

Why They Were Unmarried: Family,
Gender, and Honor in
A Summons to Memphis

by
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In short, neither in the realm of social fact nor in the realm of psychological identity has the South ceased to be distinctive, despite the changes of the twentieth century.

Carl N. Degler

Peter Taylor's *A Summons to Memphis*, a recounting of the life of a family from the 1930's to the 60's, is set in a changing yet unchanged "traditional" South, and tells the family members' psychological oscillation accompanying their removal from Nashville to Memphis. The story is told by a middle-aged narrator, now living off in New York with an intellectual Jewish woman. Suddenly awakened by the twilight phone call, with serenity of peaceful evening broken, he is forced to look back and trace his past and memory. From the outset of the reading, we must ask what the word "summons" in the title implies. Why should the narrator characterize as a "summons" what for him is simply a "return"? It is a reflection of the turmoil in the narrator's mind. One connotation of the word summons is that of a court of law. And so he begins to *testify*. But against whom, on

whose behalf, and to what authority? The substance of his testimony is about his father's remarriage (the eccentric behavior of an old widower) and the way that the narrator's two unmarried sisters responded to it. In the process of the telling, he testifies about the experience of the "Southern Woman," a narrative which has been censored in the history of the South. My inquiry into "Why They Were Unmarried" locates the reason in the authority of the "Father," and looks at female responses to male dominant culture in the historical context of the South.

I

First, let me make a brief overview of the social history of the Southern family. As Carl N. Degler analyzes it, part of the South's uniqueness is in the human warmth and security of its commitment to family and kin.¹ Two key concepts stressed therein are the family as the core of Southern society and clannishness as a manifestation of family solidarity. Among the popular images of the peaceful Southern family were small-town Southerners sitting on a front porch at twilight, Sunday dinners, long visits from maiden aunts and distant cousins, etc. Also many myths have been created about Southern families. One example is the "Southern family romance" (the term coined by Richard King), a vision in which the South itself is a huge plantation family ruled by powerful white patriarchs. The emphasis is on family background as the criterion for judging social worth. Of course, the institution of the family as the primary social unit was not limited to the South, but the family held a distinctive position there.

The South was fundamentally a class-based society divided into planters, yeomanry, poor whites, black slaves. Class distinctions were between "well bred" and "not well bred", between "genteel people" and "plain people," and a person's claims to being one or the other

were based on ancestry. The existing system of values was passed down from generation to generation through the unit of the family so that the social class might be kept in place. On the other hand, the North was a more recently industrialized society holding promises of social mobility and dreams of success. Self-identity was not based on class or the family network to the extent that it was in the South. Rather than ancestral continuity and inherited personal worth or worthiness, individualism was the core conception.

Thus, in the North, the "Father" was somewhat likely to be resisted as a symbol of oppressive authority and a barrier to independence, while the "Father" in the Southern family was the unparalleled patriarch and protector of the things that invest life with meaning: family and tradition. In the South, male dominance and sharp role-divisions between males and females were maintained in an atmosphere celebrating masculine cultural traits. The region was demarcated by violence, honor, stoicism, a proclivity toward things military, etc. In the Puritan and Protestant North, however, the prevailing ethic extolled equal opportunity for success, and emphasis was on lucre. Killing the "Father" (on the symbolic level) was a form of Northern cultural expression, to the extent that the "Father" was the symbolic reminder of past tradition or European authority. Descriptions of the ritual killing of the "Father" are not infrequently found in 19th century novels, those of Hawthorne and Melville being cases in point.

To this the Southern social backdrop stands in clear contrast:

Parents were seen as exemplars. The children were expected to emulate their parents and other worthy relatives as much as possible, to respect adults and to follow their basic moral precepts. Although fathers sought to teach their children independence, they also wanted the children to learn that they were not so much individuals as extensions of their parents.²

Although the characterization in the quotation above may not be

true of the whole of the South, it does serve to point out important distinctions in comparison with the North.

To fill out the picture of the Southern family, let us consider the myth of the "Southern Belle." She is fragile, submissive, virtuous, modest, sexually innocent, and selfless, most of which qualities belong to the nineteenth century prescription of Victorianism.³ This idealized figure of Southern womanhood rarely if ever found embodiment in the real world, but the problem faced by her mythologizers was "to literalize her function as a symbolic construct within the southern society and thus perpetuate the southern ideology."⁴ Being a society based on a system of class rule, and therefore (in a certain sense) a pre-modern one, the South feared "social dissolution," or the blurring of boundaries between social roles: between males and females, sons and fathers, or slaves and masters. Any role-positions outside of these pairs of opposites belonged to the chaotic forms of an open and "dismembered" society.

"In crisis" was a phrase that described the Southerners' prevailing mentality, especially in the heated-up times of abolitionist attacks from the North. People in threatened situations generally seek out intense symbols of order and stability to stem feelings of drift and uncertainty. In this the South was no exception. It was the insecurity of the "Gentleman" that led Southerners to create the "Lady," a myth to stand for the peacefulness of a cloud-cuckoo-land. The gender roles imposed by the myth of the Southern Belle thus "work together to prevent change and obscure reality within the South's conception of itself."⁵

In the end, the myth of the "Southern Belle" contributed to sustaining the "Father" as the unifying figure of the Southern family and to warding off visions of its dismemberment. But the very family bonds that provided security and social stability could sometimes become stultifying, bonds of restraint rather than bonds of connection. Each family member was obliged to act out a prescribed (theatrical) role both in domestic scenes and on the various social stages of

Southern life as well. Accordingly, Southerners suffered from an increasing confusion of identities, particularly after the Civil War was lost and the South and its ideology were broken up. They lost the very foundation upon which their culture had been built. Ideals became blurred, and societal disintegration invited fragmentation in everyday life. But, instead of being beaten by vicissitudes, they grew all the more conscious of their past. And so in this context "the family" has come to be the focal point in Southern writers' search for their own identities, and for the identity of the South itself.

II

As a figure contiguous to that of the "Southern Belle," the "Unmarried woman" can be seen to have a peculiar place in the culture of South. It is a topos that has become stock-in-trade in Southern literature, and there is no better token of it than the character Emily Grierson in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (1930). Emily is reflected in the eyes of the townspeople in the following tableau:

... Miss Emily a slender figure in the background, her father a straddled silhouette in the forward, his back to her and clutching a horse-whip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door.⁶

This picture captures the epitome of exalted Southern womanhood and the position of a daughter patronized and protected by her father. The implication is that Emily is fragile and retiring, while her father is authoritative and forward. Appearing as "a straddled silhouette," he works secretly through a ruling power associated with shadows and repression. Indeed, this is such a typical depiction of the daughter-father relationship in the South that nothing distinctive seems to be said about the relationship between them. Yet, the vigi-

lant eyes of the townspeople, with their tradition-mindedness, reveal what is unsaid: the picture is a seemingly stable relationship, but one which for its rigidity is all the more likely to be broken down. These eyes have witnessed the pattern of decline and fall in the Southern family; they are an accurate mirror to reflect its behaviors and psychologies. But they do more than just reflect. Also they invade, they even trespass onto her yard. The function in the story of these eyes, watching "behind jealousies closed upon the sun of Sunday afternoon,"⁷ cannot be stressed enough. This is, after all, the South, a code-based society with a dense human network, and in such a context the eyes of others force meanings onto a person's actions.

Emily's unmarriedness is directly the result from her father's driving away the young suitors, indirectly the result from a Southern tradition vigilant and untiring in acting on its precepts, which in this case means enforcing the behavioral mores imposed upon Southern women by patriarchal values. Being a "Lady," or living out the myth that she is sexually moral, virtuous, pious, and submissive, Emily is encoded as character by her father, who is an author of culture, of laws and conventions of language, in a word, the "Father." When her father dies, Emily becomes aware of "unsettling fluctuations of language and meaning,"⁸ asking to herself "Who is a Lady?" and, "Am I that name?" She searches out the interior otherness buried in the back of her mind: she discovers the difference within. Now that she is no longer a character, but "a net work of desire and production," she sets out to "relinquish the authority of the word, and thereby create a new kind of narrative process."⁹ She finds the medium for her discourse in Homer Barron, a Northern man of low taste who becomes an object, not of Emily's love, but one towards which she liberates her repressed desire. Even if the townspeople cast glances and make comments such as "even grief could not cause a real lady to forget *noblesse oblige*"¹⁰ or, "Poor Emily,"¹¹ she invents a love relationship with the man, ignoring the outer voices of condemnation. Her narrative desire propels her to make and remake herself into

something she was not before. This is truly the representation of her desire, a product of her own narration, the interplay of the difference within. Ordering a man's toilet set in silver, with the letters H.B. at the jeweler's and furnishing the room as a bridal chamber: these are the acts of representing her desires. She acts out the role of a woman in love as a reaction to oppression, or more exactly, she plays with the otherness discovered within her in a make-believe, "happy marriage." But thinking about the relationship with Homer Barron, we notice this name is a thinly veiled reference to the "domestic autocrat." Emily's high and mighty family is hinted at. At this we are reminded of how she refused to hold a funeral for her father, saying that, "her father was not dead."¹² From here it is a short step to the conclusion that, while searching for the absent father, Emily overlapped the image of her father with another, and gained a vicarious satisfaction through her relationship with Homer Barron. In a sense, he is her father's "double."

In the final analysis, the crucial question is, to what end she liberates herself. Does she succeed in escaping from being a "Daddy's girl" to make good her own desire for self-possession? The interpretation commonly argued is of estheticism: she tried to crystallize her genuine love and sensuality by arresting time and getting away from its cruelties. In this interpretation, the necrophilia Emily indulged through killing her lover by poison has been underlined and her eventual end is symbolized by "a long strand of iron-gray hair"¹³ on the pillow next to his skeletalized remains. And so the "Rose" in the title signifies a requiem for her turbulent soul. This interpretation depends on the townspeople's observation of watching her life from without, ignoring her inner conflict between her self and the "Father."

My reading focuses on Emily's "narration" as a hidden text, which finds a resentment in her to "that which had robbed her."¹⁴ It is untold in the text of the townspeople, an experience that is left out of Southern history. For Emily, spinsterhood is a kind of loss, an

aborted desire. It is an unendurable captivity. Her will to be a rebel is one topic of her "narration" of depressed desire. Her rebellion is against the "Father's" willful and selfish authority, and against the rigid social frameworks which culture inscribes upon her from without. Underlying her narration, there is no unblemished and positive *motivation*. Rather than a so called motivation, she is spurred by an urge to narrate her loss. Hers is a vindictive mind, but one mixed with love.

The notion of "killing" never occurs to Emily before her father's death. But some time after the inner change caused by her father's death, the idea creeps into her mind secretly. Emily orders arsenic from the druggist, haughtily refusing to answer his question as to what she intends to use it for. And, through the Negro delivery boy, the druggist reluctantly lets her have it, but not until after having written on the box the words "For Rats." Occupying the position of a punch line at the end of passage, the words "For Rats" are ambiguous, allowing for many possible interpretations. One is that of a routine caution to the effect that the poison should not be used for purposes other than to kill rats. In this sense the druggist might have written out the label with the purpose of evading blame for an irresponsible sale. Another interpretation is that the words were meant in a derogatory sense, the suggestion being that both Emily and her lover, the one a loose woman and the other a scoundrel, are rats, for whom a death by poison would be befitting. Either reading admits the implication that the druggist have divined the real purpose for the arsenic, that he had, so to speak, "smelled a rat."

Emily's true purpose is only hinted at in the depiction of "her face like a strained flag."¹⁵ The connotation is of the (Rebel) battle flag of the South. No explicit clues are given in the text by which it might be judged that she killed her lover, yet the previously mentioned reading reasonably permits the interpretation that the poison was meant for murder. Indeed, the poison needs such an interpretation in a conventional reading, but in the cultural context of the

father-daughter relation another one is possible: her urge to "kill" is directed toward her father on an unconscious level.

Homer Barron was witnessed entering Emily's house at the kitchen door, which was the last the townspeople saw of him. And Emily did not appear on the streets for almost six months after that. Then they commented that "we knew that this was to be expected too; as if that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die."¹⁶ The townspeople's text invites us to read that the murder of Homer was committed at that time. Into "that quality of her father" there can be read an unspoken Southern code and a condemnation of Emily's rebellious behavior against it. But, taking the side of Emily's unconscious and listening to the voice of her "narration," we might be allowed to read the text inscribed by the eyes of the other in still another way. In the retreating figure of Homer Barron as he left her, indeed in his very absence, Emily saw the image of her father, and she contrived to make good the loss of "her woman's life" hitherto thwarted by her father through marrying his surrogate in Homer. But the man himself must somehow be detained. The result of the dilemma was Emily's decision to kill her "Father" in order to solve an insolvable problem.

Obstacle and symbol of repression and recapitulation of the Southern code, the "Father" always stands in Emily's way just as her own father gave her his back in the tableau. They are obverse and reverse of gender as an institution, but the "father" is always at the head, and it is he who positions Emily in the role of "Lady." Considering unmarriedness as a phenomenon reflecting a distinctive Southern institution, in Emily we can see at once the workings of a repressed mind and a *vengeful* (and by extension *incestuous*) one. In her state of unmarriedness, Emily is a displaced woman within the context of the cultural narrative of womanhood in the South.¹⁷ Her reworking of the codes inscribed upon her is a chapter in the text of the displaced and unmarried woman of the South, a text in which A

Summons to Memphis shares a place.

III

Receiving a summons, Phillip takes the stand as a witness and testifies about the laws laid down by his father and the injustices of these, of his sisters' entrapment and of his own escape. He tells his story unwillingly; it is a text he would rather not be written into. The story is a confession of his retreat, but also a revelation of the secret rebellion that two Southern women living within the narrow constraints of the "organic" society of the South carried on.¹⁸ Almost against his will, he brings an untold story of Southern history to the surface.

In the dreary Sunday twilight, Phillip Carver receives a summons to testify his past in the form of a telephone call from his two unmarried sisters. And so he sets off on a journey to a past shared by other family members. His narration, eventuated by a summons from the past (to borrow the words of David Robinson¹⁹), does not merely trace chronologically events that happened, but stands as an act of interpretation and of self-comprehension. It is a painful confrontation with a troubled past, one he would have surely avoided if there had been a choice.

Phillip, the narrator, is a middle-aged rare-book collector and editor, living away from his Memphis family in a Manhattan apartment "with a woman friend named Holly Kaplan."²⁰ He describes himself as being in the "middle-aged doldrums," (7) or in a state of emotional aridity. The psychological distance between New York and Memphis is not only an isolating separation but also a liberation. Though he tells us, "I had left home before I was thirty," (6) as his narrative proceeds he divulges that in fact he escaped from Memphis to New York. As he traces his way back through his memory, he

represents the facts of his escape in the following way:

I was about to leave my parents' house without saying goodbye and without telling them where I was going. Perhaps it was because I felt it a shameful thing to be doing that I could not let my mind confront its reality. Perhaps even more shameful for me was the very fact of running away from home like this, like a little boy in a storybook, when I was already a man of almost thirty with his college years and even his war years now well behind him. At my relatively mature age I was playing Peter Pan, going off to live amongst the Lost Boys and blaming it all on the incomprehensible machinations of my father. (113)

The fact that he could find neither the grounds to rationalize his father's conduct nor the fortitude to "rebel against that supreme authority, Mr. George Carver," (148-49) is a blemish on the record of his life. But for him, "serene existence" (8) is attainable as long as he keeps a distance from "all the human noise," (95) which is how he refers to the family bonds of Southern tradition and his ties to his father. While Memphis is the place of "a dense and formal social culture,"²¹ New York is one made for "a runaway slave" who flees from bondage, just as Phillip fled from family duty and filial responsibility. Until the telephone call from the sisters, he denied any commitment or ties or accountability to the past, a past which threatened to disturb his "peacefulness" and seemingly "balanced life."

Detachment from the human noise is one of the prerequisites of this "dedicated bookman" (119) whose concern is more "with the value of physical books than what was inside of them" (101). Phillip feared any analogy between real life and the life full of sound and fury to be found in books. Consequently he ignored the contents of books in favor of their physical value, for the mere existence of a book speaks nothing about the past. Phillip's relationship with Holly was only sustainable out of wedlock. Holly hated her own father's lessons of submission, abandoning the family and "slipping away to

New York to find a job" (176). Together with her, Phillip attains his "peacefulness," but, though it might sound thin and shallow, that he can find such satisfaction in the relationship is due in part to similar family background, and in part to the fact that she remains "a girl friend," and no one to remind him of "the sentimental esthetics of domesticity" (143).

"To think 'it was' is to have memory." As Gail L. Mortimer argues, "the verb 'was' involves not-forgetting, anticipation, and regret."²² "Father" belongs to the realm of memory, of what "was." In the passage quoted below, Philip contrasts his own view of his father with the way another boy of the same age viewed the man:

I think Father was ever afterward for Alex like a body of belief that he could not quite give his personal credence to but whose truth he devoutly respected and held to be a philosophical absolute. My own view of father was not merely so high-flown or complicated. For me he was flesh and blood and until the day I left Memphis behind, to take up residence in Manhattan, he remained simply a barrier between me and any independent life I might aspire to—a barrier to any pursuit of ideas, interests, goals that my temperament guided me toward. As early as that day on the playground I had actually already been in Memphis just long enough to see this man as something strange and phenomenal, even as something of a clownish figure (80-1).

Phillip's conception of his father as "flesh and blood" contrasts with his friend Alex's more abstract understanding. For Philip, his father was "a commanding figure" (153), who possessed a power over his children "that was beyond all traditional parental power that fathers of earlier generations possessed" (41). In "an old-fashioned family" (21) like the narrator's, "Father" referred not only to a position in a kinship system, or to a function such as breadwinner, but also to an embodiment of the continued value system: the tradition of the South.

In that tradition, one was required to emulate one's father as

a protector of, at once, the family order and the social one. Such a notion was bolstered by the ethic of "Honor." Phillip's father held a business relationship with a man named Shackelford, thinking it to be based on admiration and solid friendship. But he was betrayed by Shackelford and left Nashville in a profound rage, dragging his unwilling family to Memphis in order to "have his wife and children with him, and with himself altogether unchanged" (21). There was a displacement of manners and social milieu concomitant with the removal from Nashville to Memphis. Consequently, though to an outsider it might have seemed "so slight a shift as from one Southern city to another" (20), that removal led to the destruction of "all balance, poise, health" (20) that family had to have. For the narrator at that younger age, this seemed to be the symbol of the "Father" in crisis. But Phillip's mother forbade her children to rebel against their father's decision to make the removal, because she was "the product of a rather formal, old society" (22), that is, the product of the "Father's" culture, to such an extent that she even alluded to the old duels as preferable to flight as a way to maintain Honor. She thought that it was the best way for the Carver family to maintain the father's honor and keep the family honor out of the dirt.

But, so eccentric, so simply a monster, was father to the eyes of the narrator at his youth that he denied the very relationship, as shown in way he refers to his father as "this man," treating him like someone objectified third person. The substance of the man is admitted but the relationship of "Father" is obfuscated. The narrator's denial of the specific sense of "Father" is also shown in the frequent use of the words "something" or "something of." Rather than blurredness or dimness of impression, the rhetorical effect is one of a tangible mystery: an unarticulated yet defined boundary of knowing. For Philip, the "Father" is the "barrier" between the self that he wishes to be and the outer world where he wishes to establish himself. "Father" intervened and prevented him from marrying one Clara Price, "for needs and reasons of his own or out of general confusion about

the role he was entitled to play with regard to his children's selection of their mates" (96). "Father" gives no good reason for his opposition to the marriage, nor permission to ask, "Why not?" The narrator looks no further into his father's "needs and reasons" and ascribes the proscription to none other than the man's stubborn refusal to let his family go. Into this we can read his fear of "dismemberment," the breaking up of his family and the consequent loss of his *raison d'être* as "Father." What was behind his father's intervention was his father's over-consciousness of himself, his desire to show himself to be what he wished to be, and to have sons and daughters to yield to him in confirmation. Yet such considerations were beyond the narrator's understanding at the time of his youth. Father behaved as only "Father" could, and in the eyes of the boy, "the view of and impression of him" (153) seemed "clownish," a word bespeaking some of his resentment. Father's panache of hair was both the sign of a commander and patriarch and the object of so much empty vanity.

But "Father's" "iron will and courage and perfect skill and limitless intelligence" (153) were sufficiently strong for the boy to have dreaded him and obeyed him as "Father obeyed his father in almost all things" (192). The basic tone of the father-son relationship is conflict between tradition in the "Father" and self-possession in the son.

IV

Let's turn to the question of how the sisters responded to their father. Love and vengeance are the key terms. My frame of reference is how love worked on the daughters in the Southern cultural context. But it may be a mistake to presume a love-based relationship between daughter and father *a priori*. And it is hard to bring to the surface the human give-and-take, the emotions and the manners of the family dynamic, since we have only Philip to depend on for the narration of

his sisters' story. One problem is the provenance of his information: it is had only through the letters from Phillip's sisters and from his friend Alex and from his own memory about them. So limited is his judgment, as a kind of the author's strategy, that we need extend and deepen understanding by adding a social and cultural dimension to our reading.

The narrator characterizes his sisters as "injured adolescents" (163). He reflects upon and testifies their past as in the following way:

At the time of the removal to Memphis both girls were made to feel that their conformity, their obedience, their moral support was the then most important matter in their father's life. And they conformed, they obeyed, they supported—they did not marry. (61)

The succinct final sentence in the quote above summarizes the daughter-father relationship in the past, yet the question remains open as to how to read the dash between the words "supported" and "they." Several readings are possible: that of cause and effect might be glossed by the grammatical conjunctions "therefore," "so," or "as a result," while emotional interjections such as "Alas!" or "Why!" might also be read into the gap. The narrator halts his narration, or is cut off, by the dash "—." This aposiopesis is an authorly device inviting readers' interpretations. We don't have any idea of whether Phillip attributes a relation of cause and effect, or whether he intentionally evades such a judgment.

On the surface, "they did not marry" merely predicates a fact, but if we dare to construe the dash as a sign of the narrator's arrested consciousness in confronting that fact, there is a chasm of interpretation, a kind of mystery, a possibility beyond any simple relationship of cause and effect.

If we read the cultural material of the South into the narrative voice's suspension or momentary silence, we see the two sisters, both Josephine and Betsy, were enthralled with the myth of the "Southern Lady," a narrative in which they are positioned as fragile, submissive,

virtuous, modest, sexually innocent, selfless. That was a narrative already written for them by their father, who expresses his power through silencing the opposite, as shown in his arbitrary refusal of their suitors without giving a good reason and his willful decision to remove from Nashville to Memphis. They saw themselves aligned with their father, the law-giver. They acted as their father wished them to and obeyed him for the sake of "Honor," which was "the then most important matter for their father's life." In spite of the fact that the notion of "Honor" was irrational and male control-based, and as such out of their reach, "they put themselves under the restraint for life" (67), that is, they accepted the gender role that was historically defined for them. This is ironic, for while the fundamental unit and organizing principle of the Southern society was distinctively the family, they in effect ended their own family line by spelling out their lives within the margins of the patriarchal text imposed by their father.

As for the narrator's aposiopesis, let me try another angle of interpretation of how love was working upon them, and of what kind of love that might be. The narrator's inference to the problem is in the following way:

Their love and admiration for the man [Father] seemed *boundless*. I suppose they otherwise could never have submitted to his wishes with regard to Wyant Brawley and Clarkson Manning. They had words of praise for Father in every sphere of his life. (italics added) (63)

There is no plausible logic in his attribution of his sisters' love for their father as the reason for their obedience to him. The attribution invites confusion for a reader's understanding of the motives of the women. If we read the word "boundless" literally, we might form a conception of so deep a love toward their father that they broke off with their lovers. But it is difficult to accept that they could have submitted to their father's unreasonable wishes just because they loved him so deeply. Until we recognize the ironic tone in the hyper-

bolic word of “boundless,” it is hard to see that the narrator admits that his sisters’ actions were prompted, at bottom, by obedience to their father. The narrator’s true but unspoken suspicion is that their obedience could not have been endurable had it not been conditioned by something approaching “boundless” love, which under the circumstances would be almost unthinkable anachronistic. In light of this, we can say that the cultural text of the “Father” was not necessarily fixed and absolute, at least as far as the sisters were concerned. Their love was a symptom of their resistance to that text. And indirectly, the narrator suggests their reworking of their position with regard to their problematic father.

Moreover, in the process of the narration he reveals his recognition of how they were actually injured by parental injustice and harbored thoughts of vengeance. When Philip received the sister’s call telling him, “It’s Father, Philip. Your father is making plans to marry” (10), he burst into laughter to hear “your father,” that is, to hear her talk “As if he had not always been more hers and Josephine’s father than anyone else’s!” (10). With a subtle sensibility he catches the hinted shade of meaning: the daughters no longer align themselves with their father. Or, as is more directly shown in his internal response to a letter from Alex (a lover of “a *simple* truth” (89)), his secret recognition of the sisters’ response to Father goes as follows:

He [Alex] did not dream, I told myself, that simultaneous with their love and admiration which they so often expressed for Father they were *silently* experiencing emotion of the very opposite kind. Or perhaps Alex did dream of that paradox and, *like me*, could not bring himself to speak of it to me or even acknowledge it to himself. (italics added) (89).

In his narrative stance, he shows a tendency to evade direct terms for characterizing what can only be thought of as a harsh situation. It is as if he hates to commit himself by speaking of it. And so he uses a circumlocution, “the very opposite kind,” for what might have been

termed “vengeance” or “spitefulness.” This is a strategy to keep his mind “serene” and a way to attain an impartial judgment of what was “actually” happening. By couching the events in terms of his own choosing he avoids involvement in an emotional turmoil. But even so, he can’t hide the fact that he knows how his sisters “silently” endured their father, that “they were willing to go against him surreptitiously” (115). This can be read both in the expressions he avoids and in the very gaps between his words: the narrator’s euphemisms and the breaking off of his thought in confronting the fact that “they did not marry.”

The remarriage of their father is a double irony, for, while he is “a man of eighty-one, afflicted with the numerous ailments of old age” (10), his adult daughters are not only unmarried but remain virgins. Further, he is no longer “the very epitome of domestic propriety” (123), appearing at night-spots and making a fool of himself repeatedly. Their father’s reassertion of the principle of the “Father” makes for a completely farcical situation which both excites his daughters’ playfulness and incites their malice. It sets his daughters dangling between what they actually are and what they were. They encounter the otherness in themselves to find themselves “displaced.” In response, they reinvent themselves variously through their subversions of the cultural codes, or “play” themselves in the Derridean sense, that is, they defer their lives’ meaning indefinitely.²³

Debutantism was regulated by strict rules even in the South of the Great Depression: one such rule was that “a girl could be presented simultaneously in two cities but could not come out in different cities in successive years” (17). It was due to this silly rule that they were prevented from finding romance in Memphis: they had already come out the year before in Nashville. Along with the hard times in Memphis, now that they were not ladies in the traditional sense, they turned out to be “the wildest things that ever got inside the Memphis Junior League” (61). No longer being “the gentle, lady-

like, submissive Southern girls" (62) that they were in Nashville, they entered the real estate business over their father's protests and masculinized their behaviors just as teenage girls often do out of their defiance. In their father's eyes the business was "Memphis vulgarity" (62), just as Memphis was "a place that had simply been laid out and sold off like any other town" (24). The houses which the daughters' each owned and lived in were tokens of their independence from their father (or their secret defiance of him). As for their attire, "they dressed more like young girls than like their married contemporaries" (68), "the grotesquery" (70) or "the awful incongruity" (70) of which the narrator acknowledges. Occasionally they played with the idea of marrying within earshot of their parents. The narrator refers to "their incredibly girlish talk, at the age fifty and more, about the possibility of marriage for them" (64) in a tone which could be read as echoing the consternation that the father might have felt. Through the eyes of the narrator at the final stage of narration, their lives are reflected in the following way:

They were still, while actually in their mid-fifties, two little teen-aged girls dressed up and playing roles. It was their way of not facing or accepting of their adult life. They could not forget old injuries. They wished to keep them alive. They were frozen forever in their roles as injured adolescents. (162-63)

But what the narrator characterizes as immaturity is for them better described as displacedness. Through a whim of their father's, they have been arrested and relocated in a position where they can not realize their womanhood. They are left to play out a "charade" (67) for the benefit of some silent other residing within themselves. For lack of a place where they can express their own unspoken desire, playing roles is only way left to live. They have no idea of how to live "their adult life." Instead, they produce representations of what that life should have been. Translating the narrator's euphemistic "old injuries" and "their roles as injured adolescents," we know the former

as "the wrongs done to them by the 'Father'" and the latter as "their vengeance on their father for condemning them to unmarriedness." And with the demise of their father, their vengeance comes to end:

And my sisters are still occupying my father's house, like two spinsters in the last century, with the family servants still there to look after them. Though they have written me several times that they think of moving back into one of their own houses at midtown and even returning to their real estate business, I am confident that they never will. The old charade would no longer have its significance, and they seem to have nothing else to live for. (232)

They were injured under the constraints of the text of the "Father." And so they tried to make their own text (or their own narrative) through taking vengeance on him. But did they ever succeed in liberating themselves from the influence of the "Father" as a cultural representation after all? In the end their lives were circumscribed by their father and their attempts at vengeance were a mere reaction to a reality delimited by their father. The narrator seems to chide them for losing themselves in the charade they play, and for ultimately resigning themselves to the destiny of "occupying my father's house."

As read after the censorship of their brother, the narrative of the two women, whether it be the one that was always already written for them or a product of their own attempts, only came to existence through the principle of the "Father." Recalling Faulkner's Emily, we remember that the secret life she made for herself was based in the recreation of a father whom she never believed dead. The material facts of the sisters' life (as depicted in the quotation above) are also strongly similar to those of Faulkner's Emily. Like her, the spinsters live in their father's house after his death, with the family servants. In both cases, and in social and material fact, the female characters are displaced within the text of traditional family and gender role in the enduring Southern tradition. The position of counterpart to any

role that might have fulfilled their desires was always already filled by an omnipresent "Father." That is why they were unmarried.

Notes

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1. Charles Reagan Wilson & William Ferris, eds., *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 1104.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1107.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 1528

4. *Ibid.*, p. 1528

5. *Ibid.*, p. 1528.

6. William Faulkner, *The Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 123.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

8. Minrose C. Gwin, "(Re) Reading Faulkner as Father and Daughter of His Own Text," in *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy*, eds., Patrician Yaeger & Beth Kowaleski-Wallace (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), p. 238.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

10. Faulkner, p. 124.

11. Faulkner, p. 125.

12. Faulkner, p. 123.

13. Faulkner, p. 130.

14. Faulkner, p. 124.

15. Faulkner, p. 126.

16. Faulkner, p. 127.

17. See the remark of Peter Taylor himself:

McAlexander: I want to ask you about a pattern that I see in several stories. Do you think that Aunt Munsine in "What You Hear From 'Em," and the grandfather in "In the Miro District," and Miss Leonora all meet similar fates and for the same reasons?

Taylor: They are all defeated by their cultures. Their culture have changed and the change has denied them their old roles. They are defeated and forced to take the only roles available to them. Miss Leonora has been rejected. The old spinster is no longer appreciated as the vessel that transmits the values

of education, of civilization—there were so many old ladies in the South like that at one time. She is heroic up to a point; remember that she gives the little black boy the book. But she is finally displaced. [Hubert H. McAlexander, ed., *Conversation with Peter Taylor* (Jackson & London: University Press of Mississippi, 1987) p. 125–26.]

18. As to “organic” society, see Joel Williamson, *A Rage for Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) p. 17. His explanation goes as follows: “The movement to reform the late Old South into an ideal, unitary order of masters and slaves, whites and blacks, was a drive to achieve what might be called an “organic” society. In that order there would be various parts in the social body, and every part would have its place and function. In that society everyone would have a role to play. To use the image that prevailed in late-medieval Western civilization, the head would not want to be the heart, and the hand would not pine to be the head. Rather each would function contentedly in its place accordingly to its nature. In the organic society, people would know their own places and functions and those of others around them.”

19. David M. Robinson, “Summons from the Past” in *Critical Essays on Peter Taylor*, Hubert H. McAlexander, ed. (New York: G. K. Hall & Co, 1993), p. 55.

20. Peter Taylor, *A Summons to Memphis* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), p. 6. The following quotation from this edition is indicated by the number within a bracket.

21. Robinson, p. 56.

22. Gail L. Mortimer, *Faulkner's Rhetoric of Loss: A Study in Perception and Meaning* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), p. 73.

23. Gwin, p. 246.