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**An Incongruous Present:
Identifying the Absurd Aesthetic in William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* (1951)**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

by

Blake Hani

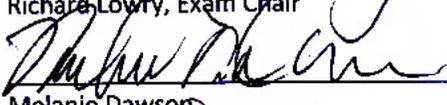
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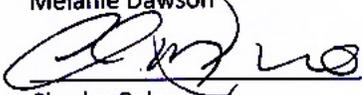
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April 30, 2019

I. Introduction – Re-contextualizing *Requiem for a Nun*

The fact that man always hopes toward a better human condition, I think that the purpose of writing, of art, is a record... That that is one thing in which he can show tomorrow that yesterday he endured.

-Faulkner, *Lion in the Garden*, pg. 177-178

Prior to publishing *Requiem for a Nun* in 1951, William Faulkner had only recently ended his longest period of inactivity between the publishing of *Go Down, Moses* in 1941 and *Intruder in the Dust* in 1948. This period of inactivity for many Faulkner critics marks a separation between what has been deemed “old” Faulkner and “new” Faulkner, and it was in the criticism of *Requiem*, the second of Faulkner’s “late” or “new” works, that the idea of a “new” Faulkner became a prominent point of comparative criticism. Malcolm Cowley, a prominent critic of Faulkner at the time of *Requiem*’s publication, wrote on the divide between Faulkner’s early work and his later projects in his review of *Requiem*, arguing that the “old” Faulkner may be the superior author: “The new [Faulkner] I vastly respect for his defense of human dignity, but I’m not sure that the old unregenerate Faulkner wasn’t the greater novelist.”¹ Another negative

¹ “In Which Mr. Faulkner Translates Past into Present,” *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, September 30, 1951, pg. 14. Cowley articulates the difference between “old” and “new” on moralist grounds:

Once there was an unregenerate Faulkner, careless of his readers but not unwilling to shock them; the author of novels about incest, rape, arson and miscegenation. Now there is a reformed Faulkner, conscious of his public duties, who has become the spokesman for the human spirit in its painful aspirations toward ‘love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice,’ to quote from his Nobel Prize address. Soon his readers on the five continents will have to decide which of the two authors they prefer.

Cowley’s quotes were found in the preface to Noel Polk’s critical study of the novel: *Faulkner’s Requiem for a Nun: A Critical Study*, Indiana University Press, 1981, pg. [x, xi]. Michael Millgate, *The Achievement of William Faulkner*, Random House, Inc., 1966. pg. 84, reiterates this same distinction between Faulkner’s work after 1948, writing that *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) featured a “polemical tone [which] plainly marked a new development in Faulkner’s work” and that this tone became “even more apparent” in *Requiem for a Nun* and *A Fable*.

review of *Requiem* from 1951 by Herbert Poster, titled “Faulkner’s Folly,” criticized the characters like Nancy Mannigoe as “a condensation of Faulkner’s central, ethical, viewpoint” as expressed in his 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech.² In his speech, Faulkner addressed the purpose of the writer/artist as not only the recorder of experience, but also as the reminder of experience, a support in dealing with the confusion and despair of life:

I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last dingdong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless [sic] in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking.

I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet’s, the writer’s, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet’s voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.³

The moralistic (and optimistic) message of Faulkner’s Nobel Prize speech often became the primary lens with which his later works were criticized, as it was assumed that the statements

² In *The American Mercury*, 73 (December 1951). Referenced in the same Polk preface, pg. [xi]

³ William Faulkner – Banquet speech. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2019.

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1949/faulkner/speech/>

made by Faulkner in this speech constituted the underlying ethos of his ensuing novels. Noel Polk, in the preface to his critical study of *Requiem*, notes the change in critical perception of Faulkner following the speech, writing on how critics focused on “the change in Faulkner...from a despairing and tragic view of man to a more positive and hopeful view.”⁴ Each ensuing novel then became a referendum on the validity of the statements Faulkner made in the speech, leading this sort of criticism to discredit Faulkner the moralist as an artist, and to see *Requiem* specifically as an “ambitious failure” in coherently uniting a moralistic message with experimental fiction.⁵

The highly experimental nature of *Requiem for a Nun* was also subject to negative criticism due to the inaccessibility of its narrative, even by Faulkner’s standards. The novel is seemingly separated into six divisions distinguished by two alternating writing styles: three sections written in prose focusing on the history of the town and its landmarks, and three interwoven sections written in dramatic form (complete with stage directions), focusing on Temple Drake’s moral dilemma regarding the murder of her child. Thus, it is a challenge to present a coherent and concise summary of the novel, but such an exercise does illustrate the deeply disjointed nature of the structure.⁶

⁴ “Preface.” *Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun: A Critical Study*, Indiana University Press, 1981. pg. [x].

⁵ Irving Howe, “Faulkner: An Experiment in Drama,” *The Nation*, 173 (September 29, 1951), 263.

⁶ It is worth noting that the plot summary on Wikipedia features only a summary of the dramatic sections, leaving out all of the events and details described in the prose section. I feel this speaks to the difficulty in simply defining the narrative of the novel as a combination of both the historically-focused prose and the individual-centered drama.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Requiem_for_a_Nun

Requiem's opening section, "The Courthouse (A Name for the City)," is written in prose, focusing on the events immediately preceding the town's founding, which lead to the construction of the courthouse. The town, not yet named Jefferson and considered a "frontier" consisting of "men and women pioneers," is faced with a dilemma of organization after some of the Natchez Trace bandits break out of their ill-made prison.⁷ The prison has no lock, and the only person in the loose congregation of people living in the area that has a lock is Alec Hurston, who requires some form of compensation in exchange for the lock, and thereby creates the dilemma of responsibility. The narrative focuses on four men – Compson, Peabody, Ratcliffe, and Pettigrew – who deal with the dilemma of Hurston's compensation by deciding to found the town of Jefferson, thus making it the collective of "Jefferson" who will compensate Hurston for the lock. This is the only portion (pg. 17-27) in all of the prose sections which replaces exposition with dialogue. The founding is tied directly to the construction of the courthouse, as the courthouse contains structures of social organization and enforcement – the office of the sheriff, the tax assessor, and the circuit- and chancery-clerk (which contained the ballot boxes for voting), as well as the courtroom, jury room and judge's chambers.⁸ The pace of the narrative picks up after the founding of the town, and the narrator introduces two more families recognizable from Faulkner's previous work who assist in the founding: Sartoris and Sutpen. The narrator then goes on to detail the town's growing relationship with other towns, its destruction in the Civil War, and its social development in the light of national social changes

⁷ Faulkner. *Requiem for a Nun*. Vintage Books ed., Random House, 1975. pg. 4.

⁸ Ibid. pg. 38.

(such as the abolition of slavery) – all of which are tied, in one way or another, to the offices of the courthouse. The section ends with a meditation on the courthouse as the witness to generations of change, and that its creation, in the first of countless rings from the building’s bell tower, “had shattered the virgin pristine air with the first loud ding dong of time and doom.”⁹

Next, *Requiem* switches into a drama, “Scene I” in the courtroom, 5:30 PM, November thirteenth of an unnamed year. The stage directions, lasting two full pages, introduce Nancy Mannigoe (a black woman on trial for the murder of a child) and her white lawyer Gavin Stevens, describing the staging of the scene in only the upper left half of the stage as “the symbolism of the elevated tribunal of justice,” as well as indicating “a further symbolism which will be clearer when Act II opens[.]”¹⁰ The first scene consists simply of the sentencing of Nancy to be hung, to which she replies “Yes, Lord,” sparking a large stir in the courtroom. The curtain then “starts hurriedly and jerkily down,” as if “the court itself were jerking frantically at it to hide this disgraceful business[.]”¹¹ Scene II shifts to the Stevens living room, the home of Gowan and Temple Drake Stevens, where Temple, Gowan, and Gavin (Gowan’s uncle) meet to discuss the trial over drinks before Gavin leaves town. It is revealed in conversation that Nancy was on trial for killing Temple and Gowan’s child, though Temple continues to speak cryptically of “something more” and asking Gavin “How much do you know?”¹² Gowan becomes frustrated, insisting that Gavin go home and that Temple tidy up the house. Temple leaves, and

⁹ Ibid. pg. 42.

¹⁰ Ibid. pg. 43

¹¹ Ibid. pg. 43

¹² Ibid. pg. 54-55

Gowan and Gavin discuss Gowan's years of sobriety, which Gowan decides to end that night. In this discussion comes the first mention of Temple's past, referring to the events of *Sanctuary* (1931) when Temple was kidnapped and imprisoned in a Memphis brothel. In his recapitulation of the story, Gowan utters an "indistinguishable word" in reference to Temple's experience in the brothel, which Gavin heard as "loved it," prompting him to press Gowan for more details that "nobody but you and she know about, maybe not even you know about," details which Gowan refuses to give.¹³ Scene III is set in the same living room four months later, after Temple has returned from her four month excursion in California. Only Gavin and Temple are present, as Temple had given Gowan a sleeping pill so that he would not interrupt their conversation. Their conversation is supposed to be about saving Nancy, which both characters believe is the motivation of the other in meeting (it remains unclear who called for the meeting). Their conversation revolves around an unclear and cryptic questioning of what the other one "knows" – Temple is suspicious that Gavin was told a secret by Nancy he won't reveal, while herself implying that she is withholding some crucial information, and implication which captures Gavin's imagination and leads to his questioning of her. Gavin insists that he knows nothing, while Temple never tells Gavin what her secret is, and she wonders inconclusively about the reason for her own interest in Nancy. Temple, after forcing Gavin to swear that he knows nothing, then insists that "Temple Drake is dead" and that there is no hope for Nancy. Gavin famously replies that "The past is never dead. It's not even past," insisting that "Temple Drake" must reveal herself in the name of justice for Nancy.¹⁴ Convinced

¹³ Ibid. pg. 66-67

¹⁴ Ibid. pg. 80

that Temple must tell the “truth” to save Nancy and set her conscience at rest, Gavin arranges for the two of them to meet with the Governor that night. It is then revealed that Gowan, having not taken the sleeping pill, had been secretly listening to Temple and Gavin’s conversation, and plans to follow them.

The next section, titled “ACT TWO: The Golden Dome (Beginning Was The Word),” moves quickly and with a great deal of high language and rhetoric juxtaposed with the listing of statistics. The very first line of the section reads, “JACKSON. Alt. 294 ft. Pop. (A.D. 1950) 201,092,” before launching into an almost biblical style of writing: “In the beginning was already decreed...,” etc.¹⁵ The entire section (nine pages) is one continuous sentence, punctuated only by colons, suggesting that each event blends seamlessly into the next, an unbreakable chain of cause and effect.¹⁶ The narrator catalogues the appearance and ensuing replacement/disappearance of various elements of the town’s social fabric: the shift in control of the land from Native to Spanish to French to American pioneer to American citizen, the texture of the land as wilderness to farmland to city, the development footpaths to riverboats to railroads to airplanes, etc. The narrative essentially illustrates a history that is not necessarily related to human concerns, as each development is presented as another step in the inevitable process of history – one ultimately unconcerned with any individual significance or end. The section concludes with the building of the capital dome in 1903, “the gilded pustule longer than the miasma and the gigantic ephemeral saurians [sic],” before listing, as of

¹⁵ Ibid. pg. 87.

¹⁶ This is the position held by Hugh Michael Ruppensburg, “The Narrative Structure of Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*,” *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Special Issue: William Faulkner, pg. 396.

1951, “the roster of Mississippi names,” the various transportation companies that operated in the town, the hotels in the town, and the popular activities of the town (pageants, youth sports, festivals).¹⁷

Scene I of “The Golden Dome” takes place in the Governor’s office at 2:00 AM with Temple, Gavin, and the Governor present. The lengthy stage directions describe the “further symbolism of the... ultimate seat of judgment” first suggested in Act I, as well as the “symbolic” nature of the Governor as “the Gabriel not before the Crucifixion but after it.”¹⁸ Temple begins the scene comparing this meeting to an execution by firing squad and herself as a mental patient of Gavin Stevens, before deciding that she is essentially on the witness stand. Temple begins to recount her past as “the all-Mississippi debutante whose finishing school was a Memphis sporting house” before getting sidetracked and then complaining that she is lying, or stalling, unable to pick which one.¹⁹ Temple then admits that she is there to defend Nancy because she likes Nancy, that Nancy’s shared past as a prostitute made it possible for Nancy to “speak her language.”²⁰ The Governor then asks why Temple has come here to plead for the life of a murderess who killed Temple’s own child, which Temple refutes and claims that she is there to give “Temple Drake a good fair honest chance to suffer.”²¹ Temple begins to recount the events of her eventual imprisonment in a brothel (essentially the plot of *Sanctuary*), and then how she had been blackmailed by the brother of the man she had a sexual relationship with in Memphis, with love letters she wrote, but she is constantly interrupted by Gavin, who

¹⁷ Faulkner. *Requiem for a Nun*. Vintage Books ed., Random House, 1975. pg. 97.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* pg. 98-99.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* pg. 101.

²⁰ *Ibid.* pg. 105.

²¹ *Ibid.* pg. 115.

says things she claims she was about to say, before Gavin ultimately decides that she cannot tell the story because she is “drowning in an orgasm of abjectness and moderation when all you need is truth.”²² Gavin then retells the story of how Temple was blackmailed, then accuses Temple of developing a relationship, vague in nature, with her blackmailer, claiming Nancy had figured out Temple was keeping a secret, and that knowledge was what led to the murder of the child. Gavin then tells Temple to “tell it,” and the next scene begins, flashing back to the day of the murder.

Act II, Scene II, the flashback, dramatizes the story that Gavin told of the blackmail, featuring Pete (the blackmailer) and Nancy along with Temple. In this version of events, Temple has fallen in love with Pete and plans to elope with him, which she tells to Nancy. Nancy encourages her not to do it for the sake of the child who will be left with Gowan, who believes the child is of another father.²³ Temple says that she is leaving regardless, and goes to gather her things and the blackmail money while Nancy goes off-stage into the nursery. Temple then follows, exiting and then screaming off stage, presumably having walked in on the scene of the murder.

Scene III returns to Temple in the governor’s office, who is finishing the story of Nancy’s arrest, and is surprised that Gowan has replaced the Governor at the desk while she was unawares. Gowan tells her that she should have told him the story earlier, so they could “forget it.”²⁴ Gavin and Gowan then insist that it is time to go home, while Temple remains dissatisfied with the lack of resolution for Nancy, as well as herself. Temple then wonders what

²² Ibid. pg. 125.

²³ Ibid. pg. 164.

²⁴ Ibid. pg. 175.

this exercise of telling was for, as she feels no different, concluding that her soul (which she is now more unsure if she even has) is no closer to salvation.

Section III, “The Jail (Nor Even Yet Quite Relinquish-),” tells the story of the Jail, touching upon many of the same incidents described in “The Courthouse.” The jail is posed diametrically to the courthouse – while the courthouse initiated the “ding dong of time,” the jail exists outside of time, “older than the town itself.”²⁵ In this section, the narrator jumps, faster and faster, to anecdotes that add to (and even contradict) the history of “The Courthouse,” as well as lending details to the events outlined in the “The Golden Dome.” The story given the most emphasis is that of Celia Farmer, a girl who scratched her name and the year into a windowsill in the Jail’s kitchen. The story focuses not on the actual event, but on the legend as it is known to the townspeople, as the readers are invited by the narrator to consider themselves strangers and witnesses, to experience the “scent, a whisper, filling that hot cramped strange room already fierce with the sound and reek of frying pork-fat:” the room where Celia Farmer scratched her name, even though the “host” (the narrator) is unable to say for sure whether Celia had light or dark hair.²⁶ The section ends addressing the audience, the “outlander with a B.A. or (perhaps even) M.A. from Harvard or Northwestern or Stanford,” who is just “passing through Jefferson,” to take a moment to explore this moment of Celia Farmer, to vivify it in one’s imagination before returning to the endless progress of their journey.²⁷

There is only one scene in Act III, taking place in the jail the morning after the meeting in Act II – the day before Nancy is to be hanged. Temple and Gavin visit Nancy, and Temple tells

²⁵ Ibid. pg. 183.

²⁶ Ibid. pg. 219-221

²⁷ Ibid. pg. 224-225.

Nancy that she failed to save her. Nancy is unmoved, saying that she was certain of her fate already, and that she had no need for hope. Temple and Gavin are confused by her response and press her on it, incredulous that Nancy would not want to be saved.²⁸ Temple asks Nancy why she doesn't have hope, how she could live without it knowing that "all you've got do is, just to die."²⁹ Nancy encourages Temple not to hope for life, but to trust in death, have faith in God that this suffering is salvation.³⁰ Gavin challenges her on this claim, asking her how she can expect to go to heaven after murdering a child. Nancy doubles down on her claim, repeating over and over that one must believe, even, strangely, if one does not know what they believe. Temple is unable to respond to Nancy, giving no indication that she has been swayed, and is eventually pulled out motionlessness by Gavin, who beckons her to come join him and Gowan. Temple says to herself, "Anyone to save it. Anyone who wants it. If there is none, I'm sunk. We all are. Doomed. Damned," before being called by Gowan again, to which she responds "Coming," as the curtain falls, and the book ends.³¹

It is difficult to condense the plot of the novel, clearly, as the prose and dramatic sections have two totally distinct narratives, and the dramatic sections, in particular, contain almost no easily digestible exposition. Thus, describing the plot is almost an empty exercise, capable really of only exposing the disjointedness of the sections, as well as the strangeness of the drama. Thus, it is difficult to get any sense of cohesion in the summary when the novel itself does not provide any, further complicating the interpretation of the structure, as the explicit

²⁸ Ibid. pg. 232-234.

²⁹ Ibid. pg. 236.

³⁰ Ibid. pg. 237.

³¹ Ibid. pg. 245.

interconnections between the prose sections and the dramatic sections are miniscule and vague in nature.³² Due to the almost complete absence of concrete connections between the two narratives the novel presents, establishing the novel's coherence becomes the primary issue of criticism, though there is virtually no textual evidence to draw on. As Karl Zender says in the opening statement of his critical reading of imagination in *Requiem*, "It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that *Requiem for a Nun* poses more severe problems for interpretation than any other novel by Faulkner."³³ The lack of concrete connection between the prose and dramatic sections inherently makes criticism of the novel as a unified work essentially reliant on the same "miniscule of archive" that the narrator of the novel deals with when interpreting the history of the town, further contributing to the critical conclusion that the novel is a failure. Cleanth Brooks, another highly regarded critic of Faulkner, gives little time to *Requiem* in his seminal work on Faulkner, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, writing that the structure of *Requiem* "constitutes the most daring but perhaps the least successful solution of the structural problems attempted by Faulkner in any of his novels."³⁴ As a result of this early negative criticism by such prominent critics, *Requiem* remained mired in relative obscurity due

³² If a sense of cohesion was found in my summary, then it would be a misreading. The separation between the prose and dramatic narratives is as abrupt as it is in my summary, and it is my intention that only the dramatic sections present a semblance of linear progression across its three fragments.

³³ "Requiem for a Nun and the Use of Imagination" pg. 272.

³⁴ *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 140. This quote was found in Karl Zender's "Requiem for a Nun and the Use of Imagination."

to the general consensus of it as a failure.³⁵ Noel Polk summarizes the misreading of *Requiem* in his preface to his critical study of the novel:

Requiem... has come to be read as Faulkner's fable of sacrifice and salvation, in which the morally vacuous Temple Drake is saved from herself by Nancy Mannigoe's selfless sacrifice and Gavin Stevens's intervention. At the same time, by extrapolation from that misreading, it is seen as a statement by Faulkner of his own beliefs, of his own late grappling with some form of Christian orthodoxy, vague though it be, and as a rejection of and perhaps an apology for the despair and pessimism of his early work. Thus *Requiem* has come to be seen as a 'statement' and a 'sermon' and, consequently, as a bad novel.³⁶

However, fresh criticism has emerged in the last few decades or so, thanks in large part to Polk's writings, that has reconsidered *Requiem*, as well as "late" Faulkner. Polk began "the task of bringing much needed critical attention to this novel, as well as correcting many of the mistaken notions about it,"³⁷ through his "willingness to challenge the moralistic interpretations prevalent in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s."³⁸

³⁵ This is the same position held by Ruppensburg, "The Narrative Structure of Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*." pg. 387: "The unusual structure of this book is perhaps the single most important reason why many readers have misunderstood or ignored it."

³⁶ Polk, "Preface," *Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun: A Critical Study*. (Bloomington 1981).

³⁷ Quoted from the third foot note of Ruppensburg's "The Narrative Structure of Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*." pg. 388.

³⁸ Quoted from the first endnote of Zender's "*Requiem for a Nun* and the Uses of Imagination" pg. 294.

While Polk's readings of *Requiem for a Nun* are problematic in themselves,³⁹ Polk's work is highly influential because of his successful reconfiguration of Temple, not Nancy, as the moral center of the novel, and the illuminating reading of Gavin not as Temple's moral guide but rather as her crucifier.⁴⁰ The new critical space created by Polk's convincing argument against the previous interpretations of the novel allowed a revisiting of the structure of the novel, most notably by Hugh Michael Ruppensburg, as Polk's criticism opened up reinterpretation of the role of the narrator,⁴¹ and thus illuminated the ideological connection between the prose and dramatic sections: the significance of communally transmitted heritage in the creation of identity. This reading uses the overwhelming emphasis on the past presented in the prose sections as a way to relate thematically to the central conflict of the dramatic sections, as the characters struggle to reconcile their past acts with their present selves, echoing the process of historicizing the past of the town. Thus, the role of the past within the present and the temporality of existence and knowledge becomes the backbone of the novel, characterizing not

³⁹ Zender points out the issue with Polk's reading, that it hinges crucially on the reinterpretation of Nancy's murder of Temple's baby as the act of a "madwoman and not of a saint," which, as Zender argues, is merely the reversal of the difficult interpretation of the central conflict rather than a resolution of it. "*Requiem for a Nun* and the Use of Imagination." pg. 272.

⁴⁰ See Michael Millgate ("*Requiem for a Nun*." *The Achievement of William Faulkner*, Random House, Inc., 1966, pp. 221–226) for a reading on the moralism of the novel expressed through Nancy and the role of Gavin as the prodding force behind Temple's supposed realization of guilt. Polk points out in his dissertation ("*A Textual and Critical Study of William Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun*." *University of South Carolina*, University of South Carolina Press, 1971) that this sort of reading ignores entirely the question of Nancy's guilt or innocence as well as the true motivation for Gavin Stevens, thereby making it an incomplete and surface-level reading.

⁴¹ Polk notes in his dissertation that the original narrator for the first section of the novel, which was originally published on its own as a short story, was likely Charles Mallison, who would have been retelling the story told to him by "Uncle Gavin." Faulkner revises the section for the novel by removing much of Stevens personality, thus creating a narrative voice "much more universal and much more impersonal," pg. 7, 9-10. Ruppensburg notes the importance of Polk's assertion in his fourth footnote, pg. 389.

only the struggle of the town to find “for itself an important place in history,” but also the struggle of Temple (as well as Gavin) to understand herself through interpreting the past.

While it may be argued as I do here that the struggle of determining one’s relationship to time and the past is the central conflict of the novel, it is certainly true that the novel also provides no solution to this conflict, neither on a communal level in the prose section nor on an individual level in the characters in the dramatic sections – particularly with Temple. In this sense, the novel’s unity through a shared *failed* search for a coherent understanding of the past’s relation to the present is essentially a unification through dis-unification - a common failure between both sections of the narrative that suggests the true message is not some simple moralistic statement or rejection of an earlier pessimism, but rather a continuation of the same underlying thought that characterized Faulkner’s early work.

Polk, as influential as he was, was certainly not the first to see the great expanse of possibilities in *Requiem for a Nun*, for Albert Camus immediately acknowledged the novel as a success and felt compelled to adapt the novel into a play of his own bearing the same title first shown in Paris in 1956, *Requiem pour une nonne*. While Camus famously wrote very sparingly on other authors and spoke little to the press about his own work, he did expressly state in his preface to the French translation of Faulkner’s novel⁴² (separate from Camus adaptation of the same name) on his appreciation of Faulkner and his “language of tragedy,” as well as naming Faulkner as one of the greatest contemporary writers.⁴³ Camus was particularly intrigued by the

⁴² Camus, “Préface,” *Requiem pour une nonne* trans. by Maurice Coindreau (Paris, 1957), pg. [xii].

⁴³ From Claude Cézan, “Avant *Requiem pour une nonne*,” *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, No. 1516, Sept. 20, 1956, pg. 10. My reference comes from a rough translation of the original French, “Et Faulkner est, à mon avis, le plus grand écrivain contemporain.” This quote was found in

resignation to destruction exhibited by Nancy Mannigoe and the struggle of Temple Drake to unify her past. The conflict of those two characters in particular evokes the confrontation between the human desire to find significance and the overwhelming insignificance found in reality, the experience of which Camus describes as the recognition of the absurd:

At this point of his effort [to unify experience through meaningful reasoning] man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.⁴⁴

In his own adaption of Faulkner's novel, Camus slightly alters the plot/dialogue of the dramatic sections, placing far more emphasis on the scene in the jailhouse.⁴⁵ Camus's thoughts on and alterations to the novel highlight the presence of a certain logic in the novel that attracted

Couch's "Camus' Dramatic Adaptations and Translations," *The French Review*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Oct. 1959), pg. 35.

⁴⁴ Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays* (Vintage International). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. pg. 28

⁴⁵ See John Philip Couch, "Camus and Faulkner: The Search for the Language of Modern Tragedy" for more information on Camus's adaptation.

Camus to the novel in the first – the logic of the Absurd, a concept developed by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*.^{46 47}

The absurd as an aesthetic refers to the artistic expression of a certain type of epistemological foundation, in this case an aesthetic dedicated to realizing the essential tenets

⁴⁶ It is worth noting that the primary focus of this work will be on Camus's description of the Absurd as it is expressed in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel* only, and will not deal with alterations or subdivision of the concept articulated by other existentialist thinkers, such as Sartre or Kierkegaard. The concept of the absurd is typically traced back to Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* (1849), in which Kierkegaard postulates that humanity's relationship with God is an absurd one because of our inability to rationalize the world, creating the problem of despair that can only be overcome through religious faith. Camus secularizes Kierkegaard's ideas on the incongruity between humanity's expectations of the world and the reality that world presents to humanity, pondering the possibility of a way to live within the absurd without ignoring the truth of absurdity by clinging to a false or blind belief in a unifying solution, like religion. Camus associated hope with religious faith, considering it to be a way of refusing to face the reality and thus not a viable solution to existential despair, like suicide. Moreover, Camus himself felt that his ideas were not entirely beholden to existentialist philosophy, or philosophy at all, but were rather a method of properly identifying the phenomena of the seeming incoherence of life and the ensuing dissatisfaction with it: "There will be found here merely the description, in the pure state, of an intellectual malady. No metaphysics, no belief is involved in it for the moment" (*Myth of Sisyphus* 2). Thus, the use of the concept of the absurd will be in the service of examining *Requiem for a Nun* for the presence of an absurd aesthetic which opens up the text to a more thorough interpretation, rather than any kind of philosophic assertion of existentialism's validity.

⁴⁷ Existentialism as an aesthetic is described most fully by Sartre, who essentially writes a manifesto of existential aestheticism in his 1938 novel *Nausea*. In this work, a man becomes aware of the universal indifference to his personal torment, and eventually comes to the conclusion that he, as well as everything, is only meaningful once meaning is applied to it, getting to the point of one of Sartre's most famous sayings, "existence precedes essence." However, Sartre's aesthetic is derived via a foundation of atheism which is relatively insignificant to Camus's absurd aesthetic, though it is often mistakenly given prominence. An acceptance of Camus's aesthetic does not necessarily imply the existence or non-existence of a God, but rather ponders the mere possibility of living without hope/religion, and therefore does not assume atheism as its point of departure, as Sartre does. Essentially, there is no consensus even within those who are supposed to make up the foundation of existentialism on the proper way to perceive the conclusion of the Absurd. Thus, it will be more useful to use the ideas propagated specifically by Camus as the lens through which we will interpret the absurd, rather than trying to make sense of the kaleidoscope that constitutes the "collective" or "general" existential aesthetic.

of absurdity as Camus presents them – the incongruence between expectation and reality, the despair in the recognition of this incongruence (and its implication of insignificance), and the ensuing struggle to continue living within that incongruence. Much of existential “philosophy” is actually closer to an aesthetic epistemology than a true philosophy. A core belief of existential thought, which the absurd is a derivative of, is that radical human freedom fosters an ability to recognize the essential features of the world, thereby giving the creation of art (considered one of the greatest examples of human freedom) a particular ontological power within the epistemology.⁴⁸ Despite its organization as an argument/statement of philosophic position, *The Myth of Sisyphus* is no exception to this tendency toward aesthetics as the primary mode of metaphysical expression, as the text operates more like an artwork articulating itself through the description of experience and the power of metaphor rather than operating like a philosophic work that fully addresses the tradition of philosophic thought. *The Myth of Sisyphus* then becomes a sort of guideline to recognizing other works that present a similar epistemology, works that also center around the “intellectual malady” that is the experience of existential despair derived from recognition of the absurd.

I present for consideration in this thesis an absurd reading of *Requiem for a Nun* built upon the revised reading of the structure of the novel, specifically the relationship between the prose and dramatic sections. This absurd reading provides a logic to the disjointedness, which in turn provides the key to recognizing the overall perspective of the book. Reconsidering *Requiem* through the lens of absurd aestheticism further debunks the assumption of the novel’s

⁴⁸ The position stated in this paragraph is derived primarily from Macquirre, *Existentialism* (1977) and “Existential Aesthetic” entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetics-existentialist/>

expressive failure, and poses the novel instead as a profound commentary on the nature of art, history, and the human condition. The application of Camus's absurd is appropriate precisely because of the interpretation opened up by Ruppensburg, in which the two sections are united primarily through the presence of a narrator who, in effect, *creates* the narrative, for such a reading frames the central conflict of the dramatic sections and prose section as the reconciliation of past and present – the reconciliation of experience and expectation – rather than a strange moralistic dilemma regarding what true crime was committed and who was guilty of it (was it Nancy who was responsible the crime? Or Temple for enacting the chain of events that led to it?).

Due to the presentation of the absurd immensity of time presented in the prose sections, the dramatic sections should be seen as the text's expression of the individual's attempt to define or create significance within their own lives, despite a narrative awareness of their own absurd insignificance. The narrator, in an attempt to create a narrative, *suggests* significance in the drama simply by including the dramatic section, giving time to and thereby validating, in a sense, the individual concerns that exist almost despite their meaninglessness within the course of history and time. The disjointedness of the novel, then, underscores what is a critical contrast in perspective between the two sections - a contrast that is the foundation of the absurd aesthetic – as the drama, merely in its existence, asserts itself as relevant, present, and in some abstract way meaningful even in relation to the indifference of history and time. The narrator, as an individual, unites absurd knowledge of cosmic progress indifferent to human concern, with the individual passion of persons concerned with issues relevant only to themselves. The deep connection between the absurd in the structure of

novel, and the ultimate *inconclusion* of the narrative not only suggests an ironic unifying logic undetected in previous criticism, but also transforms the novel from a strange experiment into a meditation on Faulkner's view on the human condition as well as the purpose of art and aesthetics at large, opening up the novel as an addition to the discourse on art offered by Camus's absurdist epistemology.

II. “Dualing” Structures

The disjointed nature of the dual structure of *Requiem for a Nun* is the most immediate, and possibly the most critical issue one must address in interpreting the novel as a whole. However, as Hugh Michael Ruppensburg notes, “The unusual structure of this book is perhaps the single most important reason why many readers have misunderstood or ignored it,” and the difficulty in interpreting the structure has led many to erroneously conclude that the prose and drama should be considered separately.⁴⁹ The severity of the disjointedness discourages any sort of connection between the distinctive sections, forcing the reader to wonder: is the text a combination of two distinct *texts*, a play within a novel, or two narratives in loose dialogue within the grand universe of Yoknapatawpha County? Or is it truly a novel, a singular work with the dual structures achieving a unified significance through a co-dependent narrative-informing relationship? Faulkner himself wrote in the introduction of Ruth Ford’s theatrical adaptation of the dramatic sections of the novel that, “This play was written not to be a play, but as what seemed to me the best way to tell the story in a novel,”⁵⁰ suggesting that the dramatic portions of the novel were never meant to be seen as written truly for the stage but rather as a stylistic decision in building the novel. Further, in a 1950 letter to Robert Haas written while Faulkner was working on *Requiem*, Faulkner wrote, “It may be a novel as it is,”⁵¹ in reference to the text, indicating that though the novel was so disjointed and written half as a drama, this incongruity was the intention of the novel, its almost unfinished appearance a

⁴⁹ Ruppensburg, “The Narrative Structure of Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*,” *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Special Issue: William Faulkner, pg. 387

⁵⁰ Ford, Ruth, and William Faulkner. *Requiem for a Nun*. Random House, 1959.

⁵¹ Joseph Blotner, ed. *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1977), pg. 302-303

crucial part of the novel's construction. Faulkner also wrote a letter to the editor Saxe Commins in June 1951, a few months before the novel was published, stating, "to me the prose is not at all a prologue, but is an integrated part of the act itself."⁵² It is clear that Faulkner viewed *Requiem* as a novel, a singular work - not as a combination of or a dialogue between two texts or narratives, but rather a singular narrative told through complementary structures. However, it is difficult to see precisely how the dual sections relate to each other, as there is but one explicit reference to any of the characters of the dramatic sections,⁵³ and the dramatic sections deal overtly with none of the various storylines and events presented in the prose sections.

There are only two commonalities between the two sections, the setting (the only explicit commonality) and the narrator/stage director, a connection implied by the exaggerated descriptive power of the stage directions. Through the implications of these minute and specific commonalities, the unifying significance of the narratives is revealed. The contradictory depictions, both within the prose sections and in the dramatic sections, of the town of Jefferson and the buildings the narrative focuses reveal an incongruence between the perception of and the reality of the world, a key interpretation in identifying an absurd aesthetic. The most important connection between the two sections is the narrator, whose presence is extended into the dramatic sections by the narrative power of the stage directions, which suggests a bond between the prose and dramatic sections through the process of narrative construction. However, as with the setting, incongruences between the prose and the drama subvert the

⁵² Ibid. pg. 316

⁵³ Faulkner. *Requiem for a Nun*. Vintage Books ed., Random House, 1975. pg. 184.

legitimacy of the narrator, which too becomes of great significance when considering the absurd aesthetic and its emphasis on narrative incoherence. Focusing on these two commonalities not only reveals the subtle connection between the otherwise distinct sections of the novel, but it also sets the stage, so to speak, for the aesthetic of absurdity - an aesthetic of the insoluble incongruence of expectation and reality.

However, before illustrating how the prose and dramatic sections are unified thematically, first the significance of their glaring differences must be established in order to understand how the two sections are to be read in reference to each other – specifically, how the prose sections frame the significance of the dramatic sections. The prose and dramatic sections not only starkly contrast from each other stylistically, but in their tone and subject as well. As stated earlier, there is only one small mention of any of the dramatic characters in the prose sections, suggesting that, on the surface, the events described in the dramatic section have little to no significance to the history of the town. Some critics have attempted to solve this apparent disconnection between the sections by positing the dramatic sections as the culmination of the history described in the prose sections. Ruppensburg, for one, identified the compelling absence of connection as a narrative strategy through which “the reader is brought to realize that the drama is the accretive end-result of the historical events and processes chronicled in the prose.”⁵⁴ While Ruppensburg is correct to identify the intentionality of the absence of connection, his analysis fails to recognize the way in which the narrator contextualizes the events of the drama *within* the historical narrative, while the analysis also

⁵⁴ Ruppensburg. “The Narrative Structure of Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*,” *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Special Issue: William Faulkner, pg. 390.

lends far too grand of a significance to the dramatic sections, and thus Ruppensburg fails to properly frame the dramatic sections in reference to the prose. In the singular crossover reference made about Gavin Stevens, Gavin is temporalized as a part of the past, another fleeting figure that added a bit of influence to the communal history the narrator presents:

Indeed, as Gavin Stevens, the town lawyer and the county amateur Cincinnatus, was wont to say, if you peruse in unbroken – ay, overlapping – continuity the history of a community, look not in the church registers and and the courthouse records, but beneath the successive layers of calcimine and creosote and whitewash on the walls of the jail, since only in that forcible carceration [sic] does man find the idleness in which to compose, in the gross and simple terms of his gross and simple lusts and yearnings, the gross and simple recapitulations of his gross and simple heart...⁵⁵

As the only cross-reference between the sections, it is only logical that one must take extra care to explore it for some sort of unifying significance - yet, in keeping with the rest of the prose, it is difficult to find any concrete connection between that reference and the plot of the drama featuring Gavin Stevens. The passage opens up little tangible content for consideration, and the most notable part of the passage may actually be the word “was.” By situating Gavin in the past, the narrator reveals that the history presented in these sections includes within it the time of the dramatic sections, meaning the Gavin to whom the narrator refers may actually be some relatively future Gavin in a time beyond the events of the drama, therefore distinct in time from the one presented in the dramatic sections. Furthering the complexity of the passage is the fact that Gavin never repeats the refrain he is supposedly so “wont to say,” even

⁵⁵Faulkner. *Requiem for a Nun*. Vintage Books ed., Random House, 1975. pg. 184.

when he is in the jail with Temple and Nancy. Thus the reader is forced to consider who exactly that “Gavin Stevens” referenced in the prose might be, as his behavior in the drama actually indicates that he may not yet hold this belief.

In Act I and II, Gavin searches for history primarily through the telling of stories, equating the story of Temple Drake with “the truth” and “the past,” encouraging her to tell “Everything” that has happened in order for the truth of the past, of her history, to be revealed.⁵⁶ Gavin is also chiefly concerned with the precise way that the story is told, often interrupting Temple in Scene 1 of Act II to include details he felt were omitted or even to tell Temple’s story himself. Gavin’s emphasis on the telling of “everything” to reveal “truth” and his compulsion to supplement the individual perspective of Temple with information of his own as a means of reckoning with one’s history is inconsistent with the idea expressed by the Gavin Stevens of the prose section. The way Gavin questions Nancy and his incredulity toward her answers in Act III suggests that he, in the dramatic section, may actually hold an opposing view with respect to the supposed wisdom of the imprisoned presented in the prose section. For example, when Nancy tells Temple that she did not write to her because that “would have been hoping” and that the only way to grasp salvation is to let go of hope, Gavin responds skeptically:

STEVENS: You mean, when you have salvation, you don’t have hope?

NANCY: You don’t even need it. All you need, all you have to do, is just believe. So maybe-

STEVENS: Believe what?

NANCY: Just believe....

⁵⁶ Ibid. pg. 76, 80, 82.

TEMPLE (convulsively): Hush. Hush.⁵⁷

This passage is one of a couple in Act III in which Gavin Stevens questions the assertions made by Nancy, suggesting that he has *yet to think* of the words of the imprisoned as the key to history. If Gavin was “wont to say” what he is supposed to have said in the prose, surely one must assume that he would have certainly done so in the context of Act III’s dialogues with Nancy, unless, perhaps, he was *yet to think of the saying*. So, then, the small passage from the prose section on the Jail reveals a significant incongruity between the prose and dramatic section that in turn illuminates how the scenes in the dramatic sections are framed within the sweeping history of the prose section, and thus how the two contrasting narratives ought to be read together.

Reading the dramatic sections as events within the context of the expanse of history presented by the prose sections indicates a presence through absence. In other words, the fundamental element connecting the interwoven sections is their emphatic indifference to one another – the dramatic sections arrest and detail singular moments in the lives of characters wholly unimportant to the great historical perspective of the prose sections, and the meticulously recorded events of the prose sections bear no tangible effects on the lives of the characters in the dramatic sections. By examining the only instance of a character from the dramatic section mentioned in the prose, the context in which the narrative is told is revealed, as the dramatic narrative is positioned as a specific moment of time in the relatively recent past, an enlargement of a moment otherwise insignificant to the great expanse of history, yet of the gravest importance to the characters themselves. Ultimately, the significance of the

⁵⁷ Ibid. pg. 234.

differences between the sections does not entail a unification of the novel, but it does indicate how the sections can be unified thematically through their treatment of history/time and the incongruence between expectations and experience.

Considering what Faulkner said about the prose section being “a part of the act itself,” it is essential to examine how the prose sections inform and position the dramatic sections, and vice versa, as both the prose and dramatic sections revolve around the same setting. In “The Courthouse (A Name for the City),” the opening section of the novel, the duality of the narrative is revealed through the subversion of the symbolism suggested by the courthouse building itself, again revealing a crucial incongruity between expectation and reality that highlights a paradoxical aesthetic logic that lends an aura (or a mirage) of meaningfulness between the otherwise disjointed narratives. The prose narrative presents the creation of the town as a product of the symbolic order brought about by the commitment to the construction of the courthouse, before subverting the symbolic meaning supposed by the courthouse by exposing the contrast between the ideals imbedded in the courthouse and the reality of the community that it is supposed to govern – an irony rendered explicitly in the prose, and implicitly, via stage direction in the dramatic sections.

The literal construction of the courthouse is explicitly tied to the figurative construction of the town, shown through the suggestion of one of the town’s founders to build the courthouse along with a school (another social institution) in order to complement the existing church which succeeded in gathering these people into a community in the first place:

‘We’re going to have a town,’ Peabody said. ‘We already got a church – that’s

Whitfield’s cabin. And we’re going to build a school too soon as we get around to it.

But we're going to build the courthouse today; we've already got something to put in it to make it a courthouse: that iron box that's been in Ratcliffe's way in the store for the last ten years. Then we'll have a town. We've already even named her.'⁵⁸

Each building establishes an institution crucial to the perpetuation of society – the courthouse devoted to the organization and enforcement of order, the school dedicated to indoctrinating children into the order of the courthouse, and the church as the vehicle through which the community is tied together - thus making their construction symbolically responsible for the creation of the town. The description of the creation of the town is the only part of any of the three prose sections that deploys dialogue between characters, and the use of dialogue ceases once the town is named and it is agreed that the a courthouse will be built, as the narrator regains control of the story and positions the construction of the courthouse as the starting point of a long history.⁵⁹ In this sense, the town is spoken into existence, obtaining its essence purely from the symbolic order tied to its naming. While it still takes six years for the courthouse to be literally constructed, the construction of the courthouse as a symbol was complete once it was verbally agreed that it would be built. The naming of the town suggests an indoctrination of the people living there into the order of society at large, bringing with it all of the influence of socialization and urban development – the construction of the courthouse with its “central hallway and the four offices” necessitates the introduction of a “sheriff and tax

⁵⁸ Ibid. pg. 25.

⁵⁹ Polk (“Alec Holston's Lock and The Founding of Jefferson.” *The Mississippi Quarterly*. Vol. 24, no. 3, 1971, pg. 268) suggests that the section be divided into two parts due to the drastic change in tone that comes after the city is named, citing that the first part of the section is slow-progressing and focused on the details of the specific event that led to the town's founding, while the second part moves fast-paced covering lightly the general history that follows the founding.

assessor and circuit- and chancery clerk” as well as a judge and jury of peers, and voting booths dedicated to deciding who these officials would be.⁶⁰ Thus, the construction of the courthouse brings about all the necessities of society to a place that did not previously necessitate such things.

The town of Jefferson, positioned as a symbol of social organization, is founded on the promise of order provided by laws, symbolized by the courthouse. That promise of order rests upon an ideal, or rather an expectation, that the order established by laws is in the service of fostering a greater society, that such order will guide individuals toward good behavior and thus improve the condition of life. The narrator makes the symbolic meaning of the courthouse to the town explicit:

...the courthouse: the center, the focus, the hub; sitting looming in the center of the county’s circumference like a single cloud in its ring of horizon, laying its vast shadow to the uttermost rim of horizon; musing, brooding, symbolic and ponderable, tall as cloud, solid as rock, dominating all: protector of the weak, judicate [sic] and curb of the passions and lusts, repository and guardian of the aspirations and the hopes...⁶¹

The courthouse is positioned as the core of the town, and is described as prominently visible from all parts of the town, with its vast shadow capable of covering the furthest reaches of the horizon. It is characterized as an active agent within the town, anthropomorphized by descriptions of it as a protector and guardian, and becoming an object of a hopeful idealism in the process – a few pages later, the courthouse is even compared to “man.”⁶² However, as the

⁶⁰ Faulkner. *Requiem for a Nun*. Vintage Books ed., Random House, 1975. pg. 38.

⁶¹ *ibid.* pg. 35.

⁶² *ibid.* pg. 41.

narrator proceeds to show, there is an incongruity between the dream assumed in the creation of the courthouse (and, by extension, society) and the reality that the town exists in.

While the courthouse supposedly represents the protection of “aspirations and hopes,” it was not founded with that aim directly in mind. Rather, as the narrator frames it in the opening paragraph of the section, the courthouse was created specifically “to cope with a situation which otherwise was going to cost somebody money[.]”⁶³ The narrator is aware of how the courthouse ideal will falter, as his power to move forward and backward through time grant him the ability to see both the ideals and feelings of the townspeople, shown in his ability to describe the courthouse’s symbolic meaning, while simultaneously being aware of the indifferent, radically impersonal unfolding of history. The ideal of the courthouse, static and dominating, is incapable of flexibility or adaptation, and thus the narrator suggests that the courthouse, as a symbol, is doomed by the longevity of the courthouse as a building to wait until the day finally comes when its supposed meaning is no longer credible, undermined by the unpredictability of history and emptied out of symbolic significance: “...its [the courthouse’s] doom is its longevity; like a man, its simple age is its own reproach, and after the hundred years, will become unbearable[.]”⁶⁴ Thus, the vivid and explicit characterization of the courthouse as symbol earlier in the section serves not as description of the building’s inherent and undeniable significance, but rather of the town’s symbolic conception of it, revealing

⁶³ Ibid. pg. 3

Specifically, the courthouse was founded when the town had to deal with how to properly repay Alec Hurston for a lock used to keep outlaws from escaping the jail, thereby creating the need for both law and order as well as an institution dedicated enforcing this order via the judgment of right from wrong, as well as the allocation proper punishments and rewards.

⁶⁴ Ibid. pg. 41.

through the narrative contradictions the incongruity between the expectations of this society and its true experience of existence.

In the following dramatic section, the text reinforces the incongruity between the idealized notion of the town's values symbolized in the courthouse and the reality of its inevitable failure to consistently to uphold such values, thereby unifying the prose section and the dramatic section thematically through further subversion of idealized expectation. The initial description of Gowan and Temple's values show that despite the lofty values supposed by courthouse, the collective ideals of society do not match the concerns of the individual, and the concerns that inspired the creation of the courthouse have not been alleviated or even altered. Temple and Gowan are described in the stage directions as living in one of "the apartments rented to young couples or families who can afford to pay that much rent in order to live on the right street among other young couples who belong to the right church and the country club," and suggest that they, and the others around them, are chiefly "concerned with money,"⁶⁵ drawing a parallel to Alec Hurston and the founders of Jefferson. The concerns of individuals of the town expressed through Gowan and Temple reveals the sham of the collective ideal supposed by the order of the courthouse – that the dream of the courthouse is a fantasy, important only to the creation and sustainment of Jefferson as a collective idea, but unimportant to and incongruent with the values of the individuals that make up the collective.

The subversion of the symbolic and communal values of the courthouse the narrator presents by the ensuing anecdotal scenes of the drama harkens back to the way the individual value of the scenes is subverted by their insignificance within the historical narrative – the two

⁶⁵ Ibid. pg. 46, 47.

structures simultaneously subverting each other, the expectation of each unmatched by the experience of the other. The setting, then, as the focus of the historical narrative and the foundational background of the dramatic narrative, becomes a point of revelation into the contradictory perspectives of the two distinct styles – what is simply background to the highly specific individual drama is the center of the historical drama, and what is otherwise insignificant to the historical narrative is of the greatest importance to the individual narrative. The contradiction between the two sections' perspectives indicates a balancing of two perspectives by the text as a whole, a balance between the macro and micro that is aware of the simultaneous futility of either singular perspective – the expanse of history is insignificant to the struggle of the individual, and the struggle of the individual is insignificant to the expanse of history. Thus, the narrator, the second commonality, who is capable of understanding the struggle of the individual while also having the ability to see the full expanse of time, is of great importance to maintaining the paradoxical foundation of the novel, as it is the narrator, through these contradictions of perspective and simultaneous subversions, that seems to hold this balance of contrasts together. However, as we will see, *Requiem* questions the power of narration to unify, exposing yet another set of inconsistencies that makes a true reconciliation between the opposing perspectives of the structure impossible, which therein reveals a “double-thinking” sense of interior logic, an aesthetic, that the struggle to reconcile the irreconcilable is the focus of the novel.

When examining the narrator, it is crucial to understand that the narrator is implicitly present in the dramatic sections. Though there is no “narrative voice,” per se, there is a large influence of stage directions that reach far beyond simple directives and touch upon the

interiority of the characters, as well as explicit references to larger symbolism. Most important, however, is the way in which the dramatic characters, particularly Gavin Stevens, take on the role of the narrator to the detriment of the narrative, undermining the legitimacy of narration itself. Ruppensburg first astutely noted the presence of the narrator in the dramatic sections, writing,

A critical key to the proper understanding of this novel is that the dramatic sections are narrated. Dialogue is relayed directly to the reader by a usually unseen, uninvolved narrator who observes events, comments on them in the stage directions, and is responsible for identifying the characters by name. As a novel, *Requiem* creates a fictional illusion which utilizes drama as one of its methods... In *Requiem* there is no drama, *per se*. It is all narrative fiction.⁶⁶

Though the conclusion that there is no drama is perhaps too extreme of a stance and, I find, an oversimplification of the dramatic sections, Ruppensburg's attention to the narrative power of the stage directions is essential and illuminating. The narrator functionally presides over what is included and excluded from the narrative, and interpreting the stage directions as an extension of the narrator lends a sense of symbolic connection between the prose and the drama, as if the narrator chose this specific anecdotal story from the history of Jefferson in order to express something that could not be articulated through the prose.

The narrator, like any narrator, functions essentially to transmit knowledge through a coherent narrative, but *Requiem* problematizes the transmission of knowledge by calling into

⁶⁶ Ruppensburg. "The Narrative Structure of Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*," *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Special Issue: William Faulkner, pg. 388

question how knowledge, in the form of a narrative history, is transmitted and utilized through generations. This is not to suggest that the narrator is unreliable, but rather that information and knowledge (and therefore narratives) are unreliable. The narrator acknowledges the unreliability of knowledge of the town immediately, noting that much of the history of the town is drawn from “a miniscule of archive.”⁶⁷ The narrator, acting like a historian interpreting the past, draws upon no single source of information and focuses solely on the community, not individuals. In fact, the narrator’s emphasis on capturing the community’s understanding of its own history takes precedence over reporting the truth of the community’s development, as is shown in the very first anecdote the narrator tells in “The Courthouse” about the legend of the Natchez Trace bandits who are believed to have escaped jail (and thus sparked the dilemma over Alec Hurston’s lock that lead to the building of the courthouse). The narrator is careful to indicate the likely fabrication of the legend, stating that, “twenty-five years later legend would begin to affirm, and a hundred years later would still be at it, that two of the bandits were the Harpes themselves[.]”⁶⁸ The third and final prose section, “The Jail,” is dedicated almost entirely to another legend which is acknowledged as an embellishment. The story of Celia Farmer, which is the focus of the section, never attempts to speak directly of her as she truly was, but rather of how the legend of her grew and how townspeople see her as a symbol. When describing how the girl was supposed to look, the narrator notes lack of true knowledge of the real Celia Farmer:

⁶⁷ Faulkner. *Requiem for a Nun*. Vintage Books ed., Random House, 1975. pg. 3.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* pg. 4-5.

...without a doubt in the town's remembering after a hundred years it has changed that many times from blonde to dark and back to blonde again: which doesn't matter, since in your own remembering that tender mist and veil will be forever blonde[.]⁶⁹

Despite noting their fabrication, the narrator still chooses to include these legends along with the factual history of the town, indicating that the primary concern of the narrator is not to simply report the facts, but rather to capture the perspective of the town on its own history, its own narrative, and then to exhibit the town's tendency to warp, exaggerate, or glorify its past in order to lend some significance to its present. Ultimately, it is not the transmitted "knowledge" itself that is significant to the narrative, but rather the awareness and deployment of history in constructing one's own identity that is meaningful, as the willingness to buy into legends exhibits the concern for finding significance within history.

Requiem, however, challenges the effectiveness of finding significance in the past by subverting the role of the narrator itself, as the role of the narrator is subverted by the characters in the drama, most notably Gavin, who occasionally takes on the role of the narrator in long-winded accounts of past events. Gavin, quite simply, is an unreliable narrator, as his own preconceptions and judgments warp the way he perceives and transmits history. In Act II, when he takes Temple to the Governor for her to tell her story, Gavin consistently interrupts her and at certain points takes control of the narrative despite not having heard the story from Temple herself. Gavin's account comes from what he has gathered from his nephew Gowan, rumors, and pure speculation, and he is never refuted by Temple. Instead, Gavin's account is just wrapped into Temple's, becoming an equal part of the communal understanding of

⁶⁹ Ibid. pg. 221.

Temple's story. Note Gavin's Act II description of the man who blackmailed Temple, as it is full of pure speculation on the interiority of the blackmailer, none of which Temple ever confirms:

a man so single, so hard and ruthless, so impeccable in amorality, as to have a kind of integrity, purity, who would not only never need nor intend to forgive anyone anything, he would never even realise [sic] that anyone expected him to forgive anyone anything; who wouldn't even bother to forgive her if it ever dawned on him that he had the opportunity, but instead would simply black her eyes and knock a few teeth out and fling her into the gutter: so that she could rest secure forever in the knowledge that, until she found herself with a black eye and or spitting teeth in the gutter, he would never even know he had anything to forgive her for.⁷⁰

Gavin, having never met the man and never having spoken fully to Temple about the matter, has no authority to report the things that he does, as he provides only speculation on the interiority of a character we never meet.⁷¹ Ruppensburg describes the lengthy speeches Gavin makes as "not dramatically realistic, nor are they meant to be," a characterization I am inclined to agree with due to their utter un-theatricality and reliance on exposition.⁷² While Ruppensburg notes the lack of dramatic realism in order to argue that the dramatic sections

⁷⁰ Ibid. pg. 147.

⁷¹ Polk asserts that Gavin speaks based upon an account previously given to him by Nancy, who he legally represents. However, Polk's argument relies on little more than Gavin's hyper-specificity, which I did not find compelling: "A Critical and Textual Study of William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*," University of South Carolina dissertation, 1971. pg. 167-171.

⁷² "The Narrative Structure of Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*," *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Special Issue: William Faulkner, pg. 402.

Ruppensburg also notes that Gavin is an unreliable narrator, citing Gavin's previous appearances in Faulkner's fiction "where he often expressed demonstrably incorrect opinions about characters whom he deeply sympathized with."

were never meant to be read as a true theatrical drama, which he is correct to do, I also see in these long speeches a direct comparison to the narrator, who also creates a narrative based upon rumors and fragmented records about events likewise unwitnessed.

Again, this is not an argument about the unreliability of the narrator, but rather the unreliability of narrative itself, as the narrator can only report what is “known,” and the town, as demonstrated through the stories of the Natchez Trace bandits and Celia Farmer, believes it knows things without proper evidence. The town and Gavin both perform this speculative historicizing in order to create narratives that give significance to the present. The town needs the legends of the bandits and celebrates the myth of Celia Farmer lends a sense of historical significance, for without them, there is not a clear reason for the town’s continued existence. Similarly, Gavin, the “champion not of truth as of justice, or of justice as he sees it,” who “looks more like a poet than a lawyer,” invents embellishing details, like a fiction writer or “poet,” in order to legitimize his personal sense that a crime had been committed and thus needed to be rectified. While the town does not necessarily “fail” in its attempt to find significance through legend, it is still clear to the reader that the town is searching for meaning in a fiction, in a lie, and thus does not truly have the historical significance it believes it has. Gavin more explicitly fails, as the drama ends without any clear resolution. His attempts to strengthen the narrative he seeks through embellishment only yields further confusion as to what crime had been committed. So, then, *Requiem* presents a challenge to the attempt to mine significance from the creation of a narrative, positing that any attempt to find meaning through the establishment of a coherent narrative is ultimately doomed to be a sham, a grasping for straws

that requires one to repress inconvenient facts (like the initial rationale for the courthouse) or to invent supplement ones (like the Natchez Trace bandits or Gavin's speculation).

Once again, just like the contradictions between the Gavin Stevens presented in the prose and the Gavin Stevens presented in the drama, just like the subversion of the symbolic meaning of the courthouse, the unreliability of narrative itself shown through the paradoxical nature of the narrator indicates a fundamental incongruence between expectation and experience that characterizes the novel. It is assumed that one – in this case, "one" could be both an individual, individual collective like a town, or even an artwork - has an identity or significance, but any attempt to prove that significance is ultimately a failure. In experience, what one believes (or expects) about oneself does not always match up with how one really is. Just as the sections themselves are disjointed and incongruent, consistent subversions of one another and seemingly at odds, so too, the novel seems to argue, is the nature of our existence, our expectations at odds with our experience. This pushes into the next section of this thesis, which (ironically) attempts to unify *Requiem's* crisis of disjointedness as an illustration of the absurd aesthetic, a mode of expression devoted to the articulation of the incongruences of expectation and experience.

III. Setting the Aesthetic

In her book *Reading the Absurd* (2013), Joanna Gavins notes how the adoption of the absurd as a means of describing literary works has become widespread since the middle of the twentieth century, but, critically, so much of the scholarly work dedicated to examining the absurd as a literary phenomena has “failed to agree on the temporal, generic or stylistic parameters which define the concept,” citing the identification of the absurd “in texts as diverse as Greek tragedy and multimodal science fiction.”⁷³ This is a problem common to existentialist thought as a whole, as Macquarrie (1977) points out that there is no single constitutional work that frames existentialism as a philosophy, and existentialism is nearer “a style of philosophizing” than a unified philosophy.⁷⁴ Because of the extremely wide-ranging nature of existentialism and the texts it is applied to, Gavins indicates that there is an appearance within this sect of literary and art criticism that “almost anything goes” which ultimately undermines the absurd’s value as a “descriptive and analytical” term.⁷⁵ In order to rectify the ambiguity surrounding the term, Gavins suggests that such criticism must be concerned with “Delineating the absurd from the existential, the philosophical from the literary.”⁷⁶ For the purposes of my analysis, I focus on what all critics agree upon in discussing the absurd: “that the absurd as a literary phenomenon is an artistic expression of human beings’ inability to find inherent meaning in their existence.”⁷⁷ Further, I curtail the concept of

⁷³Gavins, Joanna. “The Literary Absurd.” *Reading the Absurd*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2013. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0b6wd.5. pg. 1.

⁷⁴ Macquarrie, John. *Existentialism / John Macquarrie*. Penguin Books, 1977. pg. 14.

⁷⁵ Gavins. “The Literary Absurd.” *Reading the Absurd*, pg. 5.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 1.

the absurd strictly to Camus's definition of the concept as it is expressed in artwork, a topic that Camus himself gives a considerable amount of emphasis to in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and expands upon in *The Rebel* (1951).

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus identifies an “an absurd sensitivity that can be found widespread in the age—and not with an absurd philosophy which our time, properly speaking, has not known,” and Camus's writing serves as “merely the description, in the pure state, of an intellectual malady. No metaphysic, no belief is involved in it for a moment.”⁷⁸ For Camus, the concept of the absurd is not concerned with establishing a philosophical position but rather sketching out an element of experience he finds irrefutably present in the life of logical thinkers, the conclusion of the absurd thus serving as the starting point of his writing.⁷⁹ The position Camus takes is one that lies on the assumption that, at some point or another, the individual will experience a jarring recognition of the cosmic indifference of time and space, that one will be confronted with how meaning and significance of objects, people, ideas even, all melt away in the face of emptying infinity juxtaposed with the fact of our individual, finite mortality – thus, there are no absolutes, no inherent meanings, only that which is within our immediate experience available to us. This is the logic of mortality - that all things created will eventually be destroyed and give way to another creation that will continue the cycle, positioning the individual as cog in an unfeeling, incomprehensible machine. How one is to deal

⁷⁸ Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays* (Vintage International). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. pg. 2.

⁷⁹ Gavins also points out that Camus's “impressionistic sketch” of the absurd is what led to the “longer-term problematic status for the concept within philosophy more broadly.” “The Literary Absurd.” *Reading the Absurd*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2013. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0b6wd.5. pg. 3.

with the conclusion/recognition of the absurd is the true subject of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, posing Sisyphus as an allegory of how one might persevere through one's absurd relation to the universe. Camus discusses at length the various ways in which one might persevere in living, focusing on art as primary instance of this type of "revolt" against despair in meaninglessness. The absurd work of art Camus describes is concerned solely with representing the absurd predicament through "a sort of monotonous and passionate repetition of the themes already orchestrated by the world," that does not try to offer an escape from or answer to the issues of absurd existence.⁸⁰ Camus discusses specifically in *The Myth of Sisyphus* what an absurd work of art would require to achieve an absurd aesthetic:

Thus, I ask of absurd creation what I required from thought—revolt, freedom, and diversity. Later on it will manifest its utter futility. In that daily effort in which intelligence and passion mingle and delight each other, the absurd man discovers a discipline that will make up the greatest of his strengths. The required diligence, the doggedness and lucidity thus resemble the conqueror's attitude. To create is likewise to give a shape to one's fate.⁸¹

Camus posits in this passage that an absurd work of art must be a work of deliberate revolution, one that is aware of its own futility yet perseveres through an inward, personal passion for its own existence. Such a creation rests upon what Camus calls "parallel contrasts" between the intelligent knowledge⁸² of the absurd world and the ability to simply enjoy the experience of

⁸⁰ Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays* (Vintage International). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. pg. 95.

⁸¹ Ibid. pg. 117.

⁸² When Camus speaks of "intelligent knowledge," it is meant as a reference to our individual mind's ability to see beyond ourselves, to recognize that the present is but a speck within

our own individuality. Camus identifies this foundational contrast in describing the absurdity of Kafka's work:

There is in the human condition (and this is a commonplace of all literatures) a basic absurdity as well as an implacable nobility. The two coincide, as is natural. Both of them are represented, let me repeat, in the ridiculous divorce separating our spiritual excesses and the ephemeral joys of the body. The absurd thing is that it should be the soul of this body which it transcends so inordinately. Whoever would like to represent this absurdity must give it life in a series of parallel contrasts. Thus it is that Kafka expresses tragedy by the everyday and the absurd by the logical.⁸³

The "divorce" Camus describes refers to the temporal disconnection between our intelligent mind/spirit, which conceptualizes time three-dimensionally into past-present-future that extends infinitely beyond our individual lifespan, and our mortal bodies, which are constrained strictly to the present and are constantly subjected to diverse and individually fleeting experiences of the everyday. An artwork that reflects this disconnection would need to capture

infinity, to see ourselves as one of many, and to recognize the external nature of the world – the recognition that all does not begin and end with ourselves and those around us. Camus notes this in his reasoning for why one might commit suicide, describing how this intelligent thinking can empty the world of significance:

Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined. Society has but little connection with such beginnings. The worm is in man's heart. That is where it must be sought. One must follow and understand this fatal game that leads from lucidity in the face of existence to flight from light. (4-5)

For Camus, the individual is ultimately alone in this experience, for it is deeply personal and there is no space within the unifying construct of society for such a realization. The recognition of the absurd is thus a journey for the individual only. *The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays*.

⁸³ Ibid. pg. 127.

how the illogical and inescapable occurrences of present everyday experience (things like sensual pleasure/pain, emotions, and general randomness of inconsequential or tangential events) clashes with a detached, impersonal logic of a world that exists and functions completely outside of any singular, individual consciousness, necessitating a certain “parallel contrast” in order to present the dueling perspectives. The absurd work of art must maintain this contrast as the foundation of the work’s interior logic, a dual thinking that is never resolved.

To further articulate what it means to maintain the “dual-thinking” Camus describe, it is helpful to think of Walter Benjamin’s similar analysis of Kafka’s work, in which he too identifies an odd incongruity between commitment to tradition and that commitment’s exposure of the emptiness of tradition. In this sense, Kafka’s commitment is a commitment to failure, a commitment to a process with a doomed goal, which thus gives the work its power, according to Benjamin: “Kafka’s real genius was that he tried something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to its transmissibility, its haggadic element.”⁸⁴ Benjamin speaks to the decay of tradition in modernity, that the belief in wisdom in tradition has dissipated, and the idea of truth undermined. Kafka’s genius, then, is the refusal to give up the ritualistic (haggadic) despite the emptiness of the doctrine it formerly served (Halakah), capturing thus the doomed experience of humanity to live though it knows it will die; Kafka is thus an exemplary absurdist writer, one who creates with knowledge of its fruitlessness – one who writes with *the recognition of the absurd*. In Benjamin’s analysis, Kafka’s work does not speak

⁸⁴ Benjamin. “Max Brod’s Book on Kafka,” *Illuminations*. Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968. pg. 147.

to metaphysics, but rather finds its purity and beauty in the failure of wisdom, the failure of truth, in the commitment to tradition – to style. Style thus becomes greater than truth, more important than wisdom, as it is style that attracts us, that moves us, and speaks to our experience. In this way, art and expression are tools with which we grapple with experience, in which we find beauty despite the emptiness of significance. Style, then, is perhaps the most essential aspect of expressing the absurd, an aesthetic that serves as a replacement for doctrine.

Camus expands upon the work of art as tool with which humanity grapples with its own absurdity, engaging in this dual thinking, in *The Rebel*, detailing the way that the observer of art interacts with the piece on a personal level. Works of art touch upon the innate desire for structure, for unity, that puts the individual at odds with the universe through the art's suggestion of coherence – the assumption that the art is meaningful. Any work of art, to Camus, “possess a coherence and unity which [it] cannot have in reality, but which seem evident to the spectator,” meaning that works of art, in their very existence, encourage the reader to search for unity within them, just as they might yearn for unity in reality.⁸⁵ The absurd creation, which does not attempt to soothe this desire for unity like another piece of art might, plays upon this expectation of coherence, aware of the reader or spectator's inability to fully separate the observation of the art from their own everyday experience, and thus confronts the observing individual anew with the struggles and tensions faced by the individual in their relationship with the absurd world. George Selfer, in his essay on separating the

⁸⁵ Camus. *The Rebel, An Essay on Man in Revolt*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1954. pg. 261.

aesthetics of the absurd specifically from the aesthetics of existentialism at large, defines the absurd work of art described in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel* as such:

Absurd art gives no meaning or purpose to life; it does not give any solutions to or explanations of the problems of life's absurdity... its rational achievement consists in nothing other than the acknowledgement of its own nullification in fathoming reality.⁸⁶

Ultimately, an absurd aesthetic is one that embraces and embodies the parallel contrast of personal experience in the face of universal meaninglessness - its significance found in its dedication to insignificant, unresolved perspectives that serve to remind the reader or spectator of their own ultimate insignificance while simultaneously affirming their present existence via artistic consumption. The absurd work essentially seeks to be beyond singular or total comprehension, instead inviting the observer into the perpetual struggle to interpret significance and meaning by engaging in the endless double-thinking of diametrically opposed and simultaneously present perspectives.

Requiem for a Nun, in all of its contradictory complexities, primarily exhibits a *parallel contrast* inherent between the two narratives it presents, as the prose sections and dramatic sections, as we know, contrast from each other in every way from style to subject. As outlined in the previous section, the perspectives of the dual, or contrasting, structures work to subvert each other by hollowing out each other's significance – the individual drama is inconsequential within the expanse of time and history, while the cosmic perspective of history is worthless in the struggle of individual experience. In this mutual subversion by the two narratives, *Requiem*

⁸⁶ Selfer, "The Existential vs. the Absurd: The Aesthetics of Nietzsche and Camus." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1974. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/428426. pg. 416.

achieves the aesthetic aim of parallel contrast, for neither narrative is given authority over the other, meaning that neither narrative is given any validation as truer or less true than the other, and any apparent connection between the two, like the reference to Gavin Stevens, only serves to reinforce their indifference to each other. The narratives' mutual subversion demonstrates their contrast to each other, while the interweaving of the two expresses how both perspectives exist despite the other, an indifference to one another that keeps these two perspectives continuing along unimpeded by the other, a truly *parallel* contrast.

However, this is not to suggest that the absurd aesthetic, nor *Requiem*, is an expression of a harmonious balance between opposing perspectives, á la classical Great Works of Art. Rather, it is a constant imbalance between the two - a pendulum of personal experience swinging rashly in the hurricane conditions of existence, swinging un-rhythmically between the acknowledgement of the absurd and the compulsion to significance, neither capable of taking firm hold of the pendulum before it swings away, and leaving one in a constant state of upheaval. The narrator mimics the experience of the individual searching for meaning in the absurd, as, to use another metaphor, the narrator essentially constructs the narrative as if playing catch with a wall, like a bored child making do without a friend. "Catch" is an inherently pointless game, the only point is to enjoy playing it, and the only way to play is to just keep throwing and catching over and over and over again. Without a partner, one can play by throwing a ball against a wall, which mimics the throw back by completely rejecting the ball, sending the ball back where it came from with emphatic indifference to the force applied to it by the ball, but *thereby giving one a chance to play*, to catch the ball and ultimately repeat the process. The "wall" of time, infinite and constant, bounces away any attempt at significance,

sending the ball back into empty space where it must be recaptured by the human player, and the process is repeated. Further, the wall doesn't exist to be played with, it simply exists, totally outside the purposes of the human player, and it doesn't change or react or become something else when used for the game – what changes is the human player, who also does not care about whatever the significance of the wall itself might be, but rather cares about the significance applied to it, their game predicated upon the simultaneous knowledge that the wall is an indifferent, unchanging force while also recognizing the opportunity for personal enjoyment in the exercise. There is no end or aim to this experience, just the pleasurable continuation of the process, throwing and catching, by one's self. The dramatic narrative, then, is like the ball, thrown by the narrator against the wall of time presented in the prose section, which rejects any kind of unification and throws the ball back, reinforcing the profound indifference of the wall, of time, and making the throw itself pointless and insignificant – that is, until it is thrown again, and again. Indeed, the significance is not in the throw itself, in the dramatic narrative of trivial and individual concerns itself, but in the process of throwing, of concerning oneself with trivial matters or creating narratives and art that ultimately accomplish nothing, all because we like the game – we want to keep playing, despite its pointlessness, because, on some inherent level, we enjoy it. A single throw does not constitute a game of catch, and neither does a single failed attempt at meaning constitute a life – rather, life in this absurd world is repetition of struggle, throwing the ball so you can catch it and throw it again, insignificant to the wall but significant to you, a game perpetuated only by your willingness to play. Thus, the absurd aesthetic does not seek to capture a harmonious and thereby static balancing of opposing perspectives, but rather it seeks to capture this individual struggle to

keep playing, the constant back and forth, chasing and catching and repeating. It is the commitment to the game, the same commitment as Kafka to the transmissibility of tradition, to empty perpetuation, to continuing to struggle in the face of the absurd, that characterizes an absurd creation.

Keeping this metaphor in mind, let us return now to the analysis of the courthouse, which illuminated the subversive relationship between the two narratives, the negation of symbolic significance achieved by the contradictory perspectives of the prose and drama. John Foster (1981) writes on the development of the absurd from Nietzsche's ideas, identifying the way in which the loss of faith in symbolic meaning brings about the recognition of one's own insignificance - the recognition of the absurd: "when a cultural myth can no longer be believed, the resulting loss of structure and of any points of reference brings man to a confrontation with nothingness."⁸⁷ This excerpt provides a helpful way of conceptualizing how the subversion of the courthouse operates as a reminder of one's own insignificance, a reminder that is critical to maintaining the parallel contrast that constitutes an absurd aesthetic. Symbolic meaning is supposed to hold some power or value that exists outside of time, a device through which meaning can be extended to and bind in significance otherwise incongruous or unrelated events. When such meaning is exposed as a false invention, it breaks down the foundation of order, as such a revelation undermines the notion of design. If there is no symbolic meaning capable of transcending the fickleness of mortality, then there is perhaps nothing that is truly immortal or absolute – there cannot be ultimate purpose.

⁸⁷ Foster. *Heirs to Dionysus: A Nietzschean Current in Literary Modernism*. (Princeton, 1981). pg. 99.

The emptying of symbolic meaning is a reminder of one's own lack of meaning, a reminder that is critical to achieving the absurd aesthetic, and a reminder that *Requiem* achieves stylistically through the anthropomorphic description of the courthouse by the narrator. Revisiting the earlier excerpt detailing the courthouse's symbolic meaning, the courthouse is described as the "protector of the weak, judicate [sic] and curb of the passions and lusts, repository and guardian of the aspirations and the hopes," attributing a distinctly human element to the courthouse. The conception of the courthouse as having a human-like existence and human-centered values suggests the projection of human idealism as the root of the building's symbolic meaning – in other words, the courthouse becomes the projection of what humans wish they could be, an object of absolute significance that is not subject to the same incoherence and inconsistency as human life.⁸⁸ The text then extends the anthropomorphic framing of the courthouse further to point out the futility of the imposition of symbolic meaning: "...its [the courthouse's] doom is its longevity; like a man, its simple age is its own reproach, and after the hundred years, will become unbearable[.]"⁸⁹ The courthouse, like the "man" it is so revealingly compared to, is not immune from the same emptiness that plagues human existence. By anthropomorphizing both the courthouse's significance and doom, the text makes a crucial connection between the construction of symbol meaning and the futile desire for logical coherence. The courthouse is supposed to create order, but, in reality, it is just a building, and its only significance is that which humanity gives it. The courthouse has no inherent meaning, but it is given meaning by those who seek to impose

⁸⁸ Faulkner. *Requiem for a Nun*. Vintage Books ed., Random House, 1975. pg. 35.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* pg. 41.

order – those who wish to found a town, to be a part of something greater than themselves. The symbolic meaning of the courthouse is a reflection of the sense of self sought by humanity, and, as such, the courthouse as a symbol is destined to be exposed as the imposition of a non-existent significance in the face of the absurd. The comparison of the courthouse to humanity drawn by its anthropomorphic depiction reinforces the parallel contrast between intelligent mind, which seeks universal cohesion and ordering, and the reality of existence, in which our mortal bodies are doomed to insignificance and our experience beyond singular comprehension. Eventually, by nature of the building's longevity, the courthouse will find "reproach," or, rather, an incongruence between what is supposed to mean and what it comes to mean, as the text reinforces in the ensuing dramatic section via the description of the values of the community in which Temple and Gowan live, which were discussed in the previous section. The failure of the symbol to find true meaning suggests that there can be no absolute value in it, thereby reminding humanity of its own futile attempt to find absolute meaning in itself.

The parallel contrast inherent in the dual structures of the novel reveals the balance of two opposing perspectives as a means of hollowing out absolute meaning, an implication drawn purely from interpreting the *style* of the novel. Likewise, the indictment of the courthouse's meaninglessness as a symbol and that meaninglessness's relationship to the humanity that created the symbol is revealed through the anthropomorphic styling of the courthouse, another example of the text articulating its interior logic implicitly through the creation of an aesthetic. However, in order to achieve a truly absurd aesthetic, the text must reach a level of self-awareness as to almost negate its own existence, akin to the realization of

the absurd within the individual. Revisiting an earlier excerpt, Camus defines absurd creation in its relation to absurd thought: “I ask of absurd creation what I required from thought[.]”⁹⁰ Indeed, the absurd creation must mirror absurd thought, maintaining a lucid awareness of its own futility while simultaneously persevering through it. The most obvious place to start in determining an awareness of the absurd within the text is with the narrator, who is inherently tasked with the construction of the story, and thereby is the creator of the aesthetic. The text’s subversion of the narrator is the most illuminating aspect of the novel’s aesthetic, as the desire for narration is foundationally tied to the same impulse as the desire for symbolic meaning, and the narrator is a meta-representation of the author. By challenging the power of narration, the novel takes a self-aware stance on its own futility, as the narrator is guilty of trying to unify experience, unify the parallel contrast, through the extension of empty symbolism.

As established in the previous section, the narrator in the prose sections of *Requiem* is concerned primarily with expressing the town of Jefferson’s own narrative of its history, complete with legends and fabrications the narrator acknowledges as having little evidence of happening. The narrator does this in order to reflect the town’s desire for historical significance, the desire for a reason for existence, a place within a larger design. Likewise, Gavin Stevens plays the role of the narrator in his long-winded speculations about Temple’s past, speculations sprung from Stevens’s own desire for meaning. Both the town and Stevens speculate and invent happenings in order to justify their own preconceptions, attempting in such an act to unify their logical understanding of the world with the scattered, unintelligible

⁹⁰ Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays* (Vintage International). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. pg. 117.

events of experience by filling in supplemental details, and both are ultimately failures because they lack the recognition of the absurd. The narrator points out the fabrication of the legends that the town identifies so closely with, indicting the townspeople for living in a blind fantasy without recognition of the absurd, for constructing a cultural identity upon something simply untrue. The town's identity, then, is a falsehood, and its search for meaning only led to the fabrication of meaning rather than an uncovering of truth. Such a desire is the natural condition described by Camus, as the nature of the absurd requires that humans ultimately do seek meaning and significance even when presented with none. Gavin, too, fails to find meaning in his embellishment and speculation, as his hijacking of Temple's narrative only silences Temple, preventing her from presenting a more accurate depiction of the past. Gavin's aim of revealing "truth" through the complete telling of Temple's history mirrors the idea presented, and then subverted, in the prose section – that the truth of the town's significance is somewhere within its history.⁹¹ Just as the town is exposed in the text for constructing this significance through falsehood, so too is Gavin guilty of the same foolhardy endeavor, as his interruptions of Temple not only prevent Temple from telling her story, but also confuse her story as well, thereby straying further from the truth in his own dogged search for it. The failure of the town of Jefferson and Gavin Stevens to find present significance through the telling of the past harkens back to what Joanna Gavins describes as the only element of the absurd aesthetic that all critics agree upon: "that the absurd as a literary phenomenon is an artistic expression of human beings' inability to find inherent meaning in their existence."

⁹¹ Faulkner. *Requiem for a Nun*. Vintage Books ed., Random House, 1975. pg. 78.

Considering again the nature of the narrator, the failure of the town and Gavin Stevens to create a truthful narrative reflects back upon the narrator, challenges the capability of the narrator to create a truthful narrative as well. However, it is the narrator that is responsible for indicating how the town has invented a false narrative, created a sense of significance through legends like the Natchez Trace Bandits and Celia Farmer, and, in its narrative contradictions, the narrator seems to be after something other than the “truth” or sense of historical significance. Rather, by focusing on the way that the town constructs its identity instead of strictly the factual proceeding of events that led to the present, the narrator indicates a sense of self-awareness critical to achieving the absurd aesthetic. By contradicting its own narrative, the narrator presents a narrative that it knows is false, suggesting that the narrator is aware that there is no logical reason for the town to exist. So, what, then, is the narrator’s prerogative, if the narrative it presents is false? The paradoxical nature of the narrator relates back to the idea of the double think produced by the parallel contrasts/recognition of absurd incongruity, for in the act of narration, the narrator is essentially legitimizing the futile struggle of the town, against its own cosmic meaninglessness, at once exposing the absurdity of the search of significance through its narrative contradictions while also attempting to give some reason for the town’s struggle by forming the narrative in the first place.

This paradox of signifying the insignificant is essential to the absurd creation, as Camus argues that art, while still a deliberate expression of experience, requires a certain degree of the rejection of utter disunity of reality:

No form of art can survive on total denial alone. Just as all thought, and primarily that of non-signification, signifies something, so there is no art that has no signification... to

create beauty, he [humanity] must simultaneously reject reality and exalt certain of its aspects. *Art disputes reality, but does not hide from it.*⁹² (italics added)

When Camus refers to significance in this passage, he is not suggesting that all art has intrinsic significance, but rather that all art signifies something or other to the observer. In order to engage with an observer, there must be some kind of invitation to significance, something within the text that suggests the unity and cohesion that humans crave and search for.

Obviously, Camus does not mean to suggest that an absurd aesthetic involves the presentation of unified existence, for that would be a violation of the founding principle of the aesthetic expression – rather, Camus decides that it is the *style* of an art work that gives the attractive sense of design which disputes the total disunity of reality, and thus invites the observer to engage with the piece in order to discover the significance the stylistic design suggests. An absurd creation, then, aware of its own illusion of unity, subverts these expectations, providing no solution to the tensions between expectations and experience and freshly confronting the observer with the absurd reality they occupy.

Now, think of the narrator as both the observer and the artist. After all, the narrator is an individual attempting to interpret and express the significance of a narrative, and should therefore be seen in the same light as any individual struggling to find significance in the face of the absurd. The narrator, in examining the legends of the town, functions like an observer searching within an artwork for significance, sifting through the “miniscule of archive” of history in search of the defining history of Jefferson. The stories and legends present a sense of unity and coherence that the town does not truly possess, and the town’s construction of identity

⁹² Camus. *The Rebel, An Essay on Man in Revolt*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1954. pg. 258.

through fictional stories is posed thus as an aesthetic itself, explored by the narrator for some sense of what the town attempts to express. Camus writes that the observer sees within an artwork “a coherence and a unity which they [the characters] cannot have in reality, but which seem evident to the spectator. [The observer/spectator] sees only the salient points of these lives without taking into consideration the details of corrosion.”⁹³ These words reflect, to a degree, the narrator’s position in interpreting the history of Jefferson. While the narrator is aware of “the details of corrosion” as was established by the many narrative contradictions and disclaimers, there is an element of selectiveness inherent in the presentation of the narrator’s account. The narrator’s interpretation, ultimately, constitutes the narrator’s attempt to apply a unifying logic to the town, transforming the narrator from the observer into the artist as they attempt to describe the nature of the town. What we, the audience of the narrator’s account, are then presented with is the style of the narrator, who has selected what and what not to include in his account of history, and thus has constructed their own narrative, the narrator’s own aesthetic.

However, it must be remembered that the narrator, just like Gavin Stevens and the town, fails to achieve cohesion and unification. Assuming the extension of the narrator into the stage directions, which I asserted in the previous section via Ruppensburg’s successful account, only deepens the incongruence of the narrator’s narrative. If, in keeping with this logic of the narrator as the creator of the narrative, the dramatic sections are indeed a selected addition to the narrative, then they must be considered a part of the narrator’s stylistic aesthetic, a decision made in the effort of best creating a piece of art that “disputes reality,” capable of

⁹³ Ibid. pg. 261.

gripping that desire for unity. But, as established in the previous section, there is no cohesion between the dramatic narrative and the prose narrative beyond mutual subversion of significance which positions them as indifferent, parallel contrasts. Thus, the narrator's aesthetic, constructed as the best way to capture experience, embodies the rational achievement of the absurd aesthetic – “the acknowledgement of its own nullification in fathoming reality.” The narrator, in their very presence, suggests a narrative unity, but the narrative the narrator builds ultimately expresses a total disunity through its attempt at truthful rendering the story of Jefferson and Temple Drake. The narrator, then, is an embodiment of the double-think required of an absurd text – that there must be dueling perspectives simultaneously present – for the narrator, in its cosmic view of the town of Jefferson contrasted with the highly personal dramatization of a singular event, paradoxically destroys the cohesion his very presence suggests. Thus, the narrator presents the ultimate principle which all critics of the absurd agree upon: that the aesthetic of the absurd is defined by the “artistic expression of human beings' inability to find inherent meaning in their existence.”

The interior logic of *Requiem* presented in these pages I believe clearly exhibits an absurd aesthetic, shown in the parallel contrasts of the structure, the undermining of symbolic meaning, and the subversion of narrative as means of unification. But, so what? What are the implications of such a reading? I believe that there are primarily two. The first is the revitalization of *Requiem for a Nun* as a novel worthy of further criticism, which requires a rethinking of “late” Faulkner not as a moralist but as a continually developing and self-reflective artist. The second regards the idea of “failed” or “problem” texts, particularly for canonical authors like Faulkner, and the implications of such texts on how we should view artists as well

as their work – that paradoxically, being “bad” can actually be “good,” that there is some value in the rejection of value, the rejection of conventional standards, in the defense of radical freedom.

IV. Final Thoughts

Q: Sir, do you have any solution for a man to find peace if he cannot write, as you?

A: Well, I don't think the writer finds peace. If he did, he would quit writing. Maybe man is incapable of peace. Maybe that is what separates him from a vegetable. Though maybe the vegetable don't [sic] even find peace. Maybe there's no such thing as peace, it is a negative quality.

-*Faulkner in the University*, pg. 66

Consider again the negative reviews of *Requiem for a Nun*. Malcolm Cowley, the critic mainly responsible for dividing Faulkner's work into "early" and "late," decided that what he perceived as Faulkner's moralizing made Faulkner a worse artist. Both Irving Howe and Cleanth Brooks deemed the book a failure, despite its noble undertaking. *Requiem*, as established in the introduction, was read as a "fable of sacrifice and salvation,"⁹⁴ centered around Nancy's sacrifice and Temple Drake and Gavin Stevens's quest for justice. With a focus almost exclusively on the dramatic sections, critics concluded that the novel was a straightforward expression of the beliefs articulated by Faulkner in his Nobel Prize speech, and thus *Requiem* "has come to be seen as a 'statement' and a 'sermon' and, consequently, as a bad novel."⁹⁵

At the very least, I hope that my analysis has argued well enough that this novel is not simply a sermon, that there is actually a deep complexity to the relationship of the prose and dramatic sections that totally reframes their significance to each other. This is not to say that I have here presented a definitive analysis of the novel, but rather that I have opened up the novel for further, more fruitful interpretations – ones that do not rely on the dangerous assumption of Faulkner as a moralist. Rather, I believe that this novel is anything but moralistic, as the constant subversions, paradoxes, contradictions, and ambiguity lend an air of instability and confusion, rendering any kind of absolute meaning, much less a moral standard, impossible

⁹⁴ Polk. *Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun: A Critical Study*, Indiana University Press, 1981, pg. [xii].

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* pg. [xiii].

to commit to. As a result, I feel as though *Requiem* was a great success as a work of art, a strong and provocative novel written with such nuance and tenderness as to almost supersede comprehension. *Requiem* does not simply give itself over to the reader; instead it invites them on a chase down a rabbit hole of interpretation, just as the narrator invited the reader to become an “outlander” of Jefferson in “The Jail” prose section.⁹⁶ The novel, as an absurd work, reflects back on the reader – it is not meant to be definitively understood, but rather to be of constant attention, an unsolvable puzzle with just enough pieces that fit to keep one interested in filling the gaps. To read the novel as a “failure” is to disregard the potential of the piece, to throw it away because the picture it paints is shrouded in ambiguity, to fall victim to the lazy impulse to read the novel at face value. However, is the novel truly a success? This is a question that the text seems to answer itself – no.

If one, as I believe one should, were to interpret the narrator of *Requiem* as a representation of Faulkner (and by extension authors in general), then the failure of the narrative to reach any sort of cohesion is indicative of the narrator’s failure – the author’s failure. But the failure of the narrator to unify the dramatic and prose section is quite clearly intentional, raising the question of why write a “failure” on purpose?

Identifying the absurd aesthetic of the novel not only reinforces the intentionality of the disjointedness, it also indicates a self-awareness. This self-awareness was identified in the narrator in the contradictions they make throughout the novel, from the explicit contradictions in the depiction of the courthouse all the way to implicit failure in interweaving two narratives (and perspectives) that do not have any logical connection. There is no clear effort identifiable

⁹⁶ Faulkner. *Requiem for a Nun*. Vintage Books ed., Random House, 1975. pg. 217.

in the text to unify the contrasting sections. The dramatic section, the place in which one would look for some kind of resolution, provides no such resolution, only more cryptic ramblings by Temple Drake falling on the deaf ears of Gowan and Gavin while Nancy is left to hang. The narrative fails because the narrator does not want it to succeed. Thus, one can only conclude that Faulkner, too, did not want it to succeed – that he was getting at something beyond the text, a commentary on the act of writing itself.

To open this meditation, consider this quote from Olga Vickery on Faulkner's representation of time in his novels: "When man realizes that *the* past and *the* future alike are unattainable fictions, he is disenchanted of his mania for linear time."⁹⁷ Vickery emphasizes "the" to articulate the conception of the past and the future as separate objects from the present, parts of a linear progression. The narrator of *Requiem* certainly fits this description of disenchantment, but consider it in the light of Faulkner himself, reflecting on his career as a writer. By the time *Requiem* was published, Faulkner was already a Nobel Prize-winning author, and thus did not *need* to continue writing, necessarily, and yet, in his first novel following the award, he is revisiting characters from his previous works, giving an apparent second act to the characters from one of his most heralded previous novels, *Sanctuary*. This appears, at first glance, as the linear progression of characters, but the lack of resolution at the end of the novel for these characters is a jarring rejection of any sense of progress. By the end of novel, Temple and Gowan, the carry-over characters from *Sanctuary*, are closer to who they were in *Sanctuary* than they were at the start of *Requiem*: Gowan is drinking again after being sober for all the

⁹⁷ Vickery, Olga W. "Faulkner and the Contours of Time." *The Georgia Review*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1958. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41395520. pg. 201.

years between the events of the two novels, and Temple still is unable to escape the life of Jefferson after planning to leave with Pete, her blackmailer and remnant of her life in Memphis. There is no linear progress in this novel, no redemption, no aim – just a revisiting of the “Doomed. Damned.” Further, the novel’s prose section makes the text not simply a revisiting of Temple and Gowan, but a revisiting of all of Yoknapatawpha, as many of the family names from Faulkner’s previous novels make an appearance – Sutpen, Compson, Sartoris, to name a few. Faulkner seems, then, unconcerned with linear time, with logical progression toward some sort of conclusion – rather, *Requiem* seems to operate as an aimless continuation of what had already begun, the catching and throwing of narrative back against the wall to the point where it loses all semblance of aim and relishes then simply in existence, incoherent and ultimately insignificant. Faulkner is like the narrator in this sense, aware of his own role in constructing a narrative, as well of the ultimate futility and impossibility of that narrative – that everything done will eventually be undone, that individual narratives are either forgotten or warped into legend. Narratives generally rely a linear logic, a definable arc, in order to achieve a sense of coherence, but Faulkner seems to reject the validity of any representation of linear time or progress, as all of time, the entire history of Jefferson, is wrapped in fabrication and myth. If this is true (which the prose narrative, in particular, suggests it is), then what is the role of the narrator? The narrator is obsolete, a false suggestion of coherence, of comprehension. Ultimately, the narrator too is unable to construct a proper, faithful history of the town, forced to supplement his narrative with legends and speculations, much like Gavin Stevens. So, the text suggests, the role of the author is also futile.

Think back now to Benjamin's analysis of Kafka's work as a successful failure. Like *Requiem*, Kafka's work illustrates an almost illogical logic, its self-aware attempts to adhere to tradition serving as an exposure of the decay of tradition – a rejection of meaning in favor of the passionate insistence on perpetuation. In this insistence, Kafka achieves an absurd beauty which Benjamin describes as “the purity and beauty of a failure,”⁹⁸ an acceptance of coherent failure in the name of capturing the defining contrast of perspectives, mystical and logical, that characterize the tragic existence of the individual – the writer. In *Requiem*, Faulkner shows a similar sort of self-awareness, of a balancing between the tradition of expression and writing with the knowledge of its futility. I suggest here that Faulkner is not interested in writing a classic work of literature, nor is he truly interested in developing the characters of his previous works – rather, he is interested simply in the exercise, the creation of a text that reflects experience, interested in the same sort of failure attributed to Kafka.

Ultimately, the title says it all. *Requiem* operates like a ritual dedicated to easing dead souls, only it is not the characters themselves who the ritual is for, but rather the novel, at large. The “narrative” Faulkner constructs is an intentionally failed narrative – one that poses the perspective of the cosmic, intelligent mind capable of seeing time all at once who is thereby aware of the ultimate insignificance of any singular narrative, while simultaneously giving extreme voice to the individuals in the drama, if only to see them flail about in futile aims and irresolution reinforced by their insignificance in the course of history. The tradition of the novel, which the narrator evokes both in its own presence and in the attempted construction of

⁹⁸ Benjamin. “Max Brod's Book on Kafka,” *Illuminations*. Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968. pg. 148.

the historical narrative, is presented as a failure, incapable of uniting the cosmic and individual, or resolving the absurd incongruity of experience, an empty form toward a futile end.

However, *Requiem* achieves in its failure. Like Kafka, there is an entrancing beauty in failure, a certain nobility in the perpetuation of tradition in the name of nothing, to no end. This speaks to a certain type of freedom, a radical freedom in the awareness of one's own insignificance combined with the innate passion for continued existence. This is the freedom to enjoy the struggle, like Sisyphus who sees the pointlessness of his plight and (at least in Camus's version) he chooses still to keep going, exercising his freedom to choose how he is to respond to his situation. Faulkner, in *Requiem*, illustrates this freedom through a necessary failure, presenting a window into the untenable position of the artist/author/constructor of narrative/significance that attempts to capture the equally damned experience of the individual. Finally, imagine *Requiem* as Sisyphus, aware of its own futility and yet existing anyway, choosing to persist – one must imagine *Requiem* as happy.⁹⁹ In doing so, an idea comes forth that, perhaps, art does not need to adhere to some standard of “good” in order to be of value, that such an absurd aesthetic, an aesthetic of radical incongruity, is necessary to break free of preconceptions of art's value so that a piece may find itself in the position of Sisyphus, of humanity, finding joy in the simple exercise of perpetuation.

⁹⁹ A reference to Camus's famous line: “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” *The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays* (Vintage International). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. pg. 123

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