Unveiling Fantasy in the American Gothic

An honors thesis presented to the
Department of English
University at Albany, SUNY
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in English
and
graduation from The Honors College.

Olga Jacqueline Neroni

Research Advisor: James Lilley, Ph.D.
Second Reader: Paul Stasi, Ph.D.

May 2015
Abstract

In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Slavoj Žižek charts the relationship between theoretical ideology, fantasy, and ideology in practice. While ideology roots itself firmly in our lives—it crafts our very reality according to Žižek—it is a paradoxically fragile and self-destructive system of interacting symbols. We consume and perpetuate fantasy in order to elucidate and internalize the laws of ideology by placing these symbols into dialogue with one another. In turn, fantasy often draws these laws to their conceptual edge, granting bodies and voices to the underlying fears and desires implied by these symbols. Edgar Allan Poe’s “Ligeia” and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* employ the perspective of a problematically labeled “unreliable” narrator to embody the fears and desires surrounding the symbol of the ideal Southern lady within the context of the Southern United States. The reader is limited to the senses and perception of an unconventional narrator. In order to gain understanding of these narrative topographies, she must first seek to understand the difficult perspective of the seer. By reading beyond the unreliable perspective and recognizing the narrator as a consciously crafted part of the text, the reader can analyze the potential purpose of such a narrative technique. Consequently, the narrator, in embodying the inner monologue of a subscriber to this given ideological system, provides the reader with a private, detached context in which to observe possible incongruence between symbols of ideology and the reality they represent. This, in turn, allows the reader to develop the skill of questioning and analyzing the implied ideological assumptions conveyed through this type of narrative, and recognizing it in the broader context of various historical moments, including her own.
Acknowledgements

To share the sentiment William Faulkner expressed upon completion of his classic *The Sound and the Fury*, I wrote this project and learned to read. With deepest gratitude, I would like to recognize Professors James Lilley, Paul Stasi, and Ineke Murakami. Thank you for your expert guidance, your endless patience, and your unwavering support. Without you, this project would not have been possible.
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Introduction

The “unreliable narrator” trope has been a staple in classrooms and literary criticism since it was coined in 1961, but the nature of the label “unreliable” has been neglected. The image of the human according to Enlightenment period humanism is that of a stable, autonomous, earthly individual independent from spirituality. Man is reason separated from religion. To call a human narrator “unreliable” strips him or her of the variable perspective and plasticity of thought that reason, the defining characteristic of man, provides. Historically, these narrators tend to belong to marginalized social groups such as people of color, women, the addicted, and the mentally ill. As the field of posthumanist theory expands, the secular humanist ideal of man no longer dominates critical thought. Instead, we aim to re-conceive the human not as an autonomous, fixed individual, but as a being who gains understanding by assuming multiple perspectives. Especially in the modern world, the human, according to critical theorists such as Donna Haraway, is not hugely different from inhuman. Evolutionarily, humans are not superior to animals, or particularly different, and in the postmodern era, machines have been replacing and alienating human labor. The posthuman is fluid and “ambiguously natural and crafted” (Haraway), as is the ideology in which the human exists, but this label, which gives negative connotations to important diverse perspectives, remains. In “Beside Onself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy,” Judith Butler discusses the way incessant categorization undermines community. Those who fail to fit neatly into a category become susceptible to institutionally approved, perhaps implicitly or explicitly, violence. In Butler’s work, the task of humans remains to live without categorizing oneself and others into individual spaces, to live in the borders between them. Highly affective, fantastical literature, literature that evokes and requires a subjective emotional response, particularly the anxiety and horror-inducing gothic
narrative, provides an individualized space for a reader to explore and challenge the subjectivity of contemporary moral and epistemological assumptions. As in Žižek’s view of fantasy, what we read as a detached narrative space supplements our understanding of the ideological laws of our society.

I will focus particularly on the short fiction of Edgar Allan Poe and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. Poe’s short stories captivate audiences with a distinct macabre element of human perversity, and indeed, Poe writes at length about the spirit of perversity, an animalistic urge to act cruelly and violently, hidden in all of us, but at shallow depths. Subsequently, his stories feature monstrous humans, and humans captivated by monstrous Freudian uncanny figures. The critical focus long remained on this perversity and a fascination with the man who created it to cultivate a misleading image of Poe as a tortured genius obsessed with dying women and terrified of being buried alive. Poe’s spirit of perversity can, in fact, be considered to represent a much wider sort of animalistic desire of acting outside the range of normal behavior. Perversity, perhaps, does not need to involve physical violence, but encourages a subversion or perversion of ideology. More recent scholarship, such as that of Joan Dayan, suggest a much more richly textured narrative that uses stock gothic elements of the monstrous, the perverse, and the pure, white lady to address the monstrosity of contemporary rhetoric on race and the ideals of love.

From Poe, I will continue to William Faulkner’s 1929 novel, *The Sound and the Fury*. The novel is considered at once modernist as well as Southern Gothic because of its publication during the interwar period and conscious split from traditional literary style as well as it borrowing of key Gothic elements, such as the Grotesque, applied specifically to the Southern United States. It is written from the point of view of several mentally afflicted narrators with
variable perceptions of time, as well as one with a very steady, almost biblical view of time. Famously named after the lamentation in Macbeth’s soliloquy that “life…is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing” (Shakespeare 5.5), the novel embodies what the mind of an “idiot” sees and hears, and leaves the reader to piece the information together, then supplements it with other perspectives on the same series of events. As indicated through the title, the work grapples with a similar struggle with the inevitable decay of time as is depicted in Macbeth. The titular character and his precarious empire fall to the procession of time, and so do the narrators of Faulkner’s modern tragedy watch their domain crumble. Instead of the subtle inclusion of raced language into an otherwise formulaic gothic tale seen in Poe, of course constricted by publishers in Antebellum Virginia, we see a shocking, avant-garde modernist approach to devoting the literary stage to the unconventional narrator. The narration itself becomes equally important as what the narrator chooses to describe. Where Poe’s narrators described the unconventional ideals of beauty that captivated them, Faulkner’s narrators, Benjy and Quentin Compson, embody the unconventional, uncanny figure in a derelict mental and physical space. The novel’s first half is difficult, and unreadable without active participation and note taking from the reader because of the unmarked leaps in time, place, and narrator. What the reader draws out of the narration, after assembling a timeline supplemented by the more accessible narrators of the second half, is the horror of three men witnessing the decay of their family and ideological system, and another family’s survival of that same cataclysm. By actively seeking understanding, building the timelines and genealogies necessary to comprehend the narrative, the reader builds an inevitable connection with the unreliable narrators, and begins to understand a different form of reality based on individual perspective.
Part I: Understandings of Subjectivity in Narrative and Perspective

Narrative and Human Unreliability

The “unreliable narrator” trope has been a staple in classrooms and literary criticism since it was coined in 1961 in Wayne C. Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Unreliable narrators, like Faulkner’s Benjy and Quentin Compson, or Poe’s many mad and tortured characters, have captivated readers’ and critics’ attentions as heralds of unfiltered human desire. Critics have struggled with official categorizations of unreliable narration, and though more recent explanations have begun to explore the subjective nature of reliability, the problematic and subjective label remains. A narrator’s duty is not one of testimony. He or she is an integral component of a carefully and deliberately crafted fictional narrative. To call a narrator “unreliable” strips him or her of the variable perspective and plasticity that reason, the defining characteristic of man from beast, provides, which Western society cherishes as an inalienable right. A narrator who provides a point of view divergent from a reader’s perception of normality provides an equally valid opinion of a version of events. Furthermore, one must remember that, as a product of a conscious aesthetic choice, narrative voice serves a purpose. I argue that this type of narrative landscape provides an individualized context for a reader to consider the validity of, and alternatives to, contemporary moral and epistemological assumptions.

Booth calls a narrator unreliable when she does not speak or act “in accordance with the norms of the work,” or the implied author’s norms (157). The implied author, also coined by Booth in the same work, is the reader-imagined personality standing behind the work, separate from the factual author, who makes decisions about the narrative voice. Booth admits this categorization of discrepancy between two imagined entities is “hopelessly inadequate,” and was meant as a simplified explanation, and yet it persists (Booth 158). More recent critics have
developed the definition to include typological distinctions, literary frames of reference and
textual clues, and the roles of reader, text, and implied author in generating the image of the
unreliable narrator. But, they still fail to address the nature of the “unreliable” label. In “The
Lessons of ‘Weymouth’: Homodiegesis, Unreliability, Ethics, and The Remains of the Day”
(1999), James Phelan and Mary Patricia Martin develop six different categories of the unreliable
narrator who falls short or distorts whatever she is reporting based on axes of facts, ethics, and
knowledge (Phelan 93-6). Though a step forward from earlier works such as William Riggan’s
Picaros, Madmen, Naifs, and Clowns (1981), which divides unreliable narrators into the titular
categories inseparable from the negative social images they conjure, Phelan and Martin’s model
still fails to recognize how a reader decides to interpret a narrator as (un)reliable. Through their
instant visual and social connections, Riggan’s categories, as well as other critics’, indicate that
the decision is a value judgment specific to cultural and historical context, and so do Phelan
Martin’s axes of ethics and knowledge. In fact, Ansgar Nünning breaks down the basic
underlying determinations of reliability in these and similar texts to be related to understandings
of common sense, normal psychological behavior, linguistic and literary conventions, and
cultural understandings of ethics, none of which serve an independent standard, in general or for
evaluating narrative perspective (Nünning 97). The discussion of these determinants is
unavoidable, but the way in which we view narration and perception should attempt to address
their subjectivity. Nünning suggests that defining unreliability serves as an interpretive strategy
for readers to naturalize purposeful textual ambiguities to a personally chosen frame of reference.

In “Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative
Fiction,” Bruno Zerweck refers to this understanding as a groundbreaking paradigm shift.
Recognizing (un)reliability as a result of a personal cognitive strategy addresses the label’s
automatic subjectivity. Additionally, Zerweck calls for another “fundamental paradigm shift” beyond Nünning’s “toward a greater historicity and cultural awareness,” or what he calls a “cultural-narratological theory” (Zerweck 151). While interpreting a text, the reader must consider the literary, ethical, and cultural conventions and understandings of the period during which the text was composed. What would be considered unreliable now may not have been at the time of publication. Vera Nünning gives the example of a changing reception of *The Vicar of Wakefield* as a “paradigm of virtue and decency” until the 1960s, after which it seemed “satirical,” “ironic,” and having a “hypocritical” and thus unreliable narrator (Zerweck 158). In addition to a necessary greater cultural and historical awareness, I believe that the discussion of unconventional, rather than unreliable, narrators should address the historical development and trajectory of understandings of the human subject. Unreliability first requires reliability to contrast with, and the concept of the unreliable narrator presupposes that a reliable narrator, a reliable human, exists.

Flourishing in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the humanist movement focused contemporary intellectual discourse on the study the natural dignity of man, including his advanced intellect and ability to reason. Valuing the superior reason and infallibility of the senses, Renaissance humanism emphasized the value of the individual, regardless of social and economic status, as a superior earthly being. God was still the “Great Mover,” but man had the advantage over other earthly creatures of choosing perspective and theorizing spirituality.¹ By the Enlightenment period, humanist ideas developed into radical, secular departures from

¹ This is interestingly reflected in the changing understanding of geography from the Medieval to Early Modern period. The Medieval Mappa Mundi uses pilgrimage destinations and religiously significant locations as reference points while largely ignoring scale and placement of major natural features. Early Modern maps included more scientifically accurate information to aid in safe travel and trade. They still often featured elaborate theological ornamentation, such as angels blowing on the world to create winds, but mostly served very earthly purposes not connected with theological education (Murakami 2014).
religious dogmatism (Guinness 5). The human is not only the supreme earthly being and an autonomous, unified subject, but the human mind and intellect also do not depend on any spiritual understanding of a higher entity. During and after the Enlightenment, humanism encompassed a variety of vague definitions of humanity. A variety of philosophical approaches evaluated humanity in relation nature, autonomy, capability, values, and value of human beings. Some of the most notable discussions included the Hobbes versus Locke debate on intrinsic human morality, Rousseau’s understanding of natural rights, and Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* argument of fundamental epistemological principles. More important than the different definitions and facets of humanity it presented, the enduring philosophical and epistemological focus on humanist thought demonstrates a persisting respect for human intellectual superiority and desire to explore its depths.

As the field of posthumanist theory expands, the secular humanist ideal of man as a universal reference point possessing intrinsic value and autonomy no longer dominates critical thought. Instead, contemporary scholars aim to re-conceive the human as a being who gains understanding through fluid perspective, not a fixed, autonomous individual. In the modern world especially, a single human is not different or even separate from any other human, or, according to some critics such as Dona Haraway, from the inhuman animal or machine because we are “ambiguously natural and crafted” (292). There is natural evidence for this: evolutionarily, humans are not superior to other animals, or particularly different. But it is also a product of our culture: in the postmodern era, machines continue to replace and alienate human labor, and we rely on man-made inventions to aid us in the simplest of tasks. Geneticists and human biologists theorize that our ability to create technology has enabled us to change and slow the course of natural selection, which is both a testament to our superior intelligence, but may
also be an eventual death sentence. Through development of technology and a change of lifestyle, we eliminate countless physical and biological stressors that would otherwise weed out suboptimal alleles, but we have become increasingly dependent on these technologies (Nesse).\(^2\)

Truly, we are cyborgs. More importantly, this accelerating development, as well as most theories of the evolution of human culture and technology, illustrate how much we depend on and cherish our intellectual imagination. We are only cyborgs, for better or for worse, because we *imagined* it. Haraway describes the human as a cultural product of the imperialist Western mythos, and in a wider context, as dynamic and ideologically variable. In the above overview of humanist thought, and reliance on invasive medical procedures, most critics including myself focus on a European and North American history. The new cyborg whom she proposes as a representative of human is not culturally independent. It is a “creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” who recognizes the “racist, Male-dominated capital[istic]” understandings science and politics of the modern world, but chooses to subvert the boundaries of its assumptions with the goal of creating a less restrictive ideology (Haraway 291-2). The modern birth of fields such as sociology and anthropology suggests a trajectory of addressing interaction of Western ideology with other forms on a quickly contracting global stage. A revisiting of seminal literary works with greater attention to ideological interaction seems to be an appropriate extension of the epistemological concerns of contemporary scholarship.

Trends in the choice of narrative mode have developed harmoniously with fluctuating definitions of humanity. Early literary works, such as the classical Greek and Roman epics and

\(\text{\footnotesize \textsuperscript{2} Through simpler developments, like bifocal lenses and agriculture, to the advanced, like organ transplant and bypass surgeries, we have increased the presence of alleles for myopia (near-sightedness), asthma, and predisposition to cardio-vascular disease, and in turn dependence on the technology which enables us to manage them. One can achieve better health by pumping blood through one’s own heart patched with the choice of a bovine, porcine, or equine valve, by having remotely performed Lasik surgery which rebuilds the cornea or wearing corrective lenses, and occasionally inhaling synthetic chemicals.}}\)
plays address the author, aided and inspired by muses, as the narrator. Through the Medieval and Early Modern periods, the narrator is often a character who reflects a facet of the narrator, such as a pining lover or the stage manager or historian of a play. In this project, I partly explore the more modern development of interior monologue narrative forms. This is a relatively new field of study, and critics disagree on whether “interior monologue” or “stream of consciousness” is the more narrow and specific term though most agree they are not interchangeable. Abrams defines interior monologue as a “species of stream of consciousness” that presents “the course and rhythm of consciousness precisely as it occurs in a character’s mind” (298). He defines stream of consciousness as the supposedly wider term encompassing:

“without a narrator’s intervention, the full spectrum and continuous flow of a character’s mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, memories, expectations, feelings, and random associations” (298-9).

The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, while maintaining similar definitions, and using this same discussion for the listings of both of these terms argues that interior monologue does not necessarily mix thoughts with sense perceptions and does not necessarily “violate the norms of grammar, syntax, and logic” while stream of consciousness narratives do (318).

I would also argue that interior monologue is the more widely applicable and older of the two styles. The inclusion of the word “monologue” combined with Oxford’s argument that it does not betray the rules of grammar, syntax, or logic suggests literary construction. Stream of consciousness, first coined as psychological term in 1890, is less ordered and represents, as the name suggests, an uninterrupted natural current or flow. Certainly, they are not interchangeable. Both of the works I am exploring in this project, Poe’s “Ligeia” and Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury, are written in the first person and reflective of the narrator’s thoughts, but I could not
characterize them together in terms of narrative style. The text of “Ligeia” uses standard grammar and has a clear chronology. The first two sections of *The Sound and the Fury* mix dialogue with interior monologue as well as sensual perception during various points in the past and present without grammatical markers. There are generally no quotation marks and little indication of shift in time or speaker besides occasional italicized text. In a letter to his publisher, Faulkner remarked that, regrettably, printing technology had not progressed to the capability of printing in multiple colors and that this would be the ideal format for understanding the chronology (Gorra 230-1).

These two works employ complimentary forms of interior monologue narrative techniques, and should share a category based on the development of these techniques in addressing the same subject matter. As I will discuss later, though Poe’s works fit into the Gothic genre and Faulkner’s works fit into the Modernist genre, they both contribute to the sub-genre of Southern Gothic fiction in discussing the decay of the American South by employing gothic tropes. Through this connection of discussing the concerns of a similar social system, these works lay on one continuum of a developing epistemology of the American citizen. The mid-nineteenth century and modernist periods of American literature, called the first and second “American Renaissance,” reflected revolutionary developments in psychology and the nature of human communication and community (Patell 93). Modernity characterized its contemporary life as a time of a “changing sense of politics, the subject and individual…and the shifting of the individual and her relation to the universe” in terms of political structure, modes of production, and social, ontological, and epistemological understanding (Keenaghan 2014). These narratives provide benchmark examples of an aesthetic exploration of consciousness and the standard
unreliability of uninterrupted thought and contribute to an epistemological and ontological discussion of human perspective.

**Ideology and Fantasy**

Just as the human and our image of the human are both natural and crafted, so are ideology and the conditions of human existence surrounding that image. Marxist critics have discussed ideology as a “false consciousness” famously described by Louis Althusser as the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (693). All actions are motivated by and fit inside of an ideology, whether personal or prescribed by state, and this omnipresent lens prevents us from seeing the reality of our existence.

In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek discusses the specific relationship between ideology in practice and fantasy. He also insists that ideology permeates all areas of life, but in a departure from previous Marxist thought, he posits that ideology creates reality rather than clouding it. Being the only option, it provides a justification for existing social orders, but it also has limitations and weak points. Every action and existing object follows an ideological law, and since they cannot all be interpreted as strictly positive or negative, these laws are self-antagonistic. He provides the vivid example of the practice of building monumental statues among continually crumbling residential structures in the Soviet Union. The statue embodies some culturally important value, like the dutiful citizen, but it also serves as a reminder of its own cost. The crumbling buildings, which have a pragmatic use as long as they still are livable, and the people who inhabit them serve as pedestals to the symbolic ideology of the current regime (2). The statue conjures both positive ideological imagery and invokes a self-destructive ‘imp of the perverse’ type of connection with that imagery (2). An idea originally coined in
Poe’s philosophical short story of the same title, the imp of the perverse is the inherent impulse to behave in a self-destructive manner simply because one can (Poe 269). In this case, the perversity is not a specific criminal deviancy, but the desire to subvert the current social order. The sinister subtext of symbols in the Soviet Union is a somewhat obvious example of this, but the concept holds true for all ideologically driven actions and objects.

The self-destructive, sinister interpretation of ideology provides a foundation for Žižek’s definitions of fantasy. Žižek believes that our deepest desires are unconscious, and that ideology creates analogous desires on the conscious level, which we can then process. He claims that fantasy teaches us how to desire, and how to negotiate between real objects and symbolic objects, and provide us with cognitive strategies with which can approach desire. The real object can never compare to the desired symbolic one, and the fantasy reveals more about how we want others to view us as objects of desire than anything else. The latter is an idealized abstract concept, which we project onto real objects which more or less fit its mold (8-10). For example, most people have an ideal image of a romantic partner in mind. In our culture, the general male version would be a Prince Charming figure: a handsome, strong, valiant, wealthy, emotionally receptive but not needy figure. Any random individual likely will not find a perfect human specimen; they will find someone reasonably similar to their ideal and will fill in the blanks with fantasy to cultivate a romantic connection.

Because fantasy involves the act of conjuring desires, and is so revealing about personal attitudes, Žižek refers to it as the “primordial form” of narrative (11). For the time that one indulges fantasy, while reading a book or watching a film, the daily laws of ideology suspend in favor of fantastic ones, or at least, they seem to. The characters and objects within the fantasy behave in accordance with the fantastic ideology in which they exist, but the reader cannot do the
same. She must suspend disbelief in favor of an alternate path of logic. The ideology of whatever fantasy captivates the reader is not necessarily new or different, but a contained subset of the greater ideological umbrella. This is not clear to the reader, and with each attempt to escape the state ideological apparatus to which the she belongs in favor of the fantastic one, the reader, or fantasizer, or pervert as Žižek would say, also attempts to articulate her own unconscious fantasies and desires. Following the earlier described principles, these desires become clearer. By attempting to diverge from the path, the fantasizer simply finds a different route to the same destination. The writer must do the same when crafting the text, as she is attempting to put into so many words, metaphors, and impressions, those desires which defy articulation.

Paradoxically, the act of subverting prescribed ideology results, both for the reader and writer, in an amplified desire to be subjugated under that same set of rules disguised as something new. The pervert actually becomes a philosopher, and fantasy teaches her how to interpret desire through the law of ideology (8-11).

What can we learn from Žižek’s view of fantasy? Though this is not a humanist text, it helps us approach general conclusions about human behavior. Humans desire to be subjugated to ideology, to belong to something or someone else. Or do they? As described in the earlier paragraphs, we have learned that we do not and cannot have an alternative. We gravitate toward fantasy in order to simulate escape from the omnipotence of present ideology. Fantasy, science fiction, and horror narratives provide perfect spaces for this. Inhabitants of the modern world especially enjoy thrill-seeking experiences such as sky diving and horror films in order to experience the rush of epinephrine our species no longer experiences sitting at desks. These moments of socially approved, constructed, and transient stress, sometimes referred to as eustress, in moderation, can contribute to a healthier physical and psychological state (Nelson &
Lacan described our entire existence as “traumatic…”: ‘By definition, there is something so improbable about all existence that one is in effect perpetually questioning oneself about its reality’” (Žižek 48). Our trauma lies in an irreversible inability to see past ideology into an independently true reality. He connects this to the idea of jouissance, an experience of pleasure at carnal, dangerous, almost intolerable levels experienced when a subject comes into contact with an ideologically incongruent point, a suggestion of independent reality, which shatters the self. He refers to this experience as “properly traumatic.” This experience of self-shattering provides a glimpse of “the density of the subject’s reality” and anchors itself in a potentially addictive fantasy. Similarly to how exposure to the momentarily exploited laws of physics gives the thrill-seeker that feeling of being terrifyingly alive, “properly traumatic” moments rooted in fantasy give that same feeling in glimpses of snags in the ideological fabric. In order to create this effect intellectually, the reader must engage and challenge her understanding of ideology and epistemology.

**Theoretical Connections and the Gothic**

I believe that literature written in the first person perspective with an unconventional narrator, where the reader must understand all incoming information through an uncomfortably manipulated lens, is worth exploring. These narrators present a parallel reality: they live within the framework of a specific fantasy and belong to an ideology the reader views as being self-contained and excluded from the larger social context. They are literally objectified. Though they are essential to their narratives, they have no immediate purpose or value outside of them. Because fantasy is an uncanny image of reality, not the self-contained world the reader often views, the act of objectifying characters within fantasy does not depart greatly from the way
flesh and blood humans have perceived each other at certain points in history. Gothic literature, where the unreliable narrator is inevitably attached to themes of entrapment, haunting, and the shattering of norms, lends itself superbly to this type of reading. For the purpose of this paper, I will discuss this type of objectification and the function of the unreliable narrator in fantasy in relation to the ideals of the 19th Century United States as reflected in Gothic and Southern Gothic literature.

Gothic literature has persisted in popularity since its beginnings with Horace Walpole’s 1764 *The Castle of Otranto*. The genre is characterized as a fusion of old and new literary tradition, specifically the sweeping and arabesque details of medieval and early modern romances and the realism of the modern novel focused on creating a pleasurable terror. Cynthia Marshall proposes that one of the main experiences of early modern literature lies with the allure of violence and pleasure of *jouissance* in the molding of an early modern subjectivity (Murakami 2014). For Jerrold Hogle, the same kind of fatal attraction exists in the decaying and haunted spaces of the gothic. Hogle defines the most important identifying features of the gothic as an antiquated, aging, or decaying setting, and hidden secrets within these spaces which haunt the characters “psychologically, physically, or otherwise.” The narratives “oscillate between the earthly laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural,” and raise “the possibility that the boundaries between these may [be] crossed.” Similarly to the early modern example, the appeal lies in violence against earthly convention. Most gothic fiction fits into one of the two major categories: terror gothic and horror gothic. The first focuses on the tension of possible danger and depends more on suspense, both in characters and readers, while the second “confronts the principal characters with the gross violence of physical or psychological dissolution, explicitly shattering the assumed norms (including the repressions) of everyday life.”
Hogle attributes the “longevity and power” of the genre to the “way it helps use address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety…throughout the history of western culture.” The gothic allows us to project the contradictions and maladies of our modern condition onto “antiquated” and “anomalous” creatures and spaces. Similarly to Early Modernisms such as period drama films and TV shows, which almost always follow a compelling moment of sociopolitical change, the fantasy of the gothic provides a seemingly safe space where “our contradictions can by confronted by, yet removed from us” (Hogle 2-6).

We can see how the defining details of the gothic lend themselves comfortably to an interpretation using Žižek’s notions of fantasy. Having grown out of the literary traditions of Medieval and Early Modern romance, the gothic paints its characters, specifically female characters, in accordance with medieval and Early Modern-esque ideals. The literary conception of Courtly Love, as I will discuss later at greater length, during these two eras idealized an unattainable romantic relationship resembling that of the feudal lord and serf. Žižek insists that the “masochistic theatre” of Courtly Love has unfortunately survived in contemporary ideology because of a “continuing male attempt to compensate for his reduction of the woman to a mere vehicle for his fantasy” (150). Women in gothic works tend to be ethereal and unattainable, separated by physical or conceptual veils and palls. They serve the narrative with more purpose as stock characters and “vehicles of fantasy,” to borrow Žižek’s phrase, than as dynamic characters. In the two works I will be focusing on, the tragedy of the plot is driven by two women’s failure to fit the two-dimensional fantasy of the men whom surround them, and the horrifying consequence of this masochistic fantasy in the men’s minds.

By giving the reader an affective, sensory experience of anxiety, terror, in a detached space, the gothic serves as a worthy vehicle for discussing antagonistic points within ideology.
Additionally, the air of suspense and anxiety almost presuppose a first person narrator’s unreliability within the narrative, detaching it further. Considering the supernatural condition of any gothic narrative, some duty of interpretation and testimony falls on the narrator, but any observation made could be dismissed as a projection of fear, stress, or the madness resulting from an overabundance of the two. Considering the subject matter of hauntings and ancient curses, no perspective in gothic tales could possibly be considered reliable or definitive. First person narration in the gothic demands suspension in disbelief and a complete immersion in fantasy, and because of an inherently unbelievable narrative, places the responsibility of interpretation back onto the reader rather than the narrator. Whatever obstacle or obsession the narrator battles in the suspended space to which Hogle refers, the reader must battle as well.

This type of Gothic literature, though not meant to be testimony, reached the center of an already existing debate over the function of literature and importance of authenticity. Walpole published *The Castle of Otranto* under a pseudonym, and as the translation of a 1529 manuscript from Naples which recorded an even older tale dating back to the Crusades. Contemporary audiences and critics admired the work as a medieval romance at first, but rejected it almost completely when Walpole printed a second edition and admitted authorship after many other authors began publishing fiction intentionally paraded as lost diaries and histories. This backlash provides insight into how perceptions of ownership of ideas and literary authenticity have changed, or how they have not. While gaining recent critical popularity, the Gothic long suffered condemnation as being a frivolous form, in no small part because of the intentional and conspicuous deception. Many of today’s films and television shows are presented as truths or alternate universes. Many films even begin with either “based on a true story,” or “all similarities to real events are coincidences.” Many horror films, such as those relating to the misadventures
of paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren receive backlash for being allegedly “based on a true story,” possibly because they fuel disagreement between parties with opposing beliefs. Though this certainly attracted attention historically in connected with changing copyright laws and ideas of creative ownership, the supposition of truth in fantasy negated the desire to escape reality. Part of the appeal of the gothic lies in the pleasurable suspension of reality and temporary absorption within the world of the supernatural. The added allegation of truth challenges deeply seated epistemological understandings of what is real and natural and what is supernatural, and though this may be trivial on the surface, such a suggestion may resonate deeply with an audience and uncomfortably increase the intensity of a potentially properly traumatic experience.

More positively, viewers and readers may realize that the universes to which they devote so much of their time and identity are constructed, and they indulge in another small reality to which they can choose to grant their allegiance. Gothic spaces, for example, provide one such detached reality where readers can confront and explore other ideologies and points of resistance to the ideology of their waking life. These points, to Žižek, and earlier, Lacan, represent authentic truths that exist in the reality made opaque by ideology in the traditional Marxist sense. We cannot necessarily define such truths, but we can identify them, the “Real,” as points which resist full inscription into any given ideology. As we catch glimpses of them, like through the text of subversive literature and visual art, we recognize, I feel, the most profound truth that we can understand: that fantasy is our reality. Rather than impossibly lifting the veil from our eyes, points of the “Real” poke holes in the fabric and make it known that the veil exists. In the gothic, where these points are allowed to be discussed and indulged through impossible but “based on a

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3 The Early Modern map, cited in an earlier example, could lend itself to such an interpretation, as it was not meant to resist ideology, but reshaped both physical and ideological understandings of the world, as did other revision to “maps” such as the replacement of the Ptolemaic model of the solar system with the Copernican. We understand the scientific depiction of Earth’s geography and our solar system as fact, but during the Early Modern period, these truths subverted fundamental understandings of how “natural” political and religious ideology was.
true story” type scenarios and unreliable testimonies, the narrator experiences true terror having come into contact with the consequences of such contact, and the reader experiences a pleasing terror—pleasing only while that reality remains out of reach. We find these narrators and narratives fascinating and alluring, but the thought of existing in such a subversive environment creates discomfort, and if the text is convincing enough, fear or a temporary schism between fantasy and waking life. The experience of viewing the gothic through a first person perspective brings a reader to a sort of jouissance, but in a safe, fictitious environment and provokes discussion over the truly terrifying implications of our plague of fantasy.

Many gothic works achieve this effect with the use of a specific format and repeated imagery and techniques such as: dilapidated, formerly grand buildings, a fair, innocent heroine, veils and shrouds, ghosts, a heavily emphasized erotic tension. Though they are effective, when read as a compendium, the details of distinct works bear such resemblance to one another that they become tired and predictable. For example, Edgar Allan Poe often received criticism over his short stories having to do with the death and resurrection of beautiful ladies (“Ligeia,” “Morella,” “Berenice,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher”) for following a seemingly uncreative, explicit formula. A beloved woman dies. Her insane and/or drug-addicted, certainly unreliable, lover cannot forget her. He fixates on one of her mysterious, enthralling physical features. The power of his obsession reanimates her angry corpse as the narrative comes to an abrupt horrific end. Even with the addition of details, the stories remain remarkably similar. But, this well-known and established formula allowed authors to express a multitude of ideas attached to the gothic tradition using subtle techniques. The themes of containment and fear, obsession with purity and sin, almost universal concerns in western society, paired with the threat of the supernatural all contained within the testimony of one obviously unhinged narrator provide a
perfect stage for exploring the limits of ideological logic. In Edgar Allan Poe “Ligeia,” the narrator goes mad from indulging his obsession, while under the influence of opiates, of elevating, arguably, a woman of mysterious, but mix racial background, to the ideal snow white, veiled gothic heroine. The ridiculous conventions of both gothic literature and western culture fall as the spectre of the narrators love fails to conform to them, and in depicting her monstrosity, Poe reveals how fragile these conventions are. And, in an explicit manner, Poe’s narrator experiences the consequence of indulging too deeply into fantasy. Lady Ligeia’s eyes, those which he had cherished and dreamed to understand, become the only feature of the horrific ghost which he can recognize. Upon completing the story, it seems that the troubled narrator brought Ligeia’s wrath upon himself, but we never learn what that entails. The most logical assumption is that the narrator maybe indulged in too much opium, in which case, his amplified desires created the ghostly terrifying Ligeia, and maybe his memory of the flesh and blood Ligeia. For him, she was the perfect woman, and much like the historic ideals of the knight in shining armor or Prince Charming, the definition of female perfection was largely dictated by the narrator’s historical moment and a Southern American appropriation of Courtly Love rhetoric. A thorough reading of “Ligeia” necessitates a discussion of what that ideal was and how the narrator’s interpretation compared. In some more recent research models regarding the unreliable narrator, establishing unreliable narration requires a reader who recognizes a dichotomy between the narrator’s perceptions and expressions and those of the implied author and historical moment. For this structure to work, since a reader needs to be able to identify a meaningful ideological difference between narrator and author perception, an author must be aware of the ideological schema in which his audience exists and build the narrator and his unreliability accordingly (Nunning 100). Likewise, the reader must recognize the ideological schema present in any given work. In Poe’s
case, the narrators often begin, and pepper generously, their monologues with admissions of opiate use and failing sanity because of said drug use. Their unreliability depends on a public’s negative association between drug use and reliability as a functional citizen as well as the well-traversed tropes of gothic literature. By setting a predictable, formulaic stage, the narrator’s unconventionality takes a back seat to the importance of what he describes.

In the case of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, which I will also discuss later in this project, the reader must contend with a highly unconventional narrator of a different nature. The story of the Compson family falls into both the genres of modernist novel and southern gothic novel. The southern gothic depicts the social decay of the southern United States with focus on classic gothic themes such as derelict and decaying physical and psychological settings, and themes of alienation and containment (Flora 313). For Benjy Compson, who suffers from severe mental retardation, past and present flow together continuously in a stream of associations through touch, sight, smell, and verbal cues. Instead of depending on interpretive details in content, Faulkner conveys Benjy’s unreliability through aesthetic presentation of text. He intentionally abandons punctuation and other stylistic rules, writes in mixed standard and italic text, and changes speakers mid-paragraph or even mid-clause within a sentence. For Faulkner, this was an aesthetic experiment meant to explore Macbeth’s existential cry that “life’s but a walking shadow…a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing” (Shakespeare 5.5) paired with contemporary developing understandings of psychology.

Certainly, the text explores that question of the significance of individual experience of life: each of the Compsons feels differently about the decay of their noble family. But this difficult narrative style also brings up our epistemological assumption of how time flows and affects the mind. Benjy’s impressionist painting of time seems surreal to the average reader, and
this is the primary source of difficulty in his section. But, the linear scientific view of time is ideologically determined. We view time as a stable variable moving along an axis in finite quantities, like integers on a number line. Benjy, however, views time as a cloud in which he is enveloped. The past and present lie before him, and he connects the different points of each through categories of sensation, and the future lies somewhere outside the field of perception. I call his narration unconventional rather than unreliable because, quite remarkably, Benjy shares his definition of time with several Pre-Columbian civilizations including the Inca. The Inca viewed the past and present as existing on the same, easily accessible, plane lying in front of them because they had knowledge of it, and the future lurked behind them but was ever-approaching and shocking (D’Altroy 131-2). Suddenly, Benjy’s point of view makes more sense. Benjy’s brothers, Quentin and Jason, also reveal unreliability. Their narrative portions are deeply affected, as is Benjy’s, by their impressions of their sister Caddy and her independence and rebellion against contemporary expectations of women. The final narrative section concerns Dilsey Gibson, the matriarch of the African American family who tend to the Compsons. Strikingly, Dilsey’s narrative betrays no such unreliability. Not having subscribed to the popular ideology of Aristocratic Southern families, like the Compson’s, they were unaffected by Caddy’s rebellion and positively affected by the huge epistemological shift after the Civil War. Not only does the complex interaction of ideological shift with members of different social strata, it provides an alternative, more omniscient and complete, portrayal of the Compson timeline.

At the conclusion of his survey, Nünning suggests a direction of research focused on how authors use the unreliable narrator to “reflect or respond to changing cultural discourses” (Nünning 105). In the extreme case of William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, the reader must look past our most basic understandings of language, perspective and temporality to follow
the decay of one aristocratic family unable to let go of the same antiquated system of ideology with which Poe’s narrator struggled juxtaposed with the emergence of a new system from which others, like Dilsey’s family, benefit. These variable perspectives’ social functions dovetail comfortably into Žižek’s understanding of the “Real” and its role in the relationship between fantasy and ideology. As we begin to question what we hold to be essential truths, like time, we can begin to interpret unconventional narrators as intentional and essential mediators between the bit of the “Real”—the fact that what we have is a single perspective, and that others exist—revealed in their unconventional narration, and the ideological compliance of the implied author and reader. After all, a common “tell” of an unreliable narrator is revelation of personal idiosyncrasies or contradictions to the norms of the narrative through strong feeling or opinion. Through recognizing idiosyncrasies and behavioral patterns, we recognize our own and begin to depart from the paranoid reading of normativity. Through this immersion, the reader can view widened points of inconsistency with normativity as different interpretations of a subjective reality rather than distortions of truth. It is then that we can begin to step beside ourselves.
Part II: Perverse Readings in Poe

Though revered as one of the first great American authors—a copy of his first book, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, sold for a record $662,500 at Christie’s, NY—Edgar Allan Poe still occupies the popular and critical imagination as an unsung genius, and a tortured artist often conflated with his tortured characters. The repeated tales of madness, premature burial, and the untimely death and haunting of beautiful women supposedly point to a mind abused and traumatized by deaths of female family members, substance abuse, and fear. In reality, Poe was a meticulous and erudite writer, literary critic, and entrepreneur. He created his works with an intense mindfulness of aesthetics, the issues of contemporary print culture, and the interactive nature of reading. These were certainly self-therapy exercises. By combining formulaic tropes of the gothic tale with the sensationalist themes and rhetoric popular in southern antebellum print culture, Poe created “commercially desirable” literary environments. But through nuanced detail and technique, these seemingly simple or purely aesthetic works direct attention to problematic aspects of the culture of the intended readership.

“Ligeia,” is one such short story that is often read within the context of series of several stories all concerning an “insane, drugged, or deranged” narrator’s retelling of the death of a beautiful woman, what Poe states is “unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” in his “Philosophy of Composition” (Levine 62). The basic narrative and tone of each story is so remarkably similar, that the stories make for unremarkable and repetitive leisure reading. But, one can argue that Poe, by using the same framework for a handful of short, contained works, creates a set of experiments exploring individual variables in the form of cultural conceptions of human relationships and vitality. This particular work follows the interior monologue of a single narrator, as he describes his doomed marriages while under the influence of opium. In the first
half, he eulogizes his first wife, Ligeia, and retells the story of her illness and passing. In the second half, he experiences a catastrophic haunting where the enchanting Ligeia possesses the body of the narrator’s second wife, Rowena, who is ill and on the brink of death during the moment of the narrative. In this work, which Poe often named his best, the narrator’s misrepresentative description of his first wife and their relationship underlines the wider racial anxiety buried beneath contemporary conceptions of the social structure of the antebellum American South. In conducting a historically sensitive reading, the reader can cultivate strategies for approaching the implications of one’s own, and others’ epistemologies, by first working through understanding the value of one “unreliable” perspective.

In the processes of mourning his first wife, the unnamed narrator imagines her embodying the ideal Southern lady, but from the beginning of the narrative, the surrounding text struggles to support this comparison. Some scholars suggest that the narrator’s description of his wife, when placed in its proper historical context, signals her unrecognized mixed race background. Both in moral rhetoric and in unrelated popular literature in the antebellum South, the Southern lady was a white, ethereal, almost saintly figure and often stood in stark contrast to the African slave who was understood to be more ape than human. Poe arguably taps into this racial anxiety in “Murders in the Rue Morgue.” The Sherlockian detective, Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin solves a confounding “locked-room mystery” by identifying the perpetrator of the vicious and fatal attack on two white women who lived alone as an “Ourang-Outang” without any rational evidence. In “Approaches to Teaching Poe’s Prose and Poetry,” Leonard Cassuto interprets the orangutan as “not just an ape,” but as a “fraught symbol of sexually charged racial anxiety” stemming from the contemporary belief in polygenesis (37, Person 147). Phenotypic difference in humans was accounted for by classification of races as different species, and “the
Negro [and Native Americans to a lesser extent] and Orang do afford the points where man and
the brute…most nearly approach each other (Wyman 457)” (Person 149). This interpretation of
the African man as a beast necessarily qualified the opposite type of person, the white American
woman, as the angelic ideal Southern lady. Problematically, this stark contrast fails to provide an
explanation or categorization for any person on the vast spectrum of humans in between the two.
The narrator insists on eulogizing his wife as the angelic figure, but fails to recognize that she
does not fit this mold. More importantly, this narrator fails to recognize the inherent self-
antagonism and problematic inconsistency of the ideological fantasy he is attempting to uphold.
In the surreal setting of the gothic, Ligeia’s haunting and possession of the fair Rowena
represents the grotesque reality of what he so intensely tries to conflate: antiquated, simplistic
popular fantasy and socially complex reality.

Joan Dayan introduces this concept in “Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves”
through an 1850 passage from a pro-slavery pamphlet by George Fitzhugh:

“A state of dependence is the only condition in which reciprocal affection can
exist among human beings…A man loves his children because they are weak,
helpless and dependent. He loves his wife for similar reasons. When his children
grow up and assert their independence, he is apt to transfer his affection to his
grand-children. He ceases to love his wife when she becomes masculine or
rebellious; but slaves are always dependent, never the rivals of their master”
(Dayan 241).

Though the passage characterizes a wife’s devotion as limited with the word “when,”
masculinity and rebellion were not expected or encouraged trajectories, and Dayan’s only
mention of them comes in quoting James Kirke Paulding’s condemnation of “women
abolitionists who have ‘prostituted’ themselves by ‘assuming the character of a man’” (Dayan 242). More importantly, this passage begins a discussion of how the morality of slavery connected to patriarchal familial values. Dayan later relates this to Poe’s review of Paulding’s *Slavery in the United States* in which he intends to “describe the ‘essential’ negro.” Though not clearly identifying as either pro or anti-slavery, Poe, exploiting the enormous popularity of pro-slavery sensationalism describing that, like a good wife, “the enslaved want to be mastered, for they love…to serve, to be subservient,” and that this love is reflected in that one “own[s] what [he] loves” (emphasis mine). More importantly, he exalts this relationship above that which is possible between two individuals of the same race. He suggests that “habitual” use of “appropriate[ed]” affectionate language, specifically the endearing “my” indoctrinates the slave-owner from an early age to understand a slave as property because, much like in marriage, love creates a binding contract: you do not simply love what you own; “you own what you love” (Dayan 241-242).

This defense of slavery, along with many others, supports a system of servitude not unlike the European feudal system where the serf takes a marriage-like Oath of Fealty to “be true and faithful, and love all which he loves and shun all which he shuns according to the laws of God and the order of the world” (Stearns 103). Since the Middle Ages, we have advanced our understandings of the human and abandoned the idea of the sacred Great Chain of Being for a more scientific and entropic model of the universe. But still, this feudal rhetoric remains, and factored heavily into idea of amorous bondage, and subsequently the idea of love, in the antebellum American South. The feudal language of love and servitude substantially influenced the literary conception of Courtly Love, a reverent love bestowed on a superior lady, often a Petrarchan mistress, addressed as a lord, by a man who is socially unworthy or inappropriate for
her, self-addressed as a vassal, in the Medieval and Early Modern eras. It is “a love at once illicit and morally elevating, passionate and disciplined, humiliating and exalting, human and transcendent” (Newman vii).

Strikingly, in these fantasies, the woman figures as the lord, the man as the servant, but, with the partial exception of admiring a member of the female nobility, the social reality obviously contradicted this order. Though women could technically own land and act as independent agents, such Wife of Bath-type characters were of the vast minority. Women were expected to be either angels of the homestead, blessed bearers of heirs, or brides of the lord. Courtly love allowed a form of expression of love outside the proper social conventions surrounding marriage and subversively transferred the means of salvation and the worthiness of suffering from trappings of the cloth to the hands of seemingly un-requitable love. Thus literature elevated the feminine to the transcendent while women more realistically enacted the role of loving servant. But, as Žižek, Lacan, and other theorists have pointed out, the courtly Lady is anything but angelic. She is angelic and supposedly pure because she is impermeable to the narrator’s love. Really, she is cold, cruel, unattainable—an abstract form of something womanly, and more importantly, forbidden, but she is no woman. The image of the ideal Southern lady only extends the surface of this tradition: the Southern lady serves the male fantasy as a proper, faithful servant in the form of a fair, pure, in moral character and blood, beautiful, and devoted wife. The means of salvation transition, once again, from un-requitable love to reciprocal love dependent on bondage, and in this way, the masochistic theatre of courtly love becomes hidden. Controversially, this line of reasoning places both the theoretical ideal lady and the ideal slave in the single position of loving servant (this is incongruent with courtly love rhetoric) and leaves the master in a questionable, simultaneously dominant and submissive,
position. He, and the pronoun must be “he,” supposedly owns and exercises mastery over both wife and slave. Both are versions of the same servant, but somehow occupy the opposite roles of beast of burden and angelic bearer of salvation. Importantly, both are subjugated through a fundamental objectification and dehumanization, whether it is in the direction of “mud” or “spirit,” “utmost carnality” or “absolute ideality” (Dayan 243). Poe’s Lady Ligeia, problematically, inhabits and surpasses both of these inhuman spheres in the narrator’s mind, but is too complex to be distilled into a two-dimensional spirit. In his continued effort to sustain this unsustainable ideologically driven fantasy, the narrator transforms his wife from human to gothic monster.

Poe’s narrator, though it is not all that he treasures, goes to great lengths in describing Ligeia’s physicality, especially her face, and creates these images from a store of memories of their interaction. Importantly, the courtly lady does not exist in flesh within the text of courtly poetry. The poet never approaches her directly, and her physical presence generally embodied the female ideal of the time: slender, fair skinned, blonde, light eyes—in short, angelic. The poet may focus on these key features, but courtly poetry generally does not dwell on the physical body. In “Ligeia,” the reader receives a detailed inventory that gives the impression of a great beauty, but not of a fair European one, and certainly not the image of a Southern belle. We first learn that she possesses a “singular yet placid cast of beauty” and “enthralling…low musical language” (79). She is tall and slender, “even emaciated,” light of step so that she “came and departed as a shadow,” and “marble” skin. The beauty of her face held the sensual “radiance of an opium-dream,” but holds an interesting “strangeness of proportion:”

“I examined the contour of the lofty and pale forehead—it was faultless—how cold indeed that word when applied to a majesty so divine!—the skin rivaling the purest ivory,
the commanding extent and repose, the gentle prominence of the regions above the
temples; and then the raven-black, the glossy, the luxuriant and naturally-curling tresses,
setting forth the full force of the Homeric epithet, “hyacinthine!” I looked at the delicate
outlines of the nose—and nowhere but in the graceful medallions of the Hebrews had I
beheld a similar perfection. There were the same luxurious smoothness of surface, the
same scarcely perceptible tendency to the aquiline, the same harmoniously curved
nostrils speaking the free spirit. I regarded the sweet mouth. Here was indeed the triumph
of all things heavenly—the magnificent turn of the short upper lip—the soft, voluptuous
slumber of the under—the dimples which sported, and the colour which spoke—the teeth
glancing back, with a brilliancy almost startling, every ray of the holy light which fell
upon them in her serene and placid yet most exultingly radiant of all smiles…And then I
peered into the large eyes of Ligeia.

For eyes we have no models in the remotely antique. It might have been, too, that
in these eyes of my beloved lay the secret to which Lord Verulam alludes. They were, I
must believe, far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race. They were even fuller
than the fullest of the gazelle eyes of the tribe of the valley of Nourjahad” (80).

This description overflows with passionate and sensual love, and the narrator’s precise memory
of all of Ligeia’s facial features is impressive and touching. But, this is not where the story
begins. In the opening lines, the narrator states: “I cannot, for my soul remember how, when, or
even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the Lady Ligeia” and “I have never known
the paternal name of her who was my friend and my betrothed.” He only remembers that they
met “in some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine,” and that her family is “of a remotely
ancient date” undoubtedly. He considers a few possible explanations: that resisting the urge to
inquire about his wife’s past was some “test of [his] strength of affection” or a simple slip in memory (79). But, upon reading the above description which comes next, the reader may find this lack of basic knowledge, and the explanations for it, unbelievable. How can a husband not know his wife’s maiden name? The above quoted section suggests that the narrator spent many days gazing at his wife, observing how rays of light shone on her from various angles during expression of different emotions. His memory of her face reads like the description of a painting, a study of classical beauty and proportion, of baroque contrast between light and shadow, and of the masterful technique required to translate this to a visual medium. The description that follows addresses her vast knowledge and the countless times the narrator eagerly learns from her. And yet, he never learns her name. Perhaps this was because of the same reason that we never learn his name: he chooses not to share.

Joan Dayan addresses this passage as a key moment in unlocking some of the secrets of Ligeia’s identity. The narrator describes his wife as all of the beauties of Ancient Greece, alluding to Homer and Cleomenes, the sculptor of the Venus of Medici, the Middle Eastern/North African Nourjahad, the Houri, the virgins who greet one at the gates of paradise in the Muslim faith, but he never alludes to Christian Aryan beauty. He later talks of Ligeia’s vast store of knowledge, including knowledge of the occult and “deep proficien[cy]” in classical and European languages (81). Dayan argues that Ligeia, in the way the narrator objectifies her and fixates on her, “becomes the site for a crisis of racial identity” (260). This concern is not isolated to this work. Critics have interpreted part of the horrific incestuous relationship between Madeline and Roderick in “The Fall of the House of Usher” as having a moral basis. All members of the house Usher “lay in the direct line of descent” because of a very real societal fear of contaminating blood with blackness. The twins’ “cadaverousness of complexion,” and poor
health were consequences of inbreeding (Poe 89-90). In the description of Ligeia’s, Poe uses the same descriptors as did taxonomists of color in the Caribbean and the South. Her natural “glossy ringlets of...raven hair,” her large and expressive eyes, “like those of the sensuous Creole beauties,” her full “slumber[ing]” lower lip, and her status as a polyglot all indicate a mixed ethnic heritage. The narrator even says that her eyes are “far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race” and likens them to those of MENA beauties. Furthermore, Ligeia’s “ivory” or “marble” skin is suspect. The obsession with purity of blood bred a pseudo-scientific fascination with detecting “black blood in lightened skin.” Whiteness tainted by black blood was “less animated...white but pale or closer to yellow, with a tint ranging from grayish yellow to yellowish white like ivory [or marble].” Perhaps the narrator never learned his wife’s name because she did not want to subject herself to the structural violence and slave owner fantasy directed at the “tragic mulatta” or “octroon mistress” (260-2, see Appendix A). Her sensual, and controversial “tragic mulatta” beauty makes Ligeia a shockingly subversive and incompatible choice for an embodiment of the ideal Southern lady.

Furthermore, though, as the white man and husband, the narrator should be the dominant partner in this marriage, Ligeia seems to carry more power and prestige. The ideal wife should be a limb of the husband: she should concern herself only with devotion to her husband and the home he makes for her. Instead, the narrator concerns himself with all that was Ligeia because, even in death, she is such a commanding presence. Her powerful vitality and financial position alone would catapult her into masculine territory if she were to be evaluated by Fitzhugh. Beyond holding the majority of the monetary wealth in the marriage which makes the purchasing of the narrator’s arabesque chamber possible, Ligeia does not exhibit the virtues of a homemaker. The narrator tells, “I have spoken of the learning of Ligeia; it was immense—such
as I have never known in woman.” Not only is she a polyglot, as stated before, but she is also learned in physical science, mathematics, moral philosophy, and poetry. “Where breathes the man who has traversed, and successfully, all of the wide areas” which she has mastered, the narrator asks. The narrator, importantly, compares her and identifies her as intellectually superior not only to all other women, but also to all men. He characterizes her as the complete opposite of what Fitzhugh conceives as the ideal wife. In “Poe and the Theme of Forbidden Knowledge,” Jules Zanger posits that Ligeia and her mysterious knowledge embody the complete antithesis to the ideal wife: the oldest sin attributed to women. Having grouped together Poe’s short stories concerning dying women with “Descent into the Maelstrom,” Zanger identifies the women, including Ligeia, as “personifications of great, impersonal natural forces” by which the men find themselves “engulfed and destroyed” in pursuit of forbidden knowledge. Ligeia’s eyes draw our narrator in like the maelstrom or the eyes of a storm as a pathway to an unknown world.

Zanger extends this argument to conclude that the women represent an “engulfing sexual force” that reveals some secret sin in the male narrators. While I would support that the narrator’s love toward Ligeia seems obsessive and approaching perversity or sin, I do not think that it is so essentially carnal and predatory. When combined with this idea an engulfing natural force, our lady’s mysteriously vast knowledge, likeness to classical Greek and Hebrew beauties, and eventual resurrection suggests an image similar to Eve holding the apple to Adam or Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Proserpina” (see Appendix B). The subject in the painting, though sensual and beautiful, is, more compellingly, strong, holding the forbidden fruit out of which she has taken a bit, and is focused on something out of view of the audience. Certainly, this woman does not look weak and subservient. As one wonders when viewing this painting, the narrator desires to understand his wife’s thoughts. After recounting her baffling intellect, he admits her
supremacy and “resign[ed himself]...to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation” (82). Though he says he resigned himself “with child-like confidence,” his motivation seems much more adult. He describes being her student:

“With how vast a triumph—with how vivid a delight—with how much of all that is ethereal in hope—did I feel, as she bent over me in studies but little sought—but less known—that delicious vista by slow degrees expanding before me, down whose long, gorgeous, and all untrodden path, I might at length pass onward to the goal of a wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden” (82)!

One can see how Zanger reached the conclusion that the narrator’s motivation lies in Ligeia’s sexuality. But, as gathered from the previous descriptions of her, the narrator desires her equally for her body, mind, and soul. She is, after all, the ideal, and this narrative is an elegy, as the narrator follows this quote directly with a lament of how empty and lost he felt as his wife grew weak and ill. What he remembers in such vivid, sensual terms is the jouissance, the painful eager pleasure he felt in having the most perfect, inspiring muse, one who “conflates knowledge and carnality and shows...domination in both areas” (Weekes 158). Still, importantly, this role does not align with any of the virtues of a Southern Lady, and is thrust upon the image of Ligeia by the narrator.

In “Poe’s Feminine Ideal,” Karen Weekes proposes that Ligeia is meant to embody a different ideal. Instead of serving as the ideal Southern Lady, she represents the narrator’s, and by extension, Poe’s “incarnation of feminine perfection,” and “Poe’s own version of Madeline Usher: his haunting, beautiful twin” (158; 160). Weekes, and other critics, apply this argument specifically to Ligeia because of a possible resemblance to Poe’s own pale skin, raven hair, and striking intelligence. While this conflation of narrator and author is problematic, the idea of
Ligeia as the feminine half of the narrator merits a deeper investigation. Certainly, she seems too perfect. When finally recounting her death, the narrator says that, from her death bed, Ligeia showered him with “the overflowing of a heart whose more than passionate devotion amounted to idolatry” (82), and revels in her “idolatrous love” after her death (84). The surrounding text does not support this, and we never adopt Ligeia’s own perspective. The only reference to her speech manifests as the narrator retelling how she soothed his impending grief while on her deathbed. This is hardly a representative sample, and this moment would certainly be wrought with emotion and an “overflowing of a heart.” Ligeia’s only possible direct manifestation in the narrative comes when she inhabits Rowena’s body and rises to haunt the narrator.

Even then, the narrator admits, several times, to opium use. All of the events of the narrative that happen closer to the point of composition, during the demise of Lady Rowena, who fits the ideal Southern lady mold quite well, but produces no passion in the narrator, become increasingly surreal as a possible consequence of opium use. Ligeia could very well be imagined, and her haunting a manifestation of the narrator’s will being strong enough to conquer death, as The Conqueror Worm poem suggests is possible. Even if she was a living woman, she has already died by the beginning of the narrative, so all impressions of her are imagined. If so, one must consider that this belief and poem were Ligeia’s teachings. She read this poem to her husband on her deathbed to bring him comfort. From here, if we maintain that Ligeia is an incarnation of the narrator, her haunting in the final lines of the story are also imagined. Instead of exercising the power of will over death, the narrator is really enthralled by his own fantasy. Un-embodied, Ligeia serves as his courtly lady, his idolatrous wife, his angel, and his servant, and his obsession becomes even more compelling if this wife does not exist.
In the introduction to Žižek’s “Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing” Elizabeth and Edmund Wright state that “the survival of the courtly love structure testifies to the continuing male attempt to compensate for his reduction of the woman to a mere vehicle for his fantasy” (150). This type of fantasy deprives both the woman of “her own particularity as woman” and adds a sado-masochistic element to the relationship in question. In Poe’s construction of this theatre through an un-embodied narrator and his un-embodied ideal partner, the sad-masochism unravels into horror. As it borrows the language of feudalism, courtly love enacts the lord-bondsman relationship. As earlier mentioned, the lady serves as the lord, her lover the servant. I discussed earlier that the Southern antebellum tessellation of this conception switched the two roles, or at least attempted to. The ideal Southern lady is not the cold, cruel Petrarchan mistress who makes unreal demands of her lover. She is, instead, a humble servant to her husband. Really, as the narrator’s unintentional language that “speaks of emasculation” at the hands of a fantasy shows, the humble servant is the dominant party in the relationship.

Hegel describes this type of relationship, the lord and bondsman, as a dialectic between two self-conscious beings essentially involving the motion of recognition. As one self-conscious being exerts dominance over the other, they allow each other to assume the positions of master and servant. Importantly, the beings must recognize each other, and not themselves. Like any other ideological structure, this dialectic is self-antagonistic: if the parties do not agree on their hierarchy, the structure falls apart. As I discussed earlier, the narrator should, by all accounts, be the dominant figure in his marriage to Ligeia, doubly so during the time of the narrative when she is a fantasy. Her haunting and the narrator’s obsessive elegy beg to differ. When viewing their marriage as an intended lord-bondsman structure, one can begin to see why. In Hegel’s dialectic, the master’s title of “master” depends on recognition from the servant. Thus, in this
short story, the narrator’s dominance in his relationship depends on Ligeia’s allowance of this. He insists she loved him to the point of idolatry, but he gives no evidence of this. Even if his perspective is reliable, that she did idolize him, he admits that Ligeia was intellectually superior and enchanting not only to him, but to all men. She is so enchanting that, in fact, when she exists only as a figment of his imagination, he is completely enthralled and physically haunted.

In struggling to conflate his wife, an incredibly complex character, with this stagnant courtly ideal Southern lady fantasy, he strips her not of her particularity as a woman, but her humanity. Within the macabre setting of the gothic bedchamber decorated with sarcophagi, the assumption of dreariness due to drugs, and a second dying woman located in the home belonging to the deceased, Lady Ligeia, now stripped of humanity tortures her husband. But, she is not to blame. Even though the narrative grows more gothic and surreal as it progresses, there is no indication that the dead have any agency. The narrator holds responsibility for the creation of his wife’s image, and thus holds responsibility for transforming her into the beautiful monster in most readers’ imaginations (see Appendix C). When read with historical moment in mind, the narrator’s imagining of his wife as the contemporary ideal seems like the highest compliment. With the aid of the gothic’s simultaneous realism and surrealism, Poe shows through his narrator that even positive ideological conceptions can be dangerous. The narrator’s lack of understanding of his own narrative, though difficult to dissect, reflects the larger societal lack of understanding of the limits of ideology. Misunderstanding conceptions and allegories as equivalent to reality and applicable to individual leads to possibly horrific dehumanization, whether it be in the direction of mud or spirit. As I will discuss in the next section, this can hold serious consequences. In this example, Ligeia’s failure to conform to an antiquated and
paradoxical ideal only claimed one soul lost in fantasy in some ancient city by the Rhine. In William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, the stakes are much higher.
Part III: In the Time of the Compsons

In a 1931 introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*, Richard Hughes writes that he would “not attempt to give either a summary or an explanation of it: for if [he] could say in three pages what takes Mr. Faulkner three hundred there would obviously be no need for the book” (223). Indeed, the novel, like many great works of art, explores that which cannot be explained, defined or quantified: the tragic inevitability of time. In fact, Faulkner said of this novel: “I wrote this book and learned to read” (25). Originally inspired by the vision of Candace “Caddy” Compson climbing up a blossoming pear tree in her soiled drawers to sneak a peak at a funeral as her brothers watched, the novel transformed into an unplanned tour de force and is still a fascinating subject of academic inquiry. Through writing Benjy’s almost incomprehensible, but truthful, account of the final decades of the Old Compson Place, Faulkner perhaps learned the potential a narrative’s power, regardless of intent, to move an audience. Though Faulkner did not have a definite plan for this novel, and though Benjy never intends to create an argument or illustrate a point, his striking narrative, and the other narrators’ clarifying contributions, encapsulates the tragedy of what Faulkner calls the “old since dead” postbellum American South. The narrators’ unwavering faith in the integrity of their narratives provides a compelling glance at their ideologically driven source of their assumptions and their failure to endure.

Before conducting a close reading of *The Sound and the Fury*, one must consider the historical and aesthetic moment both depicted and surrounding the work. First, the novel is an experiment in, and is often cited as an example of mastery of, the style of stream of consciousness narrative as much as it is a work of Southern Gothic fiction. Faulkner has the advantage of being able to reflect on the effect of the Civil War on the South, and the way in which ideologies such as Fitzhugh’s have failed. In a draft of the introduction to the 1933 edition
of The Sound and the Fury, Faulkner both “escapes” and “indicts” the mythos of the now dead South while trying to capture it (254). As C. Vann Woodward and Richard J. Gray summarize, the South possesses a different mythos from the rest of the United States. Woodward explains the continuing American belief of invincibility and “Manifest Destiny” as a product of the nation’s never having faced major military defeat. The American Dream of immigrating, conquering, and flourishing still exists, especially in proud historically successful and politically active cities such as New York and Chicago, which Faulkner insists are still vital and alive (Woodward 285). The South, however sharing the greater pretensions of the rest of nation does not recognize “history [as] something unpleasant that happens to other people.” “Unlike the rest of the nation,” Gray writes, “the South had had the stunning experience of military defeat and occupation” during and after the Civil War (286). The South shares, with the rest of the world, the feeling of a whole generation of young men being either “wiped out” or being “effectively paralysed.” The men of the American South who lived through or had memory of the aftershock and occupation of the Civil War found it “impossible…to function as anything more than ‘shadows’” as “time had become frozen” and left them “moving among the living as ghosts” (286-7).

Faulkner sums up this sentiment perfectly with the famous allusion to Macbeth in the title:

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing (Shakespeare 5.5 2381-85).
This carefully chosen title serves as a moment of connection between the traumatized post-war generation of the South and the vast global history of defeat. The young men of Faulkner’s novel cry out in their narratives the stream of consciousness, the whole of their impressions, attached to their paralyzed imaginations. The Compson men, representative of the post-war generation of a noble Southern aristocratic family, fixate especially on the same problematic female ideal that tortured Poe’s narrator in “Ligeia.” But, instead of manifesting as an unbelievable and surreal haunting, the gothic horror in Faulkner’s work remains contained to the psychological well being, or lack thereof, of the narrators centered around the same obsession with grafting the image of the ethereal, ideal Southern lady onto a woman who treads on the ground. Their seeming unreliability fades as it informs the reader of the anguish of the, then, newly dead South.

In “On The Sound and the Fury: Time in the Work of Faulkner,” Jean-Paul Sartre insists that “man’s misfortune lies in his being time-bound” (317). The Compsons, he insists are stuck in the past as displayed by Faulkner’s choice to write all of his narrators’ thoughts as past. Even in passages that seemingly address the present, or occur in the present, like Quentin’s long monologue, arguably exist as past. Sartre insists that Quentin’s suicide is not a possibility, and therefore not a future, but an already determined event. He dismantles his watch and speaks out of time in preparation for the inevitable. After this careful analysis, Sartre concludes that though he “like[s] his art,” he does not believe in his metaphysics as he has interpreted them. To him, Faulkner’s work represents an aesthetic expression of a cataclysmic, closed future, the non-future of “a world dying of old age” (323). Though I think Sartre’s analysis is sound, and gives excellent insight to the function of time in this novel, I believe that his metaphysical approach ignores the ideological conditions and causes of this Compson tragedy. These narrators not only embody a confusing and jarring perspective in experiencing time as either static or traumatic,
they pair this experience with a static ideological state. Half of the trauma of defeat belongs to
the loss and replacement of ideology and an upheaval of social hierarchy. When considering this
post-war trauma, the inevitability of time is just as important as the institutions it has eroded.

It is important, first, to establish the narrators and the Compson family within their social
context. In the later published “Appendix: Compson: 1699-1945” within *The Portable Faulkner*
anthology, Faulkner provides a complete genealogy of the Compson family’s arrival to the
United States, rise to power, and eventual decay. Quentin MacLachan, first of his name, son of a
Glasgow printer, fled Scotland after having fought against the English crown to the Carolinas,
and fled once again, not wanting to be on the losing side of another battle, to Daniel Boone’s
Kentucky with his grandson. His son, Charles Stuart, a loyalist during the American Revolution
stole his father’s claymore to fight, but was “left for dead in a Georgia swamp by his own
retreating army and then by the advancing American one, both of which were wrong” (Faulkner
705). For a short time after that, Charles attempted to live out his days as a schoolteacher, but
became “the gambler he actually was and which no Compson seemed to realize they all were”
and joined a Confederate plot to secede the whole of the Mississippi Valley from the Union and
join it to Spain. After the failure of this movement, he burned all bridges with his co-conspirators
and fled, “running true to family tradition, with his son and the old claymore and tartan” (706).

His son, Jason Lycurgus, made a name for himself by racing against, and winning horses
from, the Chickasaw tribe that had recently become dispossessed during Jacksonian democracy.
Through a deal with their chief, Ikkemotubbe, he won the square mile of land that would
eventually become Jefferson, MI, and would contain the Compson plantation. The next Quentin
MacLachan and Jason Lycrugus would become, respectively, a governor of Mississippi and a
Confederate general. From that point, Faulkner describes the Compsons who appear in the
narrative of *The Sound and the Fury*. After the war, the “old Compson place” as everyone called it fell into disrepair. Jason III, the current patriarch, continued to mortgage off pieces to pay for Caddy’s wedding and Quentin’s Harvard education. His children fared even worse. Though their former homestead continued to be known as the old Compson place, no Compson lived there. Caddy fled, and so did her daughter, Quentin committed suicide, and Jason committed Benjy to an asylum and sold off the rest of his family’s land. And so, the Compson wealth and prestige died along with the South. Faulkner often referred to this appendix as the key to the book, and it certainly informs a reader’s understanding of the previously discussed mythos of the South as having been the only region of the United States to have experienced the trauma of military and ideological defeat. Since the beginning, the Compsons were gamblers, and though briefly successful, continually ended up on the wrong side. The Compsons comprise one of the aristocratic families of Faulkner’s “apocryphal” Yoknapatwpha County, Mississippi where the influence of the long lost South haunts every citizen and inch of landscape. Many of Compson’s novels and short stories unfolded in this county, whose name, perhaps referencing its difficult history, means “water flows slow through flat land” in Chickasaw. The history of the Compsons, and their homestead of Jefferson, MI, unfolded in intimate connection with the rest of American history. Indeed, they lived the American Revolution, Jacksonian Democracy, Secession, the Civil War, the death of the South, and they will, tragically, live no more. The sound and fury of this blur of political upheaval and continued gambles consumes all who keep the Compson name.

As previously mentioned, Faulkner discussed a desire to print Benjy’s narrative section in multiple colors to aid his readers’ understanding of the jumbled chronology, but insisted that he did not intend to write a difficult text. Despite his intention, the opening section, “April Seventh, 1928” requires intense attention and careful reading, and is often cited as a classic example of
unreliable narration. Though Faulkner, after an exchange with his publisher, added several instances of italics to indicate major shifts in time and theme, and some sections follow standard grammatical and stylistic rules, other sections are barely comprehensible, and in all, the narrative includes recollections and impressions from at least seven different dates. Sartre comments that Faulkner did not write a traditional plot “so as to shuffle it afterwards like a pack of cards; he could not tell it in any other way…in order to arrive at real time, we must abandon this invented measure which is not a measure of anything” (317). Truly, Faulkner is experimenting with one of the most essential epistemological assumptions of any civilization: the progression of time.

I could argue, confidently, that most readers would view Benjy’s understanding of time as deeply affected by his illness, and thus tragically unreliable. But, one must look past the established unreliability or unconventionality of the prose for the aesthetic purpose behind it. After all, Benjy and his stream of consciousness are fictional creations. Faulkner’s Compson chronology in the appendix begins not with a Compson, but with Ikkemotubbe, the “dispossessed American king” from whom Jason Lycurgus acquired the family land. Ikkemotubbe, who later Anglicized his nickname “Du Homme” to “Doom,” represents the first link in the chain of defeat and dispossession that lead to any understanding of what we presently call the United States of America. Dispossessed during Jacksonian democracy, the Mississippi Chickasaw were one of the few Native American tribes still living on their ancestral land by the mid-nineteenth century, and the inclusion of their legacy reminds the reader that the various Jason and Quentin Compsons were not the first or last to be engulfed by the current of time because of ideological and political shift. I think Sartre would also find a compelling similarity between Benjy’s observance of time and that of many native Pre-Columbian civilizations.
Currently, Western civilization perceives time as existing in constant linear motion split into years, months, days, hours, and so forth. Though most of these finite quantities are not imagined, but defined by the movement of celestial bodies, they are still, importantly, part of an ideologically created understanding of the universe. Medical anthropology textbooks often use this example to motivate students to think about culturally foreign medical practices and understandings of illness from a more culturally sensitive perspective. Most civilizations agree on the amount of time contained within a year, a month, and a day, as it is easily observable, but they do not necessarily agree on the evidence or the abstract meaning behind these values. Benjy can differentiate light from dark, and can observe the change of seasons, but he only recognizes past and present. He does not think with any conception of the future, and none of the other narrators choose to either. Subsequently, the future becomes, not a hopeless non-future as Sartre argues, but an ominous, haunting presence. Interestingly, the Compsons, especially Benjy, share this understanding with many Pre-Columbian civilizations, most notably, the Inca. The Inca saw the past and present as a valley or patchwork quilt laying in front the beholder where everything is visible, and existing together. Conversely, the future follows the individual as a lurking, invisible, and powerful presence. Suddenly, Benjy’s perspective holds much more validity and holds greater social significance.

Faulkner stated several times that he was exploring the trauma of the death of the South, and though I do not think that he necessarily intended to make this connection, Benjy’s physical and psychological castration serves as an allegory for the stunted American South. Not only is his disability the result of generations of the obsession with keeping bloodlines pure to avoid any blackness or contamination, an Usher-like character, but his inability to see the future or express himself also speaks to the South’s greater disability as a broken ideological system. Through the
rise to power, countless American revolutions and prideful missions of Manifest Destiny all but exterminated already existing civilizations and forced them into obscurity. The same Chickasaw to whom the fictional Ikkemotubbe belongs still exist and live on reservations in the flatlands of Mississippi. Like most other still existing Native American tribes, they struggle to find livelihood and respect as equal citizens. They experience the highest rates of dislocation, poverty, alcoholism, mental illness and suicide among all demographic groups, and this is only the most recent episode in a long history of military conquest and extermination of indigenous people. The Compson wealth, again, inextricably linked with the bloody history of the Americas, depended on a long timeline of dispossession and slavery. This historicized reading is imperative in comprehending the trauma the Compson men experience, and Faulkner’s intention to both “escape and indict” this moment in American history (254).

In the narrative of this family, not only is time difficult to discern because of a lack of standard continuity, but is also not discernable through speakers as members of different generations share the same name. But, at least in Benjy’s narrative section, one can tell at least relative time either by noticing which member of the Gibson family is taking care of Benjy, or more importantly, the status of Caddy. This falls in line with Faulkner’s multiple intimations that this narrative is about Caddy, and was inspired by the vision of Caddy, soiled, soggy drawers and all, rebelliously climbing up a pear tree as her brothers and caretakers looked on. In The Sound and the Fury: A Study in Perspective, Olga W. Vickery agrees with this notion, arguing that Caddy’s losing her virginity serves as the source of dramatic tension for the novel. Vickery adds the essential distinction that it is not the act itself that inflicts trauma upon her brothers, but it is “the significance which each of her brothers actually attributes to it,” and the structure of the novel forces the reader to “reconstruct the story and to apprehend its significance” in parallel
with grasping the brothers’ relation to it. Importantly Faulkner never grants her a narrative voice. Though she is certainly sensitive to Benjy’s needs, much more so than the rest of the family, she is not a caretaker. Though she grieves for Quentin’s already clear end at her wedding and birth of her child, she is not his keeper. She is not devoted to being a Compson, to being a mother, or to honoring the ideology of the old South. Caddy is an independent character, and is the largely absent center of the novel both because she chose, physically, to leave her stifling family, but also because she did not intend to hold any more significance to her brothers than as that of a sister and friend. While the Compson narrators, Benjy, Quentin, and Jason, live traumatized by the passage of time, Caddy simply lives. Where her brothers become static characters, she displays a very real human complexity and dynamic personality compelling enough to inspire a novel.

The split narratives: Benjy’s confusing pastiche of various losses, Quentin’s last words, Jason’s vitriolic condemnation of Caddy, and Dilsey’s endurance all create “a certain fullness of truth—truth diffused, distributed and, as it were, atmospheric” (325). Instead of saddling the narrators with reliability or unreliability, she sees the value of multiple perspectives culminating into a whole ideological atmosphere surrounding the gravitational force of the black hole left by Caddy.

“CANDACE (CADDY). Doomed and knew it; accepted the doom without either seeking or fleeing it. Loved her brother despite him…love him not only in spite of but because of the fact that he himself was incapable of love, accepting the fact that he must value above all not her but the virginity of which she was custodian and on which she placed no value whatever: the frail physical stricture which to her was no more than a hangnail would have been…” (710-11).
Faulkner, though referencing Quentin specifically as the brother in this section of the appendix, might as well be addressing all three of her siblings. Benjy’s memory of her crying and shielding her face from him on the night that she lost her virginity, and her recognition of Quentin’s personally pre-determined future, suggest that she knew of her significance to her brothers, and loved them deeply. But, her actions also suggest that she, unlike her brothers, was not bound by time. She was an independent, though troubled, young, modern woman—probably George Fitzhugh’s worst nightmare. A far cry from the ideal Southern lady her brothers longed to re-baptize her as, she had both strengths and flaws, and importantly, did not depend on virtues created by men in order to live. Though Caddy does not have the same mysterious, occult air of forbidden knowledge about her as Ligeia does, they share the intimidating vitality of a driven, passionate, sensual woman. Though we see even less of Ligeia’s perspective than of Caddy’s, perhaps she too drove her husband mad because she lived on her own terms. But Ligeia’s rebellion inflicted damage only on the one family member she had.

Benjy’s, Quentin’s, and Jason’s genealogical descriptions in the above mentioned appendix, though they do not provide any new information, distill the brothers’ values for a more concise understanding of their narratives:

Benjy

“loved three things: the pasture which was sold to pay for Candace’s [Caddy’s] wedding and to send Quentin to Harvard, his sister Candace, firelight. Who lost none of them, because he could not remember his sister but only the loss of her, and firelight was the same bright shape as going to sleep, and the pasture was even better sold than before, because now he and Luster could not only follow timeless along the fence the motions which it did not even matter to him were human beings swinging golfsticks, Luster could
lead them to clumps of grass or weeds where there would appear suddenly in Luster’s hand, small white spherules which competed with and even conquered what he did not even know was gravity and all the immutable laws” (719).

The first page of Benjy’s narrative consists of his description of a golf course as a series of motions, a flag, “red, flapping on the pasture,” a bird “slanting and tilting on it,” and a group of men who “were hitting” (Faulkner 3). Though we soon find out that this used to be his pasture, he does not seem bothered by the change in possession. He does not seem to understand what the golfers are doing, or the new purpose of the land, but he enjoys watching objects in motion, especially the projectile golf balls and the flame-like red flag. As he catches his pants crawling under the fence, he has his first flashback of Caddy caring for him, making sure he stayed warm as they climbed under that same fence. From there, Benjy jumps to another period where he insisted on going outside to meet Caddy as she came home from school. She lovingly rubs Benjy’s hands to warm them and he remarks that she “smelled like trees.” During this scene, Benjy is a toddler, and Caddy is school-aged and still innocent though inherently rebellious. Benjy looks up to her as a mother figure and finds her voice and her pastoral scent comforting and nurturing. Though he does not think of her as the embodiment of a social fantasy, Benjy sees Caddy as pure, kind, nurturing, devoted to his well-being, and an the embodiment of where he feels safest: his pasture, the physical remnant of the Compson plantation where a different Caddy, a golfer’s squire, still roams the land.

During a later flashback, Benjy feels distress over Caddy putting on perfume when she is fourteen. She holds the bottle out to him saying “Sweet. Smell. Good.” Benjy backs away while still crying, and as Caddy understands that the scent of the perfume confuses him, she takes him in her arms and promises not to put it on, and in subsequent scenes she goes to the bathroom to
wash away the scent. Instead, she gives Benjy the perfume to give to Dilsey as a gift so he
disassociates it from her. On that page alone, Benjy thinks, “Caddy smelled like trees” three
times (28). During these scenes where Caddy begins to wear perfume, and begins to show signs
of a budding sexuality, Benjy recognizes the change though all he can do to express his unease is
howl. In the scenes where she is still able to wash the scent away, she is still a virgin. Benjy’s
memory always ends in her smelling of tree, and she seems to be perceptive as to why. This
makes his memory of her losing her virginity even more poignant and painful. Caddy comes
home late, and as Benjy begins to cry from failing to catch the scent of trees, she “shrank against
the wall,” and “her eyes ran.” Benjy pulls her to the bathroom though she tries to stop him, and
“she stood against the door, looking at me. Then she put her arm across her face and I pushed at
her, crying” (46). She did not try to wash away the scent, and Benjy jumps to a different memory
without noting a scent of trees. Though Benjy suffers when she gets pregnant, gets married, and
runs away, this initial loss as Caddy grows from girl to woman seems the most traumatizing as it
is the original fall from grace. He cannot identify her as a representation of the ideal Southern
lady, and he doubtfully knows what that is, or what an ideology is, because of his stunted
cognitive development. Because of this, his interpretation of Caddy as the pastoral equivalent to
the nurturing, maternal, but pure, angelic lady carries more gravity. Though ideology crafts
reality to every beholder, and any realization of flaws within its fabric is traumatic, according to
Žižek, surely to one who sees fire when he falls asleep, and sees the world as sound and fury, the
maintenance of the symbols which define his world is even more important.

Quentin, the second Compson narrator, sustains a similar loss to Benjy, and arguably
suffers more because of Caddy’s loss of innocence than does Benjy. His passage is absolutely
static. At the close of his academic year at Harvard, Quentin lives his final hours before
committing suicide by way of drowning. Sartre draws the reader attention to a lack of potential in Quentin’s future. Though he narrates the passage of several hours, Faulkner later states that he had been dead since the day of Caddy’s wedding, and like “long since dead South,” he is simply marking time. Since his future shows no probability, but only finality, Quentin’s perception becomes just as much of a shattered mosaic of recollection and impression as Benjy’s narrative section (Sartre 319-20). He is no more reliable than Benjy, but, to Quentin’s harm, he has the intellectual capacity to articulate and dramatize his trauma at the hands of time. Quentin’s description in the appendix reads:

“QUENTIN III: Who loved not his sister’s body but some concept of Compson honor precariously and (he knew well) only temporarily supported by the minute fragile membrane of her maidenhead as a miniature replica of all the whole vast globy earth may be poised on the nose of a trained seal. Who loved not the idea of the incest which he would not commit, but some Presbyterian concept of its eternal punishment: he, not God, could by that means cast himself and his sister both into hell, where he could guard her forever and keep here forevermore intact amid the eternal fires” (710).

His appendix description also states that above all, Quentin loved death, as it was the only way to escape the passage of time. On June 2, 1910, the date of his suicide, Quentin dismantles the watch his father gave him, saying that “time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life” (56). Sartre interprets this as a symbolic gesture where Quentin “gives us access to a time without clocks” similar to Benjy’s (318). In fact, Vickery argues that Quentin’s “hopeless and endless brooding is but Benjy’s moan become articulate though not rational” across a narrative section twice as long as Benjy’s. Quentin similarly jumps between several memories connected to Caddy’s relationship with
Dalton Ames, a classmate onto whom he grafts the personality of Ames and attempts to fight with, and discussions with his father about Caddy’s pregnancy. Jason III, the children’s father, intimates to Quentin that all human experience is absurd and pathological—he calls the speculation of time passing “a symptom of mind-function. Excrement Father said like sweating”—and in doing so, he upsets Quentin’s deep valuing of an ideology surrounding purity and virginity (51).

He struggles to comprehend Caddy’s sexuality and keeps trying to tell his father, bluntly, “I have committed incest I said Father is was I it was not Dalton Ames” (53). Jason does not believe him, recognizing that his son is speaking through some ideological trauma and maintains that “purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature,” and that “men invented virginity not women” (77, 52). Though Jason expresses some progressive points of view for a man of his time and social position, Quentin sees this as a nihilistic rejection of his own values, of an obsessive belief that an incestuous match would undo the disorder caused by Caddy’s union with Dalton Ames. Ironically, the act that Quentin imagines would fix the dereliction in his family likely led to Benjy’s birth defects, the most frightening physical manifestation of this very dereliction. In this rejection of his father’s less dogmatic prescriptions, Quentin grapples with the failure of a further tessellation of the Courtly Love derivative ideal of honor he has placed upon Caddy’s shoulders. His belief paradoxical belief that committing the deep sin of incest with his sister will return her virtue perpetuates the same type of sado-masochistic male-driven ideological fantasy Žižek addresses in “Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing.” Quentin’s repeated dwelling on memories of trying to fix Caddy, and his hatred for Caddy’s lover Dalton as well as her husband, Herbert, then take on a deeper meaning manifestations of moments he sees as incongruous and perverse to his ideological reality.
This trauma logically points to his resolving to redirect his attention to escaping the painful consequences of this failure. If he cannot commit both himself and Caddy to hell where she can exist as something ethereal and intangible, and thus pure in his imagination, he will at least free himself from the suffering of watching her live in sin. Quentin’s bondage does not necessarily lie only in time, as Sartre suggests, but in his perspective, and his need to create order in a life that is inherently disordered and illogical. Instead of being bound in a chamber, being haunted by allegorical representations of one’s fear in a classic gothic text, Quentin succumbs to ghosts that he has created. The terror of his depression and suicide lies in the fact that he haunts himself. His unconventional perspective and narrative opposes all that was Benjy’s—he is too logical and ideologically driven rather than not having any concept of logic or ideology—but they share the same traumatic experience, and Quentin, equipped with too much resolution and autonomy refuses to live that trauma any longer. Caddy, as Faulkner explains in the appendix, fully aware of the gravity with which her brothers regarded her, resolved to name her child Quentin, no matter the sex, “after the brother whom they both…knew was already the same as dead when she married” (711).

The final Compson sibling, and the third narrator of Faulkner’s text, Jason IV adopts a vastly different perspective on the events surrounding his family. He is not a conventionally unreliable narrator. He is intelligent, successful, and shrewdly masochistic. Compared to the confusing and slow unfolding of events in Benjy and Quentin’s sections, Jason’s section “offers no barriers to comprehension” (Vickery 331). In fact, he explains all events and actions “in terms of cause and effect, profit and loss” (332). But, as Vickery points out, Jason’s section is no truer, but equally true, and equally distorted to that of his brothers. His logic and lack of empathy “isolates [him] as effectively as the moral abstractions of Quentin or the complete dependence on
sensations of Benjy” (332). He revels in his isolation and self-sufficiency, as he sees it as a mark of superiority, and believes that he has the firmest grasp on reality among his family. Vickery qualifies that his narrative section is “a new and welcome perspective on the Compsons,” as well as a respite from the intellectual challenge of sifting through the first 100 pages of difficult perspectives, but “it is just a perspective and not the final word that Jason makes it out to be” (332). His perspective, bereft of empathy, reduces all interaction to a series of quantitative exchanges signaling profit or loss, and thus he views Caddy not as a tragic fallen angel or maiden in a pasture, but as a selfish, morally loose woman.

Not only is Jason calculating and deeply un-empathetic, as Vickery points out, he is also sadistic. Dilsey’s family and his other siblings do not trust him, and recognize his malicious nature. Benjy, in his narrative, recalls a time when Jason III had to hold Caddy back from attacking Jason after he had cut Benjy’s paper dolls to shreds and feigned ignorance. He showed blatant contempt for Benjy, as well as Caddy, as a child, and as an adult, he clearly gains pleasure from annoying and tormenting others. He recalls in his own narrative section a time when he had two tickets to a show he had no intention of seeing. Luster, Dilsey’s son, asks for one of the tickets, but Jason, knowing Luster has no money, asks that he either pay five cents, or he burns the tickets. Though Luster begs that he will “fix dem [car] tires ev’y day fer a mont,” Jason insists that he “need[s] the cash” and drops the tickets into the stove (167). Still, he reserves a special hatred for Caddy and Miss Quentin. Benjy and Quentin, of course, implicitly attribute the same misfortune to Caddy’s fall from innocence, but Jason blames her directly, as well as her daughter, Miss Quentin, for having a direct hand in his personal failures, and he curses his sour lot of being chained to them by blood.
This is clear from the very first line of his narrative in reference to the teen-aged Miss Quentin: “Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say” (119). His narrative sections begins with this line in media res during a discussion with his mother, Caroline, about Miss Quentin’s inherited rebelliousness, promiscuity, and from his perspective, ungratefulness. Indeed, Quentin resembles her mother, and Faulkner describes her as “fatherless nine months before her birth, nameless at birth and already doomed to be unwed from the instant the dividing egg determined its sex” (719). Caroline, though upset with her for cutting school, instructs Jason to “remember she’s your own flesh and blood.” He responds by subverting her use of thinking about someone as flesh and blood as a metaphor for family in order to elicit empathy into a crass suggestion of violence, and qualifies the violence as a proper punishment. “Sure…that’s just what I’m think of—flesh. And a little blood too, if I had my way” (120). Indeed, he grabs Quentin and, loosening his belt, threatens to beat her until Dilsey, apparently the only being he “fear[ed] and respect[ed],” and his “sworn enemy” who had always detected evil in him, intervenes (Faulkner 716). Still, he threatens to beat Dilsey as well, and pushes her aside. After the scene is over, he privately thinks about more ways to torment Dilsey and Quentin.

Though he sees Caddy, and Quentin as an extension of Caddy, as the root of the illness rotting through his homestead, Jason leeches life and money from all those around him and values his own success and well being far more than the well being of others. From Jason’s section, we learn that Quentin is certainly her mother’s daughter, and that Caddy is well off enough to send a substantial monthly check for her. But most profoundly, we learn how cold and self-centered Jason is. His section moves quickly and without the many intricacies that make Benjy and Quentin’s sections so difficult to follow. Jason’s present life contains only one intricate scheme of cheating all of his family members of their money. He has the now senile
Caroline grant him power of attorney, supposedly so he can deposit his wages into her account. In reality, he keeps his wages in a separate account devoted to his mistress. In the meantime, he mortgages off more and more pieces of the family land, eventually institutionalizes Benjy to be free having to care for him, and deposits the checks Caddy sends for Quentin, which he duplicates and has Caroline burn as a symbolic rejection of Caddy, into his mother’s account as his wages. Jason displays advanced reasoning skills and possesses a brilliant mind. Certainly, he does not embody the classic image of an unreliable narrator, one who misunderstands the implicit rules of his own text. But, he is cold, and through the intense power of his hatred-fueled tunnel vision, he provides an absolutely subjective perspective that is just as singular in focus as his brothers’, whom he recognizes as “crazy” (153). But, though he sees every other member of his family as a disgrace to the Compson family name, Jason plays the most active role in the final chapter of its demise. He alienates the final generation of Compson, Miss Quentin, castrates Benjy, refuses to grieve for Quentin, and finally sells off the rest of the old Compson place. Jason’s narrative voice represents a paranoid reading unable to move past unreliability and the least productive reaction to ideological shift. Jason refuses to understand himself as a subject of time.

The final narrative section, Easter Sunday, April eighth, 1928 adopts the perspective of a semi-omniscient narrator focused on Dilsey Gibson, the matriarch of the family who serve the Compsons. Dilsey is warm, nurturing, and non-judgmental. She remains the only member of the household to understand Benjy’s need for routine, shows compassion for Caroline, defends Caddy despite her faults, and defends Miss Quentin and Luster from Jason’s anger. As Vickery says, “her very presence enables the reader to achieve a final perspective” on the Compson’s shortcomings and dysfunctions (333). Vickery continues to name Dilsey as a figure of passive
resistance and as a beacon of the “ethical norm” from which the Compsons have deviated.

Though she shows the most empathy and compassion, I do not think Dilsey’s purpose in the text is to point out the moral shortcomings of the Compsons. She does not view them as inherently bad people and does not pass judgment. Instead, she attempts to express compassion and empathy. She takes Benjy to church with her because does not view his intellect as a barrier to deserving love and experiencing the power of faith. She sees Miss Quentin as a wild and unruly child, but still offers her comfort and compassion. She thinks that Caddy’s adulterous pregnancy was unfortunate, but defends her in her absence and cares for her child. Even to Jason, she says “aint you shamed” every time he threatens or badmouths someone, suggesting a hope that he could attempt a change for the better (167). Instead, I feel that Dilsey, and the rest of the Gibson family, serve as a representative of the possible future which Sartre denies Faulkner’s metaphysics of time from having. As Benjy and Quentin narrate only in the past tense, in the form of recollection, and Jason narrates only in the present connected with the personal speech indicator, “I says,” Dilsey does not seem bound by time. As she, her family, and Benjy sit in church on Easter Sunday, she calms Benjy by saying, “Hush, now. Dey fixin to sing in a minute” (191). Though the future in this scene moves only minute by minute, by an anticipation of singing, Dilsey, importantly, speaks of the future bringing happiness and relief.

After the Easter sermon, Dilsey thinks of the preacher’s words on the finality and great equalizing force of death and comments that she “seed de first en de last…seed de beginning, en now [she] sees de endin” of the Compson family (194). This statement seems neither happy nor sad, but speaks to an almost biblical steadiness, and the omniscient view of a cycle in time. In Faulkner’s appendix, Dilsey’s entry reads, simply, “They endured” (721). Though she has watched this last generation of the Compsons come into the world and leave it, Dilsey does not
see time as the bringer of death and decay as the Compsons do. Importantly, she is of a different social class and a different position relative to the Civil War than the other narrators. The three ideologically stunted Compson men represent the shell-shocked generation of the newly dead South that Faulkner intended to both defend and indict. They are white men, descendants of a Confederate general who belonged to an aristocratic plantation-owning family. Though they did not lose their property or name in the war, they lost the support of the ideological system that built their wealth. They cling to the idea of Compson family honor, unfortunately encapsulated in Caddy’s transient virginity, because it is the last vestige of their former glory. Their South, the plantation South, indeed, perished in the war and left them to deal with a profound ideological schism. Following Žižek’s definition of ideology and fantasy as both creating and informing a sense of reality, one can conclude that the Compsons did not stand a chance. What the reader sees in Benjy’s and Quentin’s narrative, the sound and the fury of an immensely different ideological system, is arguably what the Compsons saw of their new reality and of Caddy’s traditionally masculine sexuality and rebellious nature. Dilsey, an African American woman with a very recent cultural memory of slavery and subservience to this same antiquated system, did not share this trauma. The Gibsons dealt and changed with the current of time and the massive ideological shift in the south following the Civil War and abolition of slavery while the Compson men have not. Since the Gibsons did not belong to the same social class to which the Compsons, and Poe’s narrator in “Ligeia,” belonged, the obsession with the ideological fantasy of female purity and great family honor did not apply.

I disagreed earlier with Sartre’s identification of Faulkner’s metaphysics of time as deterministic and of pointing to a close non-future. Certainly, the Compson men have reached the end. Quentin committed suicide, Benjy was castrated and institutionalized, and Jason died
childless. Ligeia’s narrator, though Poe never determined his future, likely did not recover from the terrifying haunting he experienced. They all fail in maintaining their wealth, in staying pure, in staying sane, in staying alive, because they are paralyzed in adhering to antiquated and narrow ideological systems. But Caddy and Quentin disappeared in the wind and lived a non-Compson-dependent future, and Dilsey’s family—they endured. Faulkner did not withhold a future from those who could see one.
Concluding Thoughts

Why read Poe and Faulkner together? Both of these works present the consequence of the problematic male-driven fantasy of a pure, honorable, ideal Southern lady. In both works, the insistence on forcing this image upon a real woman brings severe consequences. Where Poe’s narrator transformed his deceased wife, Ligeia, into a surreal monster within the confines of a gothic horror story, the Compson men turned Caddy into a monstrous shadow haunting their fragile psyches.

Through Poe’s narrator, the reader grasps the precarious and antagonistic nature of this myth. The South’s revival and incomplete emulation of both feudal tradition and the literary conception of Courtly Love that accompanied it in Europe defined success and moral prestige as inextricably linked with the institution of servitude. The ideal Southern lady represented, problematically, both the angelic idol of morality, the long suffering Virgin Mary, and the ideal servant, essentially a beast of burden. The ignorance and displacement of the complexity of character within a real human being prescribed an impossible duty to contemporary women. When they failed to conform, they no longer deserved familial love or respect, and contracted a socially dangerous sense of otherness. Poe’s Ligeia, a woman reincarnated as one misrepresented myth inside another, proves to be contagious and absolutely disruptive. She possesses the body of another and brings the narrative to a screeching halt. Though this can be read as a classic gothic tale, and one of many mass-produced narrative shells, this work proves to contain a much more compelling underlying social critique when read as unreliable in service of an aesthetic goal rather than simply unreliable.

Faulkner’s Caddy Compson similarly stops time. But, instead of exploring the fantasy she fails to embody, the narrators reveal the aftermath of both her subjective failure and the
shattering of the wider ideology of the antebellum South. The pall of imagined disgrace inflicts psychological torment on Benjy’s already terrifyingly confused mind, transforms into a consuming bitterness in Jason, and leads Quentin to commit suicide to avoid the anguish. Where Poe’s piece explores the surreal depths of a problematic social fantasy, Faulkner’s men depict the very terrestrial and human consequences of continuing to live by the moral code of Poe’s time long after it had been retired. In order to gleam this analysis from these texts, one must read past reliability versus unreliability and adopt an unconventional, panoramic perspective similar to that of Dilsey’s section. In fact, one must read with an ever-evolving theory of a purpose to Faulkner’s aesthetic choice of unreliability in order to understand the tragedy of the stagnant plot. As I have hopefully shown, the fact of unreliability is much less important than the insights it may bring.

By reading through an unconventional perspective with an open mind, readers can gain important cognitive tools for addressing the value of similar unreliable or unconventional perspectives in other texts, as well as in other humans. This, hopefully, serves as an example of fantasy informing ideology in a positive, if still antagonistic, way. By choosing to read past unreliability, individuals can cultivate more informed opinions on the pressing social issues of their time, such as gender identity and equality, and sexual rights. Doctors can provide their patients with more compassion, and thus with a more positive healing experience, by addressing the individual experience of illness. Looking through another’s eyes is the preamble to, to borrow a phrase from Judith Butler, stepping beside one’s self.
Appendix A: “The Octoroon Mistress,” BRADY 2003
Appendix B: “Proserpina,” Dante Gabriel Rossetti 1877
Appendix C: “Ligeia,” Harry Clarke 1919
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Works Cited


