

## **The Old Peace of *Absalom, Absalom!* Interwar Faulkner and the Tradition of Nonviolence**

**Abstract:** This article reads the rhetoric of peace in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), paying closer attention to how Faulkner's configuration of peace reflects the historical moment of nonviolence and civil rights in 1930s America. In the novel, I argue, peace is represented as a passive, abstract, and private or purely psychic state intractably bound to war and violence, and this flawed understanding of peace, which I refer to as "interwar peace," drives the suffering, injustice, and tragedy in *Absalom, Absalom!*. This reading of Faulkner's critique of peace locates the literary monolith's novel and complex anti-war politics firmly within the tradition of nonviolence and advances the important critical work by Paul Saint-Amour and other contemporary scholars on "interwar modernism" and "total war."

**Keywords:** peace, pacifism, nonviolence, war, interwar modernism, civil rights, *Absalom, Absalom!*, William Faulkner

### **Introduction**

William Faulkner's life was shaped by war. He lived through World War I and World War II, and despite being born thirty years after President Andrew Johnson signed Proclamation 157, "Declaring that Peace, Order, Tranquility and Civil Authority Now Exists in and Throughout the Whole of the United States of America," the Southerner wrote about the uniquely American Civil War across his most renowned works and was, in the words of Lionel Trilling, "at the heart of [that] exigent historical event."<sup>1</sup> Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1950, an occasion he used to address the state of humanity in the wake of atomic warfare. In his acceptance speech, America's great novelist laid bare the question that had come to define humankind: "When will I be blown up?"<sup>2</sup> Twelve years later, as Faulkner lay dying, the United States was once again preparing for war, this time in Vietnam, a conflict which would lack the manichean frames of reference shaping America's collective memory of the First and Second World Wars. That war would come to epitomize Jason Compson Sr.'s advice to his son Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929): "[N]o battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools."<sup>3</sup>

Faulkner created a body of work that, among many things, labors to subvert the conditions and illusions that support war and, in turn, underwrite the modern individual's terrorised state. And while scholars have attended to this labor for decades, there is little critical consensus over Faulkner's views on war and pacifism. The writer, like many of his fellow modernists, had a complicated relationship with

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Johnson, "Proclamation 157," *The American Presidency Project* (2012); Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008), 298.

<sup>2</sup> William Faulkner, "William Faulkner's Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech," *Southern Cultures* 12.1 (Spring 2006), 71.

<sup>3</sup> William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 48.

pacifism that reflects the socio-political climate between the First and Second World Wars and his personal history. In 1918, Faulkner made a rather ignominious attempt to join the fight against the Central Powers. The twenty-year-old joined the Royal Air Force in Canada after his beloved high school sweetheart, Estelle, married another man. He never saw combat, but Faulkner's youthful bellicosity found its way into his interwar fiction, ironically and critically, through naive Southern characters who enthusiastically participated in the Civil War and First World War. This shifting attitude toward war also reflects Faulkner larger context, for by the 1930s, pacifism had gained significant ground on the left. However, Hitler's programme of remilitarization led many of the American writer's British contemporaries to question their campaigns for peace and disarmament. At the Labour Party Conference in 1935, the party leader, George Lansbury, decided to support rearmament despite his self-professed commitment to Christian pacifism.<sup>4</sup> Virginia and Leonard Woolf were in attendance at the conference, and like England's pacifist-leaning literati, the couple was divided on the decision. Virginia reflected on the conference in her diary, writing that her "sympathies" were with "non-resistance," and through figures like Antigone and mediums like her political pamphlets, she worked to advance a precedent for resisting perpetual warfare, culminating in her pacifist manifesto *Three Guineas* (1938).<sup>5</sup> Leonard, on the other hand, who was closely involved in the Labour Party's foreign policy, felt that rearming against Hitler was an urgent necessity, especially since just days prior to the conference the League of Nations had failed to prevent Mussolini from invading Abyssinia.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, in India, the country Britain considered its most important colonial possession, Mohandas Gandhi was challenging the very premise of this political debate. Gandhi's ideas of violence, conflict, peace, and nonviolence—the foundations of India's ongoing civil disobedience movement, which commenced with the historic Salt March in 1930—redefined the terms of war and pacifism. For the Indian independence leader and his people, peace narrowly defined as the absence of war was not sufficient. For one, British military doctrine consigned "state violence against colonial, mandate, and protectorate populations to the unlegislated status of 'low-intensity conflict,'" which denied the Indian people the legal right to classify the actions of the British imperial nation-state as acts of war.<sup>7</sup> Gandhi drew from a range of Indian philosophies, the Western tradition of civil disobedience, and Hinduism to develop a form of pacifism that he believed could liberate the Indian people from the systemic violence of

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<sup>4</sup> Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (New York: Harcourt, 2005), 314-5.

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume 5*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), 345.

<sup>6</sup> Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, 315.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), 53.

colonialism: nonviolent resistance. “A non-violent revolution is not a seizure of power,” Gandhi counselled, “It is a program of transformation of relations, ending in a peaceful transfer of power.”<sup>8</sup>

In light of the conditions that gave rise to Gandhi’s thinking and the Indian movement, it makes sense that this reframing of peace was echoed in interwar America where many African American “citizens” returned from the trenches of World World I to live in “peacetime” under the systemic violence of Jim Crow. The idea of pacifism tied to Quaker religious tradition evolved throughout the 1930s into “a legible political philosophy of nonviolence” with tremendous appeal to civil rights activists.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, scholars have shown the organized resistance to US racism in the interwar years “linked American activists to their anticolonial counterparts in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean,” with the most direct evidence of this link being the “Pilgrimage of Friendship,” the trip four African Americans took to India, Ceylon, and Burma in September of 1935.<sup>10</sup> This delegation as well as other Black religious intellectuals took pilgrimages to India throughout the 1930s and “transmitted the ideas they encountered in India to large Black audiences on their return to the United States.” Sudarshan Kapur and Anthony Siracusa argue that these interwar exchanges are key yet overlooked precursors to the “Gandhian Moment” of 1941 as well as the civil right movement in the 1950s and ‘60s famously led by Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>11</sup> More broadly, the racial violence, segregation, and inequality that dominated the United States during these years posed a serious contradiction to the nation’s official narrative, which insisted that following the Great War, Americans were living in “peacetime.”

This tension found its way into Faulkner’s interwar novels, as I explore in my reading of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), but the writer’s most cogent statement on pacifism did not come until almost two decades later. Perhaps fearful that his self-professed masterpiece *A Fable* (1954) would be misunderstood or wanting to set the terms of his literary legacy as he neared the end of his life, Faulkner wrote a preface for *A Fable* that describes the novel’s relationship to pacifism as well as the road to putting “an end to war”:

This is not a pacifist book. On the contrary, this writer holds almost as short a brief for pacifism as for war itself, for the reason that pacifism does not work, cannot cope with the forces that produce the wars ... To put an end to war, man must either find or invent something more powerful than war and man's aptitude for belligerence and his thirst for power at any cost ... Man may finally have to mobilize himself and arm himself with the implements of war to put an end to war; that the mistake we have consistently made is setting nation against nation or political

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<sup>8</sup> Mohandas Gandhi, *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts*, ed. Thomas Mertin (New York: New Directions, 2007), 40.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony C. Siracusa, “From Pacifism to Resistance: The Evolution of Nonviolence in Wartime America,” *Journal of Civil and Human Rights* 3.1 (Spring/Summer 2017), 57-77, 57.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 59; Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising Up a Prophet: The African-American Encounter with Gandhi* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 81-83.

ideology against ideology to stop war; that the men who do not want war may have to arm themselves as for war, and defeat by the methods of war the alliances of power which hold to the obsolete belief in the validity of war.<sup>12</sup>

Before Faulkner concedes that achieving peace may finally demand a war on war, he articulates an anti-war position that is remarkably congruent with the philosophy and practice of nonviolence championed by Gandhi as well as the thinkers and activists who preceded and succeeded Gandhi, such as King, Leo Tolstoy, and Henry David Thoreau. Faulkner contends that the wars of his age—“setting nation against nation or political ideology against political ideology”—cannot beget peace, but he also rejects the kind of passive, simple, and private pacifism associated with religious piety, isolationist tendencies, individual non-resistance, and blind idealism. Faulkner argues that achieving peace requires action, creativity, and political engagement. Moreover, it demands that humankind finds or invents something more powerful than the intoxicating forces of war as well as our natural “aptitude” for violence. The passage parallels Gandhi’s insistence that nonviolence is the “mightiest force in the world,” “the only thing the atom bomb cannot destroy.”<sup>13</sup> For Gandhi and other leading thinkers and activists of nonviolence and civil disobedience, the road to peace and justice is necessarily built upon inventive and collective political action. Additionally, as Gandhi and his collaborators Mahadev Desai and Pyarelal put into writing in *Non-Violence in Peace and War* (1942), nonviolence, a spiritual and political practice, is based on the practitioner’s commitment to exploring the truth of each man’s experience (*satya*), enduring suffering and violence (*tapasya*), and transforming one’s opponent through compassion (*ahimsa*).<sup>14</sup> The latter speaks to an investment in creating understanding, in helping one’s opponent see the validity of nonviolence and harness their aptitude for love, as opposed to the goal of defeating or humiliating an “enemy.”

Faulkner, more so than modernists across the Atlantic who were geographically distant from the people living under British colonial rule, was positioned to think and write about the problem of war as a problem of peace in a way that resonated with Gandhi and King’s ideas of nonviolence. For many reasons, though, it would be unfair and wrong to align his vision too closely with those of the Indian and African American leaders, as well as the history of anticolonial resistance and civil rights.<sup>15</sup> In turn, it is

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<sup>12</sup> William Faulkner, *Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters*, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), 270.

<sup>13</sup> Mahadev Desai, Mahatma Gandhi, and Pyarelal, *Non-Violence in Peace and War, Volume 1* (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Publishing House, 1942), 167; Interview with Gandhi, *Harijan* 85 (Sept 1946), 370-1.

<sup>14</sup> Desai, *Non-Violence*.

<sup>15</sup> For readings of the problematic representation and/or politics of race in Faulkner’s fiction, see Arthur F. Kinney, “Faulkner and Racism,” *Connotations* 3.3 (1993/4), 265-78; Pamela Knights, “Faulkner’s Racism: A Response to Arthur F. Kinney,” *Connotations* 4.3 (1994/5), 283-99; Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003); *Faulkner and Race*, ed. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987).

imperative that any understanding of Faulkner's contributions to nonviolence emphasizes the role of his socio-political context in generating these resonances. In other words, the contradictions inherent to a "reconstructed" and "democratic" Jim Crow America, the world in which Faulkner lived and set his novels, is largely responsible for the critique of peace that emerges in his fiction.

*A Fable* has been rightly read within the anti-war and even nonviolent tradition, in no small part because it is a novel about a soldier in WWI published after the atomic bomb led Faulkner to articulate war as *the* modern dilemma.<sup>16</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that *Absalom Absalom!* (1936) has not received the same consideration. Written before the unique horrors of WWII and inhabited by a cast of characters struggling with their relationship to their Southern home and history, *Absalom* is widely understood as the story of the modern Southerner, perhaps Faulkner himself, according to Lionel Trilling, who is "deeply implicated in the pieties of his tradition" and inescapably aware of "the inadequacy and wrongness of the very tradition he loves."<sup>17</sup> Leading Faulkner scholar David Madden similarly identifies the struggle between Southerners and the history of the South, specifically the legacy of slavery, racism, and the Civil War, as the heart of *Absalom*: "Both the South and Quentin are transfixed between the nightmare of the past and its legacy in the present."<sup>18</sup> Such readings of the novel's driving conflict, I'll show, are flawed and speak to why critics have overlooked *Absalom*'s meaningful ties to Faulkner's interwar context and its contribution to the intellectual and cultural history of nonviolence. The South and Quentin are not merely transfixed by the "nightmare" of their history or "frozen into temporal immobility from their own incantations of the past," they are transfixed by their incantations of peace and the way this vision conditions their present.<sup>19</sup>

Faulkner draws from his brilliant literary arsenal to espouse a definition of peace that counters the principles of nonviolence. The characters who narrate the story of Thomas Sutpen to the young Quentin Compson represent peace as a passive, abstract, and private or purely psychic state intractably bound to war and violence. It is this flawed understanding of peace, which I will refer to as "interwar peace," no less than the realities of war and violence that drives the suffering, injustice, and tragedy in *Absalom*. The characters cannot subvert the violence, belligerence, and oppressive power embodied by

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<sup>16</sup> On the anti-war politics of *A Fable*, see Giorgio Mariani, *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Frank Turaj, "The Dialectic in Faulkner's *A Fable*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 8.1 (Spring 1966), 93-102; Joseph R. Urgo, "'There Is Evil in the World and I'm Going to Do Something About It': William Faulkner as Political Resource," *What Democracy Looks Like: A New Critical Realism for a Post-Seattle World*, eds. Amy Schrager Lang, Cecelia Tichi (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 105-114.

<sup>17</sup> Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, 298.

<sup>18</sup> David Madden, "Quentin, Listen!," *Faulkner and War* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 106.

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Tobin, "The Time of Myth and History in *Absalom, Absalom!*," *American Literature* 45.2 (May 1973), 252-270, 253.

Thomas Sutpen because they cannot conceive and actualize a peace that is more powerful than these forces. What's more, Yoknapatawpha County's interwar peace, rooted in the fantasy of a peaceful pre-war South, perpetuates warfare, for it is based on the false dichotomy of "passive peace" and "active violence" and, likewise, sustained against and through the rhetoric and phenomenon of martial violence.

Finally, as I take up in the conclusion, this reading of the novel's rhetoric of peace expands Paul Saint-Amour's important contributions to modernist and war studies in *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (2015). Saint-Amour reads interwar modernists as precisely that, "interwar" writers deeply in touch with how the false "peacetime" of the 1920s and 1930s set the stage for the Second World War. According to Saint-Amour, "in the immediate wake of the First World War, the dread of another massive conflict saturated the Anglo-European imagination, amounting to a proleptic mass traumatization, a *pre-traumatic stress syndrome* whose symptoms arose in response to a potentially oncoming rather than an already realized catastrophe."<sup>20</sup> Saint-Amour is primarily concerned with how British "encyclopedic fictions" of the twenties and thirties, such as *Ulysses* (1922) and *The Years* (1937), register and resist this anticipatory syndrome, and he illuminates how his syndrome, which leaves nothing and no one exempt from state conflict, works hand in glove with the problem of perpetual state-sponsored violence in the absence of officially declared war (e.g. Britain's colonial campaigns in Africa and Asia) a phenomenon he calls "total war." The reading that follows begins to bring Faulkner and interwar America to bear on Saint-Amour's coterie of British thinkers and writers, for as I argue, Faulkner illuminates the phenomenon and apocalyptic stakes of being "interwar"—of being the anxious subject of a future overdetermined by violence and warfare—through *Absalom's* rhetoric of peace and, in turn, calls for an alternative to the interwar peace that both dominated and came under question in 1930s America.

### **Rosa's Aestheticized Peace**

At the outset of *Absalom*, readers are introduced to two of the novel's foremost dimensions. First, it is the story of Thomas Sutpen, an ostensible stock character of Antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction narratives. Second, it is the story of its very medium: the act of narrating, remembering, and constructing and reconstructing history as well as the stakes of this process for individuals and society. The novel opens in September of 1909. The aging and scorned Rosa Coldfield calls the soon-to-be Harvard student Quentin Compson to her deteriorating home outside Jefferson, Mississippi. She implores the boy to listen to her account of the mythical Thomas Sutpen and then "write this and submit it to the magazines."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Saint-Amour, *Tense Future*, 7-8.

<sup>21</sup> Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 5.

Quentin, born in the postbellum South, is weary of his ties to Miss Rosa—Quentin asks and relentlessly implies, *Why me?*—and wisely suspects that she has graver motivations than simply setting the record straight. But Rosa’s vague and nonlinear narration leaves the boy unsure of the story, its point, and his relationship to it. This opacity and the premise of a story within a story calls attention to the high-stakes and self-conscious nature of Rosa’s narration and, in turn, that of *Absalom*. Crucially, the notion of peace is part and parcel of this reflexive, meta-narrative endeavor from the opening pages. As Rosa begins her account and Quentin listens to her haunted “not ceasing but vanishing” voice, Faulkner’s omniscient third-person narrator conjures and conveys Sutpen’s demonic disruption of “a scene peaceful and decorous.”<sup>22</sup>

Out of a quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize watercolor, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him, his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men [. . .] Then in long unmaze Quentin seemed to watch them overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing.<sup>23</sup>

Here, peace and violence each take on a particular and unified aesthetic model. Violence is associated with one man, Sutpen, and with some of the oldest artistic forms, myths and fables of biblical proportion. Peace, on the other hand, is identified as a vague and sweeping time and place, Yoknapatawpha County before Sutpen’s arrival, and this state of peace is compared to “a schoolprize watercolor,” a form of art that could hardly be farther from the pantheon of great stories. “Peace” is not a revered oil painting or wildly original fresco. Rather, it is a childish, naive, and culturally inconsequential form. By juxtaposing the image of a seemingly artless and elementary landscape portrait with the mythological rendering of Sutpen’s grand and demonic descent, Faulkner gives readers our first glimpse into how the inhabitants of *Absalom*’s South envision peace: while violence is associated with power, complexity, and a historically significant cultural form, peace is a weak, simple and derivative medium.

The nineteen-year-old Quentin imagines the assault on the innocent watercolor that was once Jefferson as beginning with a sensory assault: the smell of Sutpen’s “sulfur-reek[ing]” hair. This visceral power resonates with the tradition of fables and myths as oral story forms, as embodied performances, and crucially, it has no corollary in the world of minor watercolor paintings. The contrast, in other words, positions Sutpen’s violence and its rich dimensions as unmatched by the “peaceful” old Jefferson. The visceral assault is followed by the presence of an invading mass, described with all the clichéd trappings of the savage other: men who are black, bestial, part and parcel of an indistinct throng, and so

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 4.

forth. As Sutpen and his profoundly othered beast-men overrun the land, the earth is personified as “tranquil and astonished.” As with a “schoolprize watercolor,” the language emphasizes passivity and weakness. The “tranquil” earth is simply “astonished” by the descending terror, presenting peace as a state governed by ambivalence and passive acceptance rather than affects as powerful and meaningful as those propelling Sutpen’s violence.

The passage culminates in “the soundless Nothing.” The metaphor of Sutpen performing the impossible task of violently dragging homes and gardens out of a “soundless Nothing”—of bringing the antebellum Mississippi community from immateriality, nonbeing, and absence into materiality, being, and presence—goes a step further than conceiving of peace as a lesser form than violence. It defines peace as the mere absence of violence rather than the presence of something, of sound, of meaning, of life. This rhetorical negation of peace—peace defined as ‘not violence’ and, by extension, something outside of language and experience—is one expression of how Rosa’s vision of peace is not a socially or rhetorically viable construct, whereas violence is a totalizing social and rhetorical phenomenon.

The modern tradition of nonviolence is deeply invested in undoing the negative definition of peace. Gandhi was careful to distinguish between violence and conflict and put action at the center of nonviolence: “The first condition of non-violence is justice all around in every department of life,” and thus, “A soldier of peace, unlike the one of the sword, has to give all his spare time the promotion of peace alike in war times as in peace times.”<sup>24</sup> Echoing the Indian thinker’s understanding, Martin Luther King, Jr. consistently used the term “nonviolent direct action” to counteract the association between nonviolence and passive resistance, an imperative that led him to one of his most trenchant critiques of white Americans. “The Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom,” King wrote from Birmingham Jail in 1963, “is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice”<sup>25</sup> This line of reframing peace helps tease out the question, why does Faulkner’s Rosa initially represent the peaceful old Yoknapatawpha County through the picturesque and, further, as the mere absence of violence? David Spurr argues in *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1993), “When the picturesque and the melodramatic are given prominence, they displace the historical dimension, isolating the story as story from relations of political and economic power.”<sup>26</sup> By assigning the peaceful past an overdetermined aesthetic quality, the picturesque, Rosa divorces the past from its political and economic realities. Rosa’s aestheticization and ultimate negation of peace obscures

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<sup>24</sup> Gandhi, *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, 70, 82.

<sup>25</sup> Michael C. Leff and Ebony A. Utley. “Instrumental and Constitutive Rhetoric in Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7. 1 (2004): 37-51.

<sup>26</sup> David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire* (London: Duke University Press, 1993), 48.



her own relationship to the Hundred Acres political and economic history, namely her status as a member of the Southern aristocracy during chattel slavery. Put different, this early rhetoric of peace emphasizes the relationship between storying Jefferson's "old peace" and Rosa's self-interest and self-image (and ultimately Quentin's) rather than the socio-economic dimensions of this "old peace" and its recourse to the lives of all antebellum Southerners.

Miss Rosa's retelling of Jefferson's history as the story of the violent victimization of the "soundless Nothing" also allows her to express her Puritanical, God-fearing beliefs and fulfill her role as innocent victim, the "crucified child," a role she configures and reinforces throughout the novel.<sup>27</sup> Importantly, Rosa is consumed by Sutpen's grotesque and dark power. She becomes, according to Quentin's grandfather, "the chief disciple and advocate of that cult of the demon-harrying of which he was the chief object."<sup>28</sup> The Compson patriarch's claim that Sutpen is "the chief object" in Rosa's "cult" presents her position of innocence as not only built in opposition to Sutpen's evil but solely defined by this evil, this "object." Likewise, after Quentin introduces the Sutpen story to Shreve, his Harvard roommate from Canadian who goes on to become an army captain in WWI, the young man classifies Rosa as an "old dame that grew up in a household like an overpopulated mausoleum" occupying her time with the "hating of her father and aunt and her sister's husband in peace and comfort and waiting for the day when they would prove . . . that she had been right."<sup>29</sup> Shreve's demeaning synopsis of Miss Rosa's worldview as well as his ironic and flippant summation that she lived in "peace and comfort" deepens the critique of interwar peace. From Shreve's perspective, Rosa's "mausoleum," her cultish preoccupation with her rightness and Sutpen's wrongness, is a primary adjunct to Sutpen's design, and yet, to his mind, this state constitutes "peace."<sup>30</sup>

The rhetoric of peace tied to Rosa dramatizes the problem of interwar peace in the United States and reflects a driving concerns across a spectrum of activism associated with pacifism in the 1930s. The belief that Armistice between the Allies and Germany was sufficient grounds for a peacetime society as well as versions of pacifism resembling Rosa's "demon-harrying"—weak, isolated, and cultish derivatives of religious life, narrowly preoccupied with the evil of war—were central points of contention for thinkers and activist following the First World War. In the spring of 1937, for instance, the National

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<sup>27</sup> Faulkner, *Absalom*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>30</sup> Shreve's point of view reflects, perhaps, the most direct link between Rosa's worldview and the perpetuation of violence and war. Initially, Rosa is a passionate proponent of the Civil War, glorifying the the fight in the verse she writes in the obscurity of her father's house early in the conflict. This hawkish celebration, in other words, is an an extravagant, private fantasy fueled by her naïvety, for Rosa has never fully experienced war or peace.

Intercollegiate Christian Council and United Student Peace Committee called for members to join a fasting strike “to keep America out of war” as well as protest compulsory military training, the nation’s war budget, and “all infringements of civil rights and academic freedom,” with approximately 1,000,000 students on campuses across the country participating in the day-long strike alone.<sup>31</sup> Simultaneously, A. J. Muste, a Dutch-born American minister and labor activist committed to the problem of officially declared war as well as more diffuse forms of state-sanctioned violence, was thinking about a way “forward from pacifism.”<sup>32</sup> He came to embrace “sit-down” and “lie down” tactics, actions adopted by the Akron Rubber Plant strikers in February 1936 and used in more than five hundred labor conflicts across the United States by the end of 1938.<sup>33</sup> A. Philip Randolph, “truly the Dean of Negro leaders,” according to Martin Luther King, Jr., was likewise determined to release pacifism from its status as a cultish preoccupation with warfare and bring it into the social world of “doing” in the form of nonviolent direct action.<sup>34</sup> Randolph, who in 1925 founded the first labor union led by African Americans (Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters) and became one of the most visible spokespeople for African American civil rights prior to WWII, sought to redefine those conceptions of peace that, like Rosa Coldfield’s, lacked a foundation in praxis, action, and the conditions of daily public and private life. Randolph’s chief collaborator in the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), Bayard Rustin, articulated this position in a lecture responding to the 1943 race riots in Detroit and Harlem:

The discipline of non-violence cannot be talked about, it can be learned only by doing. Nonviolence believes in action. It says that the question of whether you will act or not act is academic. You will act in certain situations because you are forced to act when confronted with social issues . . . [I]n the past non-violence has been too close to non-resistance with its fear of action. Now the element of resistance in nonviolence is daring to come to the fore, with its challenges to action.<sup>35</sup>

These distinct movements are unified by their sense that a view holding peace to be passive or private non-resistance was wildly insufficient for the problems facing Americans in the 1930s. Moreover, they speak to how the theory and practice of nonviolence developed throughout this period as a response to forms of violence that exceeded war, the traditional object of pacifism. In short, this lesser known history

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<sup>31</sup> Eunice Bernard, “In the Classroom and on the Campus: Student Fast on April 22 Is to be Feature of Annual Protest Against War,” *New York Times* 4 April 1937, 50. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>32</sup> Siracusa, “From Pacifism to Resistance,” 62.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “To A. Philip Randolph,” *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Symbol of the Movement, January 1957-December 1958*, eds. Clayborne Carson, Susan Carson, Adrienne Clay, Virginia Shardron, and Kieran Yalors. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University. Accessed 1 Feb. 2019 at <http://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/philip-randolph-6>.

<sup>35</sup> Siracusa, “From Pacifism to Resistance,” 68.

of interwar America illuminates the connection between *Absalom's* rhetoric of peace and the tensions that animated activism in the time and country in which Faulkner was writing and living.

### Charles Bon's Peace of Mind

Charles Bon's letter to Judith similarly defines peace as a passive and abstract state characterized by absence, nothingness, and emptiness. However, unlike Rosa's use of negation and aestheticization, Charles' primary rhetorical mode is stream of consciousness. Bon is Sutpen's Achilles heel, his mixed-race son from his first marriage to a Haitian woman, the manifestation of his "tragic error." Bon becomes close friends with Henry, Sutpen's known son and heir, while attending the University of Mississippi. In 1859, he accompanies Henry on a trip home to Sutpen's Hundred where he meets Henry's sister Judith who, unbeknownst to all but Sutpen, is also Bon's sister. During the visit, Charles and Judith fall in love, and talk of a future engagement ensues, but as Bon's true origins are unearthed and Sutpen forbids the union, the Civil War breaks out. Bon and Judith are separated, and Sutpen and his sons depart for the war front. Four years into the conflict, Bon writes Judith and cryptically declares, "We have waited long enough" and "are doomed to live," to which she responds by making a wedding dress.

*I cannot say when to expect me. Because what WAS is one thing, and now it is not because it is dead, it died in 1861, and therefore what IS — (There. They have started fighting again. Which — to mention it — is redundancy too, like the breathing or the need of ammunition. Because sometimes I think it has never stopped ... To become once more for a period without boundaries or location in time, mindless and irrational companion and inmate of a body which, even after four years, with a sort of dismal and incorruptible fidelity which is incredibly admirable to me, is still immersed and obviously bemused in recollections of old peace and contentment the very names of those scents and sounds I do not know that I remember, which ignores even the presence and threat of a torn leg.<sup>36</sup>*

Bon's simultaneously lyrical and rhetorically dense letter describes the conditions of war, conditions that presumably prevent him from returning and marrying Judith, but it also offers a distinct concept of peace. Charles longs for the "old peace," "a period without boundaries or location in time." For Charles, peace is a dream-like state in which time and space disintegrate and the material conditions that characterize his service in the Civil War—the threat of physical injury, the passage of time, geographical distance, and so on—are wholly absent. Unlike the war, which, Charles notes, began in 1861 and has been going on for four years when he writes the letter, peace is associated with a sweeping period known as the past. Moreover, the passage is punctuated with rhetorical digressions that question and contradict any stable or positive definition of peace. After Charles authoritatively contrasts what "WAS" and what "IS," his sense of clarity and mastery as well as strict pre- and post-1861 periodization shifts. He writes, referring to the "fighting," "Because sometimes I think it has never stopped." Likewise, he confesses that he is immersed

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<sup>36</sup> Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 104.

in “recollections of old peace,” yet these recollections bemuse Charles, and he questions whether he even remembers the “names of those sights and sounds” that constitute the peace that “WAS.” The paradoxical digressions and negative logics tie the notion of peace to Charles’s consciousness. Charles narrates peace as a vision akin to a dream, memory, or fantasy that dissolves as quickly as it is conjured up.

Crucially, the “fatalist” Bon participates in his own demise. For Bon, peace, unlike the Civil War, is a baseless fabric that demands and allows him to retreat into the past as well as his mind. This psychic movement—and, more broadly, Bon’s way of narrating peace through the dynamic psychological processes of fantasy, memory, and repression—reflects his very literal movement within the plot. Bon ultimately reenacts the past. In a parallel to the episode when Sutpen himself was turned away from a plantation entrance as a boy, Bon is rejected at his father’s door, setting the mechanisms of his death into motion. In short, Bon’s experience of peace as a state of mind, an immaterial counterpart to his own consciousness, renders the young man’s desire to actualize peace in the present both impossible and fatal.

Like many of his fellow modernists, Faulkner was invested in exploring the psychology and inner life of man as well as their connection to the phenomenology of history. Critic Philip Castille shows how “Freudian thinking undoubtedly guided Faulkner’s efforts to organize a narrative of the inner life and represent its dynamic processes of consciousness, fantasy, memory, and repression,” and the ever-perceptive Hortense Spillers calls *Absalom* “a Freudian family drama.”<sup>37</sup> Freud’s influence on modernist literature, Paul Saint-Amour argues, is inseparable from the phenomenon of total war in the 1920s and 30s. Saint-Amour shows how British interwar modernists compel readers to “treat the term *interwar* phenomenologically—as the real-time experience of remembering a past war while awaiting and theorizing a future one.”<sup>38</sup> *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) is one expression of how “the real war and the rehearsal for war become psychotically indistinct” in post-war England, a setting that requires near-constant psychic labor from Woolf’s protagonist:<sup>39</sup>

Four-and-a-half years have elapsed since the war’s end, yet the credibility of the pronouncement that “The War was over” is nearly breached by the exceptions the narrator makes for those bereaved civilians whose grief recognizes no Armistice. Mediating Clarissa’s thoughts through free and indirect discourse, the narrator’s “but it was over; thank Heaven—over” asserts closure as an ongoing psychic performance rather than testifying to it as an accomplished historical fact.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Philip Dubuisson Castille, “Review: *Faulkner and Psychology*,” *South Central Review* 14.3/4 (1997), 118-121, 120; Hortense J. Spillers, “Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor,” *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 301-18, 306.

<sup>38</sup> Saint-Amour, *Tense Future*, 305.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

Clarissa Dalloway struggles to reconcile the officially declared peacetime of England in 1923 with her sense that war and the mechanisms of state violence have not ceased. Saint-Amour points to Clarissa's inability to distinguish between a frivolous skywriter used for post-war relief and a threatening warplane used for bombing—and her consequent anxiety—as one expression of the anticipatory syndrome experienced by a citizenry that recognized the future as a time “already lost to violence.”<sup>41</sup> Bon's letter entails a similarly dizzying psychic performance that leaves Bon feeling he is “*among those who are doomed to live.*”<sup>42</sup> Like Clarissa, Bon is unable to identify differences of time (wartime versus peacetime) and space (the war front versus the home front). But unlike Mrs. Dalloway whose psychic performance, according to Saint-Amour, is one symptom of repressed imperial violence in Europe, Charles Bon's peace of mind is inseparable from the history of repressed racial violence in America, a connection that helps interrogate the watercolor landscape that constitutes peace for Rosa and brings into relief Faulkner's attention to the profound racial dimensions of America's interwar peace.

The racially-charged context behind Bon's stream of consciousness illuminates the connection between Rosa's picturesque perception of the past and her evasion of the violent institution of slavery. Bon, whose personal journey from Haiti to New Orleans to Mississippi triangulates the history of New World enslavement, is a very literal product of this denial. Hortense Spillers shows that Sutpen's denial of French Bon, his son from the West Indies (who becomes black Jim *Bond*), allegorizes the repressed history of American slavery: “The scheme of history implied by Faulkner's fiction that the savage and dangerous denial of Charles Bon's paternity has precedent in the cultural institution of New World enslavement.”<sup>43</sup> Both Rosa and Bon imagine peace as a state without a plausible basis in the physical world or collective socio-political action, which leads to their spatio-temporal disorientation and stasis. However, Bon, “tainted” with “Negro blood,” cannot detach his war experience from the violence underpinning Rosa's picturesque and establish a boundary between life before and during the Civil War precisely because his own history has been silenced and made unknown. The racist culture, institutions, and laws that deny the mixed-race Bon a legible socio-cultural identity and lead Sutpen to deny his son's heritage force Bon to construct a past through the shadows of his private consciousness and the phantasmic history of New World enslavement, a narrative logic that grounds both Bon and Rosa's disorienting and ultimately fatal visions of peace in the repressed history of American chattel slavery.

### Mr. Compson and War's Other

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>42</sup> Faulkner, *Absalom*, 105.

<sup>43</sup> Spillers, “Notes on an Alternative,” 306.

*Absalom, Absalom!* is “famously split, redoubled, compounded and contradictory.”<sup>44</sup> From the plot to the prose, Faulkner persistently invokes binaries and yokes together antithetical elements. Critics have focused on how this technique is a key to Faulkner’s thinking on the monumental themes of race, gender, regional identity, and history in the American context. The focus on these themes has left one of *Absalom*’s most cogent couplings overlooked: passive peace and active violence.

In 1960, the year President Eisenhower announced an additional 3,500 American soldiers would be sent to Vietnam as “advisors,” Harvard literary scholar Harry Levin gave a lecture that became a touchstone in the developing field of modernist studies.<sup>45</sup> In “What Was Modernism?,” Levin observes that “a dialectic pattern of revolution and alternating reaction” characterizes both literary and socio-political movements. To illuminate the socio-political dimension of his claim, Levin points to the cycle of war and peace. “The depressive Thirties, which yielded in turn to the war-interrupted Forties,” according to Levin, reflects how each generation’s collective psyche and history are, like the periodic movement of a pendulum, a reaction against the prior generation’s.<sup>46</sup> Historic movements, therefore, are the “cyclic oscillation between tough and tender minds.”<sup>47</sup> Yoknapatawpha County’s vision of peace follows Levin’s idea of history as a contained pendulum of “revolution and alternating reaction” as well as the American critic’s problematic equivocation of violence, war, and revolutionary action.

Rosa views her peaceful sister Ellen’s marriage to the violent Sutpen—who, for Rosa, is indistinguishable from the Civil War and the South’s decline—as a totalizing exchange in which peace and violence are mutually exclusive and mutually dependent categories. “She lay dying in that house for which she exchanged pride and peace both.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Rosa testifies, “I saw what happened to Ellen, my sister ... I saw the notes of hand on pride and contentment and peace and all to which she had put her signature when she walked into the church that night, begin to fall due in succession.”<sup>49</sup> Importantly, Rosa is not the only character to subscribe to this casting. All the narrators frame Ellen and Sutpen’s bewildering marriage as the marriage of peace and violence, as if these states constitute an absolute unity and struggle. Moreover, within the narrative, Ellen is the vital medium through which Sutpen is able to enact his design. The marriage assures procreation and grants him a certain level of respectability and class status

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<sup>44</sup> Duncan McColl Chesney, “Shakespeare, Faulkner, and the Expression of the Tragic,” *College Literature* 36.3 (Summer 2009), 137-164, 146.

<sup>45</sup> Jerry Carrier, *A Long Cold War: A Chronology of American Life and Culture 1945 to 1991* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2018), 165.

<sup>46</sup> Harry Levin, “What Was Modernism?” *Varieties in Literary Experience: Eighteen Essays in World Literature*. Ed. Stanley Burnshaw (New York: New York University Press, 1962), 309.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>48</sup> Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 15.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

since Ellen's father is Jefferson's upright shopkeeper. Rhetorically, the coupling, like all the novel's most significant binaries, including master-slave, black-white, male-female, North-South, and past-present, is rooted in disavowal and negation rather than avowal and affirmation.

Quentin's father, Jason Compson III, similarly presents this passive peace and active violence binary while describing Thomas and Ellen's marriage to Quentin. As the father and son wait on their front porch at twilight, Mr. Compson translates the story he received from his father, General Compson, through his own point of view. Mr. Compson and the omniscient narrator repeatedly refer to Ellen as a "butterfly" moved by Sutpen's deadly force:

Ellen was dead two years now—the butterfly, the mouth caught in a gale and blown against a wall and clinging there beating feebly, not with any particular stubborn clinging to life, not in particular pain since it was too light to have struck hard, nor even with very much remembrance of the bright vacuum before the gale, but just in bewildered and uncomprehending amazement—the bright trivial shell not even to any great extent changed.<sup>50</sup>

The metaphor marks an important departure from Levin's pendulum. Here, the rhetoric of passive peace and active violence reflects not an endless cycle that multiplies and abounds in its view of history as a struggle between the opposing forces; rather, it implies the foreclosure of that struggle. Ellen is a "bright trivial shell," too feeble and unsubstantial to resist and survive Sutpen's amazing force. Her extreme passivity amounts to a literal and figurative death that renders her sister Rosa's own fate—telling and gravely narrated in the passive voice, "I became engaged to marry him"—an inevitable extension of Sutpen's persisting force rather than a reaction against it.<sup>51</sup>

Mr. Compson further represents the influence and identity of Sutpen by comparing two types of men. Rooted in the binary oppositions of passive and active, sick and healthy, innocent and corrupt, private and public, among others, his metaphor deepens the narrators' apocryphal conceptual framework:

Not like a man who had been peacefully ill in bed and had recovered to move with a sort of diffident and tentative amazement in a world which he had believed himself on the point of surrendering, but like a man who had been through some solitary furnace experience which was more than just fever, like an explorer say, who not only had to face the normal hardship of the pursuit which he chose but was overtaken by the added and unforeseen handicap of the fever also and fought through it at enormous cost not so much physical as mental, alone and unaided and not through blind instinctive will to endure and survive but to gain and keep to enjoy it the material prize for which he accepted the original gambit.<sup>52</sup>

By Mr. Compson's count, there are two kinds of men: a man who is "peacefully ill" and another who has been through a "furnace experience," "more than just a fever." The first man is confined to an idle

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-7.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

domestic space, a bed, while the other travels to unknown regions “like an explorer.” Similarly, the man who is peacefully ill is “diffident,” “tentative,” and capable of “surrendering.” He is a passive and ambivalent victim of his illness. On the contrary, the feverish explorer chooses to pursue a goal, fights through the hardship it entails, and not only endures but thrives, “to gain and keep to enjoy it.” He is a tenacious and resolute master of his fever. By describing Sutpen as both what he is (the feverish explorer) and what he is not (the peacefully ill), Mr. Compson defines what peace is and what it is not.

The head of the Compson household’s binary logic and rhetoric of physical weakness and domestic inertia reflect one of the novel’s unifying tropes, repeated ad nauseum by Questin’s range of historical sources. In other words, despite the famously convoluted, self-reflexive, and competing accounts offered by *Absalom*’s narrators, peace is perpetually aligned with indolence, passivity, silence, nothingness, and death—and all of these states find their counterpart in violence and war. Moreover, Faulkner puts the expression “monotonous” peace into the mouths of almost all his characters, including Quentin, our ally in interrogating the various narratives and the motivations behind them as well as the character whose “consciousness,” according to David Madden, “is at the center of Faulkner’s creative consciousness.”<sup>53</sup> Late in the novel, as the naive Quentin and Shreve set out to construct a logical, objective, and coherent account of the Sutpen legend, they adopt this rhetoric of interwar peace, describing a time before Sutpen as the “years of monotony and rich peace.”<sup>54</sup> By embracing the idea of peace as waiting, a lacking that practically begs to be filled by all that Sutpen embodies, Quentin and Shreve are implicated in the doomed fate of *Absalom*’s cast of southerners.

In short, the largely derivative and negative image of peace, rooted in the idea that Sutpen, violence, and the war are forces that revolt against and perhaps even cure Jefferson’s monotonous old peace, reinstates and affirms the vitality and hegemony of Sutpen’s violence. This problem, rooted in *Absalom*’s passive peace and active violence binary, is precisely why Gandhi distinguished between “non-violence of the weak”—the non-violence to those who are afraid to be violent and forceful—and “the active nonviolent resistance of the strong”—the brave behavior of those who have come to understand that “nonviolence is the mightiest force in the world.”<sup>55</sup> The American literary critic Werner Sollors has similarly implored his field to study positive “imaginings of ‘peace.’” Sollors’ contention that while “there may be no American Lysistrata, and American literature may not be concerned with peace as was the book of Psalms ... there is a tradition of American imaginings of ‘peace’ that could be profitably studied and taught” resonates with Gandhi’s concern that “peace” occupies a largely derivative and negative status

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<sup>53</sup> Madden, “Quentin, Listen!,” 102.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>55</sup> Gandhi, *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, 49-56.



and, in turn, needs to be disentangled from war.<sup>56</sup> Faulkner, through the rhetoric of peace and the dramatization of this rhetoric, presents the failure to embrace a discourse, concept, and socio-political practice of peace akin to Gandhian nonviolence and its manifestations in American intellectual and political life as one of the novel's great conflicts.

### **The Ironic Pacifism of Yoknapatawpha County**

Faulkner's critique of the characters' vision of peace is most evident when he employs irony. By satirizing and ironizing the old peace of Jefferson as well as the novel's explicit instances of pacifism, Faulkner represents interwar peace as a central mechanism for the perpetration of violence, injustice, and war. Mr. Compson comes the closest to denouncing the peace associated with Yoknapatawpha County prior to Sutpen's arrival. While recounting Miss Rosa's youth and eventual marriage to Thomas Sutpen in antebellum Mississippi, he tells Quentin "what a Southern lady is":

It is as though she were living on the actual blood itself, like a vampire, not with insatiability, certainly not with voracity, but with that serene and idle splendor of flowers abrogating to herself, because it fills her veins also, nourishment from the old blood that crossed uncharted seas and continents and battled wilderness hardships and lurking circumstances and fatalities, with tranquil disregard of whatever onerous cares to leisure and even peace which the preservation of it incurs upon what might be called the contemporary transmutable fountainhead who contrives to keep the crass foodbearing corpuscles sufficiently numerous and healthy in the stream.<sup>57</sup>

Unlike a "feverish explorer" and agent of action, as Mr. Compson imagines Sutpen, a Southern lady is neither voracious nor active. She lives, instead, by taking passive advantage of enslaved Africans ("the old blood that crossed uncharted seas and continents") who serve as the source of her nourishment and health. "Like a vampire," she gains life and "peace" by feeding on others, and she feels "tranquil disregard" for their suffering, the "onerous cares to leisure." The direct reference to slavery makes the passage an unmistakable signpost of the false peace that the characters both wrestle with and propagate. Moreover, the irony of one person's suffering begetting another person's peace as well as the evocation of the gothic horror genre represents the serenity experienced by Southern ladies and, by extension, the Southern aristocracy as a false serenity that is constantly threatened by its internal contradictions and necessary illusions.

Jason's vampire reference, like the novel's considerable evocation of American gothicism and ghost stories, invokes the theme of a repressed history or trauma—the return of a past or dead form

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<sup>56</sup> Werner Sollors, "Eager to Acquire Disks?": American Studies in War and Peace," *American Studies and Peace: Proceedings of the 25th Austrian Association of American Studies Conference*. ed. Dorothea Steiner and Thomas Hartl (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001), 34.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-7.

whose structural and social invisibly underwrites its perverse power. And Faulkner, bearing the marks of Jim Crow America, deepens the connection between this gothic theme and the context of antebellum slavery, race relations, *and* literature by drawing on Edgar Allan Poe in particular—from Poe’s “imagery of dark houses, spectacles of suffering, figures of alienation, and haunted histories” to the choric cry of his blackbird in “The Raven” (1845).<sup>58</sup> Between 1831, the year of Nat Turner’s Rebellion, and 1849, University of Virginia-educated Poe wrote the majority of his ghost stories. Those years also saw the horrifying height of the domestic slave trade, known as the second middle passage, as well as intensifying commitment among southern whites to the ideology of white supremacy, making it seemingly impossible to read Poe’s obsession with black and blackness, white and whiteness, and African characters separate from this context. However, well into the 1930s, Poe’s literary legacy was alienated from the history of slavery. “Poe has little to say about the darky,” concluded one American scholar, professor, and editor of Poe’s fiction in 1936.<sup>59</sup> Faulkner’s work helps correct this willful blindness toward race and interrogate the world that produces such blindness. His intertextuality, specifically the use of Poe throughout *Absalom* to narrate the different characters’ responses to forms of racial and socio-economic violence, implicates American intellectual and cultural life in producing the kind of deliberate ignorance that made it possible for the 1930s to be an officially-declared and legislated “peacetime” amid the segregated, hostile, and violent conditions of Jim Crow.

Irony and dark juxtapositions also characterize Mr. Compson’s retelling of the story of Charles Bon’s murder. “[A]nd then Wash Jones sitting on that saddleless mule before Miss Rosa’s gate, shouting her name into the sunny and peaceful quiet of the street, saying, ‘Air you Rosie Coldfield? Then you better come on out yon. Henry has done shot that durn French feller. Kilt him dead as a beef.’”<sup>60</sup> The scene’s pleasant setting, “the sunny and peaceful quiet of the street,” and playful, folk language, “French feller” and “dead as beef,” juxtapose the message’s gravely violent content: Henry has killed Charles. What causes Henry to murder Charles is one of the novel’s open mysteries, yet it is a mystery unmistakably tied to the humiliation their father suffered as a child as a result of the region’s defining socio-economic structures of slavery and aristocracy. Because he was born into a poor Scotch-Irish family, young Thomas Sutpen was

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<sup>58</sup> Susan V. Donaldson, “Literature,” *The South*, eds. Rebecca Mark & Robert C. Vaughan (London: Greenwood Press, 2004), 353.

<sup>59</sup> Killis Campbell, “Poe’s Treatment of the Negro and of Negro Dialect,” *Studies in English* 16 (1936), 106; Toni Morrison makes this intervention a centerpiece of her landmark work of literary criticism *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, arguing that “no early American writer is more important to the concept of African Americanism than Poe,” see Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 32.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

commanded to enter through the back door of a plantation manor, an experience that ignites his seemingly unstoppable contempt and tragic design.

By narrating this pivotal act of violence through the the voice of Wash Jones and the setting of “peaceful” day, Faulkner achieves an ironic tension that reveals the idea of a “peaceful” pre-war South to be an absurd illusion. Wash Jones’s ostensibly charming Southern dialect is, in fact, the product of his far from amusing plight as a poor and uneducated plantation hand, a background that leaves him essentially indentured to Sutpen’s Hundred. In short, the South never existed in a state of peace, for, as in this moment, the realities of vicious economic and racial inequality were ever-present, contained and concealed within even the seemingly innocent, peaceful facets of rural Mississippi culture and life.

Finally, literal pacifism undergoes the scrutiny of irony. Rosa’s father, Goodhue Coldfield, is the town’s well-regarded Puritan shopkeeper. He is also a pacifist: “But he was not a coward, even though his conscience may have objected, as your grandfather said, not so much to the idea of pouring out human blood and life, but at the idea of waste: of wearing out and eating up and shooting away material in any cause whatever.”<sup>61</sup> Mr. Coldfield nails himself away in his own attic and dies under the pretense of pacifism. However, his pacifism is not rooted in the desire to enact peace and make war obsolete. His death by suicide is the result of a principled aversion toward waste, the “wearing out and eating up and shooting away material,” and this disdain for wastefulness is in fact a profoundly dehumanizing attitude that reduces man to material. From the community’s point of view, he takes an honorable stance because he does not give the “enemy’s” satisfaction and comfort, a reverence that only heightens the irony of Mr. Coldfield’s pacifism. His “peaceful” response does nothing to stop Supten and, further, costs his own family great suffering—he leaves his youngest daughter alone, unprotected, and painfully convinced that “the only thing he cared about his reputation for probity among his fellow men.”<sup>62</sup> Just like Sutpen’s violence, then, Mr. Coldfield’s pacifism is rooted in vengeful pride rather than compassionate sacrifice, making his inaction and Sutpen’s action the primary difference between what the community mistakenly believes are opposing ideologies and practices.

There are two character, however, who present an exception to Goodhue Coldfield’s pacifism and the interwar peace that dominates *Absalom*: Clytie and Judith. The two survive in Sutpen's house for years while the Civil War rages by approximating Faulkner’s description in *A Fable* of peace as necessarily active, creative, and collaborative resistance to violence. Their daily struggle against privation and violence is described in exceptional detail as if their “inscrutable” and “serene” sisterhood was a hard-won

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 60.

separate peace.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, while the nation's men are destroying one another, Clytie and Judith's strenuous and inventive inter-racial peace is entirely the work of women, a gendering that presents their separate peace as conditional and, thus, unsustainable and also speaks to the relationship between war and patriarchy as well as pacifism and feminism posed, directly and indirectly, by a range of literary and philosophical works from 1930s, including Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and *The Unvanquished* (1938).<sup>64</sup>

### Quentin's "Nevermore of Peace"

The conclusion brings *Absalom's* "old peace" to a head in Quentin. On a bitter New England night in the winter of 1910, Quentin and Shreve, his Harvard roommate from the Canadian end of the Mississippi River Valley, commence their effort to pin down Jefferson's history. As good scholars invested in the pursuit of objective knowledge as well as feeling and self-aware beings, Quentin seeks distance from the Sutpen story and his Southern roots while Shreve seeks intimacy with his classmate and new country's history. But Quentin's attempt to resist the intimate implications and powerful violence of the Sutpen narrative quickly resembles the impossible feat of erecting a tower out of thin air. He tellingly stages his resistance through a word that is closer to sound than language: "wait." Terrified once he begins to grasp the enduring influence, all-consuming breadth, and imaginative force of Sutpen's violent design, Quentin worries, "*I am going to have to hear it all over again he thought I am going to hear it all over again . . . I shall have to never listen to anything else.*"<sup>65</sup> His attempt to intervene and challenge his future as the passive recipient of "it" amounts to a loss for words and a failure of imagination:

"Wait," Quentin said.

"—what he must have wanted to find or anyway what he was going to find—"

"Wait, I tell you!" Quentin said, though still he did not move nor even raise his voice — that voice with its tense suffused restrained quality: "I am telling"<sup>66</sup>

*Wait. Wait. You cant know yet. You cannot know yet whether what you see is what you are looking at or what you are believing. Wait. Wait.—*<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 125-6.

<sup>64</sup> In personal correspondence regarding this article, Philip Sicker brought this feature of the novel to my attention. Sicker's contention that the Clytie-Judith narrative represents an alternative, separate peace that dramatizes the intersection of war, patriarchy, and slavery is a productive and important line of inquiry for future scholarship on *Absalom's* configurations of peace as well as feminist scholarship on pacifism and nonviolence in the context of interwar modernism.

<sup>65</sup> Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 222

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 251.

“I don’t know,” Quentin said. He didn’t move. Shreve looked at him ... “You mean it don matter to you?”<sup>68</sup>

“Wait” is voiced by many characters, including Quentin’s grandfather. According to Quentin (who is retelling the story told to him by his father who has retold the story told to him by his father—a testament to the power of narrative itself), when Sutpen first shares his story about halting a slave rebellion in Haiti, General Compson’s reaction is “Wait wait”:

That was how he told it: he went out and subdued them, and when he returned he and the girl became engaged to marry and Grandfather saying “Wait wait” sure enough now, saying, “But you didn’t even know her; you told me that when the siege began you didn’t even know her name” and he looked at Grandfather and said, “Yes. But you see, it took me some time to recover.” Not how he did it. He didn’t tell that either, that of no moment to the story either.<sup>69</sup>

General Compson’s “wait,” both in earnest and in vain, is the earliest attempt by a townspeople to resist and make sense of Sutpen’s story. The response, grounded in the story’s questionable logic and, in turn, the late General Compson’s desire to comprehend it intellectually, is no match for its creative, affective, and socio-political force, an imbalance that registers the fundamental inadequacy of “peace” in *Absalom*.

Quentin’s “wait” functions almost identically to his grandfather’s and, thus, locates the boy within this legacy of unrealized resistance. Also, in line with this lineage, the passage, specifically Quentin’s “I don’t know,” marks an abrupt shift in the redemptive trajectory of Quentin and Shreve’s endeavor. While they begin by attempting an objective understanding of the Sutpen story, their interpretive labors become increasingly intuitive, imaginative, intersubjective, and loving. That promising momentum breaks down as Quentin and Shreve are individually overcome by private preoccupations and limitations, among them Shreve’s desire to master the Sutpen story and Quentin’s fear of being mastered by it. This communication breakdown denies the inherent pluralities, interpersonal processes, and rhetorical forms that give Sutpen’s design its power and, consequently, would seem vital to any attempt at erecting a viable alternative to his dynastic empire.

By the end of the scene, the roommates are barely communicating. Quentin is in bed, “waiting in peaceful curiosity for the next violent unharbingered jerk to come.”<sup>70</sup> He waits passively to be overcome by a violent jerk, calling to mind the picturesque old Jefferson and the “thunderclap” that introduces Quentin and readers to Sutpen. Quentin’s struggle is described as the ebb and flow of seemingly internal peace and externally-inflicted violence—unpredictable tremors, intrusive visions, and Shreve’s questions

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 259-60.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 361.

refuse to leave Quentin to an isolated, sleep-like state. Finally, following the trajectory inherent to all the southern narrator's understandings of peace, Quentin is overcome by this external violence. He shakes compulsively and the Sutpen story becomes his totalizing consciousness, recreating the opening description of Sutpen overtaking Jefferson and pulling the community out of absence into presence.

He remembered it, lying here in the Massachusetts bed and breathing fast now, now that peace and quiet had fled again. He remembered how she did not say one word to him, not Who are you? or What do you want here? but merely came with a bunch of enormous old fashioned iron keys, as if she had known all the time that this hour must come and that it could not be resisted, and opened the door and stepped back a little as Miss Coldfield entered.<sup>71</sup>

Quentin remembers. He remembers that he belongs there, in Sutpen's Hundred. He remembers that he is not an outsider. And he remembers his acceptance of what was to come. That night, after Miss Rosa returned from upstairs, her eyes wide and unseeing—just like Quentin's eyes in this scene as he relives the night—he realized he, too, “must” see what was upstairs. The climactic encounter between Henry and Quentin ensues, and the scene concludes with Clytie burning down Sutpen's Hundred, a decision that reinforces the idea the Sutpen's legacy involves a deep, possibly interminable web of interconnections and interdependencies.

Like her namesake from Greek mythology, Faulkner's Clytemnestra known as Clytie—Henry, Charles, and Judith's half-sister from Haiti who is legally chattel prior to the Civil War—highlights the false dichotomy of war and peace. In both Homer's *Odyssey* and Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Agamemnon, the commander of the Greek forces in the Trojan War, returns home from his martial victory to live, presumably, in peace only to be slaughtered by his wife Clytemnestra. In Homer's version, Agamemnon laments, “As I lay dying, the woman with the dog's eyes would not close my eyes as I descended into Hades.” Clytie, in addition to manifesting race relations in the South following the Civil War and acting as a kind of “Black Sutpen,” manifests this mythic figuration of false or unrealized peace.<sup>72</sup> Faulkner never shows Clytie directly, making her motives and thoughts profoundly illusory, but in setting fire to Sutpen's Hundred, she makes Quentin literally see and experience his people perish and figuratively see that the history of war and violence on his own home front is unresolved and ongoing.

After reliving this encounter with Henry and Clytie and, at first reluctantly but ultimately zealously and in agony, meditating upon the history of Yoknapatawpha County as expressed through the designs of his father Jason Compson, grandfather General Compson, Miss Rosa, and Charles Bon, Quentin

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>72</sup> Thadious M. Davis, “The Yoking of ‘Abstract Contradictions’: Clytie's Meaning in *Absalom, Absalom!*,” *Studies in American Fiction* 7.2 (Autumn 1979), 209-219, 210.

stares, “his eyes wide open upon the window,” and offers a statement, the novel’s arguable resolution: “Nevermore of peace. Nevermore of peace. Nevermore Nevermore Nevermore.”<sup>73</sup>

Critics have read this pivotal moment as a despairing revelation: Quentin realizes he cannot escape his ancestral inheritance, and Faulkner galvanizes his pessimistic outlook on the possibility of transcending one’s past.<sup>74</sup> M. E. Bradford argues that Quentin arrives at the true meaning of the story: “For him the point of Sutpen’s legend ... is that ‘you can’t get away,’ that there will be ‘nevermore of peace,’ that each man is arbitrarily assigned a place and responsibilities that go with it by his antecedents and the history of his people, and that must ‘cope’ with or be destroyed by them.”<sup>75</sup> But this moment does not resemble so much a revelation and elucidative moral about “coping” as it does the fulfillment of Sutpen’s design, a moment of being overtaken or overpowered that preempts Quentin’s death by suicide in the Charles River the following year. David Madden comes closer to realizing the connection between this resolution and Quentin’s imminent suicide, arguing, “Quentin’s acts are only the passive ones of reluctant listening, anguished retelling, of going along with his father to the Sutpen cemetery and going along with Miss Rosa to Sutpen’s house, of staring at his father’s letters in his room at Harvard.” But Madden holds Quentin’s unique consciousness responsible for this passivity, as if *Absalom* was foremost an existential novel: “he knows that like people, like Sutpen himself, civilizations, like Greece and Rome, come and go, so why not the South and its Sutpen? Quentin knows that he cannot forge an identity out of a heroic past as precarious as common everyday life,” and he reluctantly senses “the implication of the stories ... to who he really is, a potential suicide.”<sup>76</sup> These readings reflect the fact that critics have greatly attended to “Nevermore” but overlooked Quentin’s very precise lament for “peace,” an emphasis reinforced in all ways I’ve argued above as well as by the novel’s namesake, for in Hebrew, *Absalom* means “father of peace.”

Faulkner reveals again and again that there never was a time of peace in Jefferson, Mississippi. For both Quentin and good readers, then, peace cannot be lost in this moment because we are aware that it never existed. In this scene, Quentin embodies the fictional Mississippi county’s rhetoric of peace—he manifests its abstract, passive, private, and psychic quality as well as its status as the mere absence of violence—and therefore joins the South in its transfixed state. Quentin cannot end and survive the Supten legacy and bring about peace because he comes to hold the same stifling definition of peace that pervades

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<sup>73</sup> Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 373.

<sup>74</sup> R. Rio-Jelliffe, “Absalom, Absalom!” as Self-Reflexive Novel” *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 11.2 (Spring 1981), 75-90, 87.

<sup>75</sup> M. E. Bradford, “Brother, Son, and Heir: The Structural Focus of Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*” *The Sewanee Review* 78.1 (Winter 1970), 76-98, 80.

<sup>76</sup> Madden, *Faulkner and War*, 106-7, 108.

*Absalom*. Moreover, by echoing Poe's blackbird in "The Raven" (1845), Faulkner further figures this resolution as a moment of historical and cultural repetition rather than an existential revelation. Crucially, Poe's raven "quoths" (it mimics rather than speaks) the beguiling and climactic refrain "nevermore," which torments Poe's desperate narrator and obscures the poem's meaning. This allusion, therefore, makes Quentin's "nevermore" less a personal assertion than an expression of a larger and longer tradition of unrealized peace.

Finally, Quentin's seemingly odd concession that he cannot "catch" and silence Jim Bond, the only remaining Sutpen heir, deepens the connection between Sutpen's powerful legacy and the characters' inability to act, speak, and think in ways that sufficiently and comprehensively respond to its ongoing history and forms of violence. Jim Bond vanished from Sutpen's Hundred during the fire, but Quentin affirms that he can "still hear him at night sometimes." From the 19th century political cartoonist Frank Bellow to the contemporary literary giant Toni Morrison, critics have invited us to connect Poe's haunting blackbird to the spectre of American slavery.<sup>77</sup> Faulkner seems to be in cahoots with this line of thinking, inviting us to see the black Jim Bond's inscrutable voice as inseparable from Quentin's potential but, ultimately, unrealized thinking and response to the problems of American slavery, war, and peace. In other words, Faulkner's Quentin, like Poe's narrator, cannot achieve peace because he cannot apprehend and, thus, respond to the literal and figurative blackness in his world. Just as Poe's narrator initially denies the "tapping, tapping" at his chamber door as "darkness there and nothing more" and only later, when confronted with the presence of a raven, engages in "thinking" and "guessing" the meaning of the blackbird's "nevermore," Quentin attempts to resist the intimate implications of Sutpen's dark design until he is confronted by its undeniable existence in the present: Jim Bond. But Quentin cannot "catch" Bond and understand his cries because Quentin lives in a world that has denied Bond a home, a nation, a family, a voice, denied his humanity, epitomized by Shreve's dehumanizing summation, "You've got one nigger left. One Sutpen nigger left ... and you don't even always see him."<sup>78</sup>

Rather than forging a world that includes both Quentin and Jim, a world where they can meet as two persons, Quentin is resigned to being haunted by the presence of Jim Bond's absence. This failure reflects a "vision," as A.J. Muste called A. Philip Randolph's work, that was central to American civil rights

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<sup>77</sup> Frank Bellow's political cartoon "The Slave Owner's Spectre" for *Harper's Weekly* in 1863 adapts "The Raven" with the caption, "And the Nigger never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting/ On that horrid bust of Horace just above my chamber door;/ And his lips, they have the snigger, of a worthless freeborn Nigger,/ And he swells his sombre figger, when I asked him with a roar,/ "Will you blacks again be Cattle, as you used to be before?" Cries the Chattel, "Never more!" See Frank Bellow, "The Slave Owner's Spectre," *Harper's Weekly*, 30 May 1863, Gettysburg College Special Collections. Accessed 1 Feb. 2019 at <https://gettysburg.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4016coll2/id/361/>; Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 32-69.

<sup>78</sup> Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 302.



and labor activists who adopted Gandhian nonviolence.<sup>79</sup> Beginning in the 1920s with Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the black periodical *The Crisis*, which in 1921, published the first major report on Gandhi's crusade, a range of leaders encouraged Black Americans to see in India's anti-colonial movement their own struggle to abolish jim crowism and to abandon "pacifism in [one] Christian sense" in favor of Gandhi's ideas of nonviolence.<sup>80</sup> Randolph, in a press release for the 1943 March on Washington Movement (MOWM), called on "every militant Negro with pride of race" to make the claim "I Am an American, Too" and to make themselves visible as both American and human subjects through a broad national program of nonviolent civil disobedience and non-cooperation.<sup>81</sup> As Randolph and other early civil rights leaders stressed, programs of nonviolent action, unlike violent action, consider the welfare and "respect the personhood" of the opponent.<sup>82</sup> They are based upon, in the words of Baptist minister and civil rights leader Benjamin Mays, "the intrinsic worth of each individual" and the "kinship of all humanity" as opposed to the "unrighteous" and "life-denying" forces of not only hatred and violence but also passivity and nonresistance in the face of hatred and violence, "life-denying" forces that black leaders identified as a key mechanism behind everything from the segregation of factory workplaces across the midwest to the lynchings of twenty men and boys across eight southern states in 1935 alone.<sup>83</sup>

### **Conclusion: Faulkner, Nonviolence, and Today's "Total War"**

Why does Faulkner leave us transfixed with Quentin in a Harvard dormitory in 1910?

In 1936, the year Faulkner published *Absalom, Absalom!*, George Orwell was across the Atlantic serving in the Spanish Civil War. The British luminary narrated his experience fighting against General Franco's fascists troops in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) and concluded the novel with a haunting and prescient warning to his countrymen who were back home "sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England": "sometimes [I] fear that we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs."<sup>84</sup>

Orwell's sense that blissful ignorance was lulling 1930s England into a "deep, deep sleep" reflects a popular historical understanding of the interwar period, a critical history that Saint-Amour importantly challenges in his readings of Orwell's fellow modernists. While this period has long been recognized as "roaring only with postwar gaiety," the fiction of Woolf, Joyce, Ford, and others figures British passivity as

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<sup>79</sup> Siracusa, "From Pacifism to Resistance," 63.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 62; Dennis C. Dickerson, "African American Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 130-55," *Church History* 74.2 (June 2005), 217-235, 221.

<sup>81</sup> Siracusa, "From Pacifism to Resistance," 62.

<sup>82</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 125.

<sup>83</sup> Dickerson, "African American Intellectuals," 229-30; Patricia Hills, *Painting Harlem Modern: The Art of Jacob Lawrence* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2019), 137.

<sup>84</sup> George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (New York: Harcourt Harvest Books, 1980), 231-32.

an expression of the people's crippling anxiety over the immanence of roaring bombs, over a future foreclosed by violence:

The memory of one world war was already joined to the specter of a second future one, framing the period in real time as an interwar era whose terminus in global conflict seemed, to many, foreordained. This apparent foreclosure of the future elicited dire responses: prophecies of social collapse, visions of the archive's effacement, and military theories that capitalized on both prospects.<sup>85</sup>

For Saint-Amour, then, one of the most important features of British interwar literature is that it makes it possible for us to “finally ask what it would mean to stop waging interwar.”<sup>86</sup> And as his *Tense Future* persuasively evinces, this question has tremendous implications for the status of war and peace in the twenty-first century.

*Absalom, Absalom!* is deeply attuned America's own “waging interwar” and the question of what it would mean to put an end to this spectre of war and the very real forms of violence underpinning American life. Faulkner offers readers a fictionalized American community wherein the conception, rhetoric, and practice not only of war but of peace leads mankind to its end. Quentin, the novel's bastion of hope, is unable to radically reimagine peace—an inability that is not merely existential but historical, rhetorical, psychological, structural, and so on in nature. And Faulkner presents this inability as inseparable from the perpetuation of violence and warfare, a logic made literal by *Absalom's* frame narrative in which Quentin is already dead, his future lost to suicide, and Shreve is already a soldier in WWI, his future already committed to war. More broadly, the tropes, conceptual categories, rhetorical modes, and narrative operations Faulkner makes available to his characters for the purposes of elaborating their conceptions of peace bring to life the futile pacifism that he names and rejects in the preface to *A Fable*, presenting the southern community's failure to imagine a peace more powerful than war and violence as a central conflict for all the characters.

The “burden of the South's origin and truth,” Duncan McColl Chesney contends, “leads Quentin to suicide in the Charles River the following year, and remains modestly unresolved, untidied, and prominent as a living dilemma in Faulkner's great explorations of the 1930s.”<sup>87</sup> It is right to read Quentin as the living dilemma of the 1930s, but as I've endeavored to show, Quentin's doomed fate is not only an expression of the “burden” of Southern history but an expression of the inevitability of war, violence, and suffering in the context of a society that treats peace as “an extenuating circumstance between battles, a

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<sup>85</sup> Saint-Amour, *Tense Future*, 8.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>87</sup> Chesney, “Shakespeare, Faulkner, and the Expression,” 155.

kind of furious, shapeless enigma with which people must grapple instead of war's more comprehensible and graspable shapes."<sup>88</sup>

Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, like the work of numerous intellectuals, writers, and activists in the 1930s, needs greater recognition for its effort to interrogate "peace" and question how it contributes to the modern individual's terrorised state and her potential emancipation. Such recognition, something I intend for this article to help achieve, enriches Faulkner studies, peace and conflict studies, and, perhaps most crucially, the much-needed work by contemporary intellectuals like Paul Saint-Amour on the status of war in the post-Cold War era. It is fair to say that we are still transfixed with Quentin in his Harvard dormitory, unable to resist the "total war" that first emerged as a narratable phenomenon after the First World War. The state of contemporary American warfare, which has earned the twenty-first century the title "era of persistent conflict," and the ongoing violence against raced subjects, which ignited the Black Lives Matter movement, the most recent wave of the black freedom struggle, make Faulkner's invitation to resist Quentin's fate by producing a concept, rhetoric, and practice of peace that actively responds to the violence underwriting American life just as valuable today as it was in 1936.<sup>89</sup>

In 1950, Faulkner concluded his Nobel Peace Prize banquet speech with a faithful resolution: "I decline to accept the end of man." He explained to the elite audience, "It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will still endure: that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking."<sup>90</sup> Fourteen years later, in his own Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. echoed Faulkner's sentiment and *Absalom's* implicit call for a different and final peace:

I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind ... I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality ... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Noel Polk, "Introduction: Faulkner and War and Peace," *Faulkner and War* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), viii.

<sup>89</sup> The popular designation "era of persistent conflict" was coined by General George W. Casey. See George W. Casey, "Persistent Conflict: The New Strategic Environment," address given to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council, 27 Sept. 2007, and "America's Army in an Era of Persistent Conflict," *Army Magazine*, October 2008, 28. During his presidency, President Barack Obama repeatedly criticized the nation's "permanent war footing" and "the state of permanently authorized war." See Nicholas Kitchen, "Ending Permanent War: Security and Economy under Obama," *The Obama Doctrine: A Legacy of Continuity in US Foreign Policy?*, eds. Michelle Bentley and Jack Holland (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 9-26.

<sup>90</sup> Faulkner, "William Faulkner's Nobel Prize," 71.

<sup>91</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (New York: IPM/Warner Books, 2001).

The untidy but certain connections between *Absalom, Absalom!* and the development of nonviolence during the “interwar” years helps us do many important things, not least of them is to return now to Quentin and see the potential for real peace in the boy’s immortal final words, in his inexhaustible refusal to hate: “*I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 303.