of an overwhelming anxiety; rather, it appears in the beautiful, beatific imagery of the "white light of the moon" and "mystery and softness". It is not yet so "late in history" that death overwhelms.

The mixture of birth and death continues through the swimming scene, as the moment of sublimity passes into a test of the exercise of artistic strength. Edna "like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone... shouted for joy... she lifted her body to the surface of the water" acting as the motive force in her own emergence from the womb of the water in the "power... given to her to control the working of her body and her soul...She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (551). She surpasses all others, including the creation of her own abilities; the newly acquired ability to swim "'is nothing'" (552). Yet, her anxiety re-asserts itself, and death, casting off sleep and softness, resumes a frightening aspect. The water breaks "upon the beach in little foamy crests that coiled back like slow, white serpents" (551), making the source of Edna's birth the source of death as well. The image of snakes, inherently threatening, takes on the added imagery of an Edenic Fall, coming, as it does, on the heels of the freshly-plowed field and the blooming white blossoms. "Her unaccustomed vision" cannot yet accept the distance from the past that she "seemed to be reaching for... A quick vision of death

smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses." Her husband diminishes both the gain and the danger through the power of the observer: "'You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you,' he told her" (552). His assumption of power over the interpretation of the scene mirrors that of the other party-goers, who "each one congratulated himself that his special teachings had achieved this desired end" (552). The earlier rhetoric of the artist alone and conquering all reality suffers a defeat when viewed through a larger context of social and historical forces. Various non-artistic influences have led Edna to this moment, and, by the fact of their existence, infect claims of artistic authority with anxiety.

Anxiety increases after the Pontelliers return to the city, the scene of social, rather than individual, action. The context becomes that of the larger cultural paradigm of the society of modernity. Here, individuals fit into a role that is both expected and also functions toward a larger social goal apart from purely aesthetic motivations. The first section after the return from Grand Isle, describes the functions of the household. The house itself, as an object, appears as a thing of beauty and of art, but the narration describes it technically in terms of the arrangement of a series of objects geared toward the achievement of an end. Paintings and furnishings, though "selected with judgment and discrimination", bear the intent, not of aesthetic idealism, but of perfection "after the conventional type" or to convey the lavish habits of the Pontelliers "to the envy of many women whose husbands were less generous than Mr. Pontellier" (577-578). Art in this context becomes a tool, a form of technology to be updated and replaced when it is no longer "the conventional type." The lives of the human members of the household fall into similar categories of use and function. The house becomes a machine with

everything in it acting as a part with an identified and assigned role. Each follows a prescribed regimen, like the "programme which Mrs. Pontellier had religiously followed since her marriage six years before" (578).

However, the influence of the night at the beach remains and Edna breaks her six years' pattern of receiving visitors on Tuesdays by going out. Her husband's response, an "exclaimed" "Out!" (579) recalls the advice of the parrot in the book's opening. The scene relates Edna's reclamation of her life from the position of a functionary of the household, motivated by the advancement of the familial unit, to the establishment of herself as an individual self, motivated by personal gratification by whatever means such gratification requires. In her post-Grand Isle view, she chiefly requires the development artistic talent. Initially, the constraints of context, and their inherent reminders of the limits of the individual self force Edna back into severe anxiety. She becomes frustrated despite her surroundings:

> It was a large, beautiful room, rich and picturesque in the soft dim light which the maid had turned low. She went and stood at an open window and looked out upon the deep tangle of the garden below. All the mystery and witchery of the night seemed to have gathered there amid the perfumes and the dusky and tortuous outlines of flowers and foliage. She was seeking herself and finding herself in just such sweet, half-darkness which met her moods. But the voices were not soothing that came to her from the darkness and the sky above and the stars. They jeered and sounded mournful notes without promise, devoid even of hope. She turned back into the room and began to walk to and fro down its whole length, without stopping, without resting... Once she stopped, and taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet. (581)

The scene consciously mimics the night Edna learns to swim. Again, a garden appears with smells and "mystery". Edna explicitly "seeks herself", but, in the centered city where beautiful objects become technological tools, awakening gives way to anxiety and

despair. Edna's pacing evokes Mlle. Reisz pushing the chair back and forth, but the relief of artistic performance does not present itself for Edna as it did for Mlle. Reisz. The final section of this passage, with the presumptive artist attempting and failing to crush a golden circle, mirrors the "circle" imagery of Fisher an Emerson. Indeed, after her husband has left and Edna is alone to manage the house as she sees fit, it is Emerson that she reads "now that her time [is] completely her own" (605). As such, Edna's artistic endeavor becomes adherence to the Emersonian ideal of self-reliance. Yet, she is powerless before the "golden circle", as her own "smallness" is explicit here, and she falls asleep while reading Emerson, which she has taken up as a "course of improving study", a means of gaining social value akin to her husband's acquisition of art. The ideas of self-reliance and artistic freedom become meaningless in comparison to the final tyranny of the circles of replacement, made particularly harsh by Edna's powerlessness as a married woman, which we address in depth later.

For the time however, Edna changes; paralleling her first swim, she gradually moves away from the "other", embodied by "society" and her husband:

> She began to do as she liked and to feel as she liked… She made no ineffectual efforts to conduct her household *en bonne ménagère*, going and coming as it suited her fancy, and, so far as she was able, lending herself to any passing caprice. (586)

When she moves from the household itself, and from dependence upon her husband, Edna has established a new "circle", replacing the band that she could not crush. Her husband does not understand the significance of the move. He responds to her action as though it occurs within the old paradigm of the "Pontellier household" and its social ascent:

> he begged her to consider first, foremost, and above all else, what people would say. He was not dreaming of scandal when he uttered this warning; that was a thing that would never have entered into his mind to consider in connection with his wife's name or his own. He was simply thinking of his financial integrity. It might get noised about that the Pontelliers had met with reverses... (628-629)

Pontellier orders renovations done on the house and announces that his wife and he will go abroad: "Mr. Pontellier had saved appearances!" (629). He does not deter Edna; the any opinion of her actions, beyond her own, remains in the old circle. In the new world, she creates only her own sense of propriety as it appeals to her aesthetic sense. Pontellier becomes obsolete, but his lack of understanding allows him to continue on as though he remains relevant, without any apparent anxiety-driven psychological damage.

Meanwhile, Edna's new moral sense extends to her liaison with Alcée Arobin. Madame Ratignolle, concerned for the perception of her friend in society, tells her that Arobin's visits are becoming a matter of discussion Edna responds "indifferently". Recognizing the change in her friend, Madame Ratignolle tells her, "'In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life" (632). Again, the observer remains within the old world and cannot properly interpret the new one. "This life" which concerns Madame Ratignolle no longer exists as far as Edna is concerned. The new world exists only as she desires it.

Edna's only desires are her art and Robert LeBrun, or, more properly, the image of Robert that she imagines, created in a manner similar to the artist-persona she has created out of herself. Both creations spring from Edna's ability to deny existence as it is, to deny a specific place within a larger social construct, her existence as an individual with the recognizable and externally identified traits of "woman", "wife", "daughter", or

"mother". She creates, instead, a self, as "Edna, the artist". We have here Bloom's rejection of prior (or external) creation as a source of death and the modernist ideal of the self-created artist.

Mlle. Reisz acts as a point of contact and an influence in each of these creations. As such, Mlle. Reisz alone holds an externally focused power over her. The older artist exercises her influence to lead the younger toward her own artistic ideal of absolute independence. Her apartment, like the Pontelliers' house, embodies the ideal of its resident. Where Mr. Pontellier fills his house with carefully selected objects designed to elicit a response from visitors and observers, Mlle. Reisz carefully chooses her apartment so as to:

> discourage the approach of beggars, peddlars and callers. There were plenty of windows... for the most part dingy... They often admitted into the room a good deal of smoke and soot... A magnificent piano crowded the apartment. In the next room she slept, and in the third and last she harbored a gasoline stove on which she cooked her meals when disinclined to descend to the neighboring restaurant... keeping her belongings in a rare old buffet, dingy and battered... (591-592)

The apartment contains only the bare necessities for the maintenance of life and the one luxury of the tool of her art. Mlle. Reisz exhibits the indifference which will come to characterize Edna; asked if she desires the younger woman to visit, she responds, "I had not thought much about it" (592). The artist maintains life fully independent of any active desire. Things please or displease her as she wills, but she *needs* nothing. Thus, she withholds Robert's letter from Edna until the younger woman "captivates" her by expressing both a desire for art and a strength of will (594). With this motivation, the decision to grant the letter becomes part recognition of the merits of will, part desire to foster the development of will, and part simple curiosity toward Edna's reaction. The

letter elicits in Edna a response as emotional as that of her response to Mlle. Reisz's playing on the night she discovered the ability to swim, yet the pianist evinces her indifference through a matter-of-fact reaction. She grants, but does not initiate, Edna's request that she be allowed to make a return visit to the apartment and then simply warns Edna not to fall down the dark staircase. She calmly picks up the letter, the source of so much emotion and returns it to its proper place (595).

Edna's acceptance of Arobin as a lover results from this sense of indifference. She feels general physical desire and recognizes in his feelings for her opportunity for the exercise of freedom. She acts on the dictates of her will, and her will-driven existence makes her stronger than him: "He cast one appealing glance at her, to which she made no response. Alcée Arobin's manner was so genuine that it often deceived even himself. Edna did not care to think whether it were genuine or not... Alcée Arobin was absolutely nothing to her" (610). Contrast her attitude here with her youthful feelings for the cavalry officer ("passionately enamored"), the young gentleman ("deeply engaged"), and the actor ("haunt[ed] her imagination and stir[red] her senses") (540). Her only thought of propriety concerns Robert Lebrun's response to her infidelity. Lebrun remains her only real concern beyond freedom. Arobin provides an opportunity for the exercise of freedom, and she takes it. Arobin's kiss gives her understanding of life:

> as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality... there was neither shame nor remorse. There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips. (618)

Though she desires love with Robert, the desire for life in the new world is stronger, and a "dull pang of regret" is her only response to its absence from the new world. As such,

when Robert returns, her expression of love for him is an act of choosing, an act of will. Again, the use of the will grants power: "Her seductive voice, together with his great love for her, had enthralled his senses, had deprived him of every impulse but the longing to hold her and keep her" (646).

Yet, despite this power, she remains subject to the system of replacement. She cannot break her promise and abandon her friend, Adèle Ratignolle, as she prepares to goes into labor (646-647). Motherhood, the bringing forth of the next circle, cannot be overcome by any act of will. Edna goes to Adèle, as Robert begs her to stay. Her observation of the birth fills her with revulsion:

> With an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture.
>
> She was still stunned and speechless with emotion when later she leaned over her friend to kiss her and softly say good-by. Adèle, pressing her cheek, whispered in an exhausted voice: "Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!" (648-649)

The children, the new cycle, exhibit the same indifference for the past that Edna herself earlier expresses. Here, the motif of motherhood as a role dangerous for the woman inhabiting the role becomes an explicit statement. Adrienne Rich's work on the idea of "compulsory heterosexuality", the idea that female sexuality historically is directed by social forces into heterosexuality without the option of true choice, presents a means by which to explicitly link the demands of motherhood with a larger political and sociological system. For our purposes, traditional female heterosexuality is a means for the preservation of the roles of "wife" and "mother". Thus, the roles, rather than inherently a part of "nature" and outside of "culture", become an aspect of the larger socio-historical system, a portion of the larger circle. For the female artist pursuing the self as ideal, they become particularly disruptive oppositional forces, enabling a

continuum spanning the life of the woman and connecting the prior subjugation as "wife" to the coming subjugation as "mother". In our metaphor, it disrupts the present "perfect circle" of the self by transferring the past into the future. The earlier dependent roles of "wife" and "daughter", though escaped by the present creation of the free self as "artist", re-appears in a different and more powerful form as "mother". Thus, we have a cycle of repetition buried within the larger system of newness and specifically tied to gender. As such, female gender carries with it additional levels of forced connection to the present, increasing the potential for obsolescence.

Rich's essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience"[2] explores various means for the rejection of this compulsory heterosexuality, primarily focusing on lesbian sexuality, though she also identifies the "non-collaboration" with the heterosexual system by "marriage resisters, spinsters, autonomous widows" (Rich 14). Here Rich's study intersects with our own; in Mlle. Reisz, Chopin presents a figure who, in pursuit of art, has taken on the role of "spinster" which becomes bound up inextricably with that of "artist". Recall again the early depictions of Mlle. Reisz's outright hostility toward maternity and the depictions of the sparse apartment, appearing as a conscious contrast with the home of the Pontelliers'. The apartment is stripped of all accoutrements of the larger system of culture-commerce, and the cultural system, the only "ornament" the piano, in actuality a functional tool for the production of art motivated purely by aesthetics. We have further the implicitly lesbian interaction between Mlle. Reisz and Edna during the scene of artistic impress. The connection seems obvious; for the female artist, the "American system of the permanent new" involves a deeper system invisible to both Bloom and Fisher, that of female compulsory heterosexuality, or, as I have earlier

[2] Originally published in 1980, here cited from a 2003 volume of the *Journal of Women's History*.

indicated, a system of generational pro-creation. In order to retain a hold on the aesthetic ideal of the self-as-artist-in-isolation, our female modernist must withdraw from the roles both of wife/daughter and ultimately, pro-creative, heterosexual mother.

Edna is, however, already trapped in the position of "mother". For the third time she faces revelation:

> "I'm not going to be forced into doing things... I want to be let alone. Nobody has any right—except children, perhaps—and even then, it seems to me—or it did seem—" She felt that her speech was voicing the incoherency of her thoughts, and stopped abruptly. (Chopin 649)

Children become a threat that the future will, mosquito-like, suck the life out of the present until nothing remains but a shell of hollow fantasies. Edna suddenly sees the future, her children, as the replacement, the destroyers of the present. The anxiety of obsolescence stops her mid-sentence, as her thoughts descend into incoherence and the faculty of creative, powerful speech abandons her. For an ideology centered on the self and its celebration, this is unacceptable:

> She understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adèle Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children... There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them. (653-654)

Edna does not kill herself because of Robert's abandonment of her. She desires him, but her will is strong enough that she does not need him. What drives her to suicide is the awareness that she will be "overcome" as she has overcome others. The threat of motherhood to bring the future into the present, bringing on a premature state of

obsolescence in subjugation to the role of care-provider (and subsequent re-direction of focus from the self to the other) fills her with an anxiety that can never be defeated. As she swims out to her death, her mind turns ever farther back into the past, signaling the ultimate defeat of the artistic faculty, forced finally to turn away from creation and return ultimately to that which its whole existence sought to escape, the sound of the father's voice and the original role of daughter pursued by a future husband in the sound of the ringing spurs (538, 655).

Edna's failure to achieve a workable identity in the self-centered ideal of the modernist artist comes about due to the anxiety of obsolescence. However, her status as a mother heightens and speeds the descent into anxiety. This allows a potential reading of Chopin's novel as presenting the possibility of a realization of the artistic self within female gender but apart from the roles prescribed by the American system where such realization becomes difficult, if not impossible. Chopin offers an example of a woman who achieves high aestheticism as a way of life in the character of Mlle. Reisz. Her achievement of this ideal requires both defeat of the past and withdrawal from the present system at all levels, so as to render a personal future null and void, a conscious acceptance of what is externally perceived as obsolescence. Edna Pontellier operates too far within the present system to affect such an escape.

Chapter Two
William Faulkner: The Living Dead

William Faulkner holds a position among the pre-eminent modernist American novelists. He can, arguably, be called the primary strong poet of American modernism. Perhaps because of this, of the authors' in this study, his vision of the development of the artistic personality most closely approximates Bloom's, the more modernist of our two primary theorists. Faulkner himself performs modernist acts of self-creation, essentially writing his life into his own work, not as a form of re-creating or reclaiming previous biography, but in an apparent attempt to write his own biographical future. He plays out his own life in fiction, projecting his own future into art. [3] As part of this effort, we have Faulkner's creation of a self-created world, in his Yoknapatawapha County, the scene of nearly all of his major fiction.

His novel, *Absalom, Absalom*, serves as a act of high modern aestheticism, providing an account of the development of the modernist artist in the figure of Thomas Sutpen. However, the action of the novel occurs after this strong artist dies; he receeds into the past, becoming ancient myth. Sutpen "creat[es] the Sutpen's Hundred, the *Be Sutpen's Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light*" (Faulkner 4). He acts with Godlike powers but also at a Godlike distance. The young artist, the developing artist of the present, is Quentin Compson, and he is overwhelmed by anxiety. His story parallels Edna Pontellier's decline into neurosis and self-destruction and extends across novels, culminating in his suicide in the second part of Faulkner's earlier work, *The Sound and the Fury*.

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[3] See Thomas Watson, *William Faulkner: Self-Presentation and Performance* (2000), particularly "Marriage Matters", pp. 70-102.

Though Quentin exists in the present, he remains rooted in the past world created by the strong poet. He is split in place as well, as the frame narrative moves from Jefferson in the South and Quentin's conversations with Rosa Coldfield and his father to Harvard in the technologically advanced North and his conversation with Shreve. As such, he is in the midst of the decline of literary modernism. Quentin, thus, suffers a double anxiety; he is overwhelmed by the influence of Thomas Sutpen, whose story infests Quentin's verbal creation, while simultaneously suffering a severe anxiety of obsolescence at his awareness of the passing of the world and the artist which create the story.

While the anxiety of obsolescence has become constant, obsolescence itself has not; the ability to "tell", to present stories that affect the world, remains. Rosa Coldfield first identifies Quentin as a potential artist, telling him:

> Northern people have already seen to it that there is little left in the South for a young man. So maybe you will enter the literary profession as so many Southern gentlemen and gentlewomen too are doing now… (Faulkner 5)

We see that Rosa identifies the technological North as the cause of the death of a vibrant South. As a result, art becomes a last resort and a profession. It is entered into only because strong art disappears. The artist is now a chronicler of the lives of others. By contrast, Thomas Sutpen's artistry involves the exercise of power through actions and words. The strong artist creates a new identity, as we have seen partially in the person of Edna Pontellier, through a reaction against outside threats to the unitary self which is then able to affect other individuals.

We see this in the story of Sutpen's birth as an artist, which he relates to Quentin's grandfather and which Quentin relates to Shreve, his Harvard roommate.

Sutpen's story relates the modernist story of alienation and reaction to the strength of the prior. Sutpen begins in a sort of pre-lapsarian state typified by what he later labels as his "innocence" (Faulkner 178). This is essentially innocence of the patterns and operations of a world of modernity; his fall from a state of innocence in the mountains of western Virginia leads him into areas of increasing advancement as "doggeries and taverns now became hamlets, hamlets now became villages, villages now towns and the country flattened out now with good roads" (Faulkner 182). The encounter with modernity results in a loss of identity and power; Sutpen finds, in his encounter with the "big house" that he, literally, has no voice in the world of modernity. He comes to the plantation big house to deliver a message, to interact equally through the use of language; instead, he is rejected and told "never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back" (188). This utter and permanent loss of equal value becomes the result of an inability to use language; Sutpen dwells on the lack of regard given to the message he brought, saying, "'*He never even gave me a chance to say it. Not even to tell it, say it...I not only wasn't doing any good to him by telling it or any harm to him by not telling it, there ain't any good or harm either in the living world that I can do him*'" (192). His powerlessness and his inability to wield language are interrelated. He sets out to recreate himself in a reinterpretation of the modernity he has encountered, entering into a womblike cave and figuratively giving birth to himself as a powerful, artistically creative force (188).

At each stage of his progression into this new self the power of his use of language becomes a key factor. Thus, Quentin tells Shreve, "'He went to the West Indies. That's how he said it'" (193). The act of speaking becomes commensurate with the achievement of the goal. Again, in the West Indies, he is able to quell the slave rebellion

by "yelling louder" than the slaves (205). The power of language has progressed to a point where it functions as a weapon against the "Not-Me". Finally, as we have seen, he creates Sutpen's Hundred by figuratively speaking it into existence, the "be Sutpen's Hundred". The house he builds comes primordially out of the naked earth by the force of naked will and body united (28).

Sutpen the artist then tells his story as an act of self-creation, evidenced in the repetition of the phrase "so he told it" throughout Quentin's dialogue with Shreve. Sutpen possesses the power to tell his own life and to shape it as he pleases, regardless of truth or fiction. Sutpen's existence, and the existence of those in his story, becomes a function of his own will. Thus, when Rosa Coldfield identifies Sutpen to Quentin as "a man who... had no past at all... who rode into town out of nowhere" (10), her complaint becomes a recognition of his artistic powers of self-origin. Sutpen literally has no past beyond what he chooses to create for himself; he comes from nowhere but within his own artistic creation. By re-telling the life that Sutpen creates, Quentin and the rest become part of Sutpen's creation, the product of his influence. He holds on to them. Sutpen creates a physical object in the house he builds on Sutpen's Hundred. Quentin "[knows] the house, twelve miles from Jefferson, in its grove of cedar and oak, seventy-five years after it was finished" (29). When Sutpen tells his story to Quentin's grandfather, it functions in the same manner as his physical creation of the house, as the story lives on through the Compson and Coldfield families and travels with Quentin north to Harvard, extending beyond the passing of its creator.

By contrast, Rosa Coldfield, the initiator of Quentin's engagement with art and Sutpen the strong poet, cannot live out her own life. She is overwhelmed by death in life

and an inherited, rather than self-created, past. She becomes a function of Sutpen, staving off final dissolution of the self by telling. As a result, she herself becomes a creature of the past and death. The novel's initial scene in her dead father Goodhue's office is overwhelmed by death. She, explicitly a poet, also explicitly suffers from this stagnation in obsolescence. She wears "eternal black... sitting so bolt upright in the straight hard chair that was so tall for her that her legs hung straight and rigid as if she had iron shinbones and ankles, clear of the floor with that air of impotent and static rage like children's feet" (Faulkner 3). Her clothing places her in permanent mourning, but aimlessly, for a specifically unidentified person. This language is reminiscent of Chopin's descriptions both of the dancing girl and of Mlle. Reisz. However, in both of these prior instances, mourning as a negative act is undercut by the production of art, making the death of the other a source of liberation. For Rosa Coldfield, the death of the other becomes a source of entrapment. It is the culmination of "compulsory heterosexuality" rather than an escape from it; when the providers of the culturally established female roles die, she becomes trapped in an eternally fixed homage to them.

The description of her posture reinforces this, wit its simultaneous language of immobilization and diminishment. In the comparison to a metal construction, she becomes separated from a sense of humanity and the ability to interact with the world. She is shut up inside herself, in her "impotent and static rage", as she is within the room and within the past, as the name of the room and its airlessness come about because of the actions of people dead so long that they have become nameless, with only labels ("her father" "someone") to identify them. Her continued subordination to them, even after death, creates a form of death in life, obsolescence as life without purpose, lower even

than death as it is subordinate to the dead, that spreads to the world around her in the "dead afternoon" and the house, which turns into "dust motes...of dead old dried paint" (1).

Rosa's South is a world trapped between life and death. We see here the dissolution of the old into a fantasy of relevance. Rosa's voice "vanishes", and she dissolves into Quentin's vision of Sutpen's creation of Sutpen's Hundred. The words of Sutpen retain power, but their use is out of joint with the next-on. Quentin's vision vanishes as well; Rosa's voice becomes the sound of

> two separate Quentins now—the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts, listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times; and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South the same as she was—the two separate Quentins now talking to one another in the long silence of notpeople in notlanguage (4)

The "notpeople" Quentins proceed to tell, with conscious disjointedness and vagueness, Rosa's story of Sutpen's story. Sutpen's ghost remains an overwhelming influence on the young poet. As the influence exists only in an obsolescent death-like state, the "too young" Quentin is caught in the old while simultaneously observing the preparations for its final destruction necessitated by the move to the North and into modernity. The result is a deep anxiety that literally tears apart the artist figure.

Donald Kartiganer in his essay "'So I, Who had Never had a War . . .': William Faulkner, War, and the Modern Imagination" (1998) finds a different meaning in a similar concept, "double focus", a phrase he draws from Allen Tate's *Memoirs*. Kartiganer identifies this "double focus" in Faulkner himself. It becomes a symptom of

the Southerner facing a transition into modernity:

> The choice for the Southerner seemed to be either, on the one hand, a single-minded commitment to the Old or New South—that is, a life of principled yet impotent nostalgia or one of vital yet vulgar materialism—*or*, on the other hand, clear-eyed acceptance of the conflict itself, that is, the double focus as the necessary stance of the fully aware individual. "Looking two ways" could be a psychological torment, even a form of generational neurosis: to harbor two utterly opposed ego ideals at the same time. (Kartiganer 625)

While this principle may indeed operate in Faulkner's career viewed as a whole, or individually in some of the other, less modernist fiction, there are problems with applying it to *Absalom, Absalom.* Primarily, the split between Sutpen on the one hand and Harvard and the North on the other cannot be easily read as a literal divide between an "Old" and a "New" South, between an "era of tranquility and elegance...refinement and high-mindedness" tainted by slavery in the old and of modernism on the other (Kartiganer 625-626). Again, this provides an excellent means of observing Faulkner's larger career, but it does not hold in an examination of the artist figures of this novel. Sutpen's exercise of power and authority is anything but "refined", indeed his tearing up of the earth and re-creation of self and others becomes the form of creation of a new associated with modernism. Further, Quentin's North does not present Pound's ideal of "making it new" across the cultural range with which Kartiganer identifies the new of the "double focus". It is a place marked by a vague and largely unseen modernity rather than by cultural and artistic modernism. Quentin's North is faceless, monolithic, and cold, first described as the "iron New England snow" (Faulkner 23, 141). In a twist on this image of the cold and the idea of advancing technology, after the telling of Sutpen's death at the conclusion of chapter seven, Shreve says, of the dorm room he shares with Quentin at Harvard, "'Let's get out of this damn icebox and go to bed'" (Faulkner 234). At the conclusion of chapter

eight, after the telling of the death of Charles Bon, the phrase changes: "Let's get out of this refrigerator" (287).

With this shifting metaphor, we have both an impression of technological advance and also a link to the room that opens the novel, Goodhue Coldfield's office. Like the office, an ice box or a refrigerator present the motif of isolation and death, in the stagnation of the office and the freezing of the two machines. Moments of advancement become moments of death, as individuals are cut off and left behind, locked into an airless box as a means of removal from the living world. This is reinforced as in each of these sections Quentin thinks specifically about Shreve's ordinary habit of opening a window at night to do deep breathing exercises, but, on this particular night, the window remains shut, emphasizing the room as closed off from the outer world particularly because of the events of the night. The association of this imagery with the subject matter of the chapters achieves a figurative burial; "the tomblike room" becomes a mirror image of Goodhue Coldfield's office positioning Quentin in the role of Rosa Coldfield as the dead-though-living narrator of Sutpen's living-though-dead story. Simultaneously, Quentin and Shreve disjointedly merge with Henry and Bon, so that they become "two, four, now two again, according to Quentin and Shreve, the two the four the two still talking" (Faulkner 276). This shifting identity recalls Quentin's own earlier experience in the office where his identity fractures in the course of discussing Thomas Sutpen. Then, Shreve, who is speaking;

> ceased again. It was just as well, since he had no listener. Perhaps he was aware of it. Then suddenly he had no talker either, though possibly he was not aware of this. Because now neither of them was there. They were both in Carolina and the time was forty-six years ago, and it was not even four now but compounded still further, since now both of them were Henry Sutpen and both of them were Bon, compounded each of both yet either

neither (280)

The dissolution of individual identity becomes total and general, as though in the isolation of the "refrigerator" that the story of the strong poet has wrought, Quentin and Shreve become as the mass of "baffled ghosts" that haunt Goodhue Coldfield's office. The story becomes alive within the tomb, separate from any external influence. The two are divorced from the artistic roles of teller and listener, becoming instead inhabits of, part of and within, Sutpen's story; the stream of authority reverses. They are Sutpen's sons, so he is their creator. This event is the result of a complex, even inextricable, interaction between influence and obsolescence. The story that Quentin carries (by virtue of his birth right of "ghostliness", the earlier combination of a strong but dead past) into the room exercises power over those who hear and tell it. He can tell a story (though the story is chosen for him) by virtue of the internal divide that allows him some youth to protest against the fact of the old that makes him a part of itself and partially hold off the obsolescence that overwhelms this past so as to realize briefly his innate artistry. As Quentin the weak artist tells this story, it overwhelms him, creating a brief circle of existence for itself within the space of the closed room, the tomb that shelters this brief burst of powerful art from the indifference of the modern North. The end result of both of these factors, the overwhelming influence of the South and the overwhelming assertion of obsolescence of the whole thing by the North, is a death of the self and the faculty of creative speech; Quentin, caught between the old and the new, is defeated by both.

As they lie in their beds at the beginning of the ninth chapter, the window has been opened, effecting a change:

> Then the darkness seemed to breathe, to flow back; the window which Shreve had opened became visible against the faintly unearthly glow of

> the outer snow as, forced by the weight of the darkness, the blood surged and ran warmer, warmer...[Quentin] lay watching the rectangle of the window, feeling the warming blood driving through his veins, his arms and legs. And now, although he was warm, and though while he had sat in the cold room he merely shook faintly and steadily, now he began to jerk all over, violently and uncontrollably... though [he] himself felt perfectly all right. He felt fine even, lying there and waiting in peaceful curiosity for the next violent unharbingered jerk to come.... [He said,] "I'm not cold. I'm all right. I feel fine." (Faulkner 288)

The disappearance of the old circle begins. The new world punctures the tomb as darkness, rather than light, flows in. The darkness seems an apt image for the process of replacement, when viewed from the old. The force that drives the novel and possesses Quentin, the story of Thomas Sutpen, is no longer an active force. The darkness further links to the encroaching new by the subject matter of the chapter. We have already seen this device in the previous sections where the events of the past re-appear in the imagery of the frame story. Here, the "told" story presents the final defeat of Sutpen, in the burning and destruction of his house. Thus, this section relates the final collapse of the old into complete obsolescence.

Where previously identity, figured primarily in speech, became a matter of uncertainty, with Sutpen infesting the telling of his story; now the control of the body vanishes as Quentin is possessed by the darkness. His blood moves "forced by the weight of the darkness" leading to the uncontrollable "jerks", an image that implies the metaphorical motion of the process of replacement; sudden, violent, utterly uncontrollable, and invasive on a personal, individual level.

Initially, Quentin maintains a "peaceful curiosity" in regard to this experience, though this is not particularly positive in terms of the self-centered modernist ideal, as it indicates a deep detachment from the self. The effects of the sudden influx of the new

become increasingly pernicious for Quentin's artistic self, as he becomes increasingly aware of a complete obsolescence of the old. As this occurs he falls victim ever more exclusively to the anxiety of influence.

Shreve, the Canadian, is inherently outside of the American system of replacement. His origins are in a place (for Faulkner, perhaps based on his Canadian experiences during his "military" training in the First World War) with a unitary people, and therefore not subject to the effects of mass immigration, either voluntary or forced. Thus, the threat of obsolescence is "something my *people* haven't got. Or if we have got it, it all happened long ago across the water and so now there aint anything to look at every day to remind us of it" (Faulkner 289, emphasis added). Shreve's use of the word "people" contrasts with Fisher's rejection of that word to describe the American population, with the idea of race that hangs over the entire novel, and with Quentin's own earlier "notpeople". He becomes the dominant voice in their dialogue and explicitly identifies the obsolescence of the South; it is:

> "...a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago... a kind of entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never forgiving General Sherman, so that forever more as long as your children's children produce children you wont be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett's charge at Manassas?" (Faulkner 289)

Quentin's brief corrections of the site of the battle and the proper title for Rosa Coldfield ("Miss" as opposed to "Aunt") essentially end his role in telling the story of Sutpen. Shreve commands speech now; Quentin descends into wordlessness. What is more, Quentin's trip to Sutpen's Hundred with Rosa becomes the subject of the Shreve's telling, placing Quentin on the side of the dead past, of things to be told rather than artist

who, in telling, creates. Shreve's telling fully evokes the event for Quentin, he enters into it so that he "tastes the dust" kicked up by the buggy that he drives toward Sutpen's Hundred and smells Rosa Coldfield sitting beside him, evoking the "rank smell of female old flesh" that he experiences in the office (Faulkner 290, 4).

The entrance of the self into an existence as memory breaks Quentin's "peaceful curiosity" and he begins to "breathe hard" (291, 295). Within the memory-story, he assumes Shreve's repetition of the word "wait", used while a listener to Quentin's telling of the story of Sutpen, in attempting to dissuade Rosa from action at the big house, again reinforcing his separation from the creative telling role of the artist. In the house, in a third room "whose shutters were closed", he encounters Henry Sutpen:

> waking or sleeping it was the same: the bed, the yellow sheets and pillow, the wasted yellow face with closed, almost transparent eyelids on the pillow, the wasted hands crossed on the breast as if he were already a corpse; waking or sleeping it was the same and would be the same forever as long as he lived (298)

Sutpen has "come home to die" and the two engage in a circular dialogue, repeating its beginning at its ending, within Quentin's mind. They effectively become one again as Quentin's unfinished questions are completed by Sutpen's answers. This is reinforced by the uncertainty of the pronoun "he" that precedes the dialogue. Further, immediately following the dialogue, the narrative jumps back to Quentin's present in the dorm room, which becomes cold again. We are told that "the chimes would ring for one any time now" (298). This second ambiguous line, in addition to the mundane meaning, the chimes are about to announce the arrival of the one o'clock hour, can also be read as, "soon the bells will toll for an individual, signifying death". It is Quentin's impending death that will be announced, as he enters into deep anxiety, in his reaction within the memory-story

as he runs home and into bed, sweating in terror (297). His silence becomes the incoherence that signals the death of the artistic mind, as he repeats to himself the word, "Nevermore" (299).

Shreve interrupts him by resuming his telling of Quentin's own story, only now Quentin has himself dropped out of it, viewing the intentional destruction by fire of the "monstrous tinder-dry rotten shell", the old house that is all that is left of Sutpen's creative will, as a ghost by the side of Rosa Coldfield (299-301). At the destruction of the house, the old strong poetry, that can briefly create pockets of itself and stave off the permanent triumph of the new, collapses. Rosa, Shreve says, lives off her hate for Sutpen so that she delays three months between her trip with Quentin to the plantation and the final trip when the it burns; because, "hating is like drink or drugs and she had used it so long that she did not dare risk cutting off the supply, destroying the source, the very poppy's root and seed" (299). The conclusion of Sutpen's story in the death of his son will be the end of her hate and the end of any life she has left. Rosa's death, shortly after the burning of the house indicates the ascendant universality of the Northern modernity, both because of its conjunction with the fire and also in Quentin's father's description of Rosa's burial at the end of the letter he sends to Quentin, which Quentin, after living the fire through Shreve's telling, can finish: "*The weather was beautiful though cold and they had to use picks to break the earth for the grave yet in one of the deeper clods I saw a redworm doubtless alive when the clod was thrown up though by afternoon it was frozen again*" (302). The penetration of the iron cold of the North into the ground which creates Quentin, Rosa, and Sutpen, and which Sutpen uses to create Sutpen's Hundred out of

himself, drives home the triumph of the new. Briefly the old life opposes it in the figure of the worm, but the cold is implacable and ultimately triumphs.

In the present, Shreve, whose name derives from the verb "shrive", meaning to hear confession and assign penance or grant absolution, reinforces the victory of the new by narrowing the obsolescence of the South specifically to Quentin. He tells Quentin that he has "outlived" himself by "years and years and years." Quentin responds, "'I am older at twenty than a lot of people who have died,' Quentin said. 'And more people have died than have been twenty-one,' Shreve said" (301). When Sutpen's creation that inhabits Quentin dies, his own life becomes obsolete. Both Shreve and Quentin confirm this fact, and Shreve, in the role of confessor, implies that the necessary resolution of the life lived in obsolescence is death. This is why Quentin desperately denies a hatred of the South. The South and Sutpen conflate as the creators of the mode of powerful but dangerous artistry, but both have vanished. As Rosa Coldfield's case makes clear, hate and influence intersect. To admit hate is to admit the influence from an obsolete thing, a confession of obsolescence and the inevitability of an approaching death. In these final lines then, Quentin presents a false denial, a surge of the anxiety that destroys:

> "I dont hate it," Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; "I dont hate it," he said. *I dont hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: *I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!* (303)

Quentin degenerates into the final burst of incoherence that signals the failure of the artist. The ability to produce meaningful, powerful words is the evidence of the modernist artist's strength; its failure is the triumph of anxiety, replacing power with fear and life with death. He succumbs to the dark and the cold of the future, breathing it in the very air.

Chapter Three
Nathanael West: Art at the End of the World

The literary career of Nathanael West illustrates the American novel in a period of transition, the destruction of an old and the formation of a new "circle". In the terms of literary history, West marks the transition between modernism and post-modernism in the American novel.[4] Though writing contemporaneously with Faulkner, West's novels abandon the modernist ideal of aestheticism in high art and the attendant figure of the powerful artist. Yet, a fascination with the artist-character persists. His two major novels, *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*, present protagonists explicitly portrayed as makers of artistic media. The change occurs as these characters are *employed* as artists. Their status as artists is granted to them as official recognition of a marketable skill rather as the exercise of a faculty motivated by concerns of individual will and purpose as we have seen in the earlier novels. The intent of the creator becomes divorced from his creation. In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the artist, aware of this obsolescence, succumbs to the anxiety that arises from the harnessing of his art and its direction toward a non-aesthetic, commercial purpose. Anxiety inhabits the actions of the artist throughout the narrative as artistic despair emerges as a central theme. *Day of the Locust* serves as a form of postscript to our examination of the portrayal of the strong modernist artist. The artist figure in that late novel exists after the passing of the ideals of an aestheticism of the self. This emergent "post-modernism"[5] presents new and ambiguous forms of art and artistry.

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[4] For West's exploration of post-modernist themes within modernist forms see Louise Barnett, *Authority and Speech: Language, Society, and Self in the American Novel* (1993), pp. 183-194.

[5] In quotation marks because I do not intend to engage with the larger concept of literary post-modernism in this essay, only to present West's own portrayal of an artistic form "after modernism".

Recalling Fisher's assessment of the causes of constant replacement, shifts toward the new accelerate with movement in time; physical motion of a populace, such that the individuals have no traditional connection with the locality in which they reside; and technological advancement. The cities of modernity are essentially centers for technology and population, magnets for migration and immigration. As such, within and around the modern city, replacement occurs at faster rate, and, as a result, anxiety becomes a greater threat to the artist.

Chopin and Faulkner bear out this conclusion. In a passage from *The Awakening*, discussed above, Edna looks out, from a room in her husband's commercially decorated house in the city, on a garden the description of which mirrors the seaside scene at which she experiences her initial awakening. Yet, in this new urban context, the image "jeers" and "mourns" (Chopin 581). Similarly, in *Absalom, Absalom*, Sutpen's power emerges in connection with the rural earth of "Sutpen's Hundred" out of the ground of which he builds the plantation in order to create a new and powerful self. In contrast, Faulkner presents the figure of Quentin Compson, who, in the relatively technologically advanced setting of Harvard descends into an anxiety that spurs his, first, incoherence of identity and speech, and, then, self-slaughter.

West himself lived his life in two "modern" cities, New York City and Hollywood, the settings, respectively of *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *Day of the Locust*. West's parents were themselves immigrants, who, on their arrival in the United States, "attempted at once to become Americanized", and his father, in his position as a building contractor, was deeply involved in the modernization and technological development of New York and the "American prosperity" of the pre-Depression twentieth-century

(Martin 20, Long 2-3). West's own interaction with the processes of newness was rather problematic. He evinced a distinct ambiguity of identity, legally changing his name from "Nathan Weinstein" in 1926 and "disavow[ing] his Jewishness, which... he regarded as a 'curse'" (Long 6). Indeed, Bloom, more than once, refers to him as "a Jewish anti-Semite" (Bloom Lonelyhearts 1). The concluding passage of *Absalom, Absalom* presents such an anxiety-driven attitude, in a different context, as Quentin Compson unsuccessfully denies a hatred of his home; "'I dont hate [the South], he said. *I dont hate it... I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*" (Faulkner 303). Quentin's rejection of origin remains incomplete. Where Edna and Sutpen are able to create a new self, without connection to the old life, Quentin fails to effect a complete separation of self from the previous. His rejection of the South contains elements of self-hatred. Without attempting a sort of psychoanalytic approach to "Nathanael West"-the-human-being-as-writer, the biographical evidence of partial rejection of the old and the group in favor, not of a completely new or individual identity, but of ambiguity of self and transference of dependence onto new social authorities,[6] accords with the depiction of the anxiety-ridden artists of *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *Day of the Locust*.

Miss Lonelyhearts[7] depicts the decline and fall of the artist into obsolescence. The loss of a powerful individual identity is endemic in the world of *Miss Lonelyhearts*. The artist figure, the Miss Lonelyhearts of the title, takes his name from the column which the newspaper pays him to write. Where art, especially words, was once a function of

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[6] Kingsley Widmer, in his *Nathanael West* (1982), presents an engaging discussion of the specifics of West's adoption of new sources of authority in various "parts" including the aforementioned anti-Semitism, "his obsessive hunting", and "Stalinist fellow travel[ling]" all of which, for Widmer, serves as examples of West's "self-mockery" (Widmer 3-16).

[7] Fisher considers the book "pretentious and mannered" (Fisher 258), while Bloom regards it as a "remorseless masterpiece," (Bloom Lonelyhearts 1). This essentially illustrates the relative positioning of both theorists to the past.

identity, the creation an extension or complement of the personality and intentions of its creator, now the intentions of the creator are subjected to larger corporate concerns and identity derives from art as a process, rather than informing art as a final creation. Miss Lonelyhearts, originally a person with a name who created written words, now becomes a function of the assigned task. The character writes the "Miss Lonelyhearts" column and becomes "*The* Miss Lonelyhearts of The New York *Post-Dispatch*" (West 59, emphasis added). The use of the definite article emphasizes the essential namelessness of the character. "Miss Lonelyhearts" is a title, the name of a thing, a position to be filled. Simultaneously, it emphasizes his solitariness. He is nameless but alienated from anything other than the task imposing itself upon him.

Within the interaction between the nameless character and the column he produces, authority derives from the created thing rather than from the person. The role of "writer" becomes simply a role, a title signified by a "the", that can be filled interchangeably; that when the central character cannot write "Miss Lonelyhearts" another writer is easily able to fill in for him (West 86). This reading of Miss Lonelyhearts's "role-playing" owes much to Widmer's interpretation of the fiction and West's life. Widmer treats the taking on of a role psychologically, as a means of "pretending, for such motives as defensiveness or aggrandizement... to be other than the actual self...One puts on a mask, and cannot completely take it off; the mask takes over" (Widmer 1-2). The reading within the context of the anxiety of obsolescence differs, moving away from a strictly psychological interpretation; the mask is the product of an imposition by outer, sociological forces. Further, it is not apparently a "mask" until it has "taken over". In other words, Miss Lonelyhearts does not take on the column as a means

of escaping emotional or mental issues within his self as it existed prior to the column; rather, the column appears, to him, to be a tool for operation within the larger social structure, which ultimately takes over as the "actual self" dissolves. Widmer views role-playing as cause; here, we interpret it as the effect of larger impositional forces.

The nameless character recognizes the inversion of authority in this process and attempts to explain it:

> "Let's start from the beginning. A man is hired to give advice to the readers of a newspaper. The job is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke. He welcomes the job, for it might lead to a gossip column, and anyway he's tired of being a leg man. He too considers the job a joke, but after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that the correspondents take him seriously. For the first time in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator." (West 94)

The loss of identity is so complete that it remakes the past, as, in telling his own story, Miss Lonelyhearts only refers to himself as "a man", the name is lost. This also contrasts with his present identity as "the" holder of a title; any other state, to be "a man", becomes impossible. In this earlier time, the man, and indeed everyone who works for the newspaper, regards himself as possessing authority over his work. It is a means to an end, a rung in a ladder that leads consistently from "leg man", a lower position of which the man has grown tired, toward an ultimate goal. For the other newspaper employees, the column is a "circulation stunt", a means of increasing newspaper sales. However, the man becomes unmoored from his place in the world. He experiences a moment similar to Sutpen's realization of place in relation to the plantation owner, causing him to "look at all the objects from the other side and… find out you had never seen them before"

(Faulkner 186). He must "examine the values by which he lives"; in so doing he discovers that power and authority lies with the column rather than with its writer. The parallel with earlier moments of realization ends at this point. Edna Pontellier and Thomas Sutpen face similar realizations of relative weakness and each responds by rejecting the situation and crafting a new, powerful identity. Miss Lonelyhearts cannot actively respond. He says, "'I cannot quit. And even if I were to quit, it wouldn't make any difference. I wouldn't be able to forget the letters, no matter what I did'" (West 94). Action is impossible when anxiety possesses the artist. Though alienated within the confines of his circle, his lack of will prevents the formation of a new circle.

The condition is endemic to the world of the novel. Like Miss Lonelyhearts, the readers of his column become defined by means of their relation to the column and, by extension, the newspaper. They abandon their original names and take as identity the characteristics of despair which give them value in the commercial venue of the column. They act as a product, packages of individual despair yet "all of them alike, stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife". The letters, though written by individuals, are mass-produced opportunities to sell, not simply copies of the newspaper, but the idea that the corporate identity of the newspaper possesses a higher wisdom, an authority, that can solve the problems of the individuals, who, on their own, can only suffer. The newspaper plays a joke, or more properly, a hoax on the individuals who make up its readership. Thus a human being with a name becomes "Sick-of-it-all" or "Desperate", a weaker party in the relationship between structure and individual (West 59-60). This is, on the surface, a "democracy of suffering" with "the right of each victim to once and once only tell his tale of misery" (Fisher 260). As such it destroys the elitism

of high art, removing the possibility of aestheticism; indeed, the very idea of a "right" to "once and only once" create contradicts the idea of art existing by virtue its aesthetic merit. To guarantee that each one "victim"-artist, essentially the opposite figure of the artist-triumphant, can create simply by virtue of being (and that, conversely, no matter how valuable the work of an artist is, he or she only has one opportunity to use the capacity) is to replace the scale of value that is essential for the possibility of "high" art. Indeed, the letters are expressly portrayed as lacking aesthetic value in their description as "inarticulate" and "humble". High art vanishes, replaced by a system where the raw materials of art (words) become valuable for their service toward a power oriented goal.[8]

Thus, in a deeper sense, as the power is focused apart from the creators of the words, the system is authoritarian. Indeed, with one notable exception, each letter writer addresses him or herself to "Miss Lonelyhearts" as "yours". The letters, literally, their writers and the readers of the column, figuratively, become subject to external authority. Initially this interpretation may seem an over-reading of what is simply a matter of forms, of epistolary etiquette, but the aforementioned exception proves the rule. The Fay Doyle letter concludes with "*An admirer*" as it is not addressed to the idea of the authority of Miss Lonelyhearts, but specifically to the nameless character as "*a man... the man who... had on a blue suit and a gray hat*" (West 87).

Fay assigns an identity to the nameless Miss Lonelyhearts, both avoiding the authority of the column and placing herself in a position of authority over the character as her conception and creation. Fay's powerful size and presence and the nameless character's subservience to her bear out this reading. Fay "look[s] like a police captain",

[8] This is a decline in status for aesthetics from the social system of the Pontellier household where art, though directed toward a commercial purpose, maintained aesthetics as the ultimate source of value within the system.

suggesting an inherent authority, particularly as it correlates to Miss Lonelyhearts's fantasy of himself as "the detective", subordinate to Fay's "captain". Even here, Fay's individual authority remains externally derived from the larger social structure; "police captain" implies the power of both high office and the social and governmental framework that necessitates and creates the office. Her dominance continues, as Miss Lonelyhearts "follow[s] her up the stairs to his apartment" and she "put[s] her hand on his knee". He finds himself in the unfamiliar and weaker position of pursued, a reversal of roles in which he finds "a strange pleasure", and with which he plays along, following his new part and temporarily maintaining the fictive identity (West 89). Yet, as with the column, where its pleasures of opportunity and the power of being in on the joke gradually give way to an awareness of insignificance and a loss of identity, the assignation with Fay soon "frightens" him as she "drag[s] him to the bed" and then leads to a complete collapse and prolonged illness "in the Dismal Swamp" (92-93).

The illness mimics the Resurrection, as Miss Lonelyhearts sleeps for two days and awakens on the third, but the situation has not changed:

> He sat in the window [of the pawnshop] thinking. Man has a tropism for order. Keys in one pocket, change in another. Mandolins are tuned G D A E. The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy. Man against Nature... the battle of the centuries. Keys yearn to mix with change. Mandolins strive to get out of tune. Every order has within it the germ of destruction. All order is doomed, yet the battle is worthwhile.
>
> A trumpet marked to sell for $2.49, gave the call to battle and Miss Lonelyhearts plunged into the fray. First he formed a phallus of old watches and rubber boots, then a heart of umbrellas and trout flies, then a diamond of musical instruments and derby hats, after these a circle, triangle, square, swastika. But nothing proved definitive and he began to make a gigantic cross. (West 93)

Order and disorder appear as opposites. This implies the system of replacements, as each new order holds destruction within itself; viewed with awareness from within, the

inevitability of newness is doom. The new is not positive for those within the system. The instrument that gives the rallying cry for human endeavor is also a cheap item of commerce. Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to construct a new being from these things. At this point, we should recall the previous scenes of artistic self-birth; the artistically inclined character undergoes a moment of crises that forces him or her into action and creation of a new self by means artistic endeavor. Here, the process breaks down; Miss Lonelyhearts's imagination takes him to a "pawnshop", a depository of used objects which have failed their owners and whose owners have rejected them; the things are "paraphernalia of suffering". It is "late in history" and all that remains available to the would-be artist, his own internal resources devoted to the service of a mechanical god, are the detritus of other lives. Creation of the new self begins but soon collapses into a random formation of meaningless shapes, none of which "prove definitive", and, indeed devolve from the unity of a circle into increasingly angular and complex shapes, the last of which is the spoked and distorted lines imply both a broken cross and also a system of inevitable return toward the central point of authority in the newspaper. The turn toward the gigantic cross, figured as the last alternative in a world of exhausted options, indicates death as both the ultimate result of the failure to create and also as the only escape from the "circle" of the newspaper. The straightened swastika becomes Miss Lonelyhearts attempt at self-crucifixion, but the material of the cross grows faster than he can assemble it. The attempt is futile, and, by virtue of its size and position on the seashore, stretching out over emptiness, seems to reach out and encompass a desolate world in its despair.

The crucifixion without resurrection or redemption continues with the intrusion of Shrike, the feature editor. Shrike, as Harold Bloom tells us, takes his name from the

> small-to-medium-sized birds with remarkably hooked bills, and rather nasty face masks. Their name in Latin, *Lanius*, means "butcher," and shrikes are commonly called butcher birds, since their practice is to impale insects on the thorns of bushes, and then devour their prey. That suggests crucifixion, and Shrike is a kind of American Satan who torments Miss Lonelyhearts, and would crucify him, if he could. (How to Read 246)

He can and does. Shrike, as editor becomes authoritative representative of the newspaper and of the larger social structure of the present circle, paralleling Fay Doyle's "police captain". Skrike is "in on the joke" that keeps Miss Lonelyhearts fixed in his place, where Shrike slowly torments him to death. Though he labels Miss Lonelyhearts "an escapist", as Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to "escape" by pulling covers over his own head, "Shrike [is] unescapable" like the bird after which he is named (West 95). As if to prove this, Shrike enumerates the numerous "methods" and the impossibility of each. After dismissing "the soil, the South Seas, [and] Hedonism" the "American Satan" comes to

> "Art! Be an artist or writer. When you are cold, warm yourself before the flaming tints of Titian, when you are hungry, nourish yourself with great spiritual foods by listening to the noble periods of Bach, the harmonies of Brahms and the thunder of Beethoven. Do you think there is anything in the fact that all their names begin with B? But don't take a chance, smoke a 3 B pipe, and remember these immortal lines: *When to the suddenness of melody the echo parting falls the failing day.* What a rhythm! Tell them to keep their society whores and pressed duck with oranges. For you *l'art vivant*, the living art, as you call it. Tell them that you know that your shoes are broken and that there are pimples on your face, yes, that you have buck teeth and a club foot, but that you don't care, for to-morrow they are playing Beethoven's last quartets in Carnegie Hall and at home you have Shakespeare's plays in one volume."
>
> After art, Shrike described suicide and drugs. (West 97)

West's casually sardonic narration lumps "*l'art vivant*" with suicide and drugs, signaling the final break with the world of high aestheticism. Art collapses into the ridiculous and shabby. Shrike becomes the spiritual inheritor of Edna Pontellier's sons, grown up, in possession of his new world, and sadistically aware of his command of the artist. Miss

Lonelyhearts is the embodiment of Edna's nightmare, the self trapped in a world where everything is forced from outside, no aspect of self remains. The imagery implied by the name "Shrike" reverses that of *The Awakening*, the parasitic mosquitoes have become dominant butcher birds and the human being upon whom they once fed is now reduced to insignificance as an insect impaled on a cross of thorns, kept alive only by the sadism of its tormentor. Shrike's conscious glee in the situation appears in the echoes of the "Miss Lonelyhearts"-letters, reinforcing the powerlessness of the artist by grouping the man, Miss Lonelyhearts, with the suffering readership of the column, all of them equally subordinate to the inescapable Shrike. Shrike, elevating himself above all else, expresses pride on par with Bloom's depiction of Satan as the modern poet, but his conscious rejection of art in both the content of his rhetoric and in the act of his speech, distorting language from creative to destructive and exploitative purposes establishes him as a departure from this Bloomian ideal.

For West and the modernist artist figure, trapped within the limits of a specific historical period, Shrike's dominance seems a permanent condition. Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to find a response to his straitened existence in the return to an older form, but the inescapable next stage emerges in the form of violent apocalypse. In the speakeasy, Miss Lonelyhearts encounters a group of his friends, who advocate the violent gang-rape of female authors:

> They were aware of their childishness, but did not know how else to revenge themselves. At college, and perhaps for a year afterwards, they had believed in literature, had believed in Beauty and in personal expression as an absolute end. When they lost this belief, they lost everything. Money and fame meant nothing to them. They were not worldly men. (West 75)

Miss Lonelyhearts sits smiling to himself, fantasizing a new life as an anarchist bomber, about to kill the President, and, later, he assaults an old man for refusing to relate his "suffering". The man becomes a representative of all of the suffering who the column purports to aid. This is the final effect of Shrike's official "thick glove of words", for those, aware of the system, who cannot participate in the pleasures of "money and fame", of newspaper circulation, but who cannot escape the power of Shrike. Yet, Miss Lonelyhearts, as the friends in the bar and Shrike consistently label him, is an "escapist" by nature, the artistic nature of Edna Pontellier and the bird in the cage, though he lacks the focused will of Edna. He stumbles through Shrike's catalogue of escapes, and, exhausting them, attempts a misprision of his tormentor's ironic conclusion that "God alone is our escape" (97)

Thus, after the sojourn with Betty in the wilderness fails as a method, he responds to the effects of Shrike's irony on the "dreams" of the consumers of mass media. He seeks to re-attain the "Christ dream" by un-ironically adopting the "sincerity and humility" of the language of the letters within his writing of the column (West 103). The "Christ dream" contains the possibility of meaningful individual action, though weakened to grant a similar possibility to others, that motivates Edna and Thomas Sutpen. The pursuit of this "dream" becomes the pursuit of the obsolete individual, internally motivated voice of the powerful writer/artist. Thus, Shrike's perversion of speech, as the "thick glove of words", into mockery, publicly disguised in the empty platitudes of the column designed to trap its suffering readers into a commercial cycle of misery and commiseration, but revealed privately in the open mockery of his tirades launched against Miss Lonelyhearts, forces Miss Lonelyhearts to seek a new form of communication. Until

he does, he can maintain his new sincerity only by remaining silent, renouncing the Shrike-ian medium of words.

Miss Lonelyhearts and Shrike encounter "the cripple", Peter Doyle, Fay's husband. Doyle attempts communication through the "puerile dream" of the movie and "love story magazine" that spur Miss Lonelyhearts's commitment to humility when he encounters them on his return from the wilderness:

> Doyle had been staring at Miss Lonelyhearts as though searching for something, but he now turned to Shrike and tried to be agreeable. "You know what people say, Mr. Shrike?"
>
> "No, my good man, what is it that people say?"
>
> "Everybody's got a frigidare nowadays, and they say that we meter inspectors take the place of the iceman in the stories." He tried, rather diffidently to leer.
>
> "What!" Shrike roared at him. "I can see, sir, that you are not the man for us. You can know nothing about humanity; you are humanity. I leave you to Miss Lonelyhearts." He called to Goldsmith and stalked away.
>
> The cripple was confused and angry. "Your friend is a nut," he said. Miss Lonelyhearts was still smiling, but the character of his smile had changed. It had become full of sympathy and a little sad.
>
> The new smile was for Doyle and he knew it. He smiled back gratefully. (West 109-110)

Miss Lonelyhearts's pure, wordless sincerity momentarily achieves escape both from Shrike's authoritarian elitism, which places Doyle in a subordinate position of the mass of "humanity" and deprives him of the rights of speech, and from Doyle's own "leering" attempts to adopt the puerile insincerity that characterizes Shrike's own speech. Miss Lonelyhearts achieves direct and complete communication with Doyle, as intent and interpretation correspond, granting Doyle a "voice" of his own as he smiles back in an act of mutual and equal participation. The new communication continues as they hold hands beneath the bar table in an exchange of the love of the "Christ dream" that effectively provides the answer "not in the paper" to the letter that Doyle wordlessly forces on Miss

Lonelyhearts (111-112). The removal of this communication from the context of the paper contributes to its success. They escape the structural demands of commercial exploitation by separating communication from public speech. Both are initially disturbed by this awkward creation of a new world, calling to mind the physically contact between Edna Pontellier and Mlle. Reisz, but they pass through the initial dangers and "give into it and they sit silently, hand in hand" (112).

Momentarily, a new artist of the "triumphant thing...[the] humility" of Christ arises as a new alternative to Shrike, the embodiment of pride without art that replaces Bloom's artist of Satanic pride. Almost immediately this return to communication collapses. Miss Lonelyhearts's silent call to Christ appears next to Doyle's verbal curse, using the name of Christ, of his wife and his crippled foot. The invocation of Mrs. Doyle reasserts the authority of the Shrike world, and she appears, converting physical communication into physical violence, rejecting any communication outside of the accepted mockery of the column and letters, and re-subordinating Doyle and Miss Lonelyhearts, both of whom she drags into the apartment. As they eat, she gropes Miss Lonelyhearts under the table, parodying his contact with Doyle in the bar. Miss Lonelyhearts maintains his beatific smile, but it becomes a cipher, inadequate except as a place holder until speech in the hoped-for "new form of a message" (113-114).

Doyle, aware of his wife's attempt to cuckold him, repeats the scene with Shrike, attempting to employ the mocking language of the powerful; "'Ain't I the pimp, to bring home a guy for my wife?" He darted a quick look at Miss Lonelyhearts and laughed apologetically" (114). His wife responds with a violent reassertion of authority, striking him, in a moment of heavy-handed symbolism, with a newspaper, stripping away his

humanity so that, in defense, he imitates a dog. Yet, this indication of awareness of the rigged game "surprises" Fay, allowing Doyle a brief moment of power. He ignores her demand that he go to the store to buy gin, and he and Miss Lonelyhearts re-form their communication of hand-holding as Fay goes to the kitchen. She returns and verbally assaults this new form. Silent humility proves unworkable in the authoritarian world:

> The cripple pulled his hand away and made as though to strike his wife. Miss Lonelyhearts realized that now was the time to give his message. It was now or never.
>
> "You have a big, strong body, Mrs. Doyle. Holding your husband in your arms, you can warm him and give him life. You can take the chill out of his bones. He drags his days out in areaways and cellars carrying a heavy load of weariness and pain. You can substitute a dream that will be like a dynamo in him. You can do this by letting him conquer you in your bed. He will repay you by flowering and becoming ardent over you...
>
> She was too astonished to laugh, and the cripple turned his face away as though embarrassed.
>
> With the first few words Miss Lonelyhearts had known that he would be ridiculous. By avoiding God, he had failed to tap the force in his heart and had merely written a column for his paper.
>
> He tried again by becoming hysterical. "Christ is love," he screamed at them. It was a stage scream, but he kept on. "Christ is the black fruit that hangs on the crosstree. Man was lost by eating of the forbidden fruit. He shall be saved by eating of the bidden fruit. The black Christ-fruit, the love fruit..."
>
> This time he had failed still more miserably. He had substituted the rhetoric of Shrike for that of Miss Lonelyhearts. He felt like an empty bottle, shiny and sterile.
>
> He closed his eyes. When he heard the cripple say, "I love you, I love you," he opened them and saw him kissing his wife. He knew that the cripple was doing this, not because of the things he had said, but out of loyalty. (West 115)

Silence and humility fail to provide a meaningful message, effectively closing off the "Christ dream" from Miss Lonelyhearts. His descent into the twin forms of mockery reasserts the dominance of the Shrike world and his essential identitylessness, as an empty bottle to be filled either by the rhetoric of the column that controls him or the Shrike that consumes him slowly. Doyle falls back into the subservient role of the

cripple-husband of his letter, obeying his wife by wordlessly leaving to buy the gin. He does so "without looking at Miss Lonelyhearts", as their connection has been broken. Miss Lonelyhearts's failure ensures the approach of the violent apocalypse, and in this he moves outside of the realm of Shrike. Mrs. Doyle does not know this and resumes her attempted seduction, trying to "pull him down on top of her" as she previously drags him to the bed. He literally escapes with violence: "He struck out blindly and hit her in the face. She screamed and he hit her again and again. He kept hitting her until she stopped trying to hold him, then he ran out of the house" (116).

As his previous encounter led to three days of illness, producing the abortive reclamation of the "Christ dream", Miss Lonelyhearts's re-birth into violence produces three days of purposeful sleep "without dreaming" (117). Without feeling, he becomes "the rock" that resists both the rhetoric of Shrike and the love of Betty. His next trip into the bed turns the rock into "a furnace" of "heat and mentally unmotivated violence". It is in the furnace that he finds God and "a sweet clean grace, not washed clean, but clean as the innersides of the inner petals of a newly forced rosebud" (125). The image of the "forced rosebud" recalls the violent rape of the female writers. It is this feelingless violence that he has sought to avoid in all of his other methods of escape, and it is this violence that he now "accepts". Staring at the image of Christ's crucifixion, he becomes one, not with Christ's humility, but with the God who uses the image of violent death as "bait" for the world. He "catches" Doyle on the stairs, encircling the cripple with his arms and falls down the stairs as the gun that Doyle brings to kill him goes off.

This descent into violent death achieves the escape from torment, but it also places the artist beyond the capacity for rational thought and powerful speech. Here,

Miss. Lonelyhearts's wordlessness differs from the earlier silent interaction with Doyle. Where Doyle earlier "knew" the meaning of Miss Lonelyhearts's smile, Miss Lonelyhearts now misunderstands Doyle's warning shout. It becomes "a cry for help" from all of the letter writers (126). The catalog of the suffering in conjunction with violence recalls Miss Lonelyhearts's assault on the old man who likewise takes on the being of all the letter writers. His outstretched arms evoke the cross, as the crucifixion without resurrection culminates in a fall "part of the way down the stairs" (126). It is a meaningless death, not even presenting other-directed sacrifice, as he drags Doyle, and all of the other sufferers Doyle represents, down with him. Violence becomes universal.

Miss Lonelyhearts represents the modernist artist in a state of conscious obsolescence. Overwhelmed by anxiety, he casts about for meaningful escape, but, deprived of the use of his own creative faculties, he cannot resist the forces of the commercial and authoritative forces of modernity. Eventually, he passes beyond anxiety into a madness of speechlessness without understanding. Meaningless violence overtakes him, without his awareness of it, as he destroys himself and Doyle in a distorted gesture of salvation.

Where *Miss Lonelyhearts* depicts the end of the possibility of a strong modernist artist *the Day of the Locust* presents an ambiguous vision of what comes next, containing an extension and examination of the vision of a meaningless apocalypse that closes the earlier novel. *The Day of the Locust* continues the idea of employed art in the figure of Tod Hackett. In Hackett, West portrays the artist passing beyond the old anxiety to become a comfortable observer and participatory recorder of the new culture of casual violence.

We see this in Tod's conception of his unfinished painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles" which "definitely proves he has talent", despite his employment by a film production company as a set designer (241-242). Indeed, Hackett's acceptance of the job in Hollywood (as a "hack" painter) appears to others as the death of his artistic ability, as "selling out". For him, however, it becomes a method of fulfillment of a need for the grotesque, where the old modes of painting "mere handsomeness" bring him to the verge of abandoning painting. The people of Los Angeles, who have emigrated from other places, coming "to California to die", inspire a new and violent artistic sensibility (242). The new is fully present here in this city of emigrants where traditional art vanishes in place of the "truly monstrous" (243). Tod Hackett would, perhaps, find some aesthetic value in the Miss Lonelyhearts-letters.

His desire for Faye Greener evinces this attraction to the violent and grotesque. Faye's name associates her with Miss Lonelyhearts's predatory paramour and with triumph of modern commercialism in its associations with the color of money. It can further be associated with the "puerile dreams" of the movie house against which Miss Lonelyhearts reacts, both because of Faye's "dream" of employment in the film industry and in the last name, evoking acquisitiveness in the phrase, "the grass is always greener on the other side", with its assertion that a thing is desirable simply because it is not yet possessed. Tod, looking at a photograph of Faye contemplates her desirability: "Her invitation wasn't to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love" (251). When this grotesque desire is thwarted, he contemplates violence in rape as a means of satisfying it (376-377). He even makes an attempt, though he fails in the attempt.

In recovering from the "violent exercise" of the frustrated rape attempt, which leaves him "tingling pleasantly… [and] comfortably relaxed", he begins

> to think about the series of cartoons he was making for his canvas of Los Angeles on fire… He wanted the city to have quite a gala air as it burned, to appear almost gay. And the people who set it on fire would be a holiday crowd… he only wondered if he weren't exaggerating the importance of the people who came to California to die. Maybe they weren't really desperate enough to set a single city on fire, let alone the whole country. Maybe they were only the pick of America's madmen and not at all typical of the rest of the land.
>
> He told himself that it didn't make any difference because he was an artist, not a prophet. His work would not be judged by the accuracy with which it foretold a future event but by its merit as a painting. Nevertheless, he refused to give up the role of Jeremiah. He changed "pick of America's madmen" to "cream" and felt almost certain that the milk from which it had been skimmed was just as rich in violence. The Angelenos would be first, but their comrades all over the country would follow. There would be civil war.
>
> He was amused by the strong feeing of satisfaction this dire conclusion gave him. Were all prophets of doom and destruction such happy men? (West 308-309)

Here, the artist is at one with the violent apocalypse. The threat of destruction provides not only aesthetic inspiration, but also personal satisfaction at the prospect of destruction itself, not simply the inspiration it provides. He imputes this "happiness" to all who participate in the destruction, creating an inversion of the moral language in this passage. A mob becomes a "holiday crowd". Madness and violence are provide "richness" and, in the metaphor of milk, a form of nourishment. Additionally, we see the distinction between this artist "after modernism" and the strong artists of the old aesthetic ideal. Edna Pontellier, Mlle. Reisz, and Thomas Sutpen are concerned with creation as a satisfaction of the will. Tod Hackett, in the role of "prophet" assumes a merely descriptive role, even if he is describing the future. This role evinces a certain disengagement from human life that prevents anxiety; if the artist does not create

anything in the temporal world, only describes the current circle, he or she has nothing invested in it. The passing of the present into obsolescence is not problematic as the new may be described just as effectively as was the old.

The distinction between the artist who creates and the artist who describes appears in the climactic mob scene of the novel. Here, the rampaging mob that threatens his life spurs Tod to resume work mentally on his vision of the end of the world (387). The strong modernist artist that we earlier observe would incite the mob with words or in some metaphorical manner create it out of his or her own imagination. Nowhere is this more clear than in the final paragraph, as the police take the injured Tod home in a squad car:

> He was carried through the exit to the back street and lifted into a police car. The siren began to scream and at first he thought he was making the noise himself. He felt his lips with his hands. They were clamped tight. He knew then that it was the siren. For some reason this made him laugh and he began to imitate the siren as loud as he could. (388-389).

Tod assumes that he makes the sound of the siren, analogous to the mob violence which he conceives prior to its existence, but he soon discovers that he merely observes and imitates. However, unlike the old artist of the committed ideal of aestheticism, who, when faced with the new situation, either reacts to overturn it completely or is defeated, the new artist evinces an adaptability based in indifference.

West's depictions of the artist amount to a portrayal of the end of literary modernism and high art. The modernist, faced with the world of commercialism and suffering and trapped into a position of apparently permanent subordination cannot find a workable means of escape. He or she, aware of this powerlessness, suffers the anxiety of obsolescence and degenerates into a confused and misunderstanding agent of violence

and chaos. In the next stage, after the ideal of aesthetics disappears in obsolescence, the artist assumes a strictly descriptive capacity. As such, he or she takes the values driven by the social forces of the era and makes art that describes it. This allows adaptability and a resultant longevity; any suddenly occurring new simply becomes another model to imitate in art.

Conclusion: Patterns of Modernist Despair

We have seen the operation of the modernist ideal of aestheticism in three distinct venues of the American system of the permanent new. The cultural process of replacement and obsolescence gives rise to a system of anxiety that defeats the ideal of aestheticism. Each author portrays this system in a different setting physically and temporally and in the interaction of this larger system with various smaller individual characteristics. In each case we see varying deviations from the pattern of the anxiety of obsolescence, but the pattern generally persists.

In the case of Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier and Mlle. Reisz, we see a period where art can be consciously sought and attained to a degree or for a period of time. We also see the unique stresses placed on the female artist by the impact of "compulsory heterosexuality" within the system of the new. The female artist must defeat, in the present, both the authority of the prior and that of the next-on, in the form of children. The role of mother carries with it characteristics similar to the escaped role of daughter and wife but with the added anxiety of, rather than a mere reminder of, the replacement in the future, a threatened acceleration of the process so as to move replacement into the present. A model for attainment of the self-centered ideal exists in the present in the form of Mlle. Reisz's complete rejection of the goals of the system, be they material, sexual, or familial/maternal. Mlle. Reisz instead creates an implicitly lesbian identity as the "artist-spinster", whose only attachments are to art and aesthetics themselves and the more tenuous but still positive relationship with the younger female artist. In this figure we see a form of Bloom's aesthetic ideal, but without Bloom's pernicious interactions between

artists. Female influence becomes a mutual experience that enables a blossoming of freedom and artistic expression. Yet, for all this, Mlle. Reisz remains essentially cut off from the outside world, "erased" as Adrienne Rich would have it, from the public consciousness in an uneasy quasi-acceptance of an obsolescent state. At this early stage in American literary modernism, then, the possibility for conscious total withdrawal into the aesthetic ideal remains, however it may be perceived; however, for the female artist in particular, the process of withdrawal remains highly doubtful. Even in apparent escape, the inherent processes of replacement reassert themselves and send the potential artist to an anxiety-ridden defeat of despair and annihilation.

In the world of William Faulkner, indeed a self-created modernist world in the form of Yoknapatawapha County, the shadow of the strong artist remains, but he has receded into the past. Faulkner presents forms closest to Bloom's very modernist patterns of pernicious transmission of influence, yet he also presents the prior strong artist acting in the face of on-coming obsolescence. While the strength of the old influence allows a momentary delay of obsolescence, its ultimate triumph persists. The next-on world of technological modernity and artistic anxiety asserts itself. Here the awareness that gives birth to the anxiety of obsolescence for the new artist arises from a conjunction with Bloom's anxiety of influence. With a very strong artist in his past, and movement from his origins in the South to the more modern North and Harvard in his future, Quentin Compson is subject to the influence of his predecessor and to the anxiety of obsolescence as his predecessor's obsolescence and death pre-figure his own. As a male artist, Quentin does not suffer the unique source of anxiety to which Edna Pontellier is subject, that particular prescience of the threat of an on-coming future to the unity of the strong self;

however, the factors peculiar to his own situation, combined with the advance forward in time toward the next stage of replacement, create a situation where the incoherence of speech that afflicts Edna at her death takes over Quentin's life. Quentin becomes divorced from himself and from the story he hears and tells; he is unable to create realities of his own and simply relates the stories of the past, and even this act of telling eventually falls to others. His identity wavers; he becomes one with the creative figures of the past, effectively entering the story and removing his ability to tell. The story is taken up by another as the fiery collapse of Thomas Sutpen's physical construction, the "big house" of Sutpen's Hundred makes the fact of obsolescence inescapable.

In the thorough cultural modernity of Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, we find literary modernism itself become obsolete. Thus, the artistic development depicted in the novel presents itself as a descent from anxiety into complete destruction. This theme carries over into West's later *Day of the Locust* though in that novel a new, later form of artist arises, enabling a different response to potentially anxiety inducing situations. The artist figure, now channeled into the production of commercial rather than aesthetic material, becomes a tool of outside forces rather than an exemplar of the ideals of the self. He becomes a figure plagued by internal anxiety and external authorities. The artistic imagination suffers within this system resulting in a process of degeneration that mimics the processes of artistic development which we observe in the earlier works. The ultimate end of the process remains the same, as the artist figure becomes divorced from the mind, the source of the creative faculties. Miss Lonelyhearts degenerates into violence and death at the hands of another. *The Day of the Locust* presents an artist in a world after the collapse of literary modernism, with the artist now actively and

consciously participating in the processes of cultural replacement, even if that which replaces is the universal apocalypse. Tod Hackett's envisioned painting of "the Burning of Los Angeles" becomes the antithesis of modernist world-creation, art enslaved to instability, art as description of the moment. As the modernist artist sought self-creation as a means of combating the necessity of death, West's post-modernist artist vanishes in a scene of violence, yet laughing and "happy" for he has successfully found a new thing to imitate. This loss of the strict ideal of self-creation and aesthetic rigor enables the appearance of adaptability and disengagement as methods of response to the fact of replacement, extending the artist's career but decreasing his or her power.

The appearance of artistic despair in novels of the American modernist period reveals the operation of a system, unique to the American cultural sphere, of constant replacement with a consequence of obsolescence for those within it. The modernist artist, seeking to deny death by means of self- and world-creation finds him or herself caught in an on-rushing future. The new replaces the old leaving those within the old facing a life of obsolescence. When time and technology have undergone sufficient advancement, obsolescence becomes a permanent condition. Art and the artist give way to new forms which prize ambiguous modes, fraught with destruction, and an ultimate meaning that remains uncertain beyond. The existence of modernist despair, caused by the anxiety of obsolescence, provides us with an image of American literary modernists aware of the impending dissolution of the high art they seek to create from the beginning of the period and continuing through its final defeat.

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