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'Idiot-Brained South': Intellectual  
Disability and Eugenics in Southern  
Modernism

J.E.L. RILEY

PhD

2015

# **'Idiot-Brained South': Intellectual Disability and Eugenics in Southern Modernism**

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of the requirements of the  
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## Abstract

This thesis examines the construction and functions of intellectual disability in the modernist literature of the American South from 1925-1940. The period saw a remarkable proliferation of intellectually disabled figures in various guises. These include William Faulkner's Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury* which has become one of the most analysed 'idiots' in all literature. However, the wider trend of which he is a part has largely lacked critical attention. Furthermore, the connections between this regional literary trend and the prominence of the eugenic movement in the era have been unexplored. This thesis questions why intellectual disability was so important to Southern writers in particular, and why it appears so frequently in their works. The thesis also examines the extent to which Southern writers incorporated eugenic ideas into their representations and how authors reinforced or challenged contemporary ideas regarding intellectual disability. The thesis offers detailed close readings from a selection of southern writers' works contextualised with primary and secondary historical source material to adequately trace the period's social, scientific and aesthetic models of intelligence and intellectual disability. The thesis argues that intellectual disability and eugenics were integral to the ways in which southern writers represented their region, not only in negotiating regional and national anxiety regarding southern intelligence, but also acting as a crucial vehicle through which these authors examined the South's uneasy and peripheral relationship with modernity. The thesis adds to a growing understanding of the cultural significance of intellectual disability and the eugenic movement and shows how southern modernists' depictions of intellectual disability were linked to and can illuminate understandings of regional and national debates in the period about intelligence, inheritance, disability, family, community, and modernity.

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## **Acknowledgements**

The nascent ideas which were to culminate eventually in writing this thesis were formed while working with intellectually and physically disabled people in a number of roles before returning to higher education. The experiences I gained supporting and educating disabled people were invaluable both to this thesis and to my learning more broadly and the determination of those individuals, their families and those who worked with them to challenge and resist the social limitations imposed upon them has been at the forefront of my mind throughout the research and writing process. While this thesis focuses on the historical construction of intellectual disability, the struggle against the barriers facing intellectually disabled people continues and my own experiences of seeing both how those barriers can be fought and the restrictions they can cause, reoriented my perspective and inspired this research.

Equally, returning to education has its own challenges and I have been fortunate to have an enormous amount of help and support during the writing of this thesis. My supervisor Professor Brian Ward has been a constant source of guidance through two degrees, two universities and the arrival of two children and his patience and kindness have been much appreciated. Similarly, the encouragement and advice of Dr. Julie Taylor have helped me a great deal both academically and personally. Thanks must also go to Dr. Michael Bibler for his enthusiasm and support in turning a collection of thoughts into something more substantial at the beginning of this project. A number of people have read drafts and pieces of this thesis and thanks go in particular to Dr. Katherine Baxter, Dr. Daniela Caselli, Dr. Gavan Lennon, Dr. Naya Tsentourou and Daniel Brookes for their insights and comments.

This thesis was made possible by the generous research studentship I received from Northumbria University and I am grateful for the commitment the university has shown both in me and in my work. In a different way, it was also made possible by an incredibly supportive group of friends and family who have been constantly understanding of the demands of postgraduate study. In particular, this thesis would never have been written without the love and belief of my wife Angie who encouraged me to return to education and has supported me in innumerable ways throughout the process alongside giving birth to and chasing after two endlessly energetic young boys. They are lucky to have her, as am I.

## **Declaration**

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee on 15/09/2014

**I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 79,484**

Name: Jude Riley

Signature:

Date:



# Introduction

The lazy, laughing South  
With blood on its mouth,  
Beast-strong  
Idiot-brained.  
The child-minded South  
Scratching in the dead fire's ashes  
For a Negro's bones.

Langston Hughes  
from 'The South' (1922)<sup>1</sup>

The modernist literature of the American South features a remarkable proliferation of intellectually disabled figures. Although others in the 1920s and 1930s – most notably John Steinbeck – occasionally incorporated intellectually disabled characters into their works, southern modernists depicted intellectual disability with far greater frequency than either their contemporaries or earlier writers. Benjy, in Mississippi author William Faulkner's 1929 novel *The Sound and the Fury*, has become one of the most celebrated and analysed 'idiots' in all literature. However, Benjy is but one example of a wider trend, and modernist writers from across the region incorporated intellectual disability into their work in a variety of forms. A list of these writers would include, in addition to Faulkner, some of the most pre-eminent names in not only southern but American literature – writers such as, for example, Eudora Welty, Robert Penn Warren, Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Anne Porter, and Carson McCullers. It would also include less successful or less acclaimed authors and those who have been largely forgotten over time, such as Elizabeth Madox Roberts, John Faulkner (William's younger brother) and Evelyn Scott. Some southern modernists, most notably Faulkner, included intellectually disabled figures in a number of

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<sup>1</sup> Langston Hughes, 'The South' in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Vintage Classics, 1994), pp. 26-27

different works. Looking at the region from the North in 1922, in his poem 'South' African-American poet Langston Hughes attacked the region and in particular its racism. Hughes described the South as 'idiot-brained'. His imagery foreshadowed a great deal of literary output within the South itself about 'idiots' in the ensuing decades. The depth of this representation suggests that the region's writers were not 'idiot-brained' but rather had 'idiots on the brain'. Focusing on the period from 1925-1940, this thesis examines why intellectual disability was so important to southern writers in particular, and what role and function it serves within their work. Furthermore, it explains how these writers' works added to and challenged contemporary notions regarding intellectual disability during a period when those deemed 'idiots' or 'feebs' or 'morons', for example, faced increasing social exclusion.

In examining this trend in southern modernist writing and its implications, this thesis is also necessarily in part an examination of the influence of the eugenics movement on southern modernists and how that movement shaped ideas about intellectual disability in their writing and in the region as a whole. The impact of the eugenic movement on American society in the early decades of the twentieth century cannot be underestimated, particularly with regards to intellectual disability. Building upon pre-existing concerns regarding the heritability of 'undesirable' traits, eugenics fundamentally redefined notions surrounding intellectual disability in the period. Feeble-mindedness – the eugenic era's model of intellectual disability – was seen as a hereditary trait carried in the 'gene plasm'. Eugenicists of the era argued feeble-mindedness was biologically associated with, and often responsible for, a plethora of perceived social ills including, for example, alcoholism, promiscuity, and crime. These associations were circular: not only was a feeble-minded individual deemed to be inherently more likely to be a criminal or promiscuous, but criminality

or promiscuity were also seen as behavioural indicators of inherent feeble-mindedness. This circularity, the entanglement of cause and effect, "problem" and symptom, meant many more people were deemed to be or suspected of being feeble-minded and it was an extraordinarily expansive and vague category. The influence of these changes were profound; eugenic beliefs were widely accepted in the United States. Daylanne English has stated 'eugenics in some form can (and often does) show up on almost anyone's ideological map between 1890 and 1940'.<sup>2</sup> In terms of cultural impact and mainstream acceptance, what might be called the eugenic era in the United States probably began a couple of decades later in the 1910s, ending roughly between the late 1930s and early 1940s – although eugenic ideas and practises continued well beyond that date.<sup>3</sup> In the 1920s, in particular, the American public fretted about the 'menace of the feeble-minded' and politicians responded, building a range of institutions to house the nation's 'feeble-minded' and to protect society from the supposed threat of their biology and its associated behaviour.

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<sup>2</sup> Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press 2004), p. 2

<sup>3</sup>As Susan Currell and Christina Codgell have noted, although the scientific acceptance of eugenics was already more than fading by the early 1930s, the cultural impact of the movement, and indeed the legislative impact, can certainly be seen throughout the 1930s: Susan Currell and Christina Codgell, 'Introduction to Popular Eugenics' in *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s*, ed. by Susan Currell and Christina Codgell (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), pp. 1-12. By suggesting this period was a 'eugenic era', I do not mean to argue that the influence of the eugenic ideology upon the lives of Americans ended by the mid 1940s in the South or elsewhere. Eugenics did not just disappear. In one of the earliest and most influential histories of the eugenics, Daniel Kevles dated the decline of 'mainline' eugenics (the original eugenic movement of the early twentieth century in the United States and Europe) to the late 1930s and early 1940s, suggesting reports on the extent of eugenic sterilisation in Nazi Germany contributed greatly to the virtual death of 'mainline' eugenics by 1950 leading to a 'reform' eugenics which, he argues, shifted debates about heredity and human biological 'betterment' away from questions of race and class: Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1985), pp. 88-89; pp. 168-175. Later histories of eugenics in the United States have complicated both Kevles's dating and his division between 'mainline' and 'reform' eugenics noting the persistence of eugenic practises in certain regions and debating the extent to which the movement and/or the ideology can be seen to have changed or waned in influence. See for example, Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 1-26 and Gregory Michael Dorr, 'Protection or Control? Women's Health, Sterilization Abuse and *Relf vs Weinberger*', in *A Century of Eugenics in America*, ed. by Paul A. Lombardo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), pp. 161-190.

Incarceration was not the only solution lawmakers deployed to counter the 'problem' of feeble-mindedness. Following eugenicist lobbying, changes were made on a federal level to immigration laws and a number of states altered marriage legislation.<sup>4</sup> Most notoriously, many states also implemented sterilisation laws, allowing medical professionals to sterilise citizens diagnosed as feeble-minded.

In my examination of the influence of eugenics on southern writers' representations of intellectual disability, I show how the region had a distinctive relationship with American eugenic ideology. In stating this, I do not mean to characterise the South as a whole as any more or less inclined to eugenic beliefs than any other part of the United States. Eugenics was popular across the nation affecting public life and culture in a variety of immeasurable ways. The influence of the eugenic movement on state legislation was diverse and complex both in terms of the type and number of laws different states adopted and the extent to which those laws were put into practise. Indeed, in this regard, any conversation about southern eugenics must acknowledge variations within the region itself. Certainly, some southern states were particularly prominent in the movement's success in changing policy and practice. Most notably, Virginia's sterilization law became the model for the whole country when in 1927, in the now infamous *Buck v Bell* case, it was upheld by the Supreme Court. However, the relatively early and enthusiastic adoption of eugenic ideology in much of the Upper South was, as Edward Larson has noted, not mirrored in the Deep South, where, generally speaking, acceptance of eugenic ideas was somewhat slower and there was more reluctance to pass eugenic legislation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Kevles, *In The Name of Eugenics*, pp. 92-97

<sup>5</sup> Edward Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 5-17. If eugenics came late to parts of the South then it also had a particularly long residual impact in the region. For further discussions of the longer lasting

What made the region distinctive, in eugenic terms, was not the extent to which it embraced eugenics. Rather, it was the ways in which the region was seen, both from outside and from within, as in some sense dysgenic – that is to say not eugenic. This thesis discusses how the South was a persistent object of eugenic concern in the early decades of the twentieth century. Southern poor whites in particular were often described or represented as being inherently inferior or 'abnormal'. One explanation for this is that the South was the poorest and least developed region in the nation, and poverty itself was often understood to be evidence of feeble-mindedness. Leigh Anne Duck has argued that eugenic understandings of southern poor whites were essential to creating a national idea of a 'backwards' region. She proposes that eugenic readings of southern poor whites as a degenerate population from an isolated environment, stripped of its best stock, provided an explanation for poverty in an a modernising, liberal nation. Eugenics, Duck suggests, supported a view that 'though [poor whites] were presumed to reside within the borders of the nation, they were believed to exist only beyond spatial boundaries that national culture could not penetrate'.<sup>6</sup> The image of the 'degenerate poor white southern idiot' was a powerful and proliferate one. Indeed, the wide acceptance of eugenic beliefs about southern poor whites can be seen in W.J. Cash's famed assessment of the region's nature: *The Mind of the South* (1941). In his chapter on the South's poor white population, Cash begins with what amounts to a detailed outline of the eugenic view of the southern poor white. In his characteristic dialectical style, Cash then proceeds to challenge those views and assert

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effects of the eugenic movement in the South see Edward Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science*, pp. 146-164; Dorr, 'Protection and Control'; Johanna Schoen, 'Reassessing Eugenic Sterilization: The Case for North Carolina', in *A Century of Eugenics*, ed. by Lombardo, pp. 141-160

<sup>6</sup> Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), p. 103

environmental explanations for poverty in the region.<sup>7</sup> Cash's argument shows that there was resistance to eugenic perceptions of the region, yet that he felt the need to debunk the archetype of the dysgenic poor white reveals how prominent it had become.

While poor whites were frequently the focus of criticisms of the region's 'fitness', and the target of eugenically influenced policies, the whole region was often seen through a eugenic lens. Nationally and regionally, eugenic ideology and rhetoric fuelled explanations for southern 'backwardness' and prompted anxieties about the region's intelligence. Throughout the eugenic era in the United States, researchers suggested that the South was a 'bad breeding ground'. Yet, it was not only eugenic researchers who held and mobilised this viewpoint, a variety of medical, legislative, journalistic and aesthetic discourses added to and shaped the construction of a dysgenic South. More often than not these eugenic concerns about the South focussed on regional intelligence. Hughes's representation of the South as 'idiot-brained' in the 1920s may have been a metaphor but it reflected a growing entanglement of perceptions of southern identity with intellectual disability.

This entanglement can be best seen within the works of southern modernism. As I demonstrate in this thesis, notions surrounding eugenics and heredity undoubtedly influenced their work and in particular their representations of intellectual disability. I argue that through intellectually disabled characters, the region's modernist writers included, explored and critiqued national and regional eugenic anxieties about the South in their work. While southern modernists contributed a great deal to the production and dispersal of the 'poor white idiot' trope, they frequently borrowed from eugenic imagery and rhetoric not only to depict these

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<sup>7</sup>W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1973), pp. 42-49

characters but also to incorporate intellectual disability into their works in a variety of ways. Their works often use or remodel eugenic ideas to question the intelligence of families, societies and whole communities. Furthermore, this imagery and rhetoric, alongside older more established ideas about intellectual disability, attached an array of symbolic possibilities to the intellectually disabled figure rendering it a useful vehicle through which southern modernists could examine and critique a modernising South. For many southern modernists, intellectual disability and eugenics were integral both to the way they understood and represented their region.

However, despite an engagement with the symbolism of the eugenic movement, southern modernists were unsure about the veridicality of eugenic models of intellectual disability. Questions of aetiology in their works are nearly always ambiguous and resist orthodox eugenic interpretations. Equally, while southern writers, as part of their regional representations, borrowed from ideologies that caused a great deal of harm to those deemed 'feeble-minded', they frequently showed concern for the lived experience of those same individuals. Their works – perhaps in some instances unwittingly – present clashes between multiple and contradictory meanings of intellectual disability, which often prove integral to their depictions of the South. By examining southern modernists' representations of intellectual disability, I show how constructions of regional identity can blend with constructions of disability both within literature and beyond. Furthermore, the tensions in southern modernists' use of intellectual disability simultaneously begin to unravel the integrity of not only southern identity but intellectual disability itself. Through a variety of representational strategies, the writers discussed in this thesis often explore the construction of intellectual disability and, in the process of doing so, their works reveal a great deal about the contested meanings intellectual

disability and, as a corollary, intelligence, had in the South at a time when being deemed 'feeble-minded' could lead to institutionalisation and/or sterilisation.

Although I consider this thesis to be situated within American Studies, I hope to contribute to the emerging field of Literary Disability Studies. Broadly defined this area of study takes its lead from the wider field of Disability Studies and the disability rights movements in rejecting the medical model of disability as an individual 'problem' and instead understanding disability as a form of identity that is at least in part socially determined. Disability rights activists and latterly Disability Studies scholars have denaturalised notions of 'disability' and 'able-bodiedness' and the divide between the two, challenging the social expectations and structures upon which the exclusion and marginalisation of disabled people has depended.<sup>8</sup>

Understanding disability and ability as forms of identity, Literary Disability Studies has sought to reinterpret literary representations of disability, analysing how literary products have both supported and challenged the ideologies and hierarchies from which these identities have drawn meaning and power. Furthermore, literature scholars influenced by Disability Studies have also sought to show how reading disability as a form of identity can offer new and rewarding readings of literary works.<sup>9</sup>

While this emergence has led to a renewed attention to disabled characters in literature, scholars have only recently begun to reexamine the representation of disability in southern literature. Taylor Hagood has noted how Disability Studies

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<sup>8</sup> Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University, 1998), pp. 132-156

<sup>9</sup> Foundational and important works in the rapidly burgeoning field of Literary Disability Studies and Cultural Disability Studies more broadly would include: Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995); Rosemary Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000); Quayson Ato, *Aesthetic Nervousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010)



might offer new ways to understand the region and its literature by replacing or 'resuscitating' out of date critical models such as the 'southern grotesque'.<sup>10</sup> As Rosemary Garland Thomson has argued, rubrics such as the grotesque or gothic often demand highly or exclusively symbolic readings of disabled characters which erase the political aspect of representing disability.<sup>11</sup> Such readings disconnect representations of disability from disabled people and their experiences as well as ignoring historical understandings of disability and, at times, author's attempts, however flawed, to represent disability qua disability. Reinterpreting disability in southern literature is a broad critical project, which certainly has implications for the ways in which southern modernism has traditionally been understood given the emphasis on concepts of the southern gothic and southern grotesque in readings of the region's modernist works. Specifically 'resuscitating' these rubrics as Hagood suggests is not the aim of this thesis. Indeed, I am inclined to think that the 'southern grotesque' is a concept that is beyond resuscitation. However, I do see this thesis as part of an emerging critical process – begun to a large extent by Hagood himself – of reexamining disability in southern modernism and showing meanings and implications of southern modernists' representations of disability which, because of the aesthetic and political lenses through which that literature has been understood, have been ignored or evaded.

Although critics have begun to discuss the role of disability in the works of a number of southern modernists, critical discussion of disability in southern modernism has overwhelmingly focussed upon the works of Faulkner and mostly on *The Sound and the Fury*. Hagood's *Faulkner, Writer of Disability* (2014) is to date the only monograph focussed on a southern literary depictions of disability.

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<sup>10</sup> Taylor Hagood, 'Disability Studies and American Literature', *Literature Compass*, 7:6 (2010), 387-396, (pp. 392-393)

<sup>11</sup> Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, p. 10

Hagood's analysis tends to focus on the form of Faulkner's work and on biographical elements from the writer's life pertaining to disability, while also incorporating a number of the more recent theoretical models developed in Literary Disability Studies. He shows the author's persistent intrigue with and investment in disability and posits Faulkner as a writer who, throughout his career, revealed and deconstructed disabled identities. His work offers a number of illuminating and important new readings that are relevant not only to this thesis but to any examination of the region's literature. As I discuss in Chapter Five, Hagood situates Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury* within a wider trend of intellectually disabled figures within Faulkner's work. However, because Hagood's focus is upon Faulkner, he does not further situate this trend in the writer's work within a wider trend in southern modernism. Indeed, while Hagood initially discusses how the South has been a site of alterity, he makes clear that he wishes to examine Faulkner's life and fiction predominantly outside of this regional context.<sup>12</sup> Equally, his analysis of Faulkner's use of disability is relatively detached from its historical context and so, though he mentions eugenics in passing, the influence of the movement on the writer and the fluctuating meanings of intellectual disability in that period are largely ignored.

Contrastingly, this thesis places Faulkner's work within its regional literary and social contexts. By doing so I show how Faulkner's 'idiot' figures along with others in southern modernism were part of a broader conversation about the relationship between region and intellectual disability which was not limited to aesthetic representation and had real world sources and consequences for those deemed 'feeble-minded' in the South in the 1920s and 1930s. Seeing these works in

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor Hagood, *Faulkner, Writer of Disability* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2014), p. 10

this light, I argue, invites us to rethink some of the ethical aspects of Faulkner's, and others', representations. Furthermore, I show how by viewing intellectual disability as a significant trend across southern modernism, we can more fully understand the symbolic intertwining of region and disability that occurs in that fiction. To see Benjy et al inside of a southern context, is not only to show more clearly their symbolic functions but also to understand what forces might have influenced their creation in the first place. Therefore, while acknowledging the role and influence of *The Sound and the Fury* in southern modernism, I aim to broaden the critical conversation about intellectual disability in the South beyond that novel and beyond Faulkner's work.

While those working in or influenced by Literary Disability Studies have paid a great deal of attention to physical disability, cultural representations of intellectual disability have been comparatively less discussed. In part this may be because the very nature of the academy, and its reliance on ideas of intelligence, has meant that in general intellectually disabled people have been excluded.<sup>13</sup> As Stuart Murray has noted in his groundbreaking study *Representing Autism*, in the foundational texts of Disability Studies in the Humanities, 'disability' often indicates physical disability (and I would add, to a lesser extent sensory disabilities).<sup>14</sup> Murray's focus is on depictions of autism and although he explores the ways in which behaviours now associated with autism have been embedded into notions of 'idiocy' historically, as he notes, the concept of autism emerged in the 1940s and

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<sup>13</sup> This does not mean however, that all those who might come under such a categorization are excluded. For example, those with impairments such as dyslexia, ADHD or Asperger's have increasingly fought for and been successful in having some of the barriers preventing their access to higher education removed.

<sup>14</sup> Stuart Murray, *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), p. 8

largely only entered public consciousness in the 1980s.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, his study primarily examines more recent texts. Murray does locate certain indicators of autism in older literature, including two texts I discuss in this thesis: *The Secret Agent* and *The Sound and the Fury*. His are valuable and persuasive insights. However, in this thesis, I am more interested in examining how ideas of intellectual disability operated at the time more than tracing modern concepts of disability in the literature of the past.

More in this vein are two important studies which have been published in recent years examining the concept of idiocy.<sup>16</sup> Martin Halliwell's *Images of Idiocy* offers a wide-ranging study of representations of idiocy in world literature and film from the nineteenth century to the present day. Halliwell maps the shifts in the nature of these representations over that period, comparing literary representations with their filmic adaptations to limn the unstable meanings and images associated with idiocy. The other major cultural examination of idiocy is Patrick McDonagh's *Idiocy: A Cultural History*. Though both works can be seen as cultural history, the emphasis in McDonagh's work is more historical while Halliwell's study tends to focus more closely on cultural analysis. McDonagh's investigation of idiocy centres primarily on Nineteenth Century Britain, although it includes discussions of the meanings of idiocy from much earlier periods and other locations. Although there is some difference between these scholars' use of 'idiocy' and my own use of 'intellectual disability', which I discuss below, both of these works have influenced the methodological processes of this thesis and supplied analysis which I refer to

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<sup>15</sup> Murray, p. 11

<sup>16</sup> Other scholars have also approached the cultural history of intellectual disability. For example, Christopher Goodey's history of intellectual disability in the Early Modern period also includes some analysis of cultural depictions: Christopher Goodey, *A History of Intelligence and "Intellectual Disability"* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011). For a complex examination of the meaning of 'stupidity' in literary and philosophical texts, albeit one less influenced by the concerns of Disability Studies see Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003)

throughout. However, both these studies examine much broader geographical areas and periods than my own. As a consequence of this breadth, while both scholars discuss modernist works and Halliwell examines some southern fiction, their work cannot capture the kind of distinct regional relationship with intellectual disability I describe here. I show how, at a certain point in time, regional identity influenced the cultural representation of intellectual disability in ways that can complicate broader readings of intellectual disability in American literature or modernism, for example. Accordingly, this thesis intends to build upon studies like those of McDonagh and Halliwell, expanding and furthering understanding of the cultural significance of intellectual disability.

### **The Social Construction of ‘Intellectual Disability’**

The unravelling of intellectual disability I describe as visible in southern modernism, is indicative of the category's historical and geographical instability. For reasons I outline here, I see intellectual disability as predominantly a social construction and treat it as such within this thesis. The American Association on Intellectual and Development Disabilities (AAIDD) defines intellectual disability as a disability ‘characterised by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behaviour, which covers many everyday social and practical skills. This disability originates before the age of 18.’<sup>17</sup> However, the term ‘intellectual disability’ is a modern one which has only recently come to prominence, replacing ‘mental retardation’ both in the language of the AAIDD and more broadly in medical

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<sup>17</sup> American Association on Intellectual Developmental Disabilities, *Definition of Intellectual Disability*, (2013) <<http://www.aaidd.org/intellectual-disability/definition#.VfAxsRBwbqB>> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> October 2012]

and governmental discourse.<sup>18</sup> This change in terminology is not particularly unusual; a number of categories which have suggested, at least to some extent, a limitation in intellectual functioning have had clinical and/or legal significance in America over the last hundred years. These include but are not limited to ‘idiocy’, ‘imbecility’, ‘feeble-mindedness’, ‘mental handicap’ and ‘mental deficiency’. A recent article in the AAIDD’s journal argued that ‘regardless of the term used to name this disability, the same population has been described’.<sup>19</sup>

However, some historians, sociologists and literary critics have been increasingly circumspect regarding the transhistorical consistency of categories of intellectual ability. Robert Bogdan and Steven Taylor note that changes in the statistical processes used to measure the incidence of ‘mental deficiency’ in the American population in the 1950s and 1970s dramatically changed the number of people who were or were not deemed ‘mentally deficient’ with a ‘stroke of a pen’.<sup>20</sup> Changes in cultural values have also consistently altered the complexion of categories of people deemed as having ‘limited’ or ‘abnormal’ intelligence. For example, a number of historians have shown how the category of the feeble-minded in the first third of the twentieth century was inflected with prejudicial assumptions regarding race, gender, class and morality which were specific to that period.<sup>21</sup>

It is then perhaps unwise to assume that all of those categorised as feeble-minded or mentally deficient in the twentieth century would necessarily be categorised as intellectually disabled in the twenty-first century. Indeed, disability

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<sup>18</sup> Robert L. Schalock and others, 'The Re-naming of *Mental Retardation*: Understanding the change to the term *Intellectual Disability*', *Intellectual and Development Disabilities*, 45 (2007), 116-124

<sup>19</sup> Schalock, p. 119

<sup>20</sup> Robert Bogdan and Steven J Taylor, *The Social Meaning of Mental Retardation* (New York and London: Teacher’s College Press, 1994), p. 12

<sup>21</sup> See for example: Amanda Stubblefield, "'Beyond the Pale': Tainted Whiteness, Cognitive Disability, and Eugenic Sterilization', *Hypatia*, 22:2 (2007), 162-181; Steven Noll, *Feeble-Minded in Our Midst* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. 102, p. 112

historians such as Christopher Goodey and Tim Stainton specifically warn against trying to trace modern conceptions of intellectual disability in earlier societies. Goodey argues that previous attempts to locate the intellectually disabled within historical sources have been fundamentally flawed as they falsely assume that intellectual disability is a transhistorical ‘natural kind’ rather than a contemporary construction. Both Goodey and Stainton date the conceptual roots of categories of intellectual lack to the early modern period, connecting it to the rise of reason and capitalism.<sup>22</sup> Since this emergence, these notions have been persistently in flux. Different societies and cultures have tended to produce their own categories and terminology relating to a perceived intellectual lack in some individuals, and those terms and categories have had meanings and associations specific to the society and culture which produced them. Furthermore, these meanings and associations have been frequently contested and no one term or category has been universally accepted. Patrick McDonagh has described, for example, how in the 1860s one British doctor believed idiocy had taken on too many ‘hasty generalizations’ and suggested a new term should emerge to take its place.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Steven Noll has argued that institutions created to care for the feeble-minded in the American South in the 1920s and 1930s were repeatedly challenged by a lack of certainty over who exactly was ‘feeble-minded’ and what that categorisation meant.<sup>24</sup>

This mutability raises questions as to whether intellectual disability can be considered to be a genuine thing-in-the-world and to what extent it has meaning

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<sup>22</sup> Tim Stainton, 'Reason's Other: The Emergence of the Disabled Subject in the Northern Renaissance', *Disability & Society*, 19 (2004), 225-243; Tim Stainton and Patrick McDonagh, 'Chasing Shadows: The Historical Construction of Developmental Disability', *Journal on Developmental Disabilities*, 8:2 (2001), 9-16; Goodey, *A History of Intelligence and "Intellectual Disability"* pp. 1-14

<sup>23</sup> Patrick McDonagh, *Idiocy: A Cultural History* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2008), pp. 1-12

<sup>24</sup> Noll, *Feeble-Minded in our Midst*, pp. 155-157

beyond the social. In an attempt to highlight and address the extent to which disability was a social phenomenon and not an individual 'problem', the first wave of scholars working within and indeed founding Disability Studies, suggested a distinction between disability and impairment known as the social model. Debates over how exactly these were defined varied. For example, in one original formulation of the social model, impairment was described as the 'functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment'.<sup>25</sup> This was distinct from disability which was, according to an early definition, 'the disadvantage or restriction caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have [physical] impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities'.<sup>26</sup> While the wording and emphasis of definitions of disability and impairment were and continue to be debated, broadly speaking, advocates of the social model suggest that to make real social change for disabled individuals the focus should fall upon the disabling society and not individuals' impairments.<sup>27</sup> Although the social model has had much success in drawing attention to the role a society plays in disabling an individual, it has received increasing critique by a second wave of Disability Studies scholars who suggest that the model fails to fully acknowledge the role of impairment within disabled people's lives and that disability and impairment cannot be as easily separated as the social model suggests. This criticism has led to much debate within

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<sup>25</sup> Disabled People's International, 1982 qtd in Michael Oliver, 'Defining Impairment and Disability: Issues at Stake', in *Exploring the Divide*, ed. by Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer (Leeds: The Disability Press, 1996), pp. 29 -54, (p. 32)

<sup>26</sup> Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1976, qtd in Oliver 'Defining Impairment and Disability', p. 35

<sup>27</sup> For further discussion of the merits of the social model see Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1990)



the field over the model's value and the meaning of both disability and impairment.<sup>28</sup>

However, in the context of intellectual disability, it is dubious as to whether distinguishing between disability and impairment has any merit at all. Unlike a physical or sensory impairment – which is often, although not always, self apparent – an intellectual impairment must be judged and measured against certain criteria and expectations which must by their very nature always be social. Discursive psychologist Mark Rapley disputes the existence of intellectual disability and argues that the testing and measurement processes used by what he calls (following Foucault) the 'psy-complex' to identify intellectual disability have, both historically and now, hidden social value judgements behind a veil of scientificity.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, the fluidity of the criteria used to determine intellectual disability and similar categories historically and geographically suggests that a notion of inherent intellectual impairment which is comparable to physical or sensory impairment, however it may be defined, is at best flawed. Recognising this flaw is not to deny that there are and have always been individuals who might struggle with certain activities. Indeed, while the divide between disability and impairment does not adequately account for the specific kind of social construction intellectual disability is, there are as, Tom Shakespeare has noted, some intellectually disabled people for whom it is difficult to imagine a 'barrier-free utopia'.<sup>30</sup> Disability Studies scholars continue to attempt to adequately model the tricky boundaries between meanings of impairment and disability and it is not the purpose of this thesis to attempt to solve these dilemmas. Nevertheless, it is important to note that with regard to intellectual

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<sup>28</sup> For discussions of this debate see *Disability/Postmodernity* ed. by Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare (London: Continuum, 2002) and *Implementing the Social Model of Disability: Theory and Research*, ed. by Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer (Leeds: The Disability Press, 2004)

<sup>29</sup> Mark Rapley, *The Social Construction of Intellectual Disability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 30-77

<sup>30</sup> Tom Shakespeare, 'The Social Model of Disability', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. by Lennard Davis (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 266-273

disability, distinguishing any verifiable or tangible impairment(s) outside of a social context, is an elusive, perhaps impossible task. In understanding intellectual disability as primarily a social construction, I am not dismissing the difficulties faced by any individual but instead noting that categories of intellectual lack have always depended upon social judgements and value systems. Probing these categories enables us to see how and why certain individuals have been included within them. Constructions such as 'idiocy' or 'feeble-mindedness' have often served to uphold and sustain cultural notions regarding intelligence. As Goodey has pointed out, intelligence itself is a nebulous and ever changing concept which suggests some abilities are superior or more desirable to others and accords status to those seen to have those abilities.<sup>31</sup> Equally, as Rapley has noted, decisions about who is or is not intellectually disabled have been closely linked to moral judgements regarding 'normative expectations about the discharge of social responsibilities, of proper conduct'.<sup>32</sup> Those who have been found lacking in certain abilities and moral behaviours, whatever they might be at the time, have often been essentialised as fundamentally different to the rest of humankind and marginalised and isolated from society.

### **Historicising Intellectual Disability and the South**

In analysing the role and function of intellectual disability in the literature of southern modernism then, I am not examining the representation of a natural kind but the representation of a concept, an idea or, more specifically, a collection of ideas included under a conceptual umbrella we might call intellectual disability. McDonagh has proposed that 'idiocy, mental deficiency, folly, mental retardation,

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<sup>31</sup> Goodey, *A History of Intelligence*, pp. 1-14, pp. 63-76

<sup>32</sup> Rapley, *The Social Construction of Intellectual Disability*, p. 36

intellectual disability and learning disability [...] designate different manifestations of a set of related ideas' and as such proposes they form a Foucauldian 'discursive formation'.<sup>33</sup> In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault describes a discursive formation as 'whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations)'.<sup>34</sup> Viewing intellectual disability as a discursive formation has methodological implications for this thesis. As McDonagh notes, instead of discussing a 'presumed objective condition', examinations of intellectual disability entail 'analysing the terms, the language and structures that articulate the cultural idea of that condition and thus confer upon [it] its status as an objective state'.<sup>35</sup> The 'cultural idea' of intellectual disability is, as I have noted, remarkably fluid, varying a great deal according to time and place. Indeed, as this thesis highlights, even within relatively narrow periods and geographical spaces, ideas of intellectual disability have been deeply contested. To attempt to understand and explain some of this complexity, I historicise my close readings of southern texts. I rely in part on existing historiographies of intellectual disability and eugenics for this purpose, in particular those with a regional focus on the South such as Steven Noll's *Feeble-Minded in our Midst*, which offers a history of the arrival and development of institutions for the feeble-minded in the region, and Edward Larson's *Sex, Race and Science*, which documents the growth of eugenics in the Deep South.<sup>36</sup> However, I

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<sup>33</sup> McDonagh, *Idiocy*, p. 17

<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (London: Routledge Classics, 2006), p. 41

<sup>35</sup> McDonagh, *Idiocy*, p. 17

<sup>36</sup> Other important eugenic histories of the South include Gregory Michael Dorr, *Segregation's Science: Eugenics and Society in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008) and Paul A Lombardo, *Three Generations No Imbeciles* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2008). Beyond the South, there have been a number of historical examinations of the eugenics movement in the United States. These include: Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*; Stern, *Eugenic Nation*; Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1963); Donald K. Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968); Elof Carlson, *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea* (New York: Cold Spring

also incorporate primary texts from the period – medical journals, eugenic texts, essays, journalism – to illuminate my readings and more clearly understand the forms and meanings intellectual disability had in southern modernists' world.

Equally, I aim to show the role the literary texts discussed in this thesis played in defining these forms and meanings themselves. As Stephen Greenblatt has stated regarding employing a historicised methodology: 'the idea is not to find outside of the work of art some rock onto which literary interpretation can be securely chained but rather to situate the work in relation to other representational practices, operative in the culture at a given moment'.<sup>37</sup> In situating the works discussed here alongside other contemporary sources, I wish to argue for their importance as a means by which we are able to understand what intellectual disability meant for region and nation in the period. The relatively limited number of histories of intellectual disability in the South have tended to focus on institutional practices and legislative changes. Examining literary representations offers new insights into the ways in which intellectual disability was understood. Halliwell has suggested 'idiocy often becomes a flexible symbolic device situated between different and sometimes competing discourses: medical, legal, religious, folkloric, educational and aesthetic'.<sup>38</sup> Hence, this thesis by examining literary discourse, aims to add to the existing histories of intellectual disability in the South. Close reading of literary texts reveals not only how contemporary medical or legal discourse, for example, impacted upon southern cultural production but also often reveals the presence of other ideas about intellectual disability. As both Halliwell and

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Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001); Gerald V. O'Brien, *Framing the Moron: The Social Construction of Feeble-mindedness in the Eugenic Era* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013)

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, 'Resonance and Wonder', *Bulletin of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences*, 43:4 (1990), 11-34,

<sup>38</sup> Martin Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2004), p. 2

McDonagh note, 'idiot' figures within cultural products frequently signify older or different meanings associated with intellectual disability than those highlighted in other discourses.<sup>39</sup> Equally, literature, and in particular modernist literature with its frequent use of formal experimentation and resistance to singular interpretations, also offers a useful prism through which to view the multiplicity of meanings placed upon intellectual disability. Within the literary texts I examine the contradictions and overlaps between different interpretations of intellectual disability are allowed to co-exist and indeed often juxtaposed in a manner which makes them more apparent thereby exemplifying the extent to which concepts of intellectual disability were contested in the period.

However, this thesis aims to show not only how southern modernists incorporated and refashioned various ideas about intellectual disability in their work but also why they did so. I question why intellectual disability was so significant for these writers in particular. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have argued that 'disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight', a process they describe as "narrative prosthesis".<sup>40</sup> Mitchell and Snyder suggest that more often than not authors incorporate disability into their works for its value as a 'prosthetic' more than a desire to explore and represent the lived experience of disabled people.<sup>41</sup> As they generalise, however, modernist writers were more inclined to explore these experiences than were earlier writers. Certainly, as I discuss, some southern modernists were interested in the lived experience of those deemed intellectually disabled and their texts frequently complicated or more overtly challenged ideas surrounding feeble-mindedness. Yet, as Mitchell and Snyder point

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<sup>39</sup> Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, p. 2; McDonagh, *Idiocy*, p. 15

<sup>40</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, p. 49

<sup>41</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, p. 48

out about modernist writers more broadly, these concerns exist alongside the use of intellectual disability as 'narrative prosthesis' in southern fictions of the period.<sup>42</sup> By historicising my close readings of southern modernist texts, I trace not only what intellectual disability might have meant to writers of the period but also how and why it functioned as a 'prosthetic' in the way Mitchell and Snyder describe. That is to say I show how intellectual disability offered symbolic possibilities and disrupted social hierarchies and norms in ways which were particularly well suited to southern modernists' regional representations. Gaining a more complete understanding of southern modernists' representations of intellectual disability entails not only examining regional and national constructions of intellectual disability itself therefore but mapping, to some extent, the particular social circumstances and changes occurring in the region at the time. Naturally, the various purposes intellectual disability serves in southern modernism cannot always be seen as distinctly regional. However, by geographically and historically situating southern modernists' depictions of intellectual disability, we can gain a more textured understanding of their significance and, furthermore, begin to see how, in a range of discourses, representations of the South often incorporated and at times became dependent on representations of intellectual disability.

### **Naming 'Intellectual Disability'**

The phrases 'intellectual disability' and 'intellectually disabled' do not appear within the texts and historical sources I shall examine within this thesis. As I have noted, these phrases have a significance which is different from the variety of words describing similar concepts and modes of identity which appear in those texts.

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<sup>42</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, p. 167

Despite these fluctuations, for those examining the cultural representation of these varying categories of intellectual lack, it is clear some compromise catch-all term has to be found. The most common term chosen for this purpose has been 'idiocy' as reflected in the titles of McDonagh's *Idiocy: A Cultural History* and Martin Halliwell's *Images of Idiocy*. The value of this term lies primarily in its longevity but also as one which is used often in the texts I discuss. Nevertheless, for this thesis I find idiocy as a catch-all term less useful. Halliwell, in outlining a 'historical semantics' of 'idiocy', notes that the word has functioned as term of social abuse.<sup>43</sup> As he points out, the combination of colloquial and clinical uses is revealing and often influences cultural production.<sup>44</sup> This thesis is sensitive to the semantic complexity of words such as idiocy, however this blurring makes it, for my purposes, somewhat too broad as a catch-all term. Furthermore, in addition to being a colloquial and generic term for intellectual lack, 'idiot' was, during the period this project examines, a specific diagnostic term distinct from the supposedly less able 'imbecile' and the more able 'moron'. We cannot be certain to what extent southern modernists were aware of these diagnostic implications or used the terms they did to indicate a specific 'type' in their work. Yet, as I show, Glasgow and Faulkner in particular did use these distinctions in ways which, at the very least, suggests they were aware of the different connotations and meanings of these terms. This diagnostic function therefore imbues 'idiocy' with a specific historical and cultural

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<sup>43</sup> In creating a historical semantics of idiocy, Halliwell follows and expands upon the model of Raymond Williams in *Keywords* (1976). Williams does not include 'idiocy' in his work, hence Halliwell's intervention. Williams does though map a historical semantics for the word 'intellectual' which incorporates some reflections on how 'intelligence' incorporates both a measured abstract characteristic and notions of 'experience' and 'information'. There are certainly similar historical tensions in categories of intellectual disability between abstract (possibly inherent) characteristics and acquired experience or information. Williams's insights here highlight how we can see 'intellectual disability' as having something of an antonymic relationship to conceptions of both the 'intellectual' and 'intelligence'. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fourth Estate, 2015), pp. 165-168

<sup>44</sup> Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, pp. 3-5

meaning whose nuances might be lost if I were to use it more broadly in the language of analysis. 'Idiocy' is then oddly perhaps both too broad and too narrow to serve as a generic term. A further possibility is 'feeble-mindedness' which was the most prominent general term in the 1920s and the early 1930s. However, it is a phrase which is too ideologically loaded with eugenic implications to be entirely satisfactory when discussing the ambiguous 'half-wit' or 'simple-minded' figures, for example, in southern modernism.

The difficulties of managing the specific meanings of these historical terms, suggest an ahistorical one may be more apposite. I have therefore decided to use the term currently most commonly used in the United States: 'intellectual disability'.<sup>45</sup> This is the term now used by the psychiatric profession and, more importantly, is one recognised by the many self-advocacy groups under the People First umbrella.<sup>46</sup> However, I also use 'intellectual disability' because I wish to draw attention to it. I place it alongside categories such as feeble-mindedness not because they are the same but because I wish to imply that contemporary terminology may conceal as much as its apparent ancestors did. I must stress that where possible, in my close readings of literature or use of historical sources, I use the terms as they are in the text to maintain their own unique, culturally specific meanings, using 'intellectual disability' only where a catchall term is necessary. I also wish to note that in the course of the thesis, I discuss characters who suggest an apparent inherent intellectual lack, yet are not explicitly depicted as disabled. Often, particularly in texts influenced by eugenics, intellectual disability is suggested or hinted at symbolically rather than clearly identified. These more liminal representations are

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<sup>45</sup> In the UK, 'learning disability' is probably more widely used. I have used the American term here because of the American focus of this thesis.

<sup>46</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edn (Washington DC and London: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), p. 33; People First, *Welcome to Peoplefirst.org*, (n.d.) <<http://www.peoplefirst.org>> [accessed 8 September 2015]



integral to representations of intellectual disability in southern modernism and I often use the term to describe and discuss these characters while still distinguishing them from those that are more explicitly marked.

Similarly, there has historically been a separation of perceived disorders of the mind between those that might loosely be seen as permanent (and normally from birth) and those seen as transitory (and normally developed).<sup>47</sup> In their modern incarnations – again loosely – we can see this divide in the distinctions made between intellectual disability and mental illness. These distinctions are far from firm and the historical relationship between the two is complex. In the period I discuss, terms are frequently blurred, particularly in colloquial usage. This is reflected occasionally in southern modernist texts. For example, the 'idiot' Benjy is also called a 'loony' – a term more commonly used to describe mental illness – by Luster and Jason in *The Sound and the Fury*.<sup>48</sup> However, this ambiguity between mental illnesses and intellectual disability in the early part of the twentieth century was not limited to colloquial language, professionals too were uncertain regarding how to categorise certain individuals. Nicole Hahn Rafter has discussed the steady change of the moral or criminal imbecile into the psychopath during the 1920s and 1930s, a change which reflected a reclassification of certain behaviours from being the consequence of an inherent intellectual disability to being indicative of mental illness.<sup>49</sup> As this suggests, both intellectual disability and mental illness and their conceptual forbears have lacked stability historically and notions of what might or might not be permanent or transitory, inherent or developed have been dubious to

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<sup>47</sup> For some discussion of the beginnings of the separation of the two see Richard Neugebauer, 'Mental Handicap in Early Modern England' in *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency*, ed. by David Wright and Anne Digby (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 22-43

<sup>48</sup> William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (London: Vintage, 1995), p.10; p. 17

<sup>49</sup> Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), pp. 167-187

say the least. This thesis focuses on intellectual disability and not mental illness but, given the lack of clear distinction between the two at times in the period, there is inevitably some overlap. On occasions where the source material is unclear as to whether certain behaviours are the consequence of intellectual disability or mental illness, I have attempted to understand and explain this complexity within its historical context.

## **Defining Southern Modernism**

Critical discussions of the nature of modernist literature in the South have for many years been complicated or, less charitably, obscured by closely related debates about the 'Southern Renaissance'. The interwar years saw a remarkable flourishing in southern literature that brought a number of writers from the region to national prominence. This flourishing led to much discussion of and attempts to define an apparent 'Southern Renaissance'.<sup>50</sup> However, more recently, critics have come to reject traditional models of the 'Southern Renaissance', questioning the Renaissance's beginning and end dates, the works considered to be part of a Renaissance canon, and even whether one can consider a Renaissance to have occurred at all. In particular, they have shown how certain leading writers and critics in the middle decades of the twentieth century – most notably the conservative Nashville grouping the Agrarians and in particular the poet and critic Allen Tate –

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<sup>50</sup> This debate began early in the 1930s and persisted until at least the 1980s. See, for example Howard Mumford Jones, 'Is There A Southern Renaissance', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 6:2 (1930), 184-197; Allen Tate, 'The Profession of Letters in the South', *Virginian Quarterly Review*, 11:2,(1935), 161-176; Benjamin T. Spencer, 'Wherefore this Southern Fiction?', *The Sewanee Review*, 47: 4 (1939), 500-513; Louis D. Rubin and Robert D. Jacobs eds., *Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1953); Louis D. Rubin and Robert D. Jacobs eds., *South: Modern Southern Literature in its Cultural Setting* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1961); John M. Bradbury, *Renaissance in the South: A Critical History of the Literature, 1920-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963); C. Vann Woodward, 'Why the Southern Renaissance?', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 51:2 (1975), 222-239; Richard King, *A Southern Renaissance*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980)

constructed ideas about the region's writing in the period along ideological lines. This process involved not only defining the region's literary canon but also constructing an exclusionary model of southern identity. As Michael Kreyling has shown, the Agrarians instigated a critical project which constructed southern literature in their own image – white, heterosexual, patriarchal, conservative.<sup>51</sup>

Tate notably dismissed texts which explicitly criticised the South's injustices as 'sociological' and proclaimed they would not survive. He valorised works by writers such as Faulkner, Warren and Porter, which he saw as 'traditional' and as embracing a nebulous sense of regional distinctiveness and southern 'values'. He also expressed a belief that it was a certain, nebulously described, historical consciousness which caused these writers to emerge in the period: 'With the war of 1914-1918, the South re-entered the world -- but gave a backward glance as it stepped over the border: that backward glance gave us the Southern renaissance (*sic*), a literature conscious of the past in the present'.<sup>52</sup> Tate's declaration of a canon and his 'backward glance' theory were to hold much sway in criticism of the Southern Renaissance. Equally, the conservative idea of southern identity or (as it was often described) 'southern temperament' – outlined most prominently in the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) – underpinned later readings of southern writing in the period.<sup>53</sup> The 'sociological' works Tate described were elided or pushed to the periphery of southern literature and often positioned as not genuinely 'southern', marginalised along with fictions that incorporated queer dynamics and works by women and African Americans. Equally, readings of those texts which

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<sup>51</sup> Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), pp. 167-182

<sup>52</sup> Allen Tate, 'The New Provincialism With an Epilogue on the Southern Novel', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 21:2 (1945), 262-272

<sup>53</sup> Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature*, pp. 19-74; The Agrarians outlined their beliefs most specifically in: Twelve Southerners, 'Introduction: A Statement of Principles', in *I'll Take My Stand* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), pp. xxxvii-xlvi

were considered canonical often ignored elements which might trouble a conservative critical model, especially if they challenged the South's social hierarchies. Kreyling and many others have sought more recently to restore and reclaim these marginalised texts and to offer more complex, multivalent readings of canonical works, in the process mounting a serious challenge to the conservative narrative of the Southern Renaissance.<sup>54</sup> These radical reassessments have suggested that the concept of a 'Southern Renaissance' is no longer an especially productive one with which to examine regional writing in the inter-war years and recent critics increasingly use 'southern modernism' as an umbrella term for much of the southern writing from this period. As noted, traditional readings of disability in southern literature from the period have also been conservative tending to see disability as examples of 'southern grotesque'. Hence by highlighting and reassessing the role of intellectual disability in this fiction, this thesis is a continuation of and an addition to the critical project of dismantling traditional ideas regarding southern literature and a contribution to the developing project of analysing southern modernism.

Twenty-first century critics have begun to attempt to define and discuss what southern modernism is. Leigh Anne Duck in *This Nation's Region* suggests that southern modernist works were those which explored and represented an imagined 'backwards' South which existed in a 'specifically regional time, one distinct from that of the modernising nation'.<sup>55</sup> Duck argues that this temporal displacement of the South functioned as part of an ideological structure within which southern poverty

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<sup>54</sup>Notable examples might include: Patricia Yeager, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Carol S. Manning, 'The Real Beginning of the Southern Renaissance', in *The Female Tradition in Southern Literature*, ed. by Carol S. Manning (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993), pp. 37-54; Thadious M. Davis, 'Southern Standard-Bearers in the New Negro Renaissance', in *The History of Southern Literature*, ed. by Louis D. Rubin (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), pp. 291-313; Gary Richards, '"With a Special Emphasis": The Dynamics of (Re)Claiming A Queer Southern Renaissance', *Mississippi Quarterly*, 55:2 (2002), 209-229

<sup>55</sup> Duck, *This Nation's Region*, p. 95

and particularly southern racism and racial segregation could be understood to exist alongside, though not truly be a part of, the modern, liberal United States. That ideological structure, she proposes, was beneficial both for southerners attempting to maintain those hierarchies and for those beyond the region who could distance southern racism and poverty from national narratives.<sup>56</sup> Duck argues that southern writers sought to represent the 'temporal collisions' between national and regional 'chronotypes'. She notes in particular the use of modernist, experimental aesthetic in southern literary production to depict 'multiple temporal forms'.<sup>57</sup> Both this experimental aesthetic and the production of 'backwardness' are present in a number of the texts I discuss in this thesis. As Duck herself points out in her chapter on Erskine Caldwell, eugenics was one of the preeminent ways the 'backwards South' was explained and represented.<sup>58</sup> Building upon Duck's insights, in this thesis I show how eugenic models of intellectual disability in particular were crucial to both regional and national understandings and representations of the backwards South.

However, as David Davis has noted, in his essay 'Southern Modernists and Modernity' focussing on southern modernism as representing an 'imaginary, alternative South can distract readers from the real South – the one where sharecropping and poverty actually existed. The social context matters because in southern modernism the culture of cotton is just as important as the culture of cubism'.<sup>59</sup> Davis's insights are, I think, important in understanding and defining southern modernism. He offers a much more broad view of the field, one that attempts to include the 'sociological' texts that Tate's reading of the southern

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<sup>56</sup> Duck, *This Nation's Region*, pp. 1-16

<sup>57</sup> Duck, *This Nation's Region*, p. 8

<sup>58</sup> Duck, *This Nation's Region*, pp. 85-114

<sup>59</sup> David A. Davis, 'Southern Modernists and Modernity' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the American South* ed. by Sharon Monteith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 88-103, (p. 102)

renaissance dismissed. Equally, within this essay, he does not prioritise aesthetic experimentation as Duck does. Instead he suggests that 'the defining characteristic of Southern modernism is not aesthetic innovation but the inherent tension between modernity and Southern provincialism, a tension that has inherent consequences on aesthetic presentation'.<sup>60</sup> However, more recently, Davis has revised his thoughts on southern modernism somewhat. Recognising the growing critical acceptance that modernism may be better understood as a collection of modernisms, he suggests southern modernism reflects the region's unusual role in the modernising United States. Davis proposes that the rural South of the early twentieth century was both a site and product of modernity, but that it remained in some crucial respects, distinctive, even peripheral, within that national process, experiencing actual modernisation, according to key economic and social indices, later. He argues that 'discontinuity between modernist technique and rural content is the definitive characteristic of southern modernism. In the literature of the US South, ruralism is modernism'.<sup>61</sup> There are certainly truths about southern modernism in both of the different 'definitive characteristics' Davis proposes. However, the former explanation does not entirely account for the active production of 'southern provincialism' which Duck describes as occurring in southern literature, and the latter appears to exclude a number of southern modernist texts which are not specifically rural or which incorporate urban environments. Davis's suggestion that in the South 'ruralism is modernism', while it attempts to understand uneven development on a regional basis within the United States, does not adequately reflect the uneven development within the South itself. Davis's observation that the region is part of but peripheral to American modernity is, I suggest, more useful to reading southern modernism, than

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<sup>60</sup> Davis, 'Southern Modernists and Modernity', p. 91

<sup>61</sup> David A. Davis, 'The Irony of Southern Modernism', *Journal of American Studies*, 49:3 (2015), 457-474, (p.464)

any attempt to render it as being specifically, let alone exclusively, rural.

One way of reconciling the insights of Tate, Davis and Duck into southern modernism is to suggest that the idea of discontinuity, of a complex, fractured, sometimes peripheral, and always highly ambiguous relationship to modernity was integral to southern writers' representations of the region's experience, whether the ways in which it was peripheral were imagined or real. Discontinuity is, of course, a hallmark of modernism more broadly, but the South's unusual position, ideologically and economically, within the process of American modernisation produced distinctive qualities in its literature. Southern works staged clashes between the rural and the urban, 'traditional' values and modern mores, 'history' and the present, and even experimental or novel forms of representation and older forms. Southern modernists highlighted and prioritised their concerns about modernity in ways that are fundamentally recognisable as modernist, yet the specific content and nature of those concerns are distinctively southern.

This thesis shows how intellectual disability was often crucial to the ways in which southern modernist literature represented and critiqued the South's uneasy and peripheral relationship with modernity. Frequently authors relied upon the multiple symbolic possibilities of intellectual disability to support the clashes present in their work. For example, as noted, intellectually disabled figures often functioned as signifiers of a backwards, degenerate rural or old South. However, southern writers also often drew upon different and contradictory eugenic ideas about intellectual disability to symbolise an immoral, flawed urban or new South. These contradictory models were regularly used in the same text and even within the same characterisation, generating ambiguous intellectually disabled figures or conflicting interpretations of intellectual disability which form part of those novels' uneasy

representations of the region.

The ideological clashes in southern modernism do not only occur at a symbolic level, at times they are more overtly part of the narrative. Many southern writers in the period were, as Davis suggests, engaged with social issues, and the tensions between, for example, so-called traditions and other more novel or even 'taboo' values or practises are frequently represented. As eugenic ideology had moved intellectual disability to the forefront of debates about many social issues, especially in the South, it often plays a role, explicitly or implicitly, in these representations. Indeed, it is at times the focus of the narrative itself. For example, some southern modernists depicted communities in which new emergent ideas and practices towards 'feeble-mindedness' – themselves a consequence of modernity – are complicated by existing 'traditional' southern belief structures. The peripheral nature of the South can often become particularly clear in these narratives as they represent modern ideas arriving but not cohering. Furthermore, this 'social' or 'political' engagement with intellectual disability regularly clashes with authors' uses of intellectually disabled characters as a signifier, meaning that southern modernist texts do not merely represent ideological instability in the region but exemplify it. Finally, intellectual disability occasionally enabled formal experimentation within southern modernist texts. Southern modernists' experiments with form should be understood as part of a broader modernist engagement with aesthetic possibilities. However, as Duck notes regarding the 'temporal collisions' in southern modernism, experimentation was also a means of representing, on a formal level, the complex relationship of the South to modernity which their fictions mapped. As I show in this thesis, southern modernist explorations of the formal and representational possibilities of intellectual disability, while serving wider aesthetic aims, were part



of their regional representations.

These symbolic, thematic and formal functions of intellectual disability were by no means unique to southern literature of this period. As I discuss in Chapter One, earlier modernist and naturalist writers incorporated intellectually disabled figures into their works in somewhat similar ways which almost certainly influenced the writers discussed in this thesis. However, these uses of intellectual disability recur time and again in southern modernism, revealing both how useful these authors found them as a means to analyse and represent their region and the extent to which intellectual disability became central to questions of southern identity in the inter-war years. As such, as I aim to show in this thesis, examining these representations can not only inform our understanding of the construction of intellectual disability but also act as a useful lens through which to understand the particular nature and concerns of southern modernism itself.

### **Text Selection and Dating the Trend**

It is difficult to pin down exactly when southern modernism began. Typically, because of the fame of Faulkner, and the success of the Agrarians and their successors in defining the Southern Renaissance, the movement's beginnings are located in the early or mid 1920s. However, this periodisation is questionable: one of the writers I discuss in this thesis for example, Ellen Glasgow, wrote her first novel in the nineteenth century. The earliest work discussed in depth in this thesis is Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *Time of Man* (1926). By beginning here, I do not intend to claim this moment, let alone this text, as the beginning of southern modernism. I would argue, however, that before the mid 1920s, southern writers rarely, if ever,

represented intellectual disability. If the 1920s brought not the beginning but the flourishing of southern modernism, it is striking to note that representations of intellectual disability emerged and proliferated at roughly the same time. As I show in Chapter One, this can likely be traced to the rise of eugenics and as a means to describe and understand the South but also may be linked to the growing preeminence of the dissonant and discontinuous style and form of southern modernism described above. The latest texts analysed in any detail in this thesis were published in 1937. There are other southern novels depicting intellectual disability that were published before 1945 that might have been included here – examples include Faulkner's *The Hamlet* (1940) or Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940). These texts are, I believe, recognisably examples of southern modernism and their exclusion is a function of restriction on space and note a reflection of relevancy. This thesis necessarily offers a selection of southern modernist representations of intellectual disability and is not intended to be comprehensive.

The texts I have selected illustrate the remarkable variety of ways in which eugenic ideas about intellectual disability influenced and was valuable to southern literature of the 1920s and 1930s. My readings of these texts illuminate how interconnections between region, eugenics and intellectual disability were incorporated, examined and critiqued within southern aesthetic production, and were integral to the trend of intellectually disabled figures in southern literature. My study concludes in the late 1930s as regional and national anxieties about 'feeble-mindedness' in the South began to wane. As noted, eugenics continued to influence both southern and national attitudes towards intellectual disability long past the end of World War II. However, the eugenic movement declined in popularity and

discussions about 'bad breeding' became dramatically less prominent in discourse about intellectually disabled people. This is not to suggest that later southern writers did not depict intellectually disabled people, the figure of the 'southern idiot' was, as noted, remarkably persistent. However, after the mid-1940s, eugenic ideas are less prevalent in southern novels, and intellectual disability does not tend to function in the same ways as it had before. In addition to the decline in popularity of eugenics, later authors were less concerned with regional matters, meaning explorations of the relationship between the South and intellectual disability were less common. As Robert Brinkmeyer has stated, by the early 1950s southern literature still thrived but existential concerns had replaced regional ones; the South was a 'backdrop' rather than a topic.<sup>62</sup> Novels incorporating intellectually disabled figures from the 1950s for example, Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away* and William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness*, might be seen in this light.

Furthermore, the 'southern idiot' had become – in large part because of the texts discussed here – a widely used cultural trope. As such, depictions were increasingly distanced – though never entirely detached – from real world decisions and ideas about intellectual disability. That is to say that by incorporating intellectually disabled figures in to their fictions, southern writers were generally responding to southern writers and not directly to the kinds of interconnections between region and disability seen in the 1920s and 1930s. Above all, they were responding to the growing acclaim for William Faulkner and particularly that for *The Sound and the Fury*. The publication of Malcolm Cowley's *The Pocket Faulkner* (1946) rejuvenated interest in the author and led to republication of many of his works and after Faulkner won the Nobel Prize in 1949, he became not just a part of

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<sup>62</sup> Robert Brinkmeyer, 'The Southern Literary Renaissance' in *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, ed. by Richard Gray and Owen Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 148-165, (p.163)

southern literature but its 'star'.<sup>63</sup> Thus these later examples of intellectually disabled figures often struggle to escape the legacy of Benjy (as well as other intellectually disabled Faulkner characters). Although these depictions deserve examination, and there are certainly some similarities between them and the ones I discuss here, these fundamental differences in influences and concerns means they fall outside of the scope of this thesis.

This thesis concentrates therefore on works from the 1920s and 1930s, on novels and short stories by Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Ellen Glasgow, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty and William Faulkner. All of these authors are white. This reflects the racial nature of the trend; very few black southern writers of the period included intellectual disability into their work. As I show within the thesis, the eugenic anxiety about intellectual disability was primarily a white anxiety about the racial health of whites. For example, within the racially segregated South, institutions for the feeble-minded were nearly all for whites only.<sup>64</sup> This focus perhaps explains why white writers in particular chose to represent intellectual disability more than black authors. Equally, given the existing prejudices regarding race and intelligence, black southern writers were perhaps loath to represent intellectually disabled blacks. Indeed, the few intellectually disabled characters in southern black fiction are also nearly all white.<sup>65</sup> This does not mean African Americans were uninterested in eugenics, as Daylanne English has showed in her discussion of the influence of eugenics on Du Bois and the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> For a discussion of Faulkner's rise to pre-eminence in southern modernism see Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature*, pp. 126-147

<sup>64</sup> For a discussion of the state response to those African Americans deemed 'feeble-minded' in the South in the 1920s and 1930s see: Noll, *Feeble-Minded in Our Midst*, pp. 89-104

<sup>65</sup> The most notable of these is Earl in Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*. For a discussion of this character and the eugenic implications of Hurston's text see Chuck Jackson, 'Waste and Whiteness: Zora Neale Hurston and the Politics of Eugenics', *African-American Review*, 34:4 (2000), 639-660

<sup>66</sup> English, *Unnatural Selections*, pp. 35-64

However, in the main, both in the South and beyond, African-American authors of the 1920s and 1930s tended not to represent intellectually disabled figures.

The authors selected are also nearly all women, primarily because, as a broad generalisation, female writers were more likely to include 'halfwits' or 'idiots' in their work. As I explain, for some women writers, such as Welty or Roberts, intellectually disabled characters offered a means to resist both the sexism of southern society and what they saw as the perils of eugenics. As I discuss in Chapter One, the two were not unrelated. However, while southern women writers were more likely to depict intellectual disability than were their male counterparts, southern men were still particularly intrigued by it as compared to the rest of the nation. Indeed, Faulkner and Caldwell were the southern authors most often noted (and at times thought of as notorious) for depicting 'southern idiots'.<sup>67</sup> The role of eugenics in Caldwell's work and, to a lesser extent, its role in his representation of disability has been extensively treated in recent years and for this reason, though I mention him in passing, I have chosen not to discuss him in detail.<sup>68</sup> While this omission risks exaggerating the gender imbalance among southern writers who depicted intellectual disability during this period, it is one of the subsidiary aims of this thesis to offer new perspectives on female writers like Glasgow and especially Roberts, who have tended to be neglected or marginalised in most discussions of southern modernism.

In terms of structure, Chapter One offers some historical and literary background for the portrayals of intellectual disability which form the main subject for this thesis. The chapter maps the changes in the scientific understanding of

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<sup>67</sup> For a primer on Caldwell's success and his role in proliferating the image of a degenerate South see Jack Temple Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986)

<sup>68</sup> For discussions of Caldwell and eugenics see: Duck, *This Nation's Region*, pp. 85-114; Paul A. Lombardo, 'From Better Babies to The Bunglers', in *A Century of Eugenics in America*, ed. by Lombardo, pp. 45-67; Karen A. Keeley, 'Poverty, Sterilization and Eugenics in Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*', *Journal of American Studies*, 36:1 (2002), 23-42

intellectual disability in the nineteenth century and its impact upon cultural representation. Through short discussions of Frank Norris's *McTeague* and Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, I show how naturalist and modernist writers began to incorporate some of the new ideas about intellectual disability into their work. I also describe the influence of the eugenic movement on the South and perceptions of it, discussing the *Buck v Bell* case in more detail and using it to explain the intersections between class, race, gender and the construction of feeble-mindedness. I outline how the South became an object of eugenic concern and, focussing specifically on the role of the journalist H.L. Mencken, in that process, begin to illustrate how this anxiety about regional degeneration and heredity would influence southern modernism.

Chapter Two discusses two novels by Elizabeth Madox Roberts: *The Time of Man* (1926) and *My Heart and My Flesh* (1928). I show how Roberts incorporated intellectual disability into her novels to challenge the narratives of the eugenic movement. I argue that in both novels Roberts blends the determinism of literary naturalism with the experimental possibilities of modernism to challenge ideas about heredity and restore the possibility of environmental explanations for intellectual lack. Equally, her novels complicate contemporary understandings about gender, class and race and feeble-mindedness. In *The Time of Man*, Roberts offers in Ellen Chessier a very different image of the poor white southern woman to the one described in the *Buck v Bell* trial. Roberts, I suggest, incorporates an ambiguously disabled child Chick to resist rather than reinforce eugenic ideas about the southern poor and disability. In *My Heart and My Flesh* Roberts deepened her examination of heredity and intellectual disability. The chapter explores how specifically southern ideas about feeble-mindedness and race are reflected in Stiggins that novel's mixed

race 'half-wit' figure. I argue that through the multiple symbolic possibilities of Stiggins's intellectual disability Roberts inverts the eugenic gaze onto white men and in the process critiques the social hierarchies of the region. The chapter reveals Stiggins to be the first of a new kind of intellectually disabled figure in southern modernism, who functions to destabilise and complicate the values of the southern society Roberts depicts.

Chapter Three is an examination of Ellen Glasgow's use of intellectual disability in her 1935 novel *Vein of Iron*. I argue that Glasgow depicts a society that is increasingly concerned about 'idiots' and 'morons'. Glasgow weaves ideas about and images of intellectual disability into the symbolic architecture of her novel to represent a society in which intellectual disability has come to mean too much. As I show, through her two protagonists Ada and John Fincastle, Glasgow confronts and incorporates a whole range of eugenic concerns at work in the South. The two characters' separate chapters both contain conflicting ideas about intellectual disability and conflict with each other. Equally, the author uses intellectual disability as a vehicle through which to attack both the traditional Christianity present in the rural South, as well as the growing modernity in the urban South. I argue that this plethora of meanings is never resolved and that often the author – most notably in her depiction of 'mountain idiots' – appears as uncertain about intellectual disability as the society she depicts.

In Chapter Four I show how, in their short fiction, Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty examined the introduction of institutions for the feeble-minded into southern communities. I argue that in Porter's 'He' and Welty's 'Lily Daw and the Three Ladies' both authors reveal how the presence of the institution remade southern communities' roles as arbiters of 'feeble-mindedness'. Their stories suggest

that though modern eugenic ideas created institutions in the South, it did not necessarily follow that eugenics informed decisions about institutionalisation. I illustrate how both authors depict traditional values overlapping with new scientific ideas as communities make decisions about the treatment, clinical or social, of those they deem intellectually disabled. Furthermore, the chapter describes how the authors' experimentations with narrative and use of irony create a great deal of ambiguity about the nature of their character's disability, inviting reflection upon who institutionalisation serves and, in Welty's story in particular, who is or is not intellectually disabled.

Chapter Five explores the wide ranging and changing nature of William Faulkner's career long interest in intellectual disability. I suggest that such was the extent to which the author explored the representative and symbolic possibilities of intellectual disability it is virtually impossible to determine a singular, or archetypal 'Faulknerian Idiot'. However, through a discussion of the author's depiction of poor white intellectually disabled characters in the 1930s, I argue that, during this phase of his career, the author typically blended an idiosyncratic notion of innocence with eugenic ideas about feeble-mindedness in order to depict and critique the emergent modern South. In *Sanctuary* and in the short story 'Monk', Faulkner's poor white intellectually disabled characters are frequently shown to be too innocent for the modern world and their position as victims criticises changes in the South which have left them behind. However, Faulkner also incorporates explicitly eugenic imagery and at times eugenic family histories into his representation of poor white 'idiots'. This move, not only complicates their innocence but also positions them as the source of much that his works imply is wrong with the modern South. These characters are often vehicles for and expressions of much of the dissolution and



anomie Faulkner laments about the South. While as the author of *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner has often been praised for his representations of intellectual disability, these figures, I argue, often rely upon and reinforce stereotypical notions about poor whites and 'feeble-mindedness' in ways which should complicate perceptions of his interest in intellectual disability.

Ultimately, this thesis not only reveals the hitherto unacknowledged ubiquity and range of depictions of intellectual disability in southern modernism but also explains how these depictions were integral to the ways southern writers represented and understood their region. This research illustrates how southern modernists' representations of intellectual disability connect to important developments between the two world wars in aesthetics, medical science, psychiatry and economics. Furthermore, the thesis shows how these depictions can illuminate key debates in region and nation about intelligence, heredity, family, race and modernisation.

# CHAPTER ONE

## **The Rise of Eugenics and Intellectual Disability in Naturalism and Early Modernism**

In this initial chapter I aim to provide some historical context for the readings that follow in later chapters. I discuss the literary depiction of intellectual disability in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and examine the impact of the eugenics movement on perceptions of intellectual disability in the United States and more specifically in the American South up to the late 1920s. The intention here is to offer a historical overview of the literary, scientific and social contexts in which southern modernists' interest in intellectual disability emerged. The end of this overview broadly aligns with the *Buck v Bell* eugenic sterilisation case in 1927 and the publication of the first novel discussed in chapter two, Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *The Time of Man* (1926).

### **'A Typical Degenerate'**

The literary depiction of intellectual disability has a long history which did not begin with southern modernism. Southern writers of the 1920s and 1930s were certainly influenced by earlier representations of intellectual disability and particularly by those of their immediate literary predecessors. The nineteenth and early twentieth century, as Patrick McDonagh has shown, saw immense change in the cultural meaning of intellectual disability, which was reflected in the symbolic purposes it served in the era's literature.<sup>69</sup> While Romantic writers at the turn of the nineteenth

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<sup>69</sup> McDonagh, *Idiocy*, p. 15

century tended to associate idiocy with innocence as in Wordsworth's 'The Idiot Boy' (1798), by the beginning of the twentieth century, in the works of naturalists and early modernists, idiot figures, while not entirely emptied out of these earlier associations, became increasingly used as symbols of biological and moral degeneration.<sup>70</sup> This section discusses briefly the context in which those changes occurred and the way writers of the period responded. Although, it would be wrong to speak of naturalist idiots or modernist idiots (or for that matter Romantic idiots), with any great degree of specificity, there were recognisable changes and trends in the depiction of intellectual disability which impacted upon the writers discussed in the later chapters of this thesis. To offer an illustration of those changes and trends, I discuss two earlier examples of intellectual disability in literature, one which can be seen as broadly naturalistic: Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899) and one which bears the hallmarks of early modernism: Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907).

Both of these novels show the influence of the changes in the cultural meaning of intellectual disability McDonagh describes. The reason for this shift can be mostly attributed to new scientific theories which reconfigured beliefs about the aetiology of 'idiocy'. From the middle of the nineteenth century, idiocy became a more prominent matter of social concern and understood as both a consequence and cause of immorality. Emerging notions about the nature of heredity of idiocy causally linked idiocy in children to socially unacceptable behaviour in parents such as alcoholism and masturbation. Degeneration theorists like Max Nordau posited that modern, urban environments were producing physical and mental degenerates.<sup>71</sup> Nordau argued that mental degenerates had no 'sense of morality and of right and

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<sup>70</sup> Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, pp. 135-137

<sup>71</sup> For a discussion of degeneration theory see Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848-c.1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

wrong. For them there exists no law, no decency, no modesty'.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, early criminologists such as Cesare Lombroso argued criminals were atavistic 'savages' and linked crime to an inherent mental lack.<sup>73</sup> In both Europe and North America, those interested in the aetiology of idiocy at the end of the nineteenth century such as Samuel Gridley Howe and John Langdon Down, wrestled with the relationship between environmental and hereditary causes.<sup>74</sup> So too did Richard Dugdale, author of the influential family study *The Jukes* (1877), which sought to find explanations for the history of poverty and crime in a single family in the state of New York. Dugdale and his contemporaries were concerned with the origins of 'pauperism' and the extent to which those who were poor or criminal were so because of environment or an inherited mental (and often physical) lack or an interaction between the two.<sup>75</sup> Despite the fact that Dugdale's work was often read as evidencing a hereditary lack in the Jukes (a pseudonym) family and taken as a model for later eugenic family studies, his study, while not dismissive of heredity in causing the supposed ills he traced, leaned more towards environmental explanations for the 'problems' he examined and recommended social changes such as improved sanitation.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Dugdale was in a later speech moved to describe those who believed heredity to be the 'preponderating factor in psychology' as 'extremists'.<sup>77</sup>

By 1900, however, the rediscovery of the work of Gregor Mendel had created

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<sup>72</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton, 1895), p. 18

<sup>73</sup> Cesare Lombroso, *Criminal Man*, ed. by Mary Gibson and Nicole Hahn Rafter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006)

<sup>74</sup> McDonagh, *Idiocy*, pp. 257-284

<sup>75</sup> For an excellent discussion of the concerns surrounding pauperism in the period and its relationship to the development of feeble-mindedness, see Gavin Jones, *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 62-76

<sup>76</sup> Lombardo, *Three Generations No Imbeciles*, pp. 9-10; James W Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 70-72

<sup>77</sup> Richard Dugdale, 'Hereditary Pauperism as Illustrated in the "Juke" Family', in *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies 1877-1919*, ed. by Nicole Hahn Rafter (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), pp. 34-47, (p. 36) (first publ. in Conference of Boards of Public Charities, *Proceedings*, (1877), pp. 81-95)

new understandings of genetic inheritance. Mendel's work revealed that many characteristics in living organisms could be predicted according to the presence or nature of those characteristics in the organism's parents. His experiments suggested that there was a great deal of stability rather than change in living organisms. Amongst those seeking explanations for human characteristics, Mendel's work with its emphasis on organic stability caused a shift away from environmental understandings.<sup>78</sup> These new beliefs were to have a profound influence upon ideas about intelligence and intellectual disability. Scientists and sociologists on both sides of the Atlantic increasingly argued that an inherent intellectual lack or 'feeble-mindedness' was a Mendelian, heritable 'unit characteristic'. However, the linkages between intellect and morality that were embedded into degeneration theory remained and feeble-mindedness was associated with and often considered responsible for social ills and vices such as alcoholism, poverty and prostitution.<sup>79</sup>

Drawing on the emerging belief that human characteristics were inherited, a new science known as eugenics grew in popularity and influence throughout the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>80</sup> Building on the initial theories of Francis Galton, early eugenicists such as Karl Pearson and Charles Davenport suggested that through controlled breeding, those characteristics which were perceived to be undesirable, in particular feeble-mindedness, could and should be eradicated.<sup>81</sup> In part, they believed this could be achieved through encouraging breeding between those considered to be eugenically healthy – so-called 'positive eugenics'. However, more often, particularly in the United States, eugenicists fretted about 'bad breeding', about the reproductive behaviour of those deemed to carry 'dysgenic' or 'cacogenic'

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<sup>78</sup> Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, pp. 41-43

<sup>79</sup> Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, pp. 45-47

<sup>80</sup> Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind*, pp.135-137

<sup>81</sup> Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, pp. 57-69

traits.<sup>82</sup> To stop this kind of reproduction, eugenic movements advocated controls such as restrictive marriage legislation, institutionalisation, incarceration and, at its most extreme, eugenic euthanasia. These controls enacted a 'negative eugenics', they sought to restrict 'bad breeding'.<sup>83</sup> Feeble-mindedness became the *cause celebre* of the eugenic movement, the most prominent evidence of 'bad breeding' and the supposed root cause of many social ills. Eugenicists expressed concern that if not halted, feeble-mindedness could spread and threaten 'civilisation'.<sup>84</sup>

Like degeneration theory, the eugenic movement added new layers to both scientific and popular understanding of intellectual disability, creating new associations with heredity, immorality and 'racial decline'. However, eugenic explanations for intellectual disability did not simply replace those which had previously existed. As McDonagh has argued, with each new conception of intellectual disability there is a 'layering over' of older notions: 'occasionally, older concepts of idiocy resurface within newer frameworks or simply refuse to disappear. Indeed, these older concepts often determine the shape assumed by newer ideas, so that the demonic idiot for example shares significant features with the later pathological or degenerate idiot'.<sup>85</sup> Thus while eugenics introduced new meanings to intellectual disability, many of these – in particular the associations between feeble-mindedness and immorality – were built upon pre-existing stereotypes. Especially in the early years of the eugenic movement, eugenicists also often blurred their descriptions of feeble-mindedness with earlier explanations for intellectual disability and, while public perceptions of intellectual disability were undoubtedly altered by eugenics, a variety of the 'older concepts' McDonagh describes continued to have

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<sup>82</sup> Both 'dysgenic' and 'cacogenic' were used within the eugenic movement to describe bad heredity, throughout this thesis I use the former but the terms were interchangeable.

<sup>83</sup> For a discussion of 'negative' vs 'positive' eugenics see Carlson, pp. 233-242

<sup>84</sup> Stubblefield, 'Tainted Whiteness', pp. 171-178

<sup>85</sup> McDonagh, *Idiocy*, p. 15

value and meaning. Equally, as Martin Pernick has discussed, the meaning of eugenics – both as a science and as a term – was highly contested throughout the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>86</sup>

The scientific interest of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the role of heredity and environment in the development of individuals was mirrored in the era's literature. The emergence of literary naturalism broadly coincided with the burst of publication of family studies like *The Jukes* and the embryonic years of the eugenic movement. Writers influenced by literary naturalism were interested in the extent to which human life is determined and curtailed by forces beyond the individual's control. As Donald Pizer has noted, 'naturalistic writers found that the poor – in education, intellect, and worldly goods – are indeed pushed and forced, that the powerful do control the weak, that few men can overcome the handicaps imposed upon them by inadequacies of body and mind, and that many men have instinctive needs which are not amenable to moral suasion or rational arguments'.<sup>87</sup> James Trent in *Inventing the Feeblemind*, has suggested that this increasing turn towards determinism in the period's literature and art can be seen as a contributory factor in the rise of eugenics and the creation of the category of feeble-mindedness.<sup>88</sup> Although Trent's suggestion of a link between naturalism and the rise of eugenics may be true in part, naturalist authors of the 1890s and 1900s were at least as interested in economics, environment and chance as determining factors in human life as they were in heredity. Accordingly, a lack of intelligence, like other character traits in naturalist works, is not as firmly associated with ideas of inheritance or pathology as in later fictions.

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<sup>86</sup> Martin Pernick, *The Black Stork* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 41-80

<sup>87</sup> Donald Pizer, *Twentieth Century Naturalism: An Interpretation* (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), p. 6

<sup>88</sup> Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind*, pp. 139-141

McTeague, the eponymous protagonist in Frank Norris's naturalist novel of 1899, certainly shows an intellectual lack; the narrator and other characters repeatedly draw attention to McTeague's 'stupidity'.<sup>89</sup> This stupidity is married to a tendency towards violence which McTeague struggles to control and which is eventually central to his tragic decline. The origin of the character's intellectual lack and its connection to his brutality are never clear. Norris draws attention to the possible role of heredity in forming McTeague's brutishness clearly exploring the growing contemporary concerns regarding the connections between intellectual disability, violence and immorality in general. The novel's narrator informs us that: 'Below the fine fabric of all that was good in him ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer'.<sup>90</sup> However, this assertion of the influence of heredity on McTeague's character is then complicated by the suggestion that this evil 'faces every man and child' and that McTeague lacks the 'reason' to control it [24]. Within this formulation, it is then the 'evil' which is inherited but not necessarily the lack of 'reason' and the true role of heredity in forming McTeague's character remains elusive if not obfuscated. Furthermore, Norris opens up the possibility that McTeague's lack of reason is related to a lack of education and wealth. When his business and marriage are successful in the first half of the novel, he develops opinions and new ideas of his own [141]. Similarly, McTeague's stupidity is often exposed by moments when he is confronted by things normally denied him by his social class such as drinking champagne [124] or buying tickets for the theatre [69-

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<sup>89</sup> Norris's choice of the word 'stupid' to describe McTeague is intriguing. As a descriptor of intelligence, the word is as slippery as 'idiocy' but tends to have less pathological implications. Notably, however, early criminologist and psychologist Havelock Ellis had used the word a few years earlier to describe the inherent intelligence of criminals in his work *The Criminal* (1890) just a few years before the publication of *McTeague*. Ellis, like Lombroso and Nordau, saw criminals as 'savages' and crime as evidence of atavism. McTeague's brutishness and his murderous nature perhaps suggests his 'stupidity' is not dissimilar to that Ellis describes. Havelock Ellis, *The Criminal* (New York: Scribner and Welford, 1890), pp. 133-134

<sup>90</sup> Frank Norris, *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. 23 Further references are given after quotations in the text



70]. McTeague's tragic demise – the novel concludes with him alone in the desert having murdered his wife and former best friend – is certainly linked to an 'inadequacy of mind', yet the novel posits this as but one determining factor in McTeague's downfall and the origin and importance of his intellectual lack remain vague and uncertain.<sup>91</sup>

Much as the scientists and nascent sociologists of the latter part of the nineteenth century wrestled with the aetiology of intellectual disability so too then did the writers of the period. Yet as the twentieth century began, the growing success of the eugenic movement saw an increasing emphasis on the role of heredity in the causation of all human behaviour. While the influence of naturalism persisted in the literature of the early decades of the twentieth century, the heyday of the eugenic movement can be seen as generally contemporaneous with that of literary modernism. For many years the parallel development of eugenics and modernism was distinctly under-examined. However, in the last decade, critics have begun to investigate the relationship between the two. This criticism has tended to locate eugenic tendencies within modernist writing. Donald Childs, for example, has argued that not merely the works but also the lives of modernist writers working in Britain such as Virginia Woolf and TS Eliot reveal eugenicist inclinations.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Betsy Nies has argued that American modernists, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and H.D., incorporated the eugenic image of the supreme Nordic white American into their works.<sup>93</sup> Taking a wider view of

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<sup>91</sup> *McTeague* is not the only naturalist work which examines the role of intellectual lack in determining characters' lives. For example, Gavin Jones in *American Hungers*, pp. 76-85, argues that in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) Hurstwood's decline can be understood as the result of an inherent 'pauperism' which blurs poverty with insanity and 'mental insufficiency'.

<sup>92</sup> Donald Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yates and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 22-37; pp. 99-120

<sup>93</sup> Betsy Nies, *Racial Fantasies: Racial Ideology in the Literature and Popular Culture of the 1920s* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 19-44

American modernism and considering it alongside the Harlem Renaissance, Daylanne English has suggested that eugenic thinking was so widespread in American life that its presence, though often taking different forms, can be felt throughout the period's literature.<sup>94</sup> English's assessment of the ubiquitous influence of eugenics is an important one. It is true to say that its presence can be felt in many modernist authors' fiction, not only American, as English notes, but also European. That presence should not necessarily be read as indicative that any author was a supporter of the eugenic movement or adhered to eugenic ideology. The new science made biological explanations for behaviour more prominent and more accepted and as a result, ideas about heredity tend to be both more prominent and expressed with more clarity and certainty in modernist fictions than in naturalist or realist ones. Yet, despite this increased sense of certainty, many modernist writers continued to question the relationship between environment and heredity.

The prominence of eugenic ideas in modernist fiction is reflected in the representation of intellectual disability. Modernists – and, as I discuss in later chapters, particularly southern modernists – were undoubtedly more intrigued by the relationship between intellectual disability and heredity than earlier writers. Modernist authors frequently imply that intellectual disability is hereditary in nature in their works and questions of biological inheritance are approached with more confidence than Norris's wrestling with 'evil' and 'reason' in *McTeague*, for example. Indeed the language of the eugenic movement often appears in modernist texts and as part of their representations of intellectual disability. However, despite this assured expression of hereditarian ideas, eugenic-like models of intellectual disability sometimes appear, like eugenic ideas more broadly, to be used in bad faith

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<sup>94</sup> English, *Unnatural Selections*, pp. 1-35

by modernist writers. This is particularly true of southern modernism but it is not unique in this regard. Eugenic ideas about intellectual disability (and otherwise) are often presented somewhat ironically in modernist texts. An example of this is Jack London's short story 'Told in the Drooling Ward' (1914). The story is narrated by a self-described 'high grade feeb' who is institutionalised for his disability, yet serves as a surrogate carer for others. Eugenic language is to the fore and used to make distinctions between 'grades' of feeble-mindedness, reflecting the extent to which ideas about heredity and disability were not merely topics for eugenicists or medical professionals but matters of aesthetic and public interest and concern. Yet, by having his narrator use this language himself and show a remarkable level of erudition and self-awareness about his role in the institution and his disability, the author invites questions about both institutionalisation and the basis for it.<sup>95</sup>

Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), offers a further example of the different approaches to intellectual disability found in modernist fiction. A brief discussion of Conrad's novel is useful as it not only shows distinct differences in the way intellectual disability is used than is seen in *McTeague*, but it also in many ways foreshadows many of the ways intellectual disability is represented in southern modernism. Southern modernists frequently drew upon older models of intellectual disability to generate an uncertainty about contemporary models; the layering over process described by McDonagh is made visible. While the kind of clear clashes of meaning that appear in southern modernist depictions of intellectual disability are

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<sup>95</sup> London was interested generally in questions of heredity and degeneration. Daniel Bender has discussed the tensions and contradictions in London's writing between his socialism and his images of a degenerate working class and the 'unfit'. London's writing, to some extent like that of Conrad, is not easily defined as strictly naturalist or modernist. However, the tensions Bender describes in London's use of degenerate imagery and the kind of irony I note here are more typical of the ways modernists approached questions of heredity, intelligence and degeneration. Daniel Bender, *American Abyss: Savagery and Civilisation in the Age of Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 14; p. 146; p. 156

unusual, they were not alone amongst writers of the period in exploring these symbolic possibilities or using them to highlight contradictions in ideas about intelligence. *The Secret Agent* almost certainly had a direct influence on some of the novels discussed in this thesis. There are echoes of the novel's use of idiocy in Ellen Glasgow's *Vein of Iron* for example. Glasgow knew Conrad and visited him in England so was likely to have been acquainted with what was, by the time she wrote, already a well known novel.<sup>96</sup>

*The Secret Agent* sees Conrad explore issues of idiocy and contemporary concerns regarding degeneration and heredity are reflected within the text. However, the meaning of intellectual disability is particularly unstable within the novel. Conrad blends older Romantic notions of the innocent idiot with newer scientific theories and terms to the point that the reader can never be sure of the nature or causes of idiocy or degeneracy nor be certain of who is or is not an idiot. Noting this blurring, Martin Halliwell has suggested that the novel is a 'complicitous critique' of modern theories regarding degeneration, in particular the theories of Cesare Lombroso.<sup>97</sup> The influence of Lombroso's ideas about crime, physical appearance and intellectual ability are present throughout the novel.<sup>98</sup> One of the novel's characters, Ossipon, described as a lecturer in 'social hygienics', directly references Lombroso's proto-eugenic theories and applies these theories in an examination of the features of Stevie, the novel's idiot figure. Stevie is, according to Ossipon's assessment, a 'typical degenerate'.<sup>99</sup> Later in the novel, on discovering Stevie's sister

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<sup>96</sup> Susan Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 130-131

<sup>97</sup> Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, p. 101

<sup>98</sup> For further discussion on the presence of the ideas of Lombroso, Ellis and others in *The Secret Agent* see Allan Hunter, *Joseph Conrad and the Ethics of Darwinism* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1983), pp. 153-220

<sup>99</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 34-35 [Further references are given after quotations in the text]

Winnie has murdered her husband, Ossipon associates her actions with Stevie's idiocy and, echoing contemporary fears regarding the inherited nature of feeble-mindedness, becomes concerned that Winnie is also a degenerate, seeing in her face a resemblance to him [217]. As Halliwell shows, there are multiple references to physiognomy in the novel, and characters' descriptions often recall those used by Lombroso to describe degenerate criminals – including ironically, that of Ossipon the self-professed expert in degeneracy. Nearly all the novel's characters appear to be lacking in morality. Though many of them hold prominent political positions or pertain to have deep ideological principles, these are often treated as part of a game and ignored when necessary.<sup>100</sup>

If there is any morality to be found in the novel, it is in the idiot Stevie, and to some extent Winnie – who kills her husband Verloc in response to his role in Stevie's death. Reading these characters, a failed terrorist and a murderer as moral is not straightforward. However, this reflects the novel's blurring of ideas about intellectual disability. Stevie, as Halliwell and McDonagh have noted, retains elements of the innocence associated with Romantic idiot figures.<sup>101</sup> Although he kills himself attempting to bomb the Greenwich Observatory, this is not necessarily due to an inherited predisposition towards crime. Stevie is persuaded into the act by Verloc who politicises him. He is a naïf, a victim of the chaotic and inscrutable world in which he lives. His politicisation comes from a recognition of cruelty and injustice to which the other more cynical characters in the novel only pay lip service. And yet Stevie's willingness to use violence to respond to the cruelty he sees, allows Conrad to ask questions about the justification for terrorism and the character's nature. Stevie's naivety conceals an anger that, while reflecting a response to

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<sup>100</sup> Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, pp. 100-109

<sup>101</sup> Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, p. 101; McDonagh, *Idiocy*, p. 311

injustice, also links back to the degeneracy Ossipon notes in him. As I discuss in Chapter Five, William Faulkner was also to explore the contradictions and tensions between intellectual disability's role as a signifier of "innocence" and as a symbol of moral degeneration and violence. In Conrad's novel, as in Faulkner's works, these tensions are not resolved but are left open to interpretation but the naivety incorporated into Stevie's character resists any reading of the 'idiot' as wholly immoral. As Halliwell notes, despite his role as the arbiter of degeneracy, it is in fact Ossipon who more thoroughly embodies the criminality and immorality typically associated with idiocy. Having sworn to assist Winnie, he abandons her and steals her money leading to her suicide. Ossipon the intellectual shows the physical and behavioural characteristics of a Lombrosian degenerate while Stevie, whose idiocy would often be read as indicative of degeneracy and hereditary feeble-mindedness, is a distinctly more moral figure, albeit a far from straightforward one.<sup>102</sup> The relationship between idiocy and morality becomes vague and indeterminate in *The Secret Agent* and as Halliwell's analysis suggests, the ideas of Lombroso and others who sought to find corporeal and hereditarian explanations for crime and immorality are overrepresented, almost to the point of parody.

Conrad's destabilisation of intellectual disability is crucial to the novel's depiction and critique of modernity. The language of intellectual disability permeates throughout the novel with multiple references to 'idiocy', 'imbeciles' and 'degenerates'. Conrad appears to express concern that the modern urban sprawl of London produces a kind of intellectual disability. Although the novel contains an idiot figure in Stevie, the intelligence of other characters is never secure. As Conrad wrote in a letter to a friend, the novel contains 'half a dozen anarchists, two women

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<sup>102</sup> Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, pp. 95-109

and an idiot. They're all imbeciles, what's more including an Embassy Secretary, a Minister of State and an Inspector of Police'.<sup>103</sup> In separating out Stevie as an 'idiot', Conrad suggests a more essentialised, biological intellectual lack in him compared to the other characters who are 'imbeciles'. Although 'idiot' and 'imbecile' were used scientifically at this time to mark supposed gradations of feeble-mindedness, Conrad was perhaps here instead attempting to parse the difference between a biologically determined intellectual disability and a more nebulous, uncertain intellectual lack. These 'imbeciles' resemble naturalistic depictions of idiocy such as those in *McTeague*; their intellectual lack can be read, at least in part, as a result of their environment – the political milieu of a chaotic modern city. They are, the novel suggests, without reason because they live in a world without reason.

As noted, Nordau and others directly linked a pathological mental lack to the urban environment too, and such is the nature of Conrad's complex weaving of different literary and scientific models of intellectual disability in the novel, that even as it proposes an environmentally caused 'imbecility', the possibility of inherent intellectual lack cannot be entirely avoided. *The Secret Agent* offers an uncertainty which challenges and at times mocks the certainty of pathological explanations for intellectual disability without entirely discarding them. The novel is certainly more interested in and invested in biology and heredity than earlier fiction such as *McTeague*, despite the short amount of time that separates them. While obviously no two writers ever approach intellectual disability in exactly the same way, this increased focus on biology in *The Secret Agent* is indicative of the growing belief in, and concern about, hereditarian explanations for intellectual disability. Southern modernists too were interested in the questions generated by these new beliefs and

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<sup>103</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: Volume 3*, ed. by Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 372-373

concerns. As I show in later chapters, their works, to an even greater extent than Conrad's, make visible the slippery nature of intellectual disability, and incorporate implicit and explicit critiques of hereditarian notions while, at the same time, depending upon them. Modernist works such as *The Secret Agent* and 'Told in the Drooling Ward' foreshadowed, and in all likelihood informed, the kinds of depictions of intellectual disability in southern novels and short stories in the 1920s and 1930s.

However, Conrad's novel, like London's story, has a certain ironic critical distance usually absent in southern depictions of intellectual disability. This is not to say that irony is not present in southern modernism. However, in *The Secret Agent*, the narrative voice, and by implication the reader, are set apart from the idiocy on show. Equally, the slightly mocking tone of the novel consistently reminds the reader that the idiots and imbeciles are fictional; Conrad offers a critique not an attempt at verisimilitude. While southern modernists undoubtedly used intellectual disability for symbolic and aesthetic purposes, the fears and questions it causes are both more prominent and more tangible within their literature. This can in part be understood by the impact of eugenics upon the American South; for these writers, the incipient eugenic notions belittled in Conrad's novel, had become more fully formed and powerful within their society. As the following section discusses, the twenty years that separated *The Secret Agent* from the first southern novel discussed in this thesis – Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *Time of Man* – saw eugenics become widely accepted in the United States and hereditary feeble-mindedness become the dominant model of intellectual disability. In the South, eugenics tapped into a somewhat ambiguous notion of regional 'backwardness' and blended with pre-existing constructions of race, gender and class to produce new regionally distinctive fears about intellectual disability. This blending imbued intellectual disability with



new and significant meanings and by incorporating intellectually disabled characters into their texts southern modernists were able to explore and respond to not only eugenics and feeble-mindedness but also some of the broader issues within the region and beyond.

### **The Eugenic Era and ‘The Menace of the Feeble-minded’**

In 1927, the Supreme Court ruled in the *Buck v. Bell* case, upholding the constitutional legitimacy of eugenic sterilisation of the ‘feeble-minded’. John Bell, the superintendent of the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded, supported by a number of pre-eminent physicians and eugenicists, successfully defended his right to sterilize the appellant in the case Carrie Buck, a poor, white, Virginian woman. Buck’s lawyer, Irving Whitehead was a firm supporter of eugenic sterilisation and the case had reached the Supreme Court not because of a genuine attempt to appeal the proposed sterilisation but instead to test the constitutional validity of the Virginian sterilisation law thereby creating a model for eugenic sterilisation laws in other states. The court, headed by former President William Howard Taft – who had occasional involvement with the American eugenic movement himself – was convinced.<sup>104</sup> Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes’s now famous opinion on the case declared that ‘It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind...Three generations of imbeciles are enough.’<sup>105</sup> In October 1927, five months after the Supreme Court decision, Carrie Buck was legally sterilized by John Bell.<sup>106</sup>

*Buck v. Bell* was the most significant victory for the American eugenic

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<sup>104</sup> Lombardo, *Three Generations No Imbeciles*, pp. 157-173

<sup>105</sup> *Buck v Bell*, 274 U.S. 200, (1927)

<sup>106</sup> Lombardo, *Three Generations No Imbeciles*, p. 185

movement; a movement which, despite consistent opposition from large sections of the American population, had much success in the country in the first four decades of the twentieth century. A number of state legislatures had already passed eugenic sterilisation laws and sterilisations had already occurred – some without the any legal framework to support them.<sup>107</sup> *Buck v Bell* gave these laws federal backing and paved the way for new laws modelled on Virginia's statutes which states could be sure were constitutional. For those concerned about the deleterious effects of the nation's feeble-minded on national eugenic health, *Buck v Bell* offered a federally endorsed solution to the 'problem'. Much of the evidence for this supposed problem was based on a number of family studies which, eugenicists claimed, highlighted the recurring presence of 'feeble-minded' individuals within families and certain communities. Following the broad model if not always the environmentalist bent of *The Jukes*, these studies were based upon spurious testing methods and moral judgements. Insanity, alcoholism, physical and sensory impairments, promiscuity (or any kind of unmarried sex) and crime were all read as evidence of hereditary lack. However, feeble-mindedness became a pre-eminent and ever growing concern. Although testing usually underpinned judgements about intellectual lack, these other traits themselves were often used as evidence of feeble-mindedness.<sup>108</sup> As Nicole Rafter has noted, the success of these studies depended not only on how they mapped these traits they found into a form of scientific evidence but also on their language and use of symbol:

The appeal of the family studies lay partly in their structure as quasi-fictional accounts. Although the narratives are often combined awkwardly with scientific data displays, as a group the works present a kind of melodrama replete with danger, sex and salvation. As in

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<sup>107</sup> Elof Carlson, *The Unfit*, pp. 206-222

<sup>108</sup> Rafter, Introduction to *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies 1877-1919*, ed. by Nicole Hahn Rafter (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), pp. 9-11

melodrama the villain is very bad, the victim innocent, the solutions clear. The cacogenic imperil the good people of society – authors, readers, "our" class – who can be saved by heroic eugenics. By endorsing eugenics we can also become heroes.<sup>109</sup>

In addition to being essential to the studies' success, it is this 'quasi-fictional' nature of eugenic family studies that in part made eugenic symbolism so appealing to writers of intentional fiction. As I show in this thesis, southern modernists frequently called upon both the imagery and logic of eugenic family studies when representing intellectual disability.

Of the later studies the most influential was psychologist Henry H.

Goddard's *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredibility of Feeble-Mindedness* (1912). More than any other eugenic work, it was Goddard's that would provide the pseudoscientific underpinning for the relationship between feeble-mindedness and immorality. While other eugenic texts and literature from the emerging field of criminology (which Lombroso had initiated) had proposed that relationship, Goddard's *Kallikak Family* provided 'evidence' which solidified it. Goddard's study traced the ancestry of Deborah Kallikak – a young woman at a training school for the feeble-minded in New Jersey – back to a sexual liaison between Deborah's 'normal' great-great-great grandfather Martin Kallikak and a 'feeble-minded' woman. Through the application of I.Q. tests to all traceable descendants of this coupling and some ill-defined oral history, Goddard and his colleagues argued that many descendants of this union were 'feeble-minded' and showed a variety of what they deemed to be socially undesirable traits.<sup>110</sup> In this regard, Goddard's work was not so different from the family studies which had preceded it. However, Goddard claimed that Martin Kallikak later 'straightened up and married a respectable girl of good

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<sup>109</sup> Rafter, Introduction to *White Trash*, p. 9

<sup>110</sup> Henry H Goddard, *The Kallikak Family: A Study of the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), pp. 17-28

family, and through that union [came] another line of descendants of radically different character' and in which he and his field workers could find little sign of the socially negative traits he detected in the first line.<sup>111</sup> The difference between the two groups of descendants of Martin Kallikak, one from his relationship with a 'feeble-minded' woman and one from a marriage to a 'respectable' woman was, Goddard argued, evidence that feeble-mindedness was not only inherited but 'largely responsible' for 'paupers, criminals, prostitutes, drunkards, and examples of all forms of social pests with which modern society is burdened'.<sup>112</sup>

Goddard argued that the kind of feeble-mindedness he located in the Kallikaks was often concealed and not easily recognised. Most of the Kallikaks were, he claimed, 'morons'. Goddard himself had invented the term 'moron' a few years earlier to define a type of individual who, according to the Binet-Simon I.Q. testing he employed, had the mental ability of a 'normal' child of eight to twelve years old. Goddard's morons were a social menace because of their ability – unlike the less able 'idiot' or 'imbecile' – to function reasonably well in society.<sup>113</sup> Morons were less likely to be institutionalised and more likely to be free in the community where they could easily turn to crime and immorality. Most dangerously for Goddard, morons were more likely to reproduce, creating further social and biological degeneracy. The morons he diagnosed and depicted in *The Kallikak Family* were evidence for Goddard and his fellow eugenicists of the veracity of his fears and the need for social control of the intellectually disabled.<sup>114</sup> He argued that if Deborah Kallikak left the training school she would 'at once become a prey to the designs of evil men or evil women and would lead a life that would be vicious,

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<sup>111</sup> Goddard, *The Kallikak Family*, p. 29

<sup>112</sup> Goddard, *The Kallikak Family*, p. 116

<sup>113</sup> Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind*, pp. 161-165

<sup>114</sup> Goddard, *The Kallikak Family*, pp. 101-102

immoral and criminal, though because of her mentality she herself would not be responsible'.<sup>115</sup>

Goddard concluded the work by outlining methods he felt would provide adequate protection for society from the moronic Kallikaks and their like.

Segregation was, he suggested, the most obvious and best solution. He was somewhat more circumspect regarding sterilisation. While he believed it could be a valuable and essential tool in combating feeble-mindedness, he urged caution in its application until more was known about the nature of the condition's heredity. This caution did not however prevent Goddard's work from being cited fifteen years after its publication in the *Buck v. Bell* case as supportive evidence for involuntary sterilisation.<sup>116</sup> That *The Kallikaks* was quoted at the trial was no surprise; the book was exceptionally successful and very well known. This success continued throughout the twenties and into the 1930s. By 1939, Goddard's book had been reprinted twelve times in the United States and been equally influential in other countries, most notably in Nazi Germany.<sup>117</sup>

Goddard's greatest impact however, lay not in book sales, but in reframing notions regarding intellectual disability. As Leila Zenderland has noted, *The Kallikaks* fused 'a newer "Mendelism" onto an older and still highly potent Christian moralism'.<sup>118</sup> This combination was attractive to an American audience which was intrigued by new ideas of heredity yet remained deeply religious. Indeed, while some religious leaders and organisations (in particular Roman Catholics) resisted eugenic ideas, believing that eugenic practises immorally interfered with the actions of God,

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<sup>115</sup> Goddard, *The Kallikak Family*, p. 12

<sup>116</sup> Leila Zenderland, 'The Parable of The Kallikak Family' in *Mental Retardation in America* ed. by Steven Noll and James W. Trent (New York: New York University Press, 2004), p. 179

<sup>117</sup> Zenderland, 'The Parable of The Kallikak Family', p. 165; p. 179

<sup>118</sup> Zenderland, 'The Parable of The Kallikak Family', p. 178

a number of Progressive preachers included eugenic thinking into their sermons.<sup>119</sup> Moral judgement and eugenics were explicitly and implicitly intertwined in the United States in the period. Goddard and other American eugenicists in the early decades of the twentieth century consistently blurred their conceptions of intelligence with their own moral standards. Goddard's 'moron' bore a remarkable similarity to the 'defective delinquent' described by penologists and criminologists of the period. The 'defective delinquent' was determined as a criminal whose behaviour and inability to reform was due to some kind of vaguely determined and described 'mental defect'.<sup>120</sup> With the arrival of the moron and the defective delinquent, socially undesirable traits were not only caused by feeble-mindedness they were indicative of and inseparable from it. While intellectual disability and intelligence have always been, to some extent at least, moral categories, it is at this point in American history that the dependent relationship between the categories of morality and intelligence can be seen at its most explicit. Goddard argued that those who were less intelligent were less able to control their emotions and therefore more likely to act in an 'undesirable' manner. To be feeble-minded was therefore to be immoral and to be immoral was to be feeble-minded.<sup>121</sup>

The creation of the moron was a remarkable broadening of the category of intellectual disability. Goddard estimated that at least two percent of the population was feeble-minded; more than double the number previously thought.<sup>122</sup> However, Robert M. Yerkes's Army IQ tests of the early 1920s concluded that nearly half of the army (and therefore presumably, the nation, Yerkes argued) were in the moron

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<sup>119</sup> Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 3-23

<sup>120</sup> Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals*, pp. 149-157

<sup>121</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (London: Penguin, 1981), pp. 158-174

<sup>122</sup> Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind*, p. 162

class.<sup>123</sup> While both Goddard's and Yerkes's work was criticized at the time and has now been thoroughly debunked, the fear of an expansive moron class was a major component of concerns throughout the 1910s and into the 1920s, and to a lesser extent the 1930s, about the 'menace of the feeble-minded'.<sup>124</sup> Influenced by the research of Goddard, Yerkes and others, professionals and public officials nationwide wrestled with the idea that feeble-mindedness was not only heritable but the cause of a plethora of social problems. Both engendering and building upon this public concern, many eugenicists toured the country explaining the threat posed by the feeble-minded and lobbying for eugenic reforms such as marriage and immigration restrictions, institutionalisation and sterilisation. They often found willing and receptive audiences and moreover were sometimes invited by state organisations and institutions to provide expertise and propose solutions to the 'feeble-minded problem'.

Many states hired professional eugenic field workers to undertake pedigree studies or requested the National Committee of Mental Hygiene carry out a survey to ascertain the level of feeble-mindedness within their borders.<sup>125</sup> Often influenced by such surveys, the governmental response at a regional and federal level to the 'menace of the feeble-minded' was as dramatic as the rhetoric that surrounded it. By 1914 eugenic marriage restriction laws which prevented those deemed feeble-minded or insane from marrying were in place in over half the states.<sup>126</sup> Federally, eugenicists, in particular Harry Laughlin the assistant director of the Eugenics Records Office, were successful in lobbying for the Immigration Restriction Acts of

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<sup>123</sup> Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, p. 197

<sup>124</sup> See Noll, *Feeble-Minded in Our Midst*, pp. 31-32 for a brief discussion of criticism of IQ testing in the 1920s and Gould, pp. 192-224 for an account of the testing procedure and a thorough critique of Yerkes's methodology

<sup>125</sup> Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind*, pp.166-178; Noll, *Feeble-Minded in Our Midst*, pp. 17-21

<sup>126</sup> Edward Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science*, p. 22

1921 and 1927, suggesting that ‘inferior races’ were a threat to the nation’s eugenic health.<sup>127</sup> The period also saw remarkable growth in the number of institutions for the feeble-minded. In the South, for example, at the beginning of the 1910s, there were only two public institutions for the feeble-minded; by the mid-1920s there were eleven.<sup>128</sup> Often these institutions were training schools or colonies which aimed – at least in theory – to provide, care for, and teach skills to their inmates as well as protect society at large from the threat they supposedly posed. Nationwide, the population of those institutionalised due to some presumed intellectual disability had more than doubled, rising from just over 20,000 in 1910 to nearly 43,000 in 1923.<sup>129</sup> Sterilisation also gained popularity as a means of preventing the reproduction of the feeble-minded in this period. While eugenic sterilisation laws had always been controversial and were often legally challenged before *Buck vs. Bell*, twenty-five states had passed such laws by the time of the Supreme Court’s ruling in 1927.<sup>130</sup> As James Trent and others have argued, by the 1920s the majority of genetic scientists and many professionals working with those deemed feeble-minded had begun to turn away from eugenics.<sup>131</sup> However, the impact of eugenic rhetoric in shaping notions and legislation concerning intellectual disability continued to be felt throughout that decade and beyond.

If eugenics reframed ideas about the heritability and moral nature of intellectual disability, it also strongly influenced conceptions about who might be intellectually disabled. As Amanda Stubblefield has argued, the category of ‘feeble-mindedness’ was heavily influenced by contemporary ideas about race, gender and

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<sup>127</sup> Haller, *Eugenics*, pp. 152-155

<sup>128</sup> Noll, *Feeble-Minded in Our Midst*, p. 12

<sup>129</sup> Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind*, p. 188

<sup>130</sup> Lombardo, *Three Generations No Imbeciles*, p. 294

<sup>131</sup> Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind*, p. 182



class. Stubblefield suggests that eugenics served to create a ‘tainted whiteness’ – a means by which the white male elite could mark its biological superiority to others:

The concept of feeble-mindedness that Goddard and his associates developed and formalized became an umbrella concept that linked white poverty, off-whiteness, and lack of civilization-building skills together as related forms of hereditary white impurity. The category of the moron—the feeble-minded person who appears normal but who is prone to immorality, incapable of being a contributing citizen in a democratic society, and who will pass feeble-mindedness on to his or her offspring—was a powerful device for drawing a distinction between tainted and pure white people. The formalized understanding of feeble-mindedness legitimized white elite fears and eugenic public policies including involuntary sterilisation.<sup>132</sup>

Eugenicists overwhelmingly located dysgenic qualities within rural poor whites or within immigrants who were seen as ‘off-white’ such as Jews or Eastern Europeans. The category of feeble-mindedness concealed the inequality created by and manifested in class and racial hierarchies and suggested any difference in social status between elite whites and those who were poor or immigrants was due to some pathological taint. Feeble-mindedness was also a gendered category; women were more likely to be institutionalised and/or sterilized than men. Stubblefield suggests that eugenics offered a means for white males to control female sexuality. Women, she argues, were included amongst those who lacked ‘civilisation-building skills’; their role was to act as good mothers and nurture men who could contribute towards civilisation. Those women whose sexual behaviour challenged the white male concept of what a good wife or mother was were often categorised as feeble-minded. Indeed, lack of chastity in unmarried women could be seen as evidence of their moron status regardless of any IQ test.<sup>133</sup> Carrie Buck, who had a child born out of wedlock and was a poor white woman, was a moron not because of any innate

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<sup>132</sup> Stubblefield, 'Tainted Whiteness', p. 176

<sup>133</sup> Stubblefield, 'Tainted Whiteness', pp. 162-181

cognitive lack but because the category had been designed precisely to encompass individuals like her.<sup>134</sup>

## Eugenics in the South

For Carrie Buck, it was not merely her gender, class and race that were highlighted during debates over her eugenic sterilisation, but also her regional identity. Albert Priddy, the original supervisor at Carrie's institution, noted in a deposition given to the court that Carrie's family belonged to the 'shiftless, ignorant, and worthless class of antisocial whites of the South'.<sup>135</sup> National anxiety about poor whites predated (and outlived) the eugenic movement and southern 'white trash' were a prominent, if not the prominent, focus of this fear.<sup>136</sup> Eugenics offered a new language with which to express this anxiety. Accordingly, though fears about the association between poverty and feeble-mindedness were nationwide, poor whites of the South were seen as particularly dysgenic. Eugenacists surveying Indiana for feeble-mindedness, for example, suggested a major cause of any feeble-mindedness within the state was the arrival of itinerants who were 'the poor white trash of the South' and one family study focussed in particular on 'Kentucky Hill-Folk in Indiana'.<sup>137</sup> Eugenic works suggested this influx of poor feeble-minded southerners to more northerly states was nothing new. In 1923, leading eugenicist Arthur Estabrook re-examined the dysgenic group dubbed the Ishmaelites in Oscar McCulloch's 1888 highly influential family study *The Tribe of Ishmael*. Estabrook suggested that this supposed 'tribe' – who

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<sup>134</sup> For a discussion of how those involved in the *Buck v Bell* case blurred ideas of intelligence with class and gender see Lombardo, *Three Generations No Imbeciles*, pp. 112-148

<sup>135</sup> *Briefs and Records of Buck v. Bell*, quoted in Lombardo, *Three Generations No Imbeciles*, p. 134

<sup>136</sup> For a history of attitudes towards poor whites see Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2006). For further discussion of how these attitudes influenced the representation and treatment of poor whites in the South see Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

<sup>137</sup> Alexandra Minna Stern, "'We Cannot Make a Silk Purse Out of a Sow's Ear': Eugenics in the Hoosier Heartland", *Indiana Magazine of History*, 103 (2007), 2-38, pp. 19-20

numbered over ten thousand and could be mostly found in Northern states – had come from the South. The family's origins could be traced to colonial Virginia, he suggested, to 'idlers', 'criminals' and 'vagabonds' deported to the state from England.<sup>138</sup>

Other eugenicists sought different explanations for perceived southern difference. In 1914, for example, leading eugenicist and one of the nation's preeminent scientists David Starr Jordan and his brother Henry conducted a eugenic investigation of the region. They hypothesised that defeat in the Civil War had caused damage to the South's eugenic health by depleting the region's white male aristocracy and therefore, by the standard gender, race and class inflected eugenic logic of the time, denying it of its finest biological specimens. Their approach was unusual for a eugenic study as it reported answers to questionnaires sent to southerners asking them to evaluate the effects of the conflict on the region's biology. Unsurprisingly, southerners were circumspect about the region's lack of biological fitness and their answers did not support the brothers' hypothesis. The Jordan brothers could not deny the answers they had received and admitted as much in their conclusion. However, even after taking account of their respondents' resistance to it, they remained committed to the thesis that the Civil War had harmed the South biologically. They stated that 'the theoretical argument for reversed selection seems beyond question'.<sup>139</sup> Like most eugenic researchers of the age, the Jordan brothers found the answers they wished to find and in doing so reasserted the idea that the South was a dysgenic region.

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<sup>138</sup> Arthur H. Estabrook, 'The Tribe of Ishmael', in *Eugenics, Genetics and the Family: Volume I, Scientific Papers of the Second International Congress of Eugenics*, ed. by Harry H. Laughlin (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1923), pp. 400-401

<sup>139</sup> David Starr Jordan and Henry Ernest Jordan, *War's Aftermath: A Preliminary Study of the Eugenics of War as Illustrated by the Civil War of the United States and the Late Wars in the Balkans* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914)

However, as the Buck case suggests, concerns about the dysgenic qualities of poor southern whites came not only from outside the South but also from those within the region. Priddy's comment about Buck's family origins shows a white southerner highlighting and isolating a different and undesirable kind of white southernness. Gregory Dorr has suggested that the rising class of professionals in the Upper South – to which Priddy as a state employed doctor would have belonged – were particularly keen to distance themselves from poor whites. Eugenics offered a means to suggest there was some biological as well as social distance between elite or aspirant whites and poor whites in the South. Often eugenic attacks on the white poor in the South sought to undermine their whiteness. Racial science blurred with eugenics in the Upper South in the 1920s and poor whites were presented as a threat to 'racial integrity'. Poor whites, southern eugenicists argued, were more likely to have mixed-race ancestry and – despite the social taboos and legal restrictions surrounding miscegenation – enter into inter-racial relationships which could produce dangerous, mixed-race, feeble-minded children who might pass for white and thus further comprise the white race.<sup>140</sup> Estabrook, an employee of the Eugenics Records Office who was particularly active in the South, underscored this concern about the racial purity of the southern poor in his remarkably titled publication *Mongrel Virginians* (1926) which examined the dysgenic qualities of the 'Win' tribe, a mixed-race family living in rural poverty ('Win' was an abbreviation of 'white, indian, negro').<sup>141</sup> Eugenics was a part of everyday life and culture in the early decades of the twentieth century and eugenic texts were popular and widely read. *Mongrel Virginians* like *The Kallikak Family* was among the most successful of

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<sup>140</sup> Gregory Michael Dorr, 'Defective or Disabled?: Race, Medicine, and Eugenics in Progressive Era Virginia and Alabama', *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 5:4 (2006), 359-392

<sup>141</sup> Noll, *Feeble-Minded in Our Midst*, p. 39

them all.<sup>142</sup>

The journalist H.L. Mencken also did much to popularise the notion that the South was a region of eugenic concern. Mencken frequently drew on the language of eugenics and race to question the mental and physical condition of the southern poor, most notably in 1920 in his famous critique of the state of the arts in the region 'The Sahara of the Bozart' which suggested that the South's 'poor white trash' ought to be 'investigated scientifically'.<sup>143</sup> Mencken's article was satirical, but he seemed to express his true feelings (and those of many others) in suggesting class differences in the South were not 'economic and conventional [but] congenital and genuine'.<sup>144</sup> To elite whites like Mencken, poor whites in the South, like eastern and southern European immigrants in the North East, and Hispanics in the West were a dangerous dysgenic other whose breeding posed a threat to 'civilisation'. Mencken's essay dramatically highlighted this threat by suggesting that the 'liberated lower classes' now dominated the South politically and the cultural 'sterility' he observed in the region was due to a lack of innate intelligence. It was then not only the actual poor who fell under Mencken's rubric of 'poor white trash' but most whites. Suggesting that those of any intelligence (white or black) had abandoned the South, he portrayed a region that was itself intellectually disabled. The idea of an intellectually barren region was not without an intellectual heritage of its own. Writing in 1907, Henry Adams had suggested that 'strictly the Southerner had no mind; he had temperament. He was not a scholar; he had no intellectual training; he could not analyse an idea and he could not conceive of admitting two'.<sup>145</sup> Adams wrote of the South's elite, yet

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<sup>142</sup> English, *Unnatural Selections*, p. 145

<sup>143</sup> H.L. Mencken, 'Sahara of the Bozart' in H.L. Mencken, *The American Scene: A Reader*, ed. by Huntington Cairns (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), pp. 162-163

<sup>144</sup> Mencken, 'Sahara of the Bozart', p. 164

<sup>145</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), pp. 57-58. There is a slipperiness to this quotation as Adams is in the midst of talking about a particular

Mencken retold this piece of regional criticism from a eugenic perspective, enfolding it with the national disdain for the South's 'white trash' for an audience increasingly open to the science's mythologies. This shift from a South that 'had no intellectual training' to one in which lack of intelligence was inherent made the idiot figure – as the embodiment of this lack – a more potent cultural symbol in and of the South.

The stinging criticism of southern culture in Mencken's 'The Sahara of the Bozart' has traditionally been credited with inspiring the renewal in southern literature known as the Southern Renaissance. Indeed Mencken himself suggested as much in later publications of the essay.<sup>146</sup> Recent critics have done much to successfully challenge traditional readings of the southern renaissance and redefine our understanding of southern modernism, and I certainly do not intend to reinstate 'The Sahara of the Bozart' as the definitive catalyst for modern southern literature. Nevertheless, the impact of Mencken's essay on beliefs about southern intelligence, and in turn how those beliefs influenced southern modernists, should not be underestimated. The dysgenic model of the South that Mencken described proliferates in southern literature where feeble-mindedness is a constant concern. Southern modernists in the 1920s and 1930s wrote at a point when the region itself was seen as lacking in intelligence and their work reflects those anxieties. As I have noted their representations of intellectual disability often resist or complicate perceptions of regional intelligence, however, southern modernists can, in the act of writing itself be seen, to some extent, as trying to resist these perceptions. Furthermore, as I discuss in the beginning of chapter three, for some like Ellen Glasgow, southern writers had a responsibility to actively challenge the idea of

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southerner – his college friend Rooney Lee, son of famed confederate general Robert E. Lee. However, Adams is at once describing his friend and generalising, Lee becoming a representative of his 'type', state and region as Adams does of his.

<sup>146</sup> Mencken, 'The Sahara of the Bozart', p. 157

regional feeble-mindedness. These associations between the South and intellectual disability did not only precede southern modernists' representations of intellectual disability, they persisted in them and around them. Though geneticists had begun to abandon eugenics by the end of the 1920s, eugenic ideology had a cultural and political potency that extended far beyond, particularly in the South.

This chapter has discussed how eugenics fundamentally reshaped intellectual disability in the first three decades of the twentieth century and consequently influenced literary representations. The eugenic constructions of feeble-mindedness and the moron suggested many more individuals were intellectually disabled than had previously been believed. In the American South, poor whites, particularly women, were increasingly deemed to be threatening to the region's and the nation's eugenic 'fitness'. Like other modernist writers, southerners were intrigued by the representative possibilities offered by new ideas about heredity and intelligence. The intellectually disabled poor white, in various guises, became (and remains) something of a regional and national trope (often building upon pre-existing poor white stereotypes). However, far from all the representations of intellectual disability in southern modernism are poor whites; the numerous meanings attached to intellectual disability, both new and old, made the 'idiot' and 'half-wit' figures of southern modernism remarkably versatile. Southern authors built on literary and scientific models of intellectual disability to create new forms of representation which often dealt with regional concerns about intelligence and otherwise. For example, specifically southern beliefs about intellectual disability and miscegenation allowed the region's writers, both white and black, to question the region's response to inter-racial sex. Indeed, as I shall discuss in the next chapter, for writers like Elizabeth Madox Roberts, these southern models of intellectual disability functioned

as a means to critique both the eugenic movement and the larger power structures it depended upon.



## CHAPTER TWO

### **"In the Face of Idiots": Feeble-mindedness and the White Patriarchy in Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *The Time of Man* and *My Heart and My Flesh***

In chapter one I argued that eugenics reframed intellectual disability, intertwining it with contemporary morality and gender, race and class based prejudices creating widespread concern about feeble-mindedness. By the 1920s, feeble-mindedness in the American South took on distinctive regional characteristics that reflected regional anxieties about whiteness, miscegenation, poverty and the changing role of women, as well as a concern both within the region and beyond it that the South was culturally and perhaps biologically 'backwards'. Southern poor whites in particular were associated with feeble-mindedness and, indicating the gender bias inherent within the category, poor white women like Carrie Buck were often the focus and victims of eugenic fears. This chapter examines how one early southern modernist, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, responded to the region's shifting notions regarding eugenics and the biological basis of intelligence and feeble-mindedness. Through discussions of her first two novels, *The Time of Man* (1926) and *My Heart and My Flesh* (1928), I show how Roberts challenges eugenic assumptions about the aetiology of intelligence and intellectual disability, destabilising regional associations of feeble-mindedness with women, the poor and (in the later novel) "blackness". The earlier novel, I argue, sees Roberts representing both intelligence and intellectual disability amongst the southern poor in largely positive ways which do not fit the growing eugenic narrative of a backwards South. In *My Heart and My*

*Flesh*, however, intellectual disability is more to the fore, as are concerns about the region's eugenic health. While the later novel also resists and remodels these concerns, it is more ambiguous in its approach. In Stiggins, the novel's 'half-wit' figure, Roberts offers an early example of the complex, disruptive intellectually disabled figure found time and again in southern modernism.

Although it is unlikely Roberts would have known about Carrie Buck's legal case when she wrote *The Time of Man* as it was as yet to reach the Supreme Court and become a national news story (although the original case in Virginia began in 1924, before the novel was published), she was certainly aware of the eugenic movement. Eugenics was prominent in American life, in part through the popularity of eugenic texts but also through widespread media discussion and cultural products.<sup>147</sup> These discussions and products were more commonly found in the North and West and Roberts would in all likelihood have encountered eugenic ideas more frequently during her time at university in Chicago in the late 1910s than she would have done at home. However, the South was by no means free of eugenic ideas even in the early years of the twentieth century. For example, in Kentucky, Roberts's home state, newspapers occasionally reprinted eugenic polemics which appeared in northern newspapers. Like eugenic family studies, these articles associated perceived social ills with poverty. As early as 1909, for example, one warned:

The families of the economically better classes are not as large as they were fifty years ago, and the same is true of the more capable artisan and working classes while the families of the very poor are not diminishing in numbers. Insanity, suicide, dumbness, dipsomania, erotism, and violence are on the increase, both

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<sup>147</sup> See Pernick, *The Black Stork* for a discussion of the variety of eugenic cultural production. The widely shown eugenic film 'The Black Stork' from which the book takes its name, recreated real life eugenic euthanasia by a Chicago doctor. The film, which was widely discussed, was released at the time Roberts herself was in Chicago.

because they are bred rapidly and made possible by the bad social conditions.<sup>148</sup>

By the 1920s these eugenic concerns about the poor were increasingly focusing on southern poor whites as illustrated in prominent articles like H.L. Mencken's 'The Sahara of the Bozart' and family studies like Arthur Estabrook's *Mongrel Virginians*. As the latter's title suggests, it was not just poverty but race that mobilised eugenics in the South. In Virginia, as this chapter discusses, legislation of the period on racial segregation was increasingly inflected with the language of the eugenic movement.

Roberts's first two novels emerged then in a period when the South, particularly its rural white poor, was increasingly a matter of eugenic concern nationally and regionally. Betsy Nies has argued that Agrarians writers such as Andrew Lytle and Donald Davidson, crafted and supported the image of the stout southern yeoman in part as a response to attacks on the southern poor by the eugenic movement. As Nies points out, this defence was motivated less by genuine concern and more by a desire to uphold racial segregation by maintaining the illusion of classlessness amongst southern whites.<sup>149</sup> Roberts has often been positioned as an Agrarian writer and her representations of the rural white poor certainly share aspects of those outlined by Lytle and Davidson.<sup>150</sup> However, her work and her engagement with the ideas of the eugenic movement should be seen in a different light. Roberts had Agrarian tendencies but her resistance to eugenic ideals in her earliest novels does not reflect a concern with upholding traditional hierarchies.

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<sup>148</sup> *Hartford Herald*, Wednesday, June 9, 1909

<sup>149</sup> Betsy Nies, 'Defending Jeeter', in *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s*, ed. by Susan Currell and Christina Codgell (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), pp. 120-139

<sup>150</sup> There have been a number of discussions of Roberts's Agrarianism. For a recent example see H.R. Stoneback, 'Elizabeth Madox Roberts: Regionalist and Agrarian Visions and Revisions – In the Lowlands and 'On The Mountainside'', in *Elizabeth Madox Roberts: Essays of Reassessment and Reclamation*, ed. by H.R. Stoneback and Steven Florczyk (Nicholasville: Wind Publications, 2008), pp. 167-187

Indeed, those novels often reveal challenges to social norms and structures.

Roberts's work shows a broader sense of doubt concerning eugenic explanations for social differences within the South, exploring both biological and environmental factors and reflecting a naturalistic intrigue in the forces which control the lives of individuals.

I argue that in different ways both of her first two novels undermine the construction of feeble-mindedness: *The Time of Man* by challenging contemporary views regarding poor white women, intelligence and disability and *My Heart and My Flesh* by blurring the determining factors in the production of intellectual disability to the extent that the reader can neither be sure of where it comes from or even who is or is not intellectually disabled. Roberts problematises eugenic assumptions about the origin and meaning of intellectual disability and intelligence in southern society precisely because they give biological credence to social distinctions. As a woman and as someone who had worked among the poor, Roberts would have been all too aware of social distinctions and her work shows a reluctance to accept a biological basis for them. Her challenge to eugenic feeble-mindedness does not reflect an Agrarian conservatism instead these novels show a desire to rethink the orthodoxies of southern society and, in particular, the position of women.

## **The Externals and the Internals**

*The Time of Man* should be seen I argue as an attempt to offer a more complex and nuanced understanding of southern poverty and, above all else, the lives of poor white women, than that of the burgeoning eugenic movement. The novel's modernism blends an adventurous and experimental representation of the rich

interior life of its protagonist Ellen Chesser, a poor white southern woman, with a critique of the deterministic nature of her exterior life, challenging the eugenic argument that a society's faults lay within individuals rather than within the structures and nature of that society itself. Noting the author's emphasis upon questions of determinism, Barbara Ladd has highlighted the influence of literary naturalism in Roberts's work. Ladd suggests that Roberts, like her contemporary Evelyn Scott, was drawn to the intrigues of naturalism because as a southern woman she was familiar with them:

Scott and Roberts confront questions of freedom with the intensity of those who understand their own lives to be determined (fated, atavistic). There is a close identification between narrator and the subordinated subject... For Southern women writers in these years of poverty, restrictions on the distribution and use of birth control, poor medical care, bad roads, and high mortality rate (especially for mothers and infants), the idea that one could control one's own life and shape one's future in any new direction must have seemed not only wonderfully promising but radically limited. It should be no surprise then that determinism (a question of fatedness) exerted a powerful hold on their imaginations.<sup>151</sup>

If Roberts and Scott identified with the extent to which the lives of those who they represented were fated, they also understood the complexity of the nexus of restrictions they faced. Incorporating the determinism of literary naturalism into their work offered not merely a means to represent 'radically limited' lives but also a means to question the nature of those limits. Both in *The Time of Man* and in *My Heart and My Flesh*, Roberts draws upon naturalistic questions of free will and determinism not to reinforce eugenic suggestions that an individual's life was fated because of heredity, but to complicate that notion, generating uncertainty in the face of the certainty the pseudoscience proposed. The lives of Roberts's characters often

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<sup>151</sup> Barbara Ladd, *Resisting History: Gender, Modernity and Authorship in William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston and Eudora Welty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), pp. 35-36

appear fated but she offers multiple determining factors not the least of which are economics and traditional gender roles. *The Time of Man* invites the reader to draw different conclusions than that of the eugenic movement about the lives of poor white women in the South and the reasons for their social status.

The novel challenges eugenic preconceptions regarding intelligence, intellectual disability and poor white women. As Steven Noll has discussed, national fears regarding the feeble-mindedness of poor white women were heightened in the South. Feeble-minded women were thought a threat to racial integrity not only because of their own presumed intellectual lack but also because they were considered to be susceptible to the sexual advances of unscrupulous men resulting in the creation of further feeble-minded children. Institutions responded to this fear: lower class women were more likely to be sterilized and/or institutionalised for longer in the South.<sup>152</sup> However, Roberts depicts Ellen Chesser as an intelligent woman fated by the society she lives in to be unable to express or explore her intellectual desires. Ellen does become mother to a disabled child, Chick, yet the child's intelligence/intellectual disability is vague and uncertain; Roberts seemingly opens the possibility of feeble-mindedness in Ellen's family to problematise contemporary understandings of intellectual lack and physical impairment. Chick's disability is represented more as tragic accident than as hereditary evil. Disability exists as another determining factor in the novel, altering and changing the life not only of the disabled character but those of his family in ways beyond their control. By refusing to define Chick's disability Roberts reveals the complexity of judgements about intelligence. She invites the reader to reconsider the meaning of intelligence and intellectual disability amongst the poor and question the certainty of

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<sup>152</sup> Steven Noll, "'A Far Greater Menace': Feeble-minded Females in the South, 1900-1940', in *Southern Women: Hidden Histories in the New South*, ed. by Virginia Bernhard and others (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), pp. 31-51

hereditarian discourse.

From the novel's beginning when she appears as an adolescent living with her parents, Ellen Chesser leads an itinerant life moving frequently within the narrative from place to place for work. This wandering lifestyle could itself be seen at the time as an indicator of a lack of eugenic fitness; America's leading eugenicist Charles Davenport saw 'nomadism' as an undesirable genetic trait.<sup>153</sup> Indeed in his introduction to the 1960s reprint of the novel, Robert Penn Warren echoes the eugenic language of Albert Priddy's description of Carrie Buck in describing Ellen's life as 'shiftless wandering'.<sup>154</sup> 'Shiftlessness' was a somewhat vague term broadly equating to laziness much used by eugenicists who believed it, like 'nomadism', was a genetic trait associated with feeble-mindedness and poverty.<sup>155</sup> However, the novel suggests this itinerancy and any material or intellectual lack that Ellen may have are not the consequences of some inherent defect or disability but more the result of the social constraints placed upon her by her class and gender. As a young woman Ellen imagines a life in which her material and intellectual desires can be fulfilled:

She thought that with the change of one or two externals everything might change – a room to sleep in where there would be pink and blue, herself reading a book by the window. Things to put in drawers and drawers to put things in, she would like, and people to say things to.<sup>156</sup>

Ellen's longing for books and the learning they provide is repeated throughout the early part of the novel as is her desire for stability suggested here by 'a room'. It is the 'externals' which prevent Ellen from having the life she desires rather than any 'internals'. It is notable that Ellen is unable to or refuses to define what these

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<sup>153</sup> Kevles, *In The Name of Eugenics*, pp. 48-49

<sup>154</sup> Robert Penn Warren, introduction to *The Time of Man*, by Elizabeth Madox Roberts (New York: Viking Press, 1963), p. xi

<sup>155</sup> Lombardo, *Three Generations No Imbeciles*, pp. 137-138

<sup>156</sup> Roberts, *The Time of Man*, p. 47 [Further references are given after quotations in the text]

‘externals’ are, suggesting that the determining factors of her life are so beyond her control that she cannot or will not even put a name to them.

These external factors become increasingly apparent as the novel progresses, recalling the determinism of literary naturalism. *The Time of Man* depicts Ellen’s life from youth to middle age, marriage and motherhood. Her life shows a recurring pattern in which she is forced to move or change her expectations of life by forces beyond her control: her father’s desire for more pay, her lover’s abandonment of her for another woman, her husband Jasper’s inability to get work because of claims he is a barn burner. In the novel’s patriarchal society, it is men who make the decisions and as Michael Kreyling has noted, in Ellen’s father, lover, husband and their employers, there is a ‘succession of all-too-flawed males that shape the possibilities of [her] life’.<sup>157</sup>

This lack of ability to successfully influence the events of her life because of her gender is furthered by her social class. As Ellen herself considers towards the novel’s conclusion, her life is continually marked by movement and a failure to achieve her desires: ‘Life began somewhere on the roads, travelling after the wagons where she had claim upon all the land and no claim all at once, and where what she knew of the world and what she wanted of it sparkled and glittered and ran forward as if it would always find something better’ [383-384]. Ellen’s realisation that she at once has claim to all the land and yet also no claim to it reflects her class position; she is expected in her role as a tenant farmer’s daughter and then wife to know and understand the land and yet is unable to ever actually own it. Lisa Hinrichsen has argued in her essay on the role of the female sublime in *The Time of Man*, that Ellen’s wanting and inability to fulfil that wanting are representative of the impact of

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<sup>157</sup> Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature*, pp. 104-105



the arrival of modern forms of capitalism and materialism in the South upon the poor. Ellen is caught in a system which at once insists upon her having material desires yet renders her unable to attain them.<sup>158</sup> Restricted by her gender and class she is, like many of the protagonists of literary naturalism, fated to chase, yet never catch, the ‘sparkling and glittering’ world of knowledge and material things. It is a sign of how powerfully Ellen feels her class and gender position that the narrative suggests these things are for ‘something better’. The closeness of the narrative to the protagonist invites us to read this assessment as Ellen’s own. Although she is unsure who or what is allowed to attain what the world has to offer, she is sure it must be better than her, reflecting the extent to which she has internalised (and hence cannot escape from) her social position. Roberts depicts a heroine overwhelmed by forces beyond her control and her frame of knowledge, suggesting more complex social and psychological reasons for the failure of poor whites of the South to escape or change their position than the inherent intellectual disability proposed by the eugenic movement.

Roberts’s challenge to contemporary readings of poor southern white womanhood in *The Time of Man* goes beyond her examination of the external limitations upon Ellen’s life. It is the insight into Ellen’s thoughts and understanding of her experiences afforded by the novel’s free indirect discourse which marks *The Time of Man* as a fundamentally modern novel and Roberts’s exploration of poverty and determined lives as different from and more subtle than that of literary naturalist novels such as *McTeague*. Roberts’s depiction of her protagonist’s mental processes also undermines the association between poor white women and feeble-mindedness, suggesting instead that a richness and beauty can be found within Ellen’s interior

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<sup>158</sup> Lisa Hinrichsen, ‘Economies of Desire and the Feminine Sublime in Elizabeth Madox Roberts’s *The Time of Man*’, *Southern Quarterly*, 48: 3 (2011), 34-51, (pp. 39-41)

life. As Hinrichsen persuasively argues, Ellen, alienated by modernity, appears to find sensual pleasure from within her imagination. The novel's more experimental passages often see her become or merge with other characters and are moments of selflessness, outside of the individualist expectations and demands of free market capitalism.<sup>159</sup> Equally, these passages see Ellen cross gender boundaries in her imagination, challenging, in her unfettered mind, the restrictions imposed upon her. Often – as elsewhere in Roberts's work – music provides the catalyst for her character's imaginings. As a young woman, Ellen acts as confidante to two friends Dorine and Elmer in a budding romance as well as enjoying a playful minor relationship with Elmer herself. Encouraged by the music at a local dance, she finds herself embodying their feelings for each other:

For Mr. Townley, who was identified with his music, her manner was an extension of the ripple of her dress, and where she went dancing down his guitar notes between their eyes passes the flash of laughter, music and dancing made one in the moment, each chord a thread or a ribbon on which she walked with light feet as she twinkled down the dancing floor.[...] Dorine on her side would tell the confidence of her liking for Elmer, dwelling on each to relive its significance, so that their two likings and wishes, Elmer's reticent and unformed, Dorine's eager, unshy, realized, flowed over her and around her as if she were its musical core. [144]

In this passage any sense of Ellen as an individual seems to disappear almost entirely, her subjectivity blurring both with that of others (Townley, Elmer, Dorine) and with physical objects (her dress). Her mind also generates a new reality turning the music into her surroundings – she dances 'down guitar notes' and chords become threads or ribbons. In moments such as this in the novel, Ellen is able to step outside of the restrictions placed upon her by her world and indeed to seemingly abandon that world itself. Emptied out of these restrictions she is able, as the 'musical core',

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<sup>159</sup> Hinrichsen, 'Economies of Desire' pp. 40-43

to bring harmony to the conflicting feelings of the two young lovers, creating – in her mind at least – community with them and with Townley on new terms: aesthetic and metaphysical instead of economic or socially determined.

Hinrichsen suggests passages such as this see Ellen engage with the ‘feminine sublime’ in which ‘pleasure is not utilitarian or self-inflationary: rather it marks an aesthetics of resistance allowing for an engagement with excess that reinvents or obliterates grounds for distinction and disrupts exclusory systems’.<sup>160</sup> It was precisely the possibility of disruption posed by the poor and by women to affluent white male patriarchy that fuelled the eugenic movement’s construction of many poor women as feeble-minded. At a point when this movement was becoming increasingly successful at influencing public ideas and policies, Roberts’s novel presents the mind of a poor southern white woman not as a threat to national and regional well-being, but as a place to find hope, however limited, for a new and better society.

The birth of Chick, a disabled child, to Ellen and Jasper is a crucial further piece of Roberts’s corrective to the preconceptions of eugenics. Through Chick Roberts offers some examination of the era’s questions surrounding the origin and nature of disability and the disabled. Ellen discovers she is pregnant during a period in which the couple are struggling to maintain their marriage due to Jasper having an affair with another woman. When Ellen informs Jasper she is pregnant, he refuses to believe the baby is his, suggesting that Joe Phillips, their landlord who is attracted to Ellen, is the father, a claim which she vehemently denies but which is never entirely dismissed in the novel. In the eugenic discourse of the period, a disabled child born to a poor white southern couple, particularly with a background of extra-marital

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<sup>160</sup> Hinrichsen, ‘Economies of Desire’, p. 41

affairs and suspected criminality in the case of Jasper's barn burning would almost certainly have been seen as the result of 'bad breeding'. However, Roberts's depiction of disability amongst the southern poor, whilst not directly refuting the possibility of dysgenic heredity or degeneration as a cause of disability, challenges the idea that it is a social threat. The narrative is sympathetic and the couple's mutual love for the child and pain in his suffering reunites them and ultimately strengthens their relationship. The strength of family bonds can also be seen in the other children's relationship with the child: 'The infant was soon very much endeared to the other children, who began to call him Chick as they played about him, and after a little that name was established and the child seemed much too precious to be encumbered with any name less light' [362]. It is this 'preciousness' that the family feels about the child which is continually emphasised in the text. Roberts uses disability, which was increasingly understood to be a sign of inherent weakness, to signify the humanity and familial strength amongst the southern poor.

The precise nature of Chick's disability is somewhat unresolved in the text. That he has physical impairments is clear; he is, we are told, born with 'withered limbs' and a 'bent spine' and his life, which lasts only three years, is described as filled with pain and suffering [364-365]. However, Roberts leaves any intellectual disability uncertain. The narrative describes Chick's 'long protruding skull' and 'bulging forehead' and a contemporary audience would probably have read this as indicative of intellectual disability [361-362].<sup>161</sup> Similarly, Chick's ability to

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<sup>161</sup> For a brief discussion of how head shape was one of a number of physical features used by eugenicists to distinguish feeble-mindedness see Robert Bogdan, Martin Elks and James Knoll, *Picturing Disability: Beggar, Freak, Citizen and Other* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012), p. 83. Journalist Mary Bishop has also revealed how children in the South in the early decades of the twentieth century were deemed feeble-minded on the basis of the shape of their head. She cites an example of a 10-year-old boy deemed a 'moral imbecile' with an 'elongated skull [and an] asymmetry of face'. Mary Bishop, 'An Elite Said Their Kind Wasn't Wanted: How Social Judgements of the Day Forced Sterilizations', *Roanoke Times*, 26 June 1994, section Horizon, p. 1

communicate is unclear; he enjoys 'nonsense words' with his father, but he is never shown to have any ability to speak. Chick's parents reflect their uncertainty about his intelligence within the text. Jasper and Ellen's conversation upon the death of their child seems to dismiss any idea of feeble-mindedness. Ellen states Chick was "Bright too, ready to laugh whenever he could" and Jasper replies that "He knowed us, all to the last one, and always wanted to play when he could notice" [366]. However, that they need to discuss this with each other at all reaffirms that there is doubt about what Chick 'knows' or whether he is 'bright'. In leaving Chick's intelligence/intellectual disability unresolved, Roberts toys with an idea she explores more extensively in her next novel *My Heart and My Flesh*, that intellectual disability is, by its very nature, uncertain and unknowable.

This lack of certainty about Chick's intellectual disability is a further attempt to undermine and counteract the certainty of the eugenic movement's ideas about feeble-mindedness amongst poor whites. The novel suggests that intellectual disability is not as easily definable as some claimed at the time (if it is definable at all). This ambiguity further serves to complicate the idea that poor white women should be to blame for the presence of intellectual disability. If intellectually disability is uncertain then so too must be any idea of its origins or meaning. Rather than a sign of any genetic lack, disability in Roberts's novel becomes a way of praising Ellen for her caring skills and resilience: 'Ellen set her strength to work all the harder because of Chick, planting more because of him....She must work in the garden and so her work there became a fervor of service to the child' [363].

Roberts's poor white woman seems to be a possible source of intellectual desire more than intellectual lack. The novel concludes with her son Dick echoing his mother's expression of desire for books at the novel's beginning: 'Books is what

I want. In books, it's said, you'd find the wisdom of the ages' [396]. In direct contrast to eugenic scaremongering about poor white women and feeble-mindedness, the son's repetition of his mother's hunger for knowledge suggests that there is something valuable being 'inherited'. However, this echoing is also part of the novel's naturalistic structure, prompting the reader to speculate that Dick's desire will also be curtailed like his mother's by the social restrictions placed upon him because of his class. In Ellen's unfulfilled intellectual desires and in the possibility that this may repeat itself in her child, Roberts suggests that a perceived lack of intelligence may relate to a systemic lack of opportunity. Just as the novel invites the reader through its lack of certainty about Chick's disability to reconsider how models of intellectual disability are formed, so too through Ellen and Dick does it challenge how models of intelligence are formed. Portraying Ellen as mother to both Dick and to Chick (the rhyming nature of the two's names invites the reader to see them as a pair), Roberts suggests that assumptions about the nature of intelligence/intellectual disability and their relationship to heredity are made too easily.

To some extent, Roberts's representation of Chick in life and in death reveals him as a figure to be pitied. This follows a long and negative literary lineage of depicting disability as tragedy. His eventual death seems one more event in Ellen's life which is beyond her control and the consequence of accident, adding to the determinism present in the novel. Despite this tragic representation of disability, the novel should be seen as an attempt to reconstitute contemporary concepts of class, gender and disability. Chick's impact on the family is overwhelmingly positive and his presence in the novel functions in part as a means for Roberts to challenge eugenic preconceptions about disability and intelligence. As a whole, the novel invites the reader to reconsider how judgements about intelligence and intellectual

disability are made. In particular, *The Time of Man* contradicts the increasingly negative representation of poor white southern women in 1920s society. Roberts's depiction of the life of an itinerant poor white woman is a far cry from the description of Carrie Buck that Albert Priddy would make only a year later. Exploring the limitations experienced by poor white women, the novel rejects the growing consensus amongst the white male elite of the Upper South that they were a threat to the health of the white race and a source of feeble-mindedness. Indeed, in the figure of Ellen Chesser, the novel posits poor white women not as a threat but as a possible source of hope.

### **'His Father Had Been Some White Man'**

Roberts's next novel *My Heart and My Flesh* deals more directly and in more detail with issues of heredity and intellectual disability. Although a relatively minor character, the 'half-wit' Stiggins serves a number of important functions in a novel which furthers Roberts's examination of free will and determinism in southern society. In part Stiggins's apparent intellectual lack and the dysgenic traits of those related to him hint at the presence of hereditary biological determinism within the community she depicts. This is underscored by his race; Stiggins is mixed-race, recalling the concerns of contemporary eugenicists regarding the threat posed to southern society about miscegenation. These concerns were particularly prominent in the South at the time Roberts wrote.<sup>162</sup> In Virginia, a neighbouring state to Kentucky, a number of eugenicists argued that miscegenation was the greatest threat to white

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<sup>162</sup> Eugenic concerns about miscegenation were not limited to the South. Eugenicists such as Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard wrote on miscegenation as part of what they saw as a global biological threat to 'Nordic' supremacy. These kinds of eugenic polemics were broad and though they shared the kinds of fears about interracial sex found in Plecker's writing, they tended to either mention concerns about miscegenation in the South in passing or not at all. See for example, Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race or The Racial Basis of European History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1919), pp. 17-19; pp. 78-79 For a discussion of Stoddard's work and its influence, see Bender, pp. 237-252

racial hygiene. Blurring longstanding southern concerns over inter-racial sex and the new pseudo-science of eugenics, they argued that the ‘mulatto’ was a threat to civilisation itself.<sup>163</sup> Eugenics offered a new means for those within the southern elite and professional classes to give scientific credibility to southern segregation. Walter Plecker a leading southern eugenicist, instrumental in the passing of Virginia’s Racial Integrity Act of 1924, argued that:

It is evident that in the hybrid mixture the traits of the more primitive will dominate those of the more specialized or civilized race. It is equally obvious that these culturally destructive characteristics are hereditary, carried in the germ plasm, and hence they cannot be influenced by environmental factors such as improved economic, social and educational opportunities.<sup>164</sup>

As a mixed-race ‘half-wit’, Stiggins would seem to be the embodiment of these concerns. Indeed in the novel’s first description of him in the prologue, Luce Jarvis, the child from whose perspective the prologue is presented, believes ‘he can never learn’ reiterating Plecker’s dismissal of the influence of environmental factors in the ‘hybrid mixture’.<sup>165</sup>

However, Roberts, again borrowing from the determinism of literary naturalism, as she had in *The Time of Man*, reintroduces the influence of environmental factors blending them with biology to generate uncertainty in the face of eugenic certainty. The possibility that a lack of ‘economic, social and educational opportunities’ do play a role in creating Stiggins’s intellectual disability is primarily raised by his relationship to his half-sister, the novel’s central character Theodosia Bell, a white woman, born into an aristocratic family of longstanding wealth and property. Theodosia is subjected to what Roberts described as a ‘steady taking

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<sup>163</sup> Dorr, *Segregation’s Science*, pp. 141-153

<sup>164</sup> Walter Plecker, ‘Virginia’s Attempt to Control the Color Problem’, *American Journal of Public Health*, 15:2 (1925), 111-115

<sup>165</sup> Elizabeth Madox Roberts, *My Heart and My Flesh* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), p. 14 [Further references are given after quotations in the text]



away', abandoned by those she is close to and stripped not only of her wealth but also of the sense of superiority and entitlement engendered by her race and class.<sup>166</sup> Removed from her economically and socially privileged environment, Theodosia's life and behaviour at the nadir of her decline resembles that of Stiggins at the novel's beginning. Her thoughts become increasingly fractured and opaque echoing the speech of the 'half-witted' Stiggins. Through this mirroring Roberts is able to suggest the possibility that Theodosia shares a biologically inherited 'lack' with her brother, but also raises the possibility that what is seemingly an inherent individual trait can be explained, at least in part, by environmental difference. It is this unresolved ambiguity that is characteristic of the novel's treatment of intellectual disability; Stiggins functions as a signifier of both biological and environmental determinism.

The purpose of this dualistic function is, I argue, to offer a twin-pronged critique of white male patriarchy and the eugenic movement which supported it. Although the novel never resolves the aetiology of Stiggins's intellectual disability, it suggests that the limiting factors of his life and of Theodosia's, whether biological or environmental, are caused by white men. Inverting the beliefs espoused by eugenicists from beyond the South such as Arthur Estabrook in *Mongrel Virginians* and those within the region such as Walter Plecker that the cause of dysgenic traits in the South could be found by examining poor whites and in particular their sexual relationships with blacks, the novel suggests that, if there is a hereditary 'taint' within the family, it is an elite white male, Theodosia and Stiggins's father Horace Bell, who is the origin. Equally, it is white men who are shown to shape, often haphazardly, cruelly or selfishly, the social and economic circumstances of the lives

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<sup>166</sup> Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Letter to B.W. Huebsch, August 21, 1927, qtd in Frederick P.W. McDowell, *Elizabeth Madox Roberts* (New York: Twayne, 1963), p. 107

of others: the poor, women, blacks. Stiggins's position as mixed-race and poor renders him powerless to dramatically change the direction of his life, much as Theodosia is unable to prevent her descent into poverty because she is a woman. In highlighting the deterministic nature of Stiggins's environment, Roberts is able not merely to complicate the aetiology of his intellectual disability but also to draw attention to the societal structures that have created that environment. The ambiguity of Stiggins's intellectual disability – interpretable as symptomatic of a biological and/or moral lack amongst the novel's white male elite – serves to undermine that elite's assumption of its own eugenic fitness and as part of the novel's broader questioning of the race, gender and class hierarchies upon which its power is affirmed.

Stiggins's intellectual disability is generated in the novel primarily by his speech, which is described within the text as 'garbled recitative' [164]. Stiggins regularly repeats himself, drifts from topic to topic, often recounting half-remembered events. This repetition and fractured recounting can be seen, for example, in this passage, a segment of a tale Stiggins attempts to recount in the novel:

“Ol’ rat,” Stig said “Rat go crawl, crawl down towarge corn room. We all walk behind ol’ rat and see ol’ rat go crawl down towarge corn room. Skeeter Shoots says, Come see ol’ rat.’ Says, ‘Naw don’t kill yet. Watch ‘im crawl down towarge corn room.’ Take ol’ rat, I reckon hour. I go water Rose and hitch up Beckie. Come back. ‘Ain’t ol’rat got there yet?’ [164]

The passage shows Stiggins's reliance on repetition of stock phrases, whilst the sudden invocation by Skeeter Shoots to 'Come see ol' rat' feels like the beginning of a tale which Stiggins has already begun, making it difficult to follow his narrative of events. As I shall show, while he is the novel's most extreme example, it is not only

Stiggins who shows these mannerisms and it is through their similarity in speech that Roberts is able to suggest that Stiggins's family members share an inherited intellectual lack. However, in what is a much more experimental novel than *The Time of Man*, fracturing and repetition can be seen frequently, not only in characters' speech. Reading *My Heart and My Flesh* can at points often be an unsettling experience as, like Stiggins's speech, it moves swiftly from one scene to another or the narrative is interrupted by, for example, snippets of songs or a series of overlapping voices. In adopting this adventurous form, the novel can be seen as an example of high modernism and in this regard, *My Heart and My Flesh* is somewhat unique in Roberts's prose; her other novels are not as formally complex or as experimental. Although Roberts was undoubtedly inspired by fellow modernist writers' experimentation, I would suggest that this distinctiveness should be understood not only as reflecting an aesthetic desire to experiment but primarily as integral to her depiction of mental degeneration and intellectual disability. It is less that intellectual disability serves as a vehicle for formal experimentation and more that formal experimentation functions as a vehicle to represent intellectual disability. In creating these moments of 'garbled recitative', the novel's form itself suggests that Stiggins is not atypical but instead indicative of the society Roberts depicts. Similarly, Stiggins's repetition is typical of his world. Characters mirror themselves and others not only in speech but also in action, creating structural as well as lexical repetition. Reflecting the novel's careful balancing of the biological and the environmental, this repetition can be read both as the consequence of bad heredity and as the consequence of systemic failure and is integral to its representation of determinism, underlining the extent to which not only Stiggins but others too appear fated to live the lives they do.

The novel's unsettling form and emphasis on repetition can be seen in its prologue. The prologue differs to the rest of the novel in that it shows the city of Anneville, the primary setting of *My Heart and My Flesh*, from the perspective of the child Luce Jarvis rather than Theodosia Bell, from whose perspective the rest of the novel comes. This in itself is unsettling as Luce disappears from the novel entirely upon its beginning proper. The prologue blends Luce's imaginary city Mome with Anneville (itself a fictional location) so that the reader is never sure whether what is depicted is part of the imagined city or the 'real' one. Luce's perspective also blurs with that of the narrative voice making it difficult to distinguish who is describing the scenes depicted in particular the final two sections – one a complex and poetic description of Mome, the other depicting a group of black workmen in Anneville. Equally, the prologue dashes quickly from scene to scene showing brief vignettes of life in the city with little temporal cohesion and with characters who may or may not appear later in the novel. In part, the prologue's experimental form reflects the childlike mind of Luce, yet its fracturing is echoed later in the novel in the words and thoughts of other adult characters, in particular Horace, Stiggins and Theodosia, suggesting that Luce's perception of the city and life in it is not uncommon for any its inhabitants.

The prologue also, in one passage in particular, introduces the repetitive nature of life in Anneville:

On Jackson Street in Anneville grew great poplar trees under which men sat all day telling slow stories they had told over and over before, old men grown epic with age and fatalism. Their refrains recurring were, "Ain't that always the way!...No sooner you get...but along comes a place to spend it...looks like as soon as man gets on his feet...Always the way..." They spoke without malice, interspersing their wisdom with long slow happenings. "Did ever you know hit to fail?...Would a man ever strike hit on his corn and his wheat in one and the same year?...But of course it had

to happen that way...About the time Luke got outen that-there fix here a note he owed at the bank fell due, but it so happened that corn turned out right good that year and he tided over..." [15]  
(Ellipses in original)

This passage with its explicit reference to 'fatalism' highlights the sense of determinism in the town. This is furthered by the old men's stories which are not only repeated 'over and over' but are themselves both discussing repetition and, with their 'refrains recurring', repetitive. The passage also shows more of the novel's narrative fracturing as the recounting of 'long slow happenings' is, much like Stiggins's tale of the rat, interrupted and incomplete and difficult to follow. Incorporating this passage into Luce's prologue with its own interruptions and inscrutability hints that both young and old perspectives on life in Anneville are similar.

The prologue introduces the reader to both Theodosia and Stiggins. By positioning these introductions next to each other, Roberts invites a comparison between the privileged life enjoyed by Theodosia as a child and the much more brutal experiences of Stiggins. That they share a father is hidden from both characters and the reader at this point. However, the juxtaposition of the two passages highlights the difference in their environment, making clear that Theodosia's position as an elite white brings her privilege, whilst Stiggins's position as mixed-race 'half-wit' means he is abandoned to a cruel fate by his white father. At a church pageant the young Theodosia is depicted as a social leader because of her position as the daughter of an aristocratic family:

Luce looked at Theodosia as she marched and looked into her pride in walking first and her pride again in the feel of the drumming of the music, her feet set down rightly upon the rhythm. She looked at her. She was the daughter of Charlotte Bell and Horace. [...] She spread a trail of herself down the platform as she went proudly first, the other girls walking on her steps, setting feet down where she guided, she leaving a comet-train of herself behind to be

entered, walked into, known by the knower, the chronicler. [12]

Luce relates Theodosia's pride and her entitlement to lead to her parentage. Unlike Luce, who it is shown earlier is unknown to the group, Theodosia and her parents are 'known' not just by Luce but the other girls. This combination of pride and importance seems to create an abundance of Theodosia such that she can leave a 'trail' or a 'comet-train' of herself for the other children to follow. The abundance reflects her wealth and privilege; she can afford to give some of herself away because she is 'known by the knower, the chronicler'. 'Chronicler' implies that Theodosia has some historical relevance bestowed upon her because of who she is. However, Luce, who is observing and not participating, 'look[s] into her pride', her refusal to follow and clinical gaze suggesting she is not automatically persuaded of Theodosia's right to lead or to feel pride at doing so. Her pride is something to be critiqued. Luce's 'look into' Theodosia in the prologue offers an almost metatextual adumbration for what is to come in the rest of the novel. The novel takes on Luce's role, looking into the white southern elite, suspicious of the idea that there is something inherent within them that entitles them to lead.

The passage introducing Theodosia is immediately followed by another introducing Stiggins:

The boy who lived in the livery stable was named Stiggins, a yellow boy who slept somewhere in the stable in the straw. [...] When there was not much to do the hostlers would tease Stiggins by locking him in the loft or the old harness closet or by holding him under the spout of the pump. Or they would crack a whip under his knees to make him jump up high to avoid the keen sting of the whip-snapper. Sometimes when the proprietor was gone all day this sport went on for hours until Stiggins would cry, but if he cried he was unfailingly locked into the loft or the harness closet [...] Stiggins was not in fact a name; some of the men had given it to him one day when he was leaping to escape the whip. His mother was Dolly Brown, a half-witted negress who lived in the alley behind the jail, his father had been some white man. [13]

The contrast between the lives of Theodosia and Stiggins could not be more apparent. Theodosia is the beneficiary of her race and social class, whilst Stiggins, excluded from those groups, is subjected to the cruelty of whips and incarceration. Theodosia's name –which flatteringly means gift from the gods – is known by Luce and the 'chronicler' while Stiggins's name, meaningless, is given to him by those who abuse him. The emphasis on parentage here both introduces the possibility of hereditary feeble-mindedness and contrasts with that in the previous passage on Theodosia's parentage, reflecting the dual role of Stiggins as signifier of biological and environmental determinism. Stiggins's mother Dolly's blackness, intellectual disability and proximity to the jail mirror contemporary eugenic associations between race, feeble-mindedness and crime and suggests he has inherited his intellectual disability from her. However, that his father 'had been some white man' underlines the extent to which he, unlike Theodosia, has been abandoned by his white family. The use of 'had been' here suggests the father had only a biological and not an on-going role as a parent. Stiggins's father is not only unknown but, the text suggests, lost and unknowable. In juxtaposing the descriptions of the two characters' lives and parentage, Roberts invites a comparison between them, drawing attention to the benefits of race and class-based privilege. In the society Roberts depicts, what one inherits from one's parents is important not only for its biological but also for its social consequences. To be 'known' is to have power.

Luce's analysis of Stig, like her analysis of Theodosia's pride, expresses some doubt about the nature of social hierarchies. Observing the cruelty shown towards him by others she assumes he is not 'a real being, and it did not matter what one did to him'. She is unable to reconcile Stiggins's presence and the treatment given to him into her understanding of the world, attempting to position him, like her

imaginary city Mome, outside of the 'real'. Yet Stiggins is all too real and the treatment of him forces her to respond:

He was not real, was scarcely there at all, was not a being; but often when he was tormented until he cried...Luce would feel the approach of her own tears and a hurt would gather in her breast and spread as a fog through members, through the substance of earth and the air. [14]

In sharing his tears, Luce is confronted with the possibility that Stig is human like her. This realisation contradicts her socially constructed understanding of him, causing a 'fog' of confusion to intrude upon that which she has previously understood to be real: the 'earth and the air'. The dehumanisation of Stiggins within her society has been so powerful that Luce is 'unable to discover the cause' of her feelings, 'unable to discern the result or resolve it to any meanings'. This inability to decipher the nexus of social restrictions which create Stig's position recalls Ellen Chesser's similar inability to define 'externals'. Luce mentally turns back to Mome, the city she imagines better than her own, thinking of it with 'richer ecstasy'. The carapace of her own society having begun to fall, Luce is forced to create a society whose illusions are less easily broken down. The reluctance of Luce to process Stiggins's pain may be because she herself as a child and a female is subordinated. In Luce's tears the novel depicts a nascent because childlike example of the 'close identification between narrator and subordinated subject', Ladd describes as typical of Roberts's incorporation of literary naturalism into her work.<sup>167</sup> Luce's realisations about the nature of Stiggins's existence undermine her own sense of free will, encouraging her to create, like Ellen Chesser, a world of freedom within. Through the eyes of a child, Roberts reveals the ability of the reality of the Other (Stiggins) to not only challenge but to make visible, naturalised hierarchies.

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<sup>167</sup> Ladd, *Resisting History*, p. 35



Roberts discussed her use of Stiggins in a letter to her publisher, highlighting the disruptive power of intellectual disability:

In the face of idiots – mental incompetents of any sort – every system of philosophy and religion goes down ... Stig is human and he is alive. But he belongs to the discarded, the cast out. What is the good of trying to be “nice,” of trying to nurture a “soul” in the face of this thing which negates everything? Why do we throw anything away? Why be nice?<sup>168</sup>

Stiggins’s intellectual disability, as Roberts notes here, challenges conventional thinking, raising questions about ‘the discarded’, philosophy and religion, and the soul. *My Heart and My Flesh* is particularly concerned with issues of the soul. Luce mentally tears apart Theodosia’s mother in search of a soul in the prologue [7-8], while Theodosia quizzes Stiggins and their sister Americy about whether they have a soul [168]. The novel’s examination of questions of the soul, like its examinations of questions of heredity and environment, reflect a desire both on the part of Theodosia and Roberts herself to discover what makes us what we are, what forces are at work upon individuals and to what extent they can be controlled. Stiggins’s intellectual disability because, for Roberts, it ‘negates everything’ just as for Luce it is ‘not real’, offers a useful vehicle through which to explore these questions and to critique existing answers to them. For Roberts, intellectual disability brings into question what it is to be human; traditional systems cannot accommodate it and thus their authority is undermined. While it would be wrong to suggest Roberts was a social revolutionary, she was certainly neither in awe of tradition nor afraid of challenging it. For example, although Roberts’s own religious beliefs are not easily characterised, she found the evangelical Protestantism of her home town of Springfield to be ‘all platitudes and sayings’. This rejection of conventional religion reflected a broader suspicion towards orthodoxy. ‘One encounters so much orthodoxy’, she wrote, ‘that

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<sup>168</sup> Roberts, Letter to B.W. Huebsch, August 21, 1927, qtd in McDowell, p. 112

one writes heresies in reaction, to laugh a bit'.<sup>169</sup> The ability of the 'idiot' to cause a collapse of 'systems of philosophy and religion' was then not, for the author, something to fear. Rather it invited a reassessment of social systems and hierarchies and an examination of that which is 'thrown away' and the reasons for it. Where eugenicists found in intellectual disability an answer to social problems, Roberts found it raised further questions.

As a woman, questions about 'the cast out' had relevance to Roberts herself. The novel's plot reveals the extent to which, for a woman, even the privileges and power bestowed by race and class in the South are tenuous. Theodosia is, for the majority of the novel, rendered powerless by a similar 'succession of all-too-flawed males' to that Kreyling notes influence the life of Ellen Chesser. However, while *The Time of Man* primarily reveals the power of gender hierarchy by showing how Ellen's gender limits her in opportunity, in *My Heart and My Flesh*, Roberts is more interested in what happens when Theodosia is abandoned, 'cast out', by those men on whom her lifestyle depends. Elite white men are at the heart of Theodosia's financial, physical and mental decline. These include a number of suitors, two of whom abandon her for other women and one of whom sexually assaults her. Furthermore, the elite males within her own family cause her harm. Her grandfather Anthony, whose profligacy has squandered the family fortune, leaves his granddaughter nothing but debt while, most notably, her father Horace is a figure more concerned with fulfilling his sexual desires than caring for or providing for his family. Horace's eventual abandonment of Theodosia after Anthony's death leaves her alone – her mother and sister having died early in the novel – and, as she is unable to pay off the family debt, homeless and impoverished. His disappearance

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<sup>169</sup> Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Roberts Papers, Library of Congress, qtd in Harry Modean Campbell and Ruel E Foster, *Elizabeth Madox Roberts: American Novelist* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), p. 39

from her life, and the novel itself, mirrors his disappearance from Stiggins's life, he is just 'some white man' who 'had been' her father.

Without the support of a husband or a father, Theodosia becomes increasingly physically ill and is sent to live on a farm with her aunt. The aunt, who seems mentally ill or senile, denies Theodosia food. Hungry and isolated, Theodosia increasingly shows signs of mental illness herself, represented in the novel by her thoughts becoming splintered into different voices in dramatic form. In part, the change in Theodosia's mental state can be understood by the change in her environment, yet Roberts hints earlier in the novel that there are more deep rooted biological causes. Theodosia's discovery, whilst attempting to investigate the true extent of her grandfather's financial problems, that her father has three mixed race children, Lethe, Americy and Stiggins, all of whom show dysgenic traits, but apparently from two different mothers, introduces the possibility that she has inherited a mental lack of some kind from her father.

These traits – violence and drunkenness as well as feeble-mindedness – are suggested when Theodosia first begins to think of her brother and sisters following her discovery of their relationship to her. Lethe she remembers as having declined to do work for her with a smile which she twice notes had 'some evil in it' [108]. This undefined 'evil' is expressed more clearly later in the novel when Lethe murders her lover Ross. Americy she remembers as being part of a story of violence and substance abuse: 'she now remembered that it was for drunken brawling that Americy had been incarcerated. The incident belonged a year or two back in time. Americy had been making loud obscene talk on the street, in a brawl with some man, and she had been taken to the lock up. There was something more of it, she remembered, cocaine or whisky' [109-110]. Theodosia's response to these memories

suggests she is concerned about their implications for her own genetic inheritance: “‘All right, then, my sisters” she said. A great weariness assailed her and she was aware of fear’ [110]. The fear Theodosia is showing here should be seen as biological. There is no need for contact with these family members: Theodosia is fearful about what her half-sibling's actions say about her.

The threat to Theodosia's sense of biological integrity posed by Lethe and Americy is furthered by her acknowledgement of her relationship to Stiggins, the novel's most clearly dysgenic figure. He forces a more physical response: ‘Her thought passed beyond fear and rested on pity, abhorrence, sickening loathing. Stiggins, then – she turned no longer from the thought of Stiggins’ [110]. Her ‘pity’ for her brother seems to turn quickly into rejection, a ‘sickening loathing’. The possibility of their biological closeness limits her objective sympathy. She not only loathes the idea of being related to Stiggins but is sickened by it. The implication is that Theodosia wishes to expel Stiggins (or the biological ‘flaw’ Stiggins represents) from her body. Stiggins, as a half-wit, brings the possibility of dysgenic inheritance more to the fore, solidifying the fear she feels at thinking of her sisters and causing her to have a stronger more visceral response. This ‘sickening loathing’ recalls Theodosia's response to a black baby earlier in the novel. Seeing the baby Theodosia takes ‘pleasure...in her own sense of superiority and loathing, in a delicate nausea experienced when she knelt near the baby's quilt’ [39]. Confronted with her own biological proximity to not only blackness but intellectual disability, the ‘pleasure’ is removed. Theodosia finds thinking of Stiggins ‘irksome and difficult’ and the ‘delicate nausea’ is replaced by a more violent ‘sickening,’ reflecting the removal of the distance and ‘superiority’ she has revelled in. Stiggins's presence, as it does in the prologue, collapses class and race boundaries forcing the protagonist to confront

their similarity to him. However, while for Luce Stiggins signifies the limitations of her environment, for Theodosia he signifies the possible limitations of her physical self.

Theodosia's growing fears about her biological inheritance from her father are hinted at shortly after her discovery of her mixed-race siblings. Her discovery encourages a reappraisal of her father: 'Her infantile concept of her father as one playful, merry, light-hearted, child-like, made a confused war with later concepts of him as a jumble of demands upon affection and forbearance' [101]. The references to both a 'child-like' Horace and a previously 'infantile' Theodosia recall the similarities between Luce and the old men in the prologue hinting at a society that lacks maturity. However, Theodosia's 'later concepts of him' suggest there is more to this lack than mere childishness. The letters she discovers to her mother from her family highlight that Horace, who we are told as early as the prologue is an adulterer and has fathered a further white child with local woman Tennie Burden, has little sexual morals. They suggest he has an out of control sex drive much like that associated with feeble-mindedness: "'Dropped his litter in the alley behind the jail. The half-wit, Dolly Brown, for God's sake! Old Josie's girl was a handsome wench, but slobbering Dolly Brown...A strange taste in wenches'" [100-101]. Concerns about inter-racial sex amongst the southern upper class were of course nothing new and dated back to antebellum times and beyond. Whilst accusations of miscegenation would be seen as marking a white man as immoral, they would not necessarily be indicative of biological degeneracy. However, it is Horace's choice of Dolly Brown that seems 'strange' to the letter's unidentified writer, positioning him outside of the norm and suggesting Horace has a dysgenic lack of care regarding who he breeds with. This fear is realised that evening when Horace's 'demands upon affection' take

on a more sinister tone. Horace attempts to coerce Theodosia herself into an incestuous relationship, revealing his moral lack and his inclination towards 'bad breeding' [104-105].

Theodosia pulls herself away from Horace and locks herself in her room (her self-imprisonment recalling the imprisonment of Stiggins) and attempts to 'set in order' the clutter in there. This physical tidying up signifies her own desire to restore order to her sense of self following the discovery of her mixed-race siblings and Horace's attack. As she cleans, she attempts to remove, mentally, Horace from her biological family, revealing her concern about what she may have inherited from her father. She tries to distance herself from him and seeks to find a sense of 'soul' in common with her grandfather:

Between her and her grandfather there was some relation she resolved. There was some beauty in his putrefaction, some flower in his decay. She was freed to hate Horace Bell. His touch on her arms and on her breast had been obscene. Somewhere there was a soul within her, within her grandfather likewise, she thought. She had identified it with a swift moment of concentrated loathing, cut it free with hate. [105]

Mentally, she eliminates her father from her lineage: the word 'relation' is particularly telling, indicating not only a similarity but also a biological link with her grandfather that she denies in her father, freeing her to hate him. The 'loathing' here directed towards her father adumbrates the 'sickening loathing' she will feel towards Stiggins. Her attempt to 'cut free' her soul is a similar attempt to free her sense of self from her body which bears the dysgenic possibilities of Horace and his mixed-race children.

However, the new Horace-free family bloodline she seeks to find between her and her grandfather is rejected. When she approaches her grandfather to discuss her father's other children he reacts angrily suggesting that there is 'Enough virtue in

a Bell, in a Montford to carry a little excess weight' [107]. Anthony's citing of the family lineage suggests that a sense of aristocracy is evidence of 'virtue'. He leans upon the white male patriarchy that has produced him for his sense of inner value. Contrastingly, for Theodosia, Horace's immorality and his incestuous approach towards her thoroughly undermine this notion of familial virtue and, unable to respond to Anthony's anger, she weeps.

Horace's suspect biology is signified not only by his immoral sexual desires but through similarities in action and in speech, to his children, including Theodosia. Although the prologue draws upon contemporary eugenic and racist discourse to invite the conclusion that Stiggins's intellectual disability is inherited from his mother Dolly Brown, the novel suggests that the true source of any biological taint is Horace. In suggesting a hereditary lack in Horace and his white child, Roberts complicates eugenic assumptions about race, class and intellectual disability. This questioning of the eugenic fitness of the novel's central elite white male figure is partly achieved by the absence of Dolly Brown and Deb, the mother of Americus and Lethe. They are only mentioned in passing within the text and are never seen. Similarly, Catherine Bell, Theodosia's mother dies very early in the novel, offering the reader only limited opportunity to make any judgment upon her. This removal of the novel's mother figures, both black and white is crucial to its representation of the genetic landscape of the South. As Stubblefield has discussed, both women and blacks were seen as biologically inferior to men and more likely to be the bearers of a hereditary taint.<sup>170</sup> By removing Dolly, Deb and Catherine from the text, Roberts restricts the interpretation that they are the source of the dysgenic traits present in the novel and shifts the eugenic gaze onto Horace as the surviving parent. This is not to

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<sup>170</sup> Stubblefield, 'Tainted Whiteness', pp. 162-181

suggest that the novel rejects eugenic associations between blackness, miscegenation and feeble-mindedness – in fact, symbolically to some extent it relies upon them – but instead to note that it seeks to question these associations and direct attention towards the ‘germ plasm’ of the very people that were making them: upper and middle class white men.

In breeding with a half-wit and fathering Stiggins, another half-wit, Horace is guilty not only of adultery and miscegenation but also of propagating dysgenic traits, thus positioning him – by contemporary southern standards – as a highly immoral figure. There is also a suggestion that Stiggins begins an incestuous relationship with his sister Americy – apparent evidence of his (and her) immorality which also raises the possibility of further half-wit children [196]. That Stiggins and Americy, from different mothers, both show an incestuous desire, a desire Horace shows himself towards Theodosia, implies they have inherited this trait from him. It is Horace’s immorality that is reflected in his mixed-race children, positioning him as the likely source of the dysgenic traits they display. Furthermore, Roberts’s lexical choices indicate that Horace may be the source of Stiggins’s intellectual disability. The ‘garbled recitative’ of Stiggins is most commonly echoed in the dialogue of Horace and his children, including Theodosia. Indeed, Horace’s own speech is described at one point as a ‘continued recitative’. This similar description of a shared trait hints that Horace too has an intellectual disability of some sort. His words, like Stiggins’s, are often repetitive and impenetrable. For example:

Tell him I’ll take him on a trip next summer to the Virginia Ocean. A ship glides down the water on silken satin sails. Tell him to think about that and he’ll drop off right away. Tell him to think of silken satin sails. The silken sad uncertain. Tell him not to think about the silken sad uncertain, but tell him to think of silken satin sails. Nothing is uncertain. All is certain. I’m right. [90]



It is not only the repetition and the convoluted nature of this passage which resembles Stiggins conversation but also the assertion at the end of it. Stiggins too adopts this mannerism: "I got a hungry belly insides me. I got a tape-snake wants a ham bone to gnaw," Stig said. "I mean what I say" [168]. If Stiggins's intellectual disability is depicted in the novel by his incestuous desire and his speech patterns then Horace too, by these standards, is a 'half-wit'.

Theodosia, Lethe and Americy also reveal speech patterns which resemble Stiggins's further suggesting that it is Horace and not perhaps Dolly Brown who is the biological source of intellectual disability in the novel. This is clearly revealed in the scene in which Stiggins discusses the 'ol rat'. In what is a highly claustrophobic scene, featuring all four children, all the characters talk at cross-purposes, regularly repeating themselves and incorporating the words of each others 'recitatives' into their own:

"What is it you know about him?" Theodosia asked sharply, turning suddenly on Lethe, unafraid in her sudden surprise.

"I know enough, I ain't been borned so long ago for nothing."

"A ham bone," Stig began to whimper. "Ham-meat is right good now. Ham"

"You can take him away when you've done whatever you come for"

"We all say 'Whoopee! come see ol rat.' So weak in his legs he can't walk on his feet. Crawl on his belly. Slow, go like a snail bug. See ol' rat go up stable. Ol' rat. 'Take ker, ol' rat' we all watch ol' rat towarge corn room. Slow, slow, towarge corn room." He made slow creeping gestures with his fingers on the floor.

"I know enough. Was I borned last week? For God's sake!"

"You hate me Lethe," Theodosia said after a little, speaking through Stig's garbled recitative that continued. "You hate me. What makes you hate me? What did I ever do to you?"

"Was I borned last week? Don't you reckon I know your tricks? Is he anybody to me?" [164]

Stiggins continual discussion of 'ham' and the 'ol' rat' is mirrored throughout the scene by Theodosia's use of 'know' and 'hate' and Lethe's use of 'borned' and 'God'. Communication entirely breaks down, Theodosia and Lethe drift in and out of lucidity and Americy, who is not quoted in the sample above, plays music, heightening the sense of aural claustrophobia and when she does talk seems to exhibit echolalia, speaking in meaningless platitudes that repeat the words of her siblings for example: "'What's God got to do? I do' know,'" Americy said. And then she whispered "Oh, God a pity" [165]. The narrative fracturing and repetition which indicate Stiggins's intellectual disability seem increasingly in this scene like a family trait inherited from Horace.

However, Roberts blurs the influence of environmental and biological determinism in the creation of intellectual disability throughout the novel to the extent that it is difficult to disentangle the two. This blurring can be seen in Theodosia's eventual mental decline on her aunt's farm. It is here that her familial resemblance to Stiggins becomes most apparent yet her environment too resembles that in which Stiggins lives at the novel's beginning. She is like him 'cast out' from elite white society, hungry and vulnerable to the abuse of others. Frank, her remaining suitor, comes to visit her and she, increasingly delusional, begs him for food. However, he responds by putting his 'hands...on her body'. She is weakened and unable to respond with 'an ironic mind where yes and no functioned identically'. No longer able to make decisions, she has become, like Stiggins in the stable, an easy victim.

It is following Frank's visit that her mind truly unravels and she hears and speaks in a number of voices represented in dramatic form within the text.

Tellingly, her thoughts reveal similar concerns to those of Stiggins, at times echoing his words:

She settled her whole mind on some event, long past, selected at random from the nothingness of all forgotten events and brought forward to be examined minutely. It was the meeting, some meeting, of the literary society at the seminary – quotations, addresses, papers, debates. She began to recite carefully, dwelling on each phrase with humorous interest, sucking from each its last degree of pleasure.

And, “Please your honours, said he, “I’m able  
By means of secret charms to draw  
All creatures living beneath the sun,  
That creep or swim or fly or run,  
After me as you never saw!  
And I chiefly use my charm  
On creature that do people harm,  
The mole, the toad, the newt, the viper;  
And people call me the Pied Piper.”

SECOND VOICE: The murderer. Murder in her hands. A snake in her belly

FOURTH VOICE, *screaming*: She eats murder and snakes.

FIRST VOICE: Frank. She asked him for bread and he gave her a snake.

SECOND VOICE: If you had a hog to kill for food, could you butcher a hog? Would you? [235]

Theodosia’s ‘settling of her whole mind’ on a past event to examine minutely, only to interrupt that narrative almost immediately, recalls the mental process Stiggins reveals in his long broken recollection on the rat. Indeed, the story she attempts to tell is that of the Pied Piper, a story, just like Stiggins’s, about chasing rats. Roberts’s suggestion that Theodosia merely ‘recites’ her tale, seemingly bypassing any function such as analysis or questioning that might be deemed intellectual, recalls not merely in the process but in the word used to describe it Horace’s ‘continued recitative’ and Stiggins’s ‘garbled recitative’. Theodosia’s drifting away from her topic also resembles Stiggins’s in nature and, to some extent in content. Stiggins’s

concern with food, in particular ham is echoed in the concern with killing hogs spoken by the 'second voice'. The voices' discussion of a 'snake in her belly' almost directly repeats a line Stiggins's reference to the 'tape-snake' inside him earlier in the novel. Theodosia's 'snake' however, also becomes a phallic reminder of Frank, inviting the suggestion that they have had sex or she has been raped (the novel never makes this entirely clear as the scene is represented through Theodosia's delusion). Stiggins's concerns are not only mirrored therefore by Theodosia's voices but blend with her own concerns.

A similar blending occurs in Theodosia's mind with the actions of Lethe. It is Lethe who is the 'murderer' in the novel, having killed her lover Ross for an affair with another woman Lou. Yet, Lethe's murderous intent is initially directed towards Lou, it is Theodosia who persuades her to kill Ross hence the second and fourth voices' description of Theodosia as the true murderer. [194-5]. Indeed, Theodosia reveals her own violent inclinations in her persuasion of Lethe saying "'Kill, I will. I couldn't bear not to'" [194]. Here Roberts again cannily weaves the influences of environment and heredity in the creation of dysgenic traits. Theodosia's redirection of Lethe's anger towards Ross reflects her own rejection by men for other women suggesting an environmental explanation for her rage. Yet Theodosia's expression that she 'couldn't bear not to', a claim she repeats twice, suggests this violence may be an instinctive response for her, a claim matched by Lethe who repeats that killing is 'how it is with me' [193-4]. Theodosia's wondering about her ability to 'butcher a hog' in the passage above, reveals her own questioning and uncertainty about her violent tendency.

For the majority of the time she is at the farm, the novel's form attempts to represent Theodosia's mental process, unlike the rest of the text which is, the

prologue aside, indirectly from her perspective. Roberts uses a variation between dramatic form, prose and verse to represent a chaotic and confused mind. This experimental representation of Theodosia's thought process sees the author attempt to offer an 'internal' representation of the traits and we see presented externally by Horace and his children throughout the novel. The inclusion of shared concerns between siblings further invites the reader to reflect upon the similarities between what initially appears to be some kind of mental illness in Theodosia and Stiggins's intellectual disability. The fractured nature of Theodosia's thought process can be read as offering a model for the internal cogitation that produces the external 'recitative' of Stiggins and Horace. Because of the hints of hereditary intellectual lack woven into the novel's narrative and symbolic structure prior to this point, there is a sense that the full extent of the familial 'intellectual disability' is revealing itself in some form in Theodosia.

It is in the representation of Theodosia's mental confusion that Stiggins's crucial function in the novel is most apparent. As the novel's most visibly dysgenic figure, his presence undermines the genetic integrity of his family, inviting biological explanations for their actions. Yet the similarities between Stiggins and Theodosia do not necessarily imply a shared biological 'taint'. Theodosia's mental process whilst on the farm undoubtedly reflects the traumatic experience she has gone through at the hands of white men particularly Horace and Frank. It is only whilst being 'cast out' from the protective hierarchies of race and class that Theodosia reveals these seemingly dysgenic traits. This in turn posits important questions about Stiggins's intellectual disability, inviting the reader to question the extent to which that which eugenicists claimed was internal can be read as such. Roberts, by 'steadily taking away', puts her protagonist in an environment that

closely mirrors that of her half-brother. Theodosia's steady descent into 'hell', as she describes it, is matched by a steady revealing of dysgenic behaviour. The more she is in an environment like Stiggins, the more she becomes like Stiggins.

Theodosia's eventual escape from 'hell' and rebuilding of her life among rural whites depends on her overcoming her similarity to Stiggins. This is achieved in the text through what can only be described as an epiphany:

At once a vivid appearance entered her mind, so brilliant and powerful that her consciousness was abashed. Larger than the world, more spacious than the universe, the new apparition spread through her members and tightened her hands so that they knotted suddenly together. It tightened her spine until she sat erect. Her recognition settled to a word, groped with words, settled again about a word, some word, catching at words with a net. The word was vivid, was like a new flower in a sunny place, and unable to say it she knew it with a rush of thanksgiving that out-ran all her recognition of it. The word she could not say, could only approach with reaching tentacles of memory and thought, erected a joy through her senses. Her body spread widely and expanded to its former reach and the earth came back, herself acutely aware of it. A pleasure that she still lived to participate in this recognition caught her throat with a deep sob. She had shifted her gaze so that she looked now into the fire. She sat leaned forward, tense with new life, with the new world, and she penetrated the embers with her gaze and saw into the universe of the fire, the firmament of dimly glowing heat that receded, worlds on worlds, back into infinities, atoms, powers, all replete with their own abundance...The word let a happy substitute stand for itself, a delegate appearing clearly defined, a word experienced as a glow of pride in life and joy. "Tomorrow" was the utterance, clearly placed then.

The 'brilliant and powerful appearance' and the emphasis on 'the word' have Genesis-like qualities which, when blurred with the passage's sexual imagery, suggest Theodosia experiences a reconception and rebirth. She is both father 'erect' and able to 'penetrate' and mother: 'her body spread widely'. She is 'new life' in a 'new world'. Indeed, the epiphany seems to be a dramatic realisation of the process she attempts earlier in the novel when mentally cutting her father from her heritage. This is a new Theodosia in which heritage is not defining. The 'pride' Luce observes

in her at the novel's beginning has returned, but this is not a pride based on her ancestry but on 'life and joy'. However, it is also clear that this moment sees the end of Theodosia's 'intellectual disability'. The initial struggling for understanding as she 'grope[s] for words' recalls the earlier process seen as she attempts to remember 'The Pied Piper', yet this is overcome with returning 'thought and memory'. That she 'participates in this recognition' suggests not only an active perception of 'the word' but also hints at the word 'recognition's' Latin root – she is able to 'know again'. The emphasis on clarity in the passage suggests the confused thinking she has experienced has passed; she is now 'acutely aware' and the word 'Tomorrow' is 'clearly defined' and 'clearly placed'. Similarly, her ability to 'penetrat[e] the embers with her gaze' reveals a renewed interest in and insight into the world before her, instead of a punishing dwelling on the world she has experienced. If Theodosia is reborn in this episode then she is reborn without the intellectual lack she has shown earlier in the novel.

With its promise of a 'new world' and the removal of her Stiggins-like disability, the epiphany sees Theodosia rejecting the determinism of the society she has lived in be it biological or environmental. Indeed, if there is a 'word' that 'Tomorrow' eventually stands in for, it is perhaps 'freedom'. It is the possibilities of tomorrow which engender a sense of free will in Theodosia. Renewed and apparently free of the dysgenic traits she has shown in the farm (reflected in the novel by an end to the formal experimentation), she begins, for the first time, to take some control of her life. She catches a ride with a local peddler who visits the farm and travels to a local rural village. In the village, Theodosia begins to create a new life for herself, becoming a school teacher and marrying local farmer Caleb Burns.

What limited criticism there is on *My Heart and My Flesh* has tended to see

this conclusion to the novel as an Agrarian-like paeon to rural life. Frederick McDowell for example saw in Theodosia's eventual rejuvenation in rurality a return to the spiritual nourishment of a connection with the earth.<sup>171</sup> However, while Roberts – whose first two novels were published before the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) – certainly shared an affection for folk-ways and rural life with that collection's male authors, the novel's conclusion reveals a challenge to traditional gender hierarchy less in tune with the Nashville group. Beth Harrison, discussing Ellen Glasgow suggested that in her novels *Barren Ground* and *Vein of Iron*, Glasgow sought to revise the southern pastoral, imagining a new world built upon agrarian values but also 'a community historically self-sufficient and matriarchal rather than hierarchical and patriarchal'.<sup>172</sup> In the conclusion of *My Heart and My Flesh*, Roberts explores similar possibilities. In the rural community Theodosia moves to it is a woman, Midi, who dating 'all happenings by the birth of some child' serves as the village's memory as opposed to the men who 'used history and memory and were often refuted, their method wanting' [284]. The failing method of the village men recalls the broken history presented by the group of old men in the prologue and represented in the fractured speech of Horace and his offspring, most notably Stiggins. The histories of men are false and mistaken, the novel suggests, whereas those of women are more accurate and rooted in the (maternal) events of life. The 'new world' of Theodosia also allows for greater female autonomy. Theodosia's economic independence as a school teacher gives her, for the first time, some power in her relationships with men. It is she who selects Caleb, having assessed the village's available men, 'appraising them [and] measuring their quality' [278]. Reflecting Theodosia's increased power, he tries to impress her by

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<sup>171</sup> McDowell, *Elizabeth Madox Roberts*, pp. 121-122

<sup>172</sup> Beth Harrison, 'Ellen Glasgow's Revision of the Southern Pastoral', *South Atlantic Review*, 55 (1990), 47-70, (p.61)



laying out his economic prospects and offering her one of his cows [293-5]. This is the first time in the novel in which a white male seems concerned with what he can give rather than take from her. Caleb and Theodosia's relationship promises to be built on a more equal footing than those she has experienced in the world she has left behind. This is underscored by a feminisation of Caleb who even positions himself as a mother figure: "'Whenever I touch you,'" his voice making the saying, "I have to take a deeper breath to accommodate the new life that's grown in me'" [298]. By creating 'new life' inside Caleb, Theodosia reverses the biological roles of the sexes as she has begun to reverse the hierarchical roles.

Lewis Simpson, one of the few critics to highlight the novel's challenge to gender hierarchies, has noted that the conclusion to the novel reflected Theodosia's rejection of Horace Bell. He cites a note from Roberts's papers which, suggests that Roberts's conclusion should be seen, as Simpson states, as 'more than a comforting pastoral resolution of Theodosia's suffering'<sup>173</sup>:

Horace Bell is not an accurate portrait, but I have known men as brutal. During the process of writing I have always a great deal of machinery off stage which makes the performance move. Writing of him, then, I thought of him as a great Jovian thunderer lacking Jove's benignant paternity. He is the Don Juan ideal of freedom carried to the end of its logic. Beyond him lies the spider that is eaten by his female, and a new world.<sup>174</sup>

It is possible to see here the narrative of Theodosia's rejuvenation. In overcoming the godlike (and therefore deterministic) but malignant power of Horace Bell, Theodosia, becomes the female spider who promises a new world, empowered in her position with men (as reflected in her relationship with Caleb Burns). However, there is perhaps also in this quotation an implicit reference to hereditary feeble-

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<sup>173</sup> Lewis P. Simpson, *Fable of the Southern Writer* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1994), p. 63

<sup>174</sup> Elizabeth Madox Roberts, *Roberts Papers*, qtd in Simpson, p. 63

mindedness. If the 'Don Juan ideal of freedom' is represented in the novel by Horace's sexual activity then 'the end of its logic' suggests a belief that Horace's breeding (or that of the powerful male figure more generally) has troubling, illogical, consequences which, I argue, implies the creation of dysgenic traits, as represented in the novel by Stiggins.

Intellectual disability in *My Heart and My Flesh* is a reflection of the failure of white patriarchy. Whether the consequence of 'brutality' or 'Don Juan' breeding it is something Theodosia must overcome to become the symbol of a 'new world'. That Roberts built her 'new world' in a poor rural community reflects not only her affection for rural Kentucky but also a further rejection of eugenic notions. It is here, precisely where eugenicists located dysgenic traits, that Roberts chooses to locate her heroine at the novel's end; in a feminised rural world, seemingly free of half-wits, murderers and incest. It is a world free of Horace Bell and all he entails. However, this is also a world without blacks. There is no place for Stiggins, Lethe or Americy in Theodosia's new life. While Roberts destabilised the biological essentialism of eugenics, it is only the white woman Theodosia who is able to escape her fate. Roberts may have inverted the class associations of eugenics, yet the new world she imagined was, like that of eugenicists, white.

This chapter has argued that in both *My Heart and My Flesh* and *The Time of Man* Roberts complicated eugenic understandings of intellectual disability, reinserting environmental explanations for traits that were increasingly understood as inherent. To some extent, intellectual disability functions in her novels to draw attention to its own constructed nature and to posit questions about society's response to it. However, these were not questions Roberts was either able or willing to solve. Chick's death in *The Time of Man* and Stiggins' absence from Theodosia's

new life removes them from the text in a manner reminiscent of the 1920s response of sterilization and segregation to perceived intellectual disability. Indeed, Theodosia's epiphany, which sees the disappearance of her own half-wit-like traits, must be seen as something of a *deus ex-machina*. Unable to adequately respond to the challenge posed by the blending of environmental and biological determinism in her creation of Theodosia, Roberts makes them vanish in a moment of thought. It is not only Roberts's narrative then but her novel itself that reveals the destabilising nature of intellectual disability. In the face of idiots it appears, every system of philosophy and religion, even Roberts's own, goes down.

However, although the pastoral world Roberts sketches at the end of *My Heart and My Flesh* is disconcertingly free of the disability and blackness found in more urban environs, her novel nonetheless, like its predecessor, represented a South in which individual lives were determined by systemic inequality to a far greater extent than the eugenic movement might have claimed. In Stiggins, Roberts created what should perhaps be thought of as the first fully formed representation of intellectual disability in modern southern literature. Functioning at once as both symbol of southern degeneracy and vehicle through which to explore and expose the damaging nature of rigid social hierarchies, Stiggins embodies a wealth of concerns about the American South. In *My Heart and My Flesh*, Elizabeth Madox Roberts inaugurated a trend of disruptive intellectually disabled figures in the region's literature. The influence of her creation can be felt, as I discuss in coming chapters, in the works of others, particularly Ellen Glasgow and William Faulkner. They, like Roberts, explored, challenged and at times struggled with the ambiguous aetiology and meaning of intellectual disability while, at the same time, finding these ambiguities invaluable in depicting, and often critiquing, their region.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **‘A Multitude of Half-Wits’: Intellectual Disability and the Appalachians in Ellen Glasgow’s *Vein of Iron***

One may admit that the Southern States have more than an equal share of degeneracy and deterioration; but the multitude of half-wits, and whole idiots and nymphomaniacs and paranoiacs and rakehells in general that populate the modern literary South could flourish nowhere but in the weird pages of melodrama.<sup>175</sup>

Thus wrote Ellen Glasgow in 1943, bemoaning the proliferation of intellectually disabled and dysgenic figures in southern literature. This trend which, as discussed in Chapter Two, had begun in the middle of the 1920s with Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *My Heart and My Flesh*, had become much more visible with the success in the 1930s of authors such as William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell, both of whom prominently incorporated intellectually disabled figures in their work. Caldwell's remarkably successful novel *Tobacco Road* (1932) and its subsequent adaptation for stage, certainly fuelled perceptions of the South as a hotbed of degeneracy and caused much consternation both in the South and beyond about the behaviour and living conditions of the region's poor whites.<sup>176</sup> Despite her criticism of these new depictions of the South, however, Glasgow herself had incorporated intellectually disabled figures into her work, most notably in her novel *Vein of Iron* (1935), which not only features an idiot, Toby Waters, but also shows a broader

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<sup>175</sup> Ellen Glasgow, *A Certain Measure: An Interpretation of Prose Fiction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943), p. 69

<sup>176</sup> For a discussion of the institutional response to *Tobacco Road* in the South, see Lombardo, 'From Better Babies to The Bunglers', pp. 56-63

thematic concern with the origins and meanings of intellectual disability.<sup>177</sup> In this chapter I discuss how Glasgow's representation of intellectual disability seeks in part to undermine the extent to which it had become entangled with southern identity. However, intellectual disability becomes deeply intertwined with Glasgow's own representations of the South and her distrust of both traditional values and modernity. Equally, the author's depictions betray her belief that degeneracy was especially rife in the region. As such, the novel is both an awkward critique of the trope of southern idiots in the region's modernist fiction and also an almost archetypal example of that trope.

*Vein of Iron's* engagement with intellectual disability and its aetiology is very much in keeping with Glasgow's career long interest in heredity. As a young woman she read Darwin, Malthus and Spencer, thinkers whose works were to provide key building blocks for later eugenic thought.<sup>178</sup> Despite the hostility towards science that Glasgow professed in her late career autobiographies, Darwin in particular was a lasting influence upon her writing. Her curiosity about biological inheritances should not serve to strictly position her as a eugenicist. In fact in her short story 'The Artless Age' (1923) Glasgow gently mocks the eugenic movement. In that story, a mother who takes a prominent role in The National Eugenic Committee, fails in her own efforts to provide an 'appropriate' wife for her son. He chooses the very woman she does not want him to marry, and she finds, much to her chagrin, that, regardless of

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<sup>177</sup> Although Toby Waters is Glasgow's most developed intellectually disabled figure, he is not the only example in her work. A pair of idiot figures – Black Tom and Billy Appleseed – feature briefly in *Barren Ground* (1925). While neither is an important character in the novel both, particularly Billy who shares Toby's innocence and love of sweet things, can be seen as precursors to Glasgow's representation of idiocy in *Vein of Iron*.

<sup>178</sup> Ellen Glasgow, *The Woman in Me* (Charlottesville and London: The University Press of Virginia, 1994), p. 42; p. 102

her attempts at controlling breeding, 'modern love' trumps 'race improvement'.<sup>179</sup> For all that 'The Artless Age' indicates Glasgow was suspicious of the possibility of 'positive eugenics', ideas about degeneration, 'bad breeding' and inherited character traits appear in different forms throughout her work. This interest is visible, for example, in another short story from 1923, 'Jordan's End'. The gothic tale depicts a white southern elite family whose choices in breeding lead to degeneration, represented here by mental illness not intellectual disability. The story's association of the southern aristocracy's social decline with biological decline adumbrates similar examinations by Roberts in *My Heart and My Flesh* and Faulkner in both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936).

Although, as we shall see, Glasgow was to depict a society fearful of bad breeding in *Vein of Iron*, a eugenic horror story like 'Jordan's End' was not typical of her work nor the influence of hereditarian science upon it. As Lisa Hollibaugh has noted, Glasgow was most interested in the role biology played in the formation of character. In her examination of the influence of Darwinism on *Barren Ground*, Hollibaugh argues that in the writer's later novels it is the inherent character of individuals which determines their ability to resist social and economic forces and survive.<sup>180</sup> *Vein of Iron* places a great deal of emphasis on character and heredity. Depicting the lives of the Fincastles, a rural Virginian family, from before the First World War until the Great Depression, the novel examines how in both their home village of Ironside and in the city of Queensborough (a fictional rendering of

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<sup>179</sup> Ellen Glasgow, 'The Artless Age', in *Collected Short Stories of Ellen Glasgow*, ed. by Richard K. Meeker (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963), pp. 184-202

<sup>180</sup> Lisa Hollibaugh, "'The Civilized Uses of Irony': Darwinism, Calvinism, and Motherhood in Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*", *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 59 (2005/2006), 31-63, (pp. 49-50)

Richmond), to which they move for work, the family confront social rejection and financial hardship. The 'vein of iron' of the title refers to an inherited sense of determination and will to survive within the Calvinist family which can be traced back to their pioneer origins. It is this inherited trait that enables Ada Fincastle, one of the novel's two protagonists, to overcome the social stigma of unmarried motherhood and the financial pressures of the Depression to build a new life for her family in the course of the novel.

Glasgow, whose father descended from Scottish Presbyterian pioneers much like the Fincastles, described the novel as an opportunity to test 'the resolute breed from which my father had sprung' in the face of 'the disintegrating forces of the modern world'.<sup>181</sup> The novel can then be understood as playing out a conflict between inherited character and environmental pressure. The resilience of Ada and her father John, the two characters from whose perspective the novel is predominantly depicted, is tested throughout. Indeed the novel begins with the family in relative poverty caused by John's dismissal as the local cleric due to his philosophical writings, which challenge church doctrine and have seen him removed from his post leading him to take up a much more poorly paid role as a schoolteacher. The family's response to this poverty and Ada's troubled relationship with Ralph McBride, her childhood sweetheart, form the focus of the novel's first half. The couple's engagement is broken off when Janet, Ada's sometime friend, declares she is pregnant with Ralph's child and the village elders, including Ada's father, convince Ralph, who pleads innocence, to marry Janet. There is never a baby,

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<sup>181</sup> Glasgow, *A Certain Measure*, p. 168

but Ralph's attraction towards other women is a persistent test of Ada's resilience throughout the novel. The two have an affair and Ada has Ralph's illegitimate child, Ranny, while Ralph is away fighting in the war. When he returns, the family, having suffered the death of both Ada's mother and her grandmother and the village's criticism of her extramarital sex, have moved to Queensborough. Here they encounter a fresh set of tests as the Depression brings great poverty and John, and latterly Ralph, struggle for work. The vein of iron becomes crucial as the family not only survive but support others around them. John, for example, starves himself so the family does not go without food. The novel concludes with him returning to Ironside to die. When Ada brings the rest of the family for his funeral, she determines to return to the village to begin a new life.

Intellectual disability is integral to the novel's representation of the struggles the Fincastles face. As with Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, idiocy is a central piece of the novel's symbolic architecture; characters are haunted by visions, dreams and memories of idiots. To some extent these fears mirror the concern Glasgow voices in the quotation above regarding a 'more than equal share of degeneracy and deterioration' in the South, a perception which, though mobilised by the eugenic movement in the 1920s, persisted into the 1930s. Glasgow often draws upon contemporary associations between rural mountain populations in the South and feeble-mindedness. For example, the intellectual disability of Toby Waters is, it is suggested, the consequence of degeneration and 'bad' heredity. Despite being dismissive of her peers' 'weird melodrama', the spectre of the dysgenic feeble-mind haunts her work as it does theirs. However, intellectual disability serves broader



purposes within the text beyond representing a degenerating poor white class. It is a lens through which characters attempt to understand their society, its flaws and their own position within it. *Vein of Iron* sees its characters and the author herself wrestling with the meanings attached to intellectual disability. There are tensions, for example, between rural and urban models of intellectual disability, between essentialised intellectual lack and a more nebulous social idiocy, and between depictions of harmless 'village idiots' and representations of intellectual disability as a threatening social ill. These tensions are, at points, explicitly juxtaposed a few lines or a few pages apart, but also become apparent over the course of the novel. Competing understandings of 'idiocy' appear right until the very final scenes of the novel and are never satisfactorily resolved.

This uneasiness regarding the meaning of intellectual disability is as, I have noted, typical of southern modernist texts. However, Glasgow adopts a distinctive formal approach to staging the clashes between meanings found throughout the region's literary exploration of intellectual lack. The novel is presented almost entirely from two characters' viewpoints – John Fincastle and his daughter Ada. The two reveal different perspectives on intellectual disability. While they overlap at points, there are clear distinctions. From John's viewpoint, intellectual disability is more abstract, often functioning as a signifier of the decline of (or lack of) civilisation within the South Glasgow portrays. This is particularly noticeable in John's time in Queensborough where he spends much time mulling over the failures of modernity. At times John's thoughts resemble eugenic doctrine regarding the looming threat of the feeble-minded. However, while John's reflections about idiocy

seem apocalyptic, Ada has a different experience. She too, at times, has eugenic-like fears of intellectual disability, yet her relationship with Toby Waters can often be read as an affinity with the idiot. Toby's victimhood mirrors Ada's own and her empathy for him raises provocative questions about the society in which they live. The novel incorporates distinctly defined, genetically inherited differences between Toby and Ada, but their circumstantial proximity renders Toby as a sympathetic figure. Toby is ultimately more a benign and benevolent figure than he is a degenerative demon. Ada's relationship and empathy with Toby does not fit easily with her father's concerns about 'morons' and degeneration

In highlighting this bifurcated approach to intellectual disability within the novel, I do not mean to suggest that the two perspectives are always placed in opposition. Glasgow develops a dialogue which reveals the multiplicity of meanings created by intellectual disability. In his examination of the novel, Julius Raper noted that Toby Waters seems to be intended to 'carry a good deal of meaning' but argued that it is difficult to successfully trace a sustained symbolic function for the character.<sup>182</sup> I argue that this difficulty is directly related to the excess of interpretation provoked by the disabled mind. In part, Glasgow's novel can be understood as an attempt to represent this excess – her critique of the 'whole idiots and half-wits' in the fictional Souths of her contemporaries certainly suggests a writer who felt intellectual disability had come to mean too much. *Vein of Iron* shows characters in the process of this meaning making, in an environment where concerns about intellectual disability have reached a heightened state. Glasgow

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<sup>182</sup> Julius Rowan Raper, *From the Sunken Garden: The Fiction of Ellen Glasgow, 1916-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press), pp. 162-163

brings to the fore contradictions and ambiguities about intellectual disability both within John's and Ada's narratives and between them, depicting a people no longer able to adequately make sense of the idiocy they perceive around them.

Toby's presence in Ada's life but absence from John's is central to the difference between their thinking about intellectual disability. In this respect *Vein of Iron*'s treatment of intellectual disability is redolent of much of the contemporary attitude in the 1930s South, which should perhaps be understood as divided between 'idiocy' and the 'idiot'. As a concept, idiocy (or more accurately feeble-mindedness) was threatening to both the individual and society; yet those deemed idiots were often looked upon as charity cases or in need of care. As Steven Noll has highlighted, this conflict presented southern institutions for the feeble-minded with unmanageable directives to be at once prisons, training schools and care homes.<sup>183</sup> This tension is reflected in the divided perspectives of the novel: for Ada, the presence of Toby, a reified idiot, complicates the eugenic fears of idiocy we see in her father. However, the novel depends greatly upon hereditarian and eugenic logic and for all that John's eugenic fears seem, in the light of Ada's experiences, psychological, Glasgow never allows the reader to doubt the presence of idiots within and around the mountain community. The failure to resolve the plethora of meanings of intellectual disability should be seen largely as a representational strategy by Glasgow. Yet, the novel itself at times feels overwhelmed by the clash between its desire to expose the symbolism surrounding intellectual disability and the narrative's dependence on the reader accepting certain eugenic ideas about

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<sup>183</sup> Noll, *Feeble-Minded In Our Midst*, pp. 155-158

intellectual disability as true. Thus it becomes as much an example of the southern confusion and concern about intellectual disability as it does a critique of it.

My interrogation of the role of intellectual disability within the novel is presented in three distinct sections. Firstly, I discuss the eugenic genesis of the 'southern mountain idiot' trope and its social and cultural influence. I show how Glasgow draws upon fears of feeble-mindedness that are specific to the novel's setting and position the novel within a broader discourse about intellectual disability within the Appalachians. In doing so I intend to illustrate how cultural representations of intellectual disability such as Glasgow's cannot be seen in isolation from the treatment of those deemed feeble-minded in the South of the 1930s. The next section primarily focuses on John Fincastle's relationship with intellectual disability within the novel. I show how hereditarian conceptions of intellectual disability, especially the atavistic implications of the mountain idiot discussed in the first section, are essential to representing John's concerns about modernity and civilisation. The third section discusses the relationship between Toby Waters and Ada Fincastle. I argue that through this relationship, the text offers very different readings of intellectual disability than those described in the previous section. I show how Ada's empathy for Toby's plight, and in particular his position as a social outcast, complicates the novel's use of eugenic imagery.

## 'Fearful Sights in the Hills'

Although *Vein of Iron*'s idiot characters should be seen as part of the broader vogue for such figures in southern modernism, Glasgow's representation of intellectual disability is also specific to the novel's setting in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The intellectual capacity of some communities within the Appalachian mountains of Virginia was a distinct concern for eugenicists and sociologists of the period. These concerns, rooted in class and racial prejudices, had a tremendous impact upon the way such communities were depicted and ultimately treated. Disability frequently became a means to explain poverty and cultural difference. Glasgow incorporates these beliefs into her depiction of the region – the novel's idiots have their origins in the mountains which border the village of Ironside and intellectual disability is frequently associated with heredity and immorality. Thus while intellectual disability has a highly symbolic value within *Vein of Iron* its presence should also be read as part of an attempt by Glasgow – who saw herself, particularly when writing this novel, as something of a social historian – to recreate accurately the region in which her novel is set.<sup>184</sup> This desire goes beyond the representation of half-wits and idiots in mountain communities to imagining how these localised concerns about intellectual disability affect those who live there.

The novel's characters' preoccupation with intellectual disability and its implications reflects their geographical proximity to its supposed mountain source. Consequently, the threat of idiocy, though certainly implied in other modernist southern writing, is more to the fore than in any other novel discussed here.

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<sup>184</sup> Glasgow discusses her desire for historical realism in her chapter on *Vein of Iron* in *A Certain Measure*, pp. 165-170

However, if reading Glasgow's idiot figures within their historical and geographical contexts illuminates why intellectual disability is so prominent in the novel, it also positions *Vein of Iron* as part of a troubling discourse on Appalachian communities which had real life consequences for those communities in the form of state enforced institutionalisation and sterilisation.

The archetype of the mountain idiot which Glasgow drew upon in *Vein of Iron* was much discussed and widely reproduced in the early decades of the twentieth century. Eugenic ideology reinforced and gave a scientific validity to pre-existing prejudices against southern mountain whites.<sup>185</sup> The pre-eminent figure in American eugenics and founder of the Eugenic Record Office (ERO), Charles Davenport had suggested in 1911 that dysgenic individuals were more likely to be found in mountainous regions. Oddly, although Davenport suggested that inbreeding amongst Appalachian residents was 'much exaggerated', he then proceeded to firmly locate the threat to America's racial hygiene precisely amongst the mountain people of the South: 'As the mountains rise to the southwestward so do inbreeding, pauperism, and defect, reaching their fullest fruition in the mountain fastnesses of western Virginia and eastern Kentucky and Tennessee'.<sup>186</sup> Davenport's conclusions were reinforced by Henry Ernest Jordan of the University of Virginia, who expressed concern to Davenport about the biological fitness of a group of mixed-race people living in the Blue Ridge Mountains. This concern would eventually culminate in Davenport sending an ERO employee Arthur Estabrook to the region and in the

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<sup>185</sup> For a history of this pre-eugenic antipathy towards Appalachian whites see Harkins, *Hillbilly*, pp. 13-70

<sup>186</sup> Charles Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911), p. 197

publication of *Mongrel Virginians*.<sup>187</sup>

As discussed in Chapter Two, Estabrook's work suggested that racial 'hybridity' was the cause of a lack of intelligence and eugenic fitness in those he examined.<sup>188</sup> However, as the stereotype of the 'mountain idiot' became more prominent in the late twenties and thirties, this emphasis on racial mixing diminished. The 'mountain idiot' became somewhat divorced from the 'mulatto idiot' in regional and national cultural imaginaries. Mountain origin alone was enough to suggest an intellectual lack. While all the region's poor whites were frequently seen as biologically and/or culturally backward, the poor whites of the mountains were particularly read in this manner. It was not only scientific literature that promoted this linkage; Anthony Harkins, in his examination of the hillbilly stereotype has shown cultural products – in particular cartoons and literature – did much to propagate the notion that the mountain ranges of the South were filled with feeble-minded, incestuous, animalistic individuals.<sup>189</sup> While these cultural images were to some extent known to be exaggerated they were, as Harkins argues, understood to be based upon and predominantly representative of reality.<sup>190</sup>

Even for those sociologists who advanced environmental explanations for the poverty found in mountain communities the ideology of eugenics was difficult to escape. Stephen Fender has persuasively argued that despite its environmentalist

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<sup>187</sup> Dorr, *Segregation's Science*, pp. 57-58

<sup>188</sup> Arthur Estabrook and Ivor McDougle, *Mongrel Virginians: The Win Tribe* (Baltimore: The Williams and Wilkins Company, 1926), pp. 198-202

<sup>189</sup> The influence of eugenics on depictions of Appalachian poor whites in southern literature often did not result in direct representation of intellectual disability per se but rather a more nebulous lack of 'civilisation'. See for example, Debra Beilke, 'Evolving into Violence: Poor White Humor in T.S. Stribling's *Teeftallow*', in *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture, 1880-1940*, ed. by Lois Cuddy and Claire Roche (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses: 2003), pp. 102-115

<sup>190</sup> Harkins, *Hillbilly*, pp. 103-113.

slant, *Hollow Folk* (1933) – a Federal Writers' Project examination of the same group of people as studied in *Mongrel Virginians* – reproduced much of the same imagery of degeneration and decay found in eugenic family studies. Fender also noted that *Hollow Folk* relied upon similar methodologies to eugenic works (such as IQ testing) and echoed them stylistically. While the authors of such works undoubtedly wished to separate themselves from eugenic discourse, their studies reinforced the sense of determinism at work in the lives of those living in the Appalachians. In doing so they merely added to the wider cultural perception that southern mountain dwellers were inherently different from the rest of the white American population.<sup>191</sup> As Susan Currell has noted, the eventual traumatic and violent removal of these people from their mountain homes for the creation of Shenandoah National Park in 1936 was a consequence of this eugenically influenced perception. Seen as potentially feeble-minded 'white trash', they were considered a blight on the prospective new recreational area and forced to leave.<sup>192</sup>

In addition to the emerging sociological discourse, more traditional eugenic thought persisted, as is apparent in this quotation from a 1935 medical journal article on Virginia's mountain communities: 'In the room were three grown boys, all imbeciles, all illegitimate, one stretched out on a filthy bed in a drunken stupor. There was not a normal human being in the room [...] In view of the present inadequacy of medical science in curing these mental ills, the only alternative seems

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<sup>191</sup> Stephen Fender, 'Poor Whites and the Federal Writers' Project', in *Popular Eugenics*, ed. by Currell and Codgell, pp. 145-160.

<sup>192</sup> Susan Currell, *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), pp. 181-182; Susan Currell, 'Dirty History and American Eugenics and the Problem of Purity', *Excursions*, 4:2, 2013, 1-10 <<http://www.excursions-journal.org.uk/index.php/excursions/article/view/123/163>> [accessed 25 September 2015]



to be the further prevention of propagation by sterilization'.<sup>193</sup> The intervention of the state government in the mountains in the period suggests the author was not alone in his conclusions. In what stands as one of the most shocking facts of not only southern but American eugenic history, in the 1930s individuals and whole families in Virginian mountain communities were collected in raids by county sheriffs and taken to local hospitals or the state colony for the feeble-minded at Lynchburg for sterilisation.<sup>194</sup> Others had their IQ estimated by welfare officials and were separated from their families and institutionalised. Moral judgements were often integral to these assessments of feeble-mindedness; petty crime, sexuality, or (for women) children born out of wedlock were seen as indicative of an intellectual lack.<sup>195</sup> Above all else it was poverty which made those in mountain communities vulnerable to being deemed feeble-minded. As Mary Bishop has revealed, poverty was the shared feature of the lives of nearly all those who were institutionalised in Virginia in the first four decades of the twentieth century.<sup>196</sup> In the decision-making process that rendered some poor Appalachians sterile or institutionalised or both, class, morality and intelligence were inseparably related categories, each influencing the judgement of the next.

By incorporating mountain idiots into *Vein of Iron*, Glasgow was responding to a particular local anxiety about intellectual disability which affected not only the perception of Appalachian people but the treatment of them. The novel offers an

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<sup>193</sup> Jack Manne, 'Mental Deficiency in a Closely Inbred Mountain Clan', *Mental Hygiene*, 20 (1936), 269-279. Qtd in Harkins, p. 111

<sup>194</sup> Kevles, *In The Name of Eugenics*, p. 116; Edgar Black, *War Against The Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Make a Master Race* (New York: Four Walls Four Windows, 2003), pp. 3-6

<sup>195</sup> Mary Bishop, 'Sterilization Survivors Speak Out', *Southern Exposure*, 23 (1995), 12-17

<sup>196</sup> Bishop, 'Sterilization Survivors', p. 15

insight into the impact this anxiety had through its representation of the fear of intellectual disability amongst its characters. However, Glasgow's representation of mountain intellectual disability shows in itself the clear influence of the eugenic movement. Local concerns about the eugenic fitness of the nearby mountain dwellers are articulated early in the novel. While these ideas were relatively modern, Glasgow makes them feel traditional:

Old black Aunt Abigail Geddy, who had Indian blood, muttered that there were fearful sights in the hills if you knew where to look for them. She had once gone to Panther's Gap to help Grandmother take care of a family of half-wits. Three generations of half-wits, from a chattering crone of a granny to a new-born baby barely a day old! And the baby was the worst. If it had been a kitten, she said, they would have tossed it straight into Panther's Run.<sup>197</sup>

Abigail's account of the half-wits of Panther's Gap is like a very short eugenic family study reconstituted as a gossipy local story. By having Abigail, the Fincastle's servant, recount the tale, Glasgow shifts beliefs about inherited feeble-mindedness out of the scientific realm, naturalising them and giving them a less didactic tone and a folksy authenticity. The move is augmented by Abigail's age and her 'Indian blood', suggesting respectively wisdom and a racialised special knowledge. As can be seen in the following chapter, this blurring between the clinical and the colloquial is similar to that which occurs in other southern modernist accounts of community beliefs about intellectual disability and reflects the peripheral modernity of the region.

Her claim there are 'three generations of half-wits' resembles Supreme Court Judge Wendell-Holmes's declaration that 'three generations of imbeciles are enough'

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<sup>197</sup> Ellen Glasgow, *Vein of Iron* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), p. 17 [Further references are given after quotations in the text]

in the Buck v Bell sterilisation case. However, while the novel itself was published after Wendell-Holmes's statement, Abigail's claim – which is made roughly in the 1900s in the novel's chronology – precedes it. By anachronistically recalling the famous decree the novel suggests a more longstanding community belief in the role of heredity in the production of intellectual disability in the hills. Equally, Abigail's belief that the 'baby was the worst' – which similarly anticipates the Buck trial in its assessment of a baby as feeble-minded – provides anecdotal evidence of eugenic worries about not only continuing but worsening degeneration. In her hint towards euthanasia, which she is not able to commit to fully as the baby is not a kitten, Abigail even half proposes a highly eugenic solution to this persistent mountain intellectual disability.<sup>198</sup> This too has a homespun element; by comparing it to the familiar treatment of unwanted pets in the local 'Panther's Run', eugenic euthanasia becomes a less medical and more community based solution to a community problem. The modern mountain idiot construction becomes in this passage an integral and traditional part of the Appalachian milieu and the eugenic desire to eliminate this 'problem', though muted, seems more instinctive.

This introduction to the presence of inherited intellectual disability near to the community of Ironside also incorporates elements of the gothic recalling

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<sup>198</sup> This brief and muted nod towards the possibility of eugenic euthanasia of the intellectually disabled was written only four years before Nazi Germany enacted such a policy. Though of course neither Glasgow nor her character should be equated with Nazis, I raise this comparison merely to indicate that though this thesis focuses on eugenics and intellectual disability in the US South, it should not be ignored that these ideas, and those of Nazi Germany, were part of a global discourse. For a discussion of the transnational nature of the eugenic movement see Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 100-132. Robert Brinkmeyer has also discussed how the presence of eugenic like ideas in southern modernism overlapped with those emerging in Nazi Germany in his chapter on Thomas Wolfe, emphasising in particular the author's treatment of poor whites: Robert H Brinkmeyer, *The Fourth Ghost: White Southern Writers and European Fascism, 1930-1950* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), pp. 173-175

Glasgow's earlier blending of eugenic fears with horror in 'Jordan's End'. The 'fearful sights' and 'chattering crone' are suggestive of a ghost story. Indeed Ada, who is as a young child listening to Abigail, responds as if she were being told such a story by 'quaking with horror'. This almost clichéd resemblance to gothic narrative continues as Abigail is silenced by Ada's mother 'as she approach[es] the hair-raising part' [18] which sees Glasgow not only using the language of ghost stories but also evoking their sense of dramatic tension. The borrowing positions the people of Panther's Gap as not just different but dangerous. The dysgenic southern mountaineer becomes something not quite human, something to be afraid of. In Abigail's tale of horror the supposed abnormal has replaced the paranormal as the external threat. The nature of this threat should be seen within the context of eugenic interpretations of intellectual disability. The fear generated by the mountain idiot, which is a recurring theme in the novel, is biological, eugenic beliefs rendering intellectual disability as a threat not only to the individual body but to the body corporate. As Abigail is silenced before the 'hair-raising part', it is not only Ada but the reader who is invited to speculate what this might be, to generate their own dysgenic fantasy, perhaps drawing upon the plethora of contemporary imagery of mountain degeneracy. By hinting at a greater horror than she is willing (even through Abigail) to describe, Glasgow asks her audience to share the fearful imaginings about mountain intellectual disability felt by her characters throughout the novel. The reader is invited to associate with the normate Fincastles and the cumulative effect of the passage is to position the people of Panther's Gap as dangerous and frightening intellectually disabled others.

Glasgow returns to the mountain community of Panther's Gap to provide an ancestry for the novel's central idiot figure, Toby Waters. The clash between Toby's benign behaviour and the fear of the mountain idiots is central to the novel's unresolved tensions regarding intellectual disability. It is often unclear whether the fears felt by the people of Ironside are justifiable. However, if the novel is unclear as to the extent of the threat posed by Appalachian idiocy there appears to be little doubt as to its existence. Toby's idiocy is depicted as inherited and associated with immorality and poverty. His mother is a local prostitute and the pair live together outside of the village, closer to the mountains on a site known as Murderer's Grave. The home is repeatedly described as a 'hovel' and associated with the pigsty attached to it and the filth therein. This imagery of crime, illicit sex, animals, dirt and a decrepit home strongly recalls the language of eugenic family studies. As Nicole Hahn Rafter has discussed the descriptions used in these studies created an 'ideologically charged mythology'.<sup>199</sup> By placing the idiot Toby in these surroundings and closer to the local source of idiocy in the mountains Glasgow firmly associates him with this mythology.

Mrs Waters is never described as intellectually disabled, but the revelation that she is a prostitute early in the novel creates eugenic like links between her sexuality and morality and her son's idiocy.<sup>200</sup> This dysgenic ancestry is affirmed

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<sup>199</sup> Rafter, Introduction to *White Trash*

<sup>200</sup>Prostitution and feeble-mindedness were understood to be very closely related in the early decades of the twentieth century. In 1920 a federally commissioned study applying Binet-Simon IQ tests to 100 prostitutes in Kentucky found 38 to be 'feeble-minded', 43 to be 'constitutionally inferior' and only 2 to be 'normal (probably)'. L. O. Weldon, 'Psychiatric Studies of Delinquents: Part II. A Study of Physical and Mental Conditions of 100 Delinquent White Women in Louisville, Ky', *Public Health Reports*, 35 (1920), 1247-1269

later in the text when Ada reflects upon Toby's heritage during an encounter with him:

The village ought to take care of him, her father said. Yet his mother had buried two other children, both idiots. Mrs Waters had a father, an old man, still living in Panther's Gap. He had married an idiot girl from the almshouse and they had four idiot sons who worked in the cornfield. Once when Ada was little she had ridden by the place behind her father on his old bay mare, and she had seen three of these boys gathering sunflower seeds for the chickens. They had frightened her so by the faces they made that she had slipped down from the mare's back. If Bess, the mare had not been wise enough to stop, her father had said, there might have been broken bones for Dr. Updike to set. But people couldn't do anything about idiots. It was God's law, Grandmother said that married people, no matter whether they were half-wits or not, must bring all the children into the world to share in the curse that was put upon Adam and Eve. [167]

Toby is subtly described here as the being in the third generation of idiots in his family, making him, like the baby Abigail discusses earlier in the novel, living proof of inherited intellectual disability in the mountains according to eugenic logic (and federal law). His uncles whose faces terrify Ada, are like him associated with animals, in this case chickens not pigs, while his grandmother's history in the almshouse suggests a history of pauperism. The horror that Ada felt as a child during Abigail's account is echoed here in her face-to-face encounter, almost causing her injury. Again it is difficult to be certain whether this fear is justified: the idiots are only making faces and not posing a direct threat. This memory of childhood fright mirrors the reaction Ada has just had to Toby. She is horrified that 'almost he had touched her' [166] as if she might be contaminated by being near him. Toby's threat to Ada appears rooted not in what this idiot might do but in idiocy itself, its existence evidence of the fragility of normalcy. It is this fear that Ada and her father carry, in different ways, throughout the novel, the fear that idiocy is too close to the normate

self for comfort.

Like Abigail's thought of killing the half-wit baby, Ada's consideration of the Waters's familial idiocy provokes reflection on a solution. The line '[b]ut people couldn't do anything about idiots' seems, with the 'but' at the beginning, to be regretful as though she wishes that something could in fact be done. This 'but' functions similarly to the 'yet' in '[y]et his mother had buried two other children, both idiots' in revealing Ada's inner reluctance to accept her elders' suggestions of community acceptance of idiots. The number of idiots Mrs Waters has produced seems in Ada's mind to complicate her father's suggestion that the village has a duty of care. Similarly, although Ada parrots her Grandmother's belief in 'God's law', the passage does not suggest she entirely agrees with these beliefs. In generating these questions about what can be done Glasgow is, I argue, inviting the reader more than Ada herself to challenge the Grandmother's conclusions. Despite the disavowal of a solution, the reader, living in the age of sterilisation, would be aware that something could and indeed was being done about inherited feeble-mindedness. The doctrine of Calvinist predestination on which the grandmother's religious beliefs are founded is persistently criticised within the novel, thus Ada's citing of her religious objections to inhibiting the breeding of idiots should be seen as ironic. The very fact that Ada does appear simply to be reciting her Grandmother's proclamation makes it seem like dogmatic doctrine. This is typical of the early sections of the novel in which Ada often unthinkingly repeats her grandmother's religious beliefs. Glasgow time and again critiques the negativity of the local religion which wishes its followers to 'share in the curse'. The author is subtly mocking this basis for the grandmothers

argument and, with its emphasis on heredity and the horror of idiocy, the passage should be read as implicitly supportive of eugenic sterilisation.

It is often difficult to parse the extent to which the threat of intellectual disability is real or imagined in *Vein of Iron* and it is often unclear if idiocy beyond the mountains is social or biological. However, the idiots of Panther's Gap with their clearly defined ancestries are presented as real, dysgenic individuals integral to the novel's setting. While fictional, they are representative of a collective belief that there truly were 'fearful sights in the hills if you knew where to look for them'. Equally, the novel's hints at eugenic solutions to the region's 'idiot problem' should not be seen as abstract pondering but instead indicative of genuine regional responses. If placing the novel in this context offers new ways to read Ada and John Fincastle's relationship with intellectual disability as I hope to show in the remainder of this chapter, then it also highlights the relationship between the representation of intellectual disability and the treatment of those deemed intellectually disabled. In her depiction of idiocy in the mountains, Glasgow did not simply draw upon eugenic ideas but made them fictional flesh, contributing to a mythology which led some individuals to the institutional door or the surgeon's knife.

### **'A Whole World of Idiots'**

Through John Fincastle, Glasgow explores the extent to which a lack of intelligence, hereditary or otherwise, is responsible for social decline. When the family move to the urban Queensborough John's critiques of modernity are inflected with speculation about how intellectual lack and atavistic tendencies are responsible for



the world he sees. As critics have noted there is some overlap between John's distaste for modernity and perception of a civilisation in decline and Glasgow's own.<sup>201</sup> The critiques are wide ranging, mirroring many of Glasgow's own concerns, attacking for example, consumerism, modern politics and economics, the prominence of scientific as opposed to philosophical thought, new technologies and changing social – and in particular sexual – mores. It is certainly true that there is much similarity between John and the author, not the least of which is the similarity of Glasgow's own family heritage to that of the Fincastles. John's speculation about the role of intellectual lack in these changes can then be seen to an extent as Glasgow herself working through a rationale for these 'problems'. Marcel Thiébaux suggested that '*Vein of Iron* signals Glasgow's 'definitive retreat before modernism, her inability to confront change that did not conform to her idea of progress [...] Scarred and grim, her people denounce the moderns and withdraw into a haven of inherited wisdom'.<sup>202</sup> John, as the novel's premier example of 'inherited wisdom', would apparently be a good vehicle through which to condemn modernity.

Yet, the presence of mountain idiots in the novel complicates John's reading of intelligence and intellectual disability, troubling his role as the arbiter of civilisation and the modern world. John is as suspicious and fearful of the role of intellectual disability in his own community and, by association, himself. The novel appears to suggest that John's eugenic speculations about his rural hometown and his new urban home are separate, yet a nightmare as he is dying, filled with mountain

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<sup>201</sup> Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, pp. 169-170; Marcelle Thiébaux, *Ellen Glasgow* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982), pp. 162-163; Linda Wagner, *Ellen Glasgow* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), pp. 95-96

<sup>202</sup> Thiébaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, p. 163

idiots, suggests that fears about idiocy have had a profound and definitive affect upon him. In the light of his terror, the distinction between a national, modern form of intellectual disability and southern fears about half-wits begins to erode. Hence, while Glasgow borrows from John's fears to criticise the modern world, his views cannot be entirely equated with hers. Thiébaux sees John as a flat, unconvincing character. Challenging this view, I argue that by closely reading John's emotional engagement with mountain half-wits, we find a considerably fuller and more intriguing character who functions as much more than a mere mouthpiece for his creator.<sup>203</sup>

As the novel's intellectual, John appears to stand in direct contrast to the idiots of Ironside. Much is made of the Fincastle's own ancestry, not only as having a resilient 'vein of iron', but also as producing a long line of thinkers dating back to John's great-great grandfather, another John Fincastle, the 'scholar pioneer' who led an exodus from Ulster to America and founded the church in Ironside. One purpose of inherited intellectual disability in the novel is to serve as an opposition to this inherited intelligence. Rosemary Garland Thomson has highlighted how physical disabilities underpin corporeal normality, offering an 'array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries'.<sup>204</sup> Similarly, in *Vein of Iron*, intellectual disability is the deviant, failed example of intelligence (and by association civilisation) which helps to limn the normative or even super normative Fincastles. Just as one is fixed and heritable so is the other. John, in using the language of intellectual disability to assess the world around him therefore

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<sup>203</sup> Thiébaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, p. 162

<sup>204</sup> Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, pp. 8-9

underlines his own position of innate superiority.

However, despite setting up this opposition between John and the novel's idiots, Glasgow offers a glimpse of a counter narrative in which his own eugenic credentials are uncertain. Abigail's description of the mountain idiots to Ada is immediately preceded by her father's opinion on the mountaineers. John suggests 'they [are] a stalwart breed, the true American Highlanders. In pioneer days their forefathers had fled from the strict settlements, some because they could only breathe in freedom, and others to escape punishment for crimes against the laws of the Tidewater' [17]. This history is echoed a few passages later in Ada's grandmother's outlining of the Fincastle's heritage. She states the Fincastles have 'strong blood' [21], her words mirroring both in meaning and form John's description of the mountaineers' 'stalwart breed'. This mirroring continues as she elaborates that the Fincastle are descended from pioneers and, perhaps most crucially, show a passion for freedom in the wilderness. The original John Fincastle, the grandmother states 'thrust out towards the frontier...pursuing a dream of a free country' [20] while his son John Fincastle II, 'abandoned what was then called civilisation...and went alone into the wilderness as a missionary to the Shawnees' [21]. John and his mother make the drive for freedom and the abandonment of civilisation of these early pioneers sound noble, yet their descriptions also push the Fincastles closer to the wildness and lack of civilisation of both the mountain idiots and the Native American tribes who are described throughout as 'savages'. John's citing of runaway criminals amongst the mountaineers suggests a dysgenic element amongst them that is not in the Fincastle's reported ancestry. Nevertheless, the similarities between the

origin stories of the mountaineers and those of the Fincastles hints that they are more closely linked than it seems. In this light, Abigail's accounts of idiocy in the mountains begins to raise questions about the eugenic health of the people of Ironside and of the Fincastles themselves.

In juxtaposing John's image of the 'true American Highlanders' with Abigail's 'three generations of half-wits', Glasgow brings to the fore the contradictions in the two prevailing narratives about Appalachian whites in the early decades of the twentieth century. Although the mountains were frequently read and depicted as a site of degeneration, they were also contrarily seen as a site of pure cultural, biological and racial Americanness, as the living echo of a founding Anglo-Saxon heritage. In this interpretation, mountain whites were portrayed as "true Americans" or at least the possessors of a white culture 'untainted' by immigrants or blacks. The desire held by those from outside to preserve or reclaim this supposed culture led to a number of cultural interventions in the region in the early decades of the twentieth century. Albeit in a very different way, folklorists, like eugenicists, found in the people of the mountain South a group to study and build their mythologies upon.<sup>205</sup> The mythology of the folksy white mountaineer in many ways resembled that of the Agrarian southern yeoman – outlined most notably in Andrew Nelson Lytle's 'The Hind Tit', his contribution to *I'll Take My Stand* – with similar stress on the preservation of an older culture with links to the British Isles.<sup>206</sup> Glasgow in the thirties was certainly sympathetic to Agrarianism, and her origin stories for the

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<sup>205</sup> For a detailed history of this adoption of the Appalachians as an 'authentic' white culture see David Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

<sup>206</sup> Andrew Nelson Lytle, 'The Hind Tit' in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, by Twelve Southerners (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), pp. 201-245

Fincastles recall those of Lytle. However, in offering similarities between the Fincastles' heritage and that of the now half-wit people of Panther's Gap in *Vein of Iron* she presents mountain idiocy as something of an unresolved challenge to the idea of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. It is not that Glasgow undoes either the mythology of the mountain idiot or the pure Anglo-Saxon southerner – after all her own father's heritage is notably similar to that she describes for the Fincastle's – rather the tension between the two functions as a seed of doubt for her characters. Glasgow frequently seems less interested in resolving the contradictions and complexities of hereditarian science than exploring what they do to the society she represents.<sup>207</sup>

For example, the notion of an inherited wildness in the family influences John's mother's thoughts about him. She observes that 'many of the men who had come to the wilderness to practise religion appeared to have forgotten it's true nature' [41]. This reflection hints at degeneration and recalls her son who has been forced to leave his position as minister of Ironside due to his philosophical publications questioning the church's predestinarian doctrine. The Grandmother then considers Martha Tod, her own grandmother who had as a young woman been captured and lived with 'Indians', and who after her return to the village had appeared until her old age to pine for the wilderness. Her mind turns from this recollection directly to John's biological inheritance: 'was it true that wildness could be handed down in the

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<sup>207</sup> Thomas Wolfe also juxtaposed the folk and eugenic narratives regarding Appalachian whites in his novel *Look Homeward Angel* (1929). His idiot figure Greeley Pentland is at once 'degenerate' and able to play 'violin music that had in it something unearthly and untaught'. While folklorists and eugenicists almost entirely avoided explicitly bringing these two narratives together (albeit that there is a great deal of ideological overlap), for modernists like Glasgow and Wolfe, combining the two offered enigmatic figures who could signify a great deal in a southern context. Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward Angel* (New York: Scribner, 2006), p.15

blood? Could Martha Tod's spells have skipped her own children and broken out again in John's heresy?'. She reassures herself through physiognomy, examining John and noting 'but he has a fine face!' [42]. The uncertainty about heredity in the Grandmother's questions and the reliance on the outdated science of physiognomy perhaps suggest she is mistaken searching for reasons for her son's beliefs in his biology. Yet her reflections show how doubts about hereditary fitness and the proximity to 'wildness' haunt the community.

It is John himself who most clearly elucidates these doubts however. In the midst of a conversation about Janet's apparent entrapment of Ralph and her 'ways with men', John declares 'That [is] the trouble of a village...All likes and dislikes are inbred until they become like the half-wit families in Panther's Gap' [73]. John's statement is something of a *non-sequiteur* which is not expanded upon. It appears to associate Janet's sexuality with intellectual disability, and as such reflects contemporary eugenic concerns about young women, sex and feeble-mindedness. While his declaration opens as a generic comment on any village, by introducing the families of Panther's Gap, it seems John's belief is mobilised by local concerns that what has happened to the 'stalwart breed' of mountaineers could happen (or is happening) to Ironside. As his own heritage lies in the same village, it also suggests a nervousness about consanguinity in himself – a distinct possibility given that we are told his mother's family origins lie in the 'flock' brought to America by John Fincastle I [21]. There is a great deal of blurring of the 'flock' and the 'stock' in the Grandmother's family histories such that it becomes impossible to separate shared religion from shared 'blood'. In addition to the suggestion of inbreeding, the

reference to 'likes and dislikes' has racial overtones which recall those expressed in *Mongrel Virginians*. The neighbouring Native American communities – and his own family's historical relationship with them through Martha Tod – have perhaps provoked in John a doubt about the 'racial integrity' of not only the people of Panther's Gap but his own village. He is not directly discussing himself, but John seems to betray here eugenic concerns influenced by, but even closer to home than, the idiots of Panther's Gap. Given his own proximity to them, John's worries about the consequences of local sexual practises must be seen to a degree as personal. By offering a counter-narrative of the possibility of 'bad' inheritance amongst the Fincastles alongside the much more prominent narrative of inherited intelligence and strength, Glasgow incorporates a sense of self-doubt in her characters, giving meaning and rationale to the eugenic fears present in the novel.

When John speculates about the eugenic health of Queensborough, he is more distanced and these fears appear to be divorced from those expressed in Ironside. However, they are similarly inspired by the actions of youth and in particular the sexuality of young women:

[H]e had seen...three drunken boys sprawling on the grass after a dance at a club...[and] had stumbled upon one of his own pupils, a girl of seventeen, locked in an embrace in a parked car down a country lane. All this, he reminded himself was merely the foam of transition, and would disappear as it came. But would the perpetual flux and reflux of individualism reduce all personality to the level of mass consciousness? Would American culture remain neither bourgeois or proletarian, but infantile? Would the moron, rather than the meek inherit democracy?  
[293-294]

Much as Janet's actions had led John to worry about half-wits, in this passage a young girl's 'embrace' leads to worries about morons. Yet, despite a similar catalyst,

these are not entirely equivalent concerns. Glasgow's use of the word 'moron' here should be seen as an explicitly eugenic reference. The term, still relatively new in the 1930s, retained its scientific meaning and was rarely used as a generic term for intellectual lack as it would later be. It is the only time Glasgow uses it in her fiction and it is rare to find in southern literature at all, Faulkner's 'Monk' being the only other example in the works examined for this thesis. In using the term, Glasgow perhaps suggests John makes a distinction in types of intellectual disability, shifting from a supposedly traditional half-wit intellectual disability in the mountains to a different more modern, scientific intellectual disability in the city. Like eugenicists of the time, John is tempted to read the drinking and sex he sees amongst the urban young as indicative of a distinct type of inherent intellectual disability.<sup>208</sup> Though the half-wit can be understood – in John's logic – to be the result of isolated mountain inbreeding, the moron did not necessarily have the associations with inbreeding and was frequently linked to urban degeneration.<sup>209</sup> Symptomatic of his mistrust of contemporary politics, he questions whether either capitalism or socialism will be able to prevent a regression to childhood – 'infantile' in itself recalling the standard I.Q. test practise of apportioning a 'mental age' – suggesting a biological determinism unable to be changed by social forces.

The moron appears to pose a greater threat to civilisation than the half-wit. Whereas in Ironside John's eugenic musings were tied to local and personal suspicions about intellectual disability, here they take on national implications. It is 'American culture' John worries for and it is 'democracy' – so integrally tied to

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<sup>208</sup> For a discussion of the anxieties about degeneration and bad breeding provoked by the sexual and leisure activities of America's youth in the 1930s see Currell, *The March of Spare Time*, pp. 161-164

<sup>209</sup> Noll, *Feeble-minded In Our Midst*, pp. 38-39



models of American national identity – not the earth that he fears the moron might inherit over the meek. The notion of 'inheritance' weds the nation's biological fate to its political fate, continued degeneration in the former leading to degeneration in the latter. In Queensborough John projects his eugenic speculation about morons outwards to the nation in a way he does not with the half-wits of Ironside. In his analysis it is the urban, thoroughly modern moron that threatens the nation's 'mass consciousness'; the rural, traditional halfwit being a more localised, lower order of threat: 'the trouble of a village'.

This distinction also serves to insulate John himself from this form of intellectual disability. While there are some doubts about his relationship to the half-wits, here he is positioned as the intellectual surveying intellectual disability. In this chapter he describes himself as a 'lover of wisdom' [293], he has a 'scholar's stoop' [294] and projects that his work will 'live on as thoughts in the minds of a few and scattered thinkers' [292]. This positioning of John imbues him with an authority. It is within these passages reflecting upon modern life that John seems closest to the author, who certainly saw herself as an intellectual and hoped but doubted that her work would be more greatly appreciated by coming generations than it was by her contemporaries.<sup>210</sup> Parts of John's reflection on the modern world such as the use of 'the machine' as a synecdoche for modernity [293] are typical of Glasgow's own prose. The speculation about individualism and mass consciousness, for example, resembles a very similar passage in Glasgow's declarative appendix to her autobiography 'What I Believe'.<sup>211</sup> However, despite this similarity, when Glasgow

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<sup>210</sup> Glasgow, *The Woman in Me*, pp. 278-279

<sup>211</sup> Glasgow, *The Woman in Me*, p. 307

discusses morons in her non-fictional work, she seems much less concerned about the impact they might have on the nation than her character does. While she doesn't express any doubt over their existence, she describes the attention paid to them in literary works as excessive and suggests an American preoccupation with the moron is typical of the nation's 'single track mind'. 'An unsentimental Republic,' she suggests, 'might have discovered the moron as it discovered sex with more understanding and less romance'.<sup>212</sup> There is a symmetry between this statement and her critique of the role of half-wits in southern literature: these forms of intellectual disability, though real, have come to mean too much. John's ruminations on morons – and for that matter the sex that in part motivates them – should then be seen as all his own. John's use of the language of intelligence and intellectual disability supports Glasgow's critique of modernity and she undoubtedly questioned the intelligence of the average American, but his fear of idiots, half-wits and morons is a consequence of his origins.

Despite his position as the great yet obscure philosopher – there is even a section of the novel in which John, by then in poverty, is visited by a European philosopher who admires his work – he never seems certain as to whether the modern world's problems are hereditary or environmental and his logic often seems hazy. His thoughts about morons come in the form of questions reflecting the extent to which they may just be fears. The 'foam of transition' suggests a passing social change in contrast to rigid biological degeneration. This is part of an extended water metaphor within the chapter in which John wrestles with trying to accommodate an

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<sup>212</sup> Glasgow, *The Woman in Me*, pp. 276-277

atavistic reading of the world with an optimism for its future. He speculates that the 'dregs of violence' come to the surface then 'sink again to the bottom' [292]. This ideology of cyclical atavism is further described when Ada recalls her father telling her that 'systems and civilisations are all overwhelmed in time by the backward forces of ignorance, of barbarism, of ferocity. Yet the level would rise...little by little...and the indestructible will of the world was towards life' [359]. There is a degree of tension in this philosophy between the environmental and the hereditary; 'ignorance' and 'barbarism', while rooted in the language of intellectual lack do not necessarily indicate intellectual disability, yet the unexplained tendency towards regression appears very much linked to inherent atavism and degeneration. While the mountain half-wits seem tangibly 'real' in their idiocy, John's speculation about intellectual lack and degeneration elsewhere is filled with doubt and ambiguity.

As Raper has noted, there are moments in the novel when John's philosophy and his expression of it seem lacking; he suggests this is a flaw in Glasgow's development of the character.<sup>213</sup> This critique is somewhat predictable, being levelled against an author who, though not a philosopher, includes a philosopher in her novel. However, we can also read John's vague philosophising as a flaw of the character more than one of characterisation. Perhaps because of the close association between him and the author, there has been a tendency to view John as a very rational figure or, more pointedly, as one the author wishes us to see as rational. This view is, in the main, a persuasive one. Yet there are moments, as already discussed, when we see his emotional responses short-circuit his thinking. In the case of John's

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<sup>213</sup> Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, p. 165

inability to adequately express his understanding of idiocy and atavism, his confusion appears inextricably bound to his fear of mountain idiots.

A scene towards the end of the novel reveals the extent to which his concerns about broader idiocy are shaped and inflected by this fear. As John, ill and starving, takes a long journey alone to die in his home village of Ironside, he collapses and has a nightmarish fantasy in which as a child he is taken by his mother to the mountain communities in Panther's Gap. She leaves him and he is suddenly filled with terror and is unable to move or speak:

While the sweat broke out on his skin, and every pore seemed dripping with fear, the family flocked from the cabin and began to dance round him, singing and jeering. And as soon as he saw them he knew what he had dreaded – for they were all idiots. His mother had brought him to one of the mountain families that had inbred until it was imbecile. Two generations of blank, grinning faces and staring eyes and driveling [sic] mouths danced and shouted round him as they pressed closer and closer. A world of idiots, he thought in his dream. To escape from them, to run away, he must break through not only a throng but a whole world of idiots.... [455] [ellipsis in original]

The dream exposes the extent to which John's fears of mountain idiocy are both rooted in concerns about his own heredity and at the root of his anxiety about more widespread degeneration. That it is John's mother who brings him to and leaves him with inbred mountain half-wits signifies his mistrust of his biological inheritance from her and recalls the doubt she has had herself about him earlier in the novel. There are 'two generations' here rather than the three discussed by Abigail (and Wendell-Holmes) but as they press 'closer and closer' to John himself, their proximity to him suggests that he is in fact the missing third generation. John's inability to speak as the idiots approach him with his 'tongue at the roof of his mouth' strips him of the evidence of his intelligence and renders him like them with their

'blank faces' and 'driveling mouths'. John cannot run away because his biological inheritance is inescapable and has been with him since he was a child.

Before the idiots actually emerge, John is panic stricken as he 'knew without knowing how he knew it, that something horrible was about to happen'. This awareness indicates John's longstanding subconscious doubts about his heredity nagging away at him, threatening to expose 'something horrible'. There is the sense here that John feels a concealed inherent lack that could emerge as idiocy, a lack that is significant not only for him but for his child. By having John express eugenic ideology in response to young women's sexuality, Glasgow invites an unanswered question as to how he reads his own daughter's actions. When Ada's unmarried sexual encounter with Ralph leads to a child, John does not deem her a moron or an idiot even though, as we shall shortly see, Ada herself contemplates this question. There is an apparent hypocrisy in John's logic here which in itself raises questions about his capacity to judge intellectual disability.

However, his silence may also reflect his inability to confront his doubts about his own heredity and its impact on Ada. The dream initially resembles Ada's confrontation with the families of Panther's Gap much earlier in the novel. In that instance it was John taking Ada as a child to the mountains, following the same path as he does in the dream with his mother. The similarity between the two encounters suggests Ada is the next 'generation'. Like Ada, John first sees the people of Panther's Gap in agricultural tasks and then becomes fearful. Both characters perhaps recognise in the idiots' performance of these tasks a similarity to themselves, generating anxiety about not only their physical but biological closeness to idiocy. In

a further similarity between the two 'idiot encounters', Ada and John ride a horse with the same name: Bess. Bess protects Ada from the idiots by being 'wise enough to stop' [167] and similarly, Bess is named as John's only 'protector', when his mother leaves him [453]. As this is John's dream, the similarities between the two encounters suggest that John is incorporating Ada's meeting with the idiots into his own childhood, reflecting his eugenic worries about both her and himself. Given this overlapping, John's concern in his dream that his mother cannot help him also reflects his own fear that he cannot protect Ada from idiocy, hoping only that nature (signified by the horse) intervenes. The horse in John's dream is called 'old Bess' which certainly hints that this dream is not a childhood memory as it cannot, given the passage of time, be the same 'old' horse. However, 'old Bess' may also indicate that Ada rode a 'new Bess' and hence Glasgow generates a degree of ambiguity as to whether both Ada and her father had genuine childhood encounters with idiots which mobilises their later adult terror. This ambiguity epitomises the novel's depiction of the Fincastles' relationship with the mountain idiots. There is a persistent tension between whether their fear is brought on by geographical proximity to idiots or whether there is a 'real' biological doubt about the family.

What begins as a nightmare about John's own idiocy, by the conclusion metamorphoses into anxieties about idiocy beyond the self. Initially, John cannot run away from a family of mountain idiots; but in the end he cannot run away from a 'world of idiots'. As the 'throng' gets closer they become a 'whole world', John's fear seemingly so intense that he can no longer contain it within and expands it out to the entire human race. John states to his grandson Ranny earlier in the novel that 'there is

only one force stronger than selfishness and that is stupidity' [422], here that viewpoint becomes embodied in the mountain idiots and the 'force' so powerful that John himself cannot 'escape' it. Raper has described this dream as a 'misanthropic phantasy', but it is also a eugenic nightmare.<sup>214</sup> Idiocy shifts from 'two generations' to a 'throng' to a 'world' to a 'whole world' within two sentences, the ellipsis at the end of the dream suggesting an ever expanding, unending idiocy. John's earlier fears about the threat of morons are manifested here but in the form of the half-wits, revealing how his concerns about modernity are deeply entangled with his anxiety about mountain idiots. John's desire to escape shows how his return from Queensborough to Ironside has failed. His journey to die at home was, we are told, motivated by his belief that 'only in Ironside could he find the freedom to sink back into changeless beatitude, into nothing and everything' [452]. Yet this nirvana is nowhere to be seen. Instead, he finds the idiot world he condemned in Queensborough is no different from the idiot world in Ironside. In this light his statement to a stranger shortly before the dream begins that "'I think we always live where we're born'" [453] becomes darker – John has taken the idiocy with him. Escape from idiocy and death become the same for John not only because he sees the 'whole world' as idiotic, but also because he sees idiocy as an indestructible part of himself. Like Abigail half wishes for the third generation of idiots to be 'thrown in Panther's Gap', John sees death, even his own, as the solution to intellectual disability.

Through John Fincastle's relationship with mountain idiocy, Glasgow subtly

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<sup>214</sup> Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, p. 159

examines the southern internalisation of intellectual disability and in turn places those regional concerns within the national eugenic discourse. However, as much as half-wits and morons are part of John's psychological make-up, they are also essential to the author's representation of both rural and urban Virginia. While there is much uncertainty about aetiology, Glasgow never entirely convinces the reader that John's 'whole world of idiots' is solely in his head. In highlighting the poverty of the depression and the failure of social systems in Ironside and Queensborough, the novel indicates that a lack of reason is the cause. John's own failure to overcome his idiot demons are emblematic of the region's failure. Through her exploration of the impact of intellectual disability upon John's psyche, Glasgow borrows the power of intellectual disability to symbolise a civilisation in decline without ever committing to the belief that the two are essentially linked.

### **'In the Skin of the Idiot'**

Glasgow tends to divide her two protagonists' perspectives into separate chapters. Yet there is much overlap in terms of symbolic and thematic concerns beyond the simple progression of plot, creating a unity to the novel without undermining the individualisation of her characters. Like the structural resemblance between John's nightmare and Ada's childhood encounter with mountain idiots, in many passages father echoes daughter or vice versa. In creating moments where the two reflect on similar topics or experience similar events, Glasgow generates a dialogue between them. In the case of intellectual disability, this dialogue is often disharmonious. Ada's empathy for and affinity with Toby Waters introduces very different meanings



of intellectual disability into the text. Although visceral and eugenic fears of intellectual disability permeate Ada's narrative as they do her father's, they are persistently mediated by her relationship with Toby. Toby enables much reflection on Ada's part about the cruelty of society. At once a benign figure and the embodiment of mountain idiocy, Toby complicates the fears of idiocy on display in either Ada's own sections or more prominently in her father's without fundamentally undermining the eugenic basis for these fears.

Ada's ability to empathise with Toby is a crucial piece of Glasgow's formation of her character. Like intelligence and fortitude, empathy is a family trait. Time and again the Fincastles are shown to be charitable and moral people. For example, the grandmother visits and brings aid to the halfwits of Panther's Gap and in the midst of the depression John gives his shoes and only good suit to a virtual stranger trying to get a job. The novel's opening shows Ada's emotional distinctiveness as a child in comparison to her peers. She and a group of other children chase Toby and steal his cap. However, Ada brings a halt to the chase telling the others "'it hurts him to cry'" and realising, to her own surprise, that she "'[does not] like to hurt things'" [4]. Both Janet and Ralph are enjoying the chase, establishing early in the novel that Ada is morally superior to both.

However, this childhood experience also foreshadows later events. Ada does not only empathise with Toby but has a 'vision' in which she becomes him: 'In a flash of a vision it seemed to her that she and Toby had changed places, that they were chasing her over the fields into that dirty hovel' [4]. She equates this mental changing of places between her and Toby to an earlier experience in which she saw a rabbit

killed by hounds. These visions recur later in the novel when Ada is, like Toby, rejected by the community, forming a mirror relationship between Ada and Toby as helpless and innocent victims. By incorporating this early vision, however, Glasgow establishes a bond that already exists, outside of Ada's life experience. The scene foreshadows their later similarity but without the shared experiences that might explain it. The affinity with the idiot that Ada expresses here then appears innate. Yet this does not necessarily reflect an internal idiot waiting to break out as in John's nightmare (which at the novel's conclusion, mirrors this initial and a later idiot chasing sequence). Instead it humanises both Toby and Ada, bringing both together as living things that can be hurt. It is Ada's growing understanding of her instinctual empathy with Toby that marks the characters' relationship and forms a crucial part of Ada's development into adulthood and her eventual role as matriarch of the Fincastle family.

This initial scene is also reminiscent of Roberts's prologue to *My Heart and My Flesh*, in which a child's recognition of suffering collapses the firm distinction between intellectual disability and the normate self. This collapse causes in turn a fissure in what the child understands or experiences as real – both Luce and Ada have 'visions'. John's nightmare would seem, on the surface, to be a similar experience; there too idiots cause a breakdown in the perception of reality. However, John's nightmare does not engender empathy but instead generates an ever expanding and terrifying 'world of idiots'. Crucially, Ada is, like Luce, responding to a 'real' idiot, a figure lacking in John's fantasy. The tangible presence of the harmless Toby invites idiocy to be read sympathetically rather than fearfully. Within these

contrasting fantasies Glasgow separates what the idiot alone might signify and what a plurality of idiots and idiocy might signify. Despite their similar heritage, the village idiot evokes very different meanings for the daughter than the idea of mountain idiots does for the father.

However, despite Ada's empathy with Toby, this does not mean that he is emptied out of eugenic meanings in her sections. While Ada and John's differing responses to idiocy create a great deal of symbolic ambiguity, there is also internal ambiguity about its meaning within their respective narratives. The eugenic family study style descriptions of Toby's home and heritage described earlier are all given from Ada's perspective. It is through her that we learn of his mother's immorality and Ada describes her definitively as a 'bad woman' [64]. Her fear of being touched by Toby extends to his mother, who she seems averse to even being near: 'though she pitied the old woman (it seemed so hopeless to be old and bad together), she was embarrassed when they passed each other, as if a bodily disfigurement had been thrust under her eyes' [83]. Ada's metaphor is telling here, physical disability being, like intellectual disability, a product of the immorality and bad breeding which the old prostitute embodies. Mrs Waters, as evidenced by Toby, is to be feared as the source of bad biology. Ada's pity for Mrs Waters in spite of her eugenic doubts about her are, like her empathy for Toby, typical of her character and marks her as distinct from the rest of the village. She questions the village's response to Mrs Waters, critiquing the religion that banishes her from the church. For example after an illness, Mrs Water is no longer desirable to the village's men, is denied a place in the almshouse and has to beg. The young Ada questions the justification for this

decision, asking 'was religion like that?' [85]. Toby, as Mrs Waters's son, is also rejected from the church. This furthers Ada's suspicion about religion. In an argument with Ralph's mother – a strict Calvinist who stops her son playing with Toby as a child – Ada declares that she '[does not] know about God' and that everybody is a member of the church 'except poor Toby Waters, who needs religion more than any of us' [243].

When the village's strict moral codes force her and Ralph apart, these twin feelings of eugenic disgust and empathy with Toby blur in a complex scene. Seeking 'ugliness' to 'blunt the edge of her pain' [163], she runs to Murderer's Grave where she finds Toby crawling on the ground. Toby's presence provides an odd kind of solace for Ada as his situation is worse than her own: 'being an idiot was more terrible than anything in the world. It was worse than death; it was worse than losing your lover' [165]. To assure herself of the horror of Toby's plight she calls on a plethora of negative imagery, focussing on his 'foul smell' [167] and his 'filthy clothes and evil stench' [166]. Toby's stench of evil recalls the hereditary immorality of his mother and accordingly it is also in this scene that Ada calls to mind her childhood experience with the idiots at Panther's Gap and dwells upon Toby's family history. She imagines a horrific Toby whose life is unalterably and inevitably awful. However, to function in the role that Ada needs him to fulfil, to comfort her, he must also be, in some sense, like her. Ada's visit to Toby's hovel brings these connections to the fore. Recalling the vision she has as a child and the innate similarity between her, Toby and the rabbit, she thinks 'he [is] a creature like herself...more repulsive than any animal, but born, as she and an animal were born, to crave joy, to suffer

loss, and to know nothing beyond' [166]. Ada's reflection that there is nothing to know beyond joy and loss effectively destroys the whole notion of idiocy; in this emotional world, knowledge, a cornerstone of the divide between intellectual disability and intelligence, becomes worthless. As much as Ada relies upon the distinctions between Toby and herself to ease her broken heart, as she begins to explore the emotional similarities they have, those same distinctions begin to erode. This nascent understanding of a shared ability to suffer and feel joy as being more important than the distinction between idiot and not-idiot become, as I show, more prominent as the novel proceeds.

Despite being integral to the novel's depiction of Ada's emotional growth, this episode, with its weaving of affinity and disgust for the idiot, sees Toby take on so much symbolic value that he becomes almost meaningless. Raper cites this scene in particular as one in which Toby's role as a mirror to Ada fails.<sup>215</sup> However, as the scene explicitly shows Ada trying to 'press' Toby 'into her consciousness' [165], this failure is perhaps hers more than it is the author's. It is Ada who seems, at this point, incapable of reconciling the dysgenic Toby with the sympathetic Toby. As with John Fincastle's reflections on half-wits and morons, Glasgow depicts her character making a multiplicity of meaning out of intellectual disability . In representing a community in which intellectual disability is a concern, she allows ambiguities about its significance to bubble to the surface without resolving them.

When Ada becomes pregnant with Ralph's illegitimate child, she is socially ostracised, ultimately leading to the family leaving the village. Even her

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<sup>215</sup> Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, pp. 162-3

grandmother refuses to speak to her, praying for Ada's soul. As Ada listens to her grandmother praying she fears the child may be an idiot like Toby:

A superstitious dread shot through her mind. Suppose the punishment should fall not on her but on her child! The sharpest anger she had to bear was the fear that her baby might be born deformed or disfigured, or even an idiot, like poor Toby Waters. "Not that," she implored in breathless horror. "Whatever happens to me, don't let Grandmother's anger fall on my child!" [258]

The mention of 'disfigurement' and Toby recalls the earlier description of Mrs Waters and, to some extent, Ada's fears should be seen as quasi-eugenic, associating punishment for errant sexual behaviour with disability. Like her father, she sees the grandmother as a possible source of idiocy. However, where John fears his genetic inheritance from his mother, Ada imagines 'superstitiously' that her grandmother's religiously fuelled anger might cause disability. This is a somewhat odd, paranoid thought and the narrator's description of it as 'superstitious' suggests it should not be taken particularly seriously. Yet, it is characteristic of Ada, for whom idiocy is so often associated with social rejection. The 'punishment' she is receiving and that she fears will impact upon her child is a social exclusion based upon religious morality. This is the same form of punishment that she recognises and criticises being imposed upon Toby and his mother. Blending her anxiety over this exclusion and the hereditarian implications of idiocy, she generates a kind of Lamarckian model of degeneration and the ostracised Toby becomes, in her imagination, a possible archetype for her own child.

Her fear of being rejected like the Waters is realised shortly after her child is born. Ada visits the village for the first time to get the doctor as her grandmother has fallen ill. Running home, partly through a need to get back to the grandmother and

partly through tension at being in the village, she is chased by children exactly as she and other children chased Toby at the start of the novel:

While their eyes gleamed and their foolish mouths dribbled, a vivid memory crossed her mind of the day when she had chased Toby Waters, and had suddenly felt herself fleeing in the skin of the idiot, as she fled once before in the skin of the hare. So this is what it means to be human, she thought...was all life divided, she wondered while she ran on, between the pursued and the pursuers? Did fate compel one, sooner or later, to take part? But Father wouldn't have seen. He wouldn't have seen they were chasing him. A lump of soft clay struck the back of her head; behind her the voices of children – or were they idiots? – were babbling. [264]

Ada is no longer merely mentally placing herself in Toby's position but, as the 'pursued', is physically occupying the same role as he had earlier in the novel.

Confronted with this shift from empathy to embodiment Ada is able to process her affinity with Toby more clearly than earlier in the novel. In her mind, they are both victims, both being pursued, both feeling suffering and consequently both humans. Being in the 'skin of the idiot' is not an experience which makes Ada an 'idiot' but rather leads to a realisation that what they share is more important than what divides them.

This realisation seems to lead to a re-examination of what idiocy is or more specifically who the 'idiot' might be. Though Ada finds herself in Toby's place, she questions whether it is the children who are in fact idiots. This thought corresponds to the novel's descriptions of the children which, though in the narrative voice, seem to come from Ada. They have 'foolish' dribbling mouths – the physical characteristic most commonly used to describe Toby – and their 'babbling' voices suggest an idiot like nonsense. Ada's moments in 'the skin of the idiot' cause a recognition that a kind of idiocy lies in the pursuers more so than the pursued. However, as the questioning

tone of Ada's speculation on the children's idiocy indicates, this is not so much a reflection of eugenic concern: it is a comment on their behaviour. Equally, their 'babbling' is not, as we later discover, as nonsensical as this passage might suggest. Ada tells her father they were in fact calling her names 'they could only have got from their mothers' [268]. The children's repetition of their mothers' comments presumably relate to Ada's illegitimate child. In imagining being pursued by idiots then, Ada is not merely reflecting on the irrationality of the actual chase but on the irrationality of her social exclusion. The children as prospective 'idiots' embody the idiotic cruelty of a village which has excluded Ada just as it has excluded Toby.

The similarities between this chase and John's nightmare are clear, yet Ada's 'world of idiots' is not a dysgenic dystopia. Rather she discovers a kind of social idiocy. Ada's reflection that her father 'wouldn't have seen they were chasing him' shows she feels her father is unable or unwilling to hold the village to account for the idiocy of his own exclusion on religious grounds. Ada is wrong as her father does ultimately see in his nightmare that 'they [are] chasing him', and yet by intertwining his realisation with his fears of mountain degeneracy, he imagines the threat of idiots in a much more eugenic sense than she does and, despite his education, is unable to entirely grasp the fundamentally social and religious failings of his home.

The chase's conclusion emphasises that there is a difference in kind and in degree of threat between the social idiocy Ada has encountered and the region's 'real' idiots. It is Toby who comes to Ada's rescue as she had come to his aid as a child. He chases off the children with his broom while his mother throws hogwash onto them. The 'changing places' that Ada imagines at the novel's beginning becomes a reality.



Toby here is not a figure of horror but a hero, no longer having the 'stench of evil', he has the 'air of a benevolent conqueror' [265]. The threat of idiocy that runs throughout both Ada's narrative and her father's never seems more imagined than in this sequence. Recognising that she is being victimised like them, Toby and his mother feel the affinity with Ada that she feels with him in particular earlier in the novel and react accordingly. There is a clear distinction between the real actions of these descendants of mountain idiocy and the imagined actions of their kin in John's later delusion. The truly dangerous form of 'idiocy' in Ada's sections of the novel is the strict Calvinist morality of the village; it is social not biological.

Ada's relationship with Toby ultimately seems to free her from the familial fear of idiocy. Though this scene immediately precedes – and partly inspires – the family's departure for Queensborough, when Ada finally returns to Ironside, unlike her father, she is not filled with eugenic fear. She includes Toby in the pastoral vision of a new life she describes to Ralph, imagining him helping to work the garden at the old manse where she grew up and wishes to return to. The image of the idiot performing agricultural tasks is no longer a precursor to fear but a symbol of happy rural, family life. This conclusion is in stark contrast to her father's nightmare about idiots upon his return to Ironside and Glasgow certainly appears to suggest that Ada finds more resolution than her father.

However, as throughout the novel, the juxtaposition of John's nightmare with Ada's familial feeling towards Toby (they occur only five pages apart) leaves the reader moving in a rapid and disorienting manner between alternate meanings of intellectual disability. Similarly, while the family's time in Ironside ends with Ada

being chased and Toby being her saviour, this is only the midway point of the novel and John's more apocalyptic assessments of modernity, along with their speculation about intelligence, are still to come. Thus, while described in isolation, Ada's experiences with Toby undermine her father's fears of mountain idiots, this is not how the reader experiences them, constantly being exposed to not only the contradictory meanings of intellectual disability between Ada and John's accounts but also the ambiguous treatment of it within them. Glasgow consistently destabilises intellectual disability, making any consistent reading of its meaning almost impossible.

Ironically, given her criticism of her peers, more than any other southern novel of the period, it is *Vein of Iron* that depicts a 'multitude of half-wits'. There are so many idiots or pseudo-idiots in the novel that Glasgow suggests drawing any conclusion about the meaning of idiocy has become, at least in the Appalachian South, a fruitless task. However, the extent to which the novel calls upon eugenic imagery, and in particular its citing of familial histories of intellectual disability, reinforces the notion that though her characters may create too much meaning out of the South's degenerating idiots, they are undeniably real. While capturing and criticising an Appalachian South overwhelmed by the possibilities of intellectual disability in the region, Glasgow also added to the plethora of representations of intellectual disability in the mountains, inevitably building yet more layers of meaning. Therefore, while Toby's incorporation into the pastoral future she sketches for Ada at the novel's conclusion suggests a community-based resolution to the South's 'idiot problem', the lingering sense that generations of threatening half-wits

occupy the hills remains. Glasgow criticised her southern literary contemporaries for replacing the 'fabulous southern hero of the past [with] the fabulous southern monster of the present' and decried the lack of 'realism' in the modern southern novel, yet in *Vein of Iron*, she created 'monsters' of her own whose origins lay in the same eugenic mythmaking and fear of disability as those found in *Tobacco Road* or Faulkner's *Sanctuary*.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Ellen Glasgow, 'Heroes and Monsters', *Saturday Review of Literature*, 4 May 1935, pp. 3-4

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **'Our Own Domestic Burdens': Institutions, Family and Community in Eudora Welty and Katherine Anne Porter**

In his contribution to the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), Stark Young argued there existed a distinctive sense of family within the American South: 'The Southern family sense, often onerous to aliens and not seldom one of our own domestic burdens, is nevertheless a good trait'.<sup>217</sup> This sense, Young argued, held firm 'no matter what imperfections may appear'. As Edward Larson has noted, Young's use of 'domestic burdens' and 'imperfections' can be read as an implicit critique of the rise of eugenic thinking within the United States and as an attempt to position the South against it. Yet Young was perhaps out of step with a changing southern society. Larson argues in his nuanced examination of the impact of eugenics on the Deep South that though southern traditions, in particular those concerning family and religion, may have slowed the arrival and limited the impact of eugenics in the region by the time Young wrote, it was becoming more like the rest of the nation in its attitude towards institutionalisation and sterilisation of the feeble-minded.<sup>218</sup>

In this chapter I discuss how two southern writers – Eudora Welty and Katherine Anne Porter – explored the changing response of the region's families and

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<sup>217</sup> Stark Young, 'Not in Memoriam, but in Defence' in *I'll Take My Stand* by Twelve Southerners, pp. 328-360

<sup>218</sup> Edward Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science*, pp. 5-17

communities to intellectual disability. The chapter focuses particularly on the writers' response to institutionalisation. They depict societies which are, as Larson describes, increasingly inclined towards eugenic thinking and the institutionalisation of members of the community, however, these changes are satirised and critiqued. The authors were not alone amongst southern writers in their suspicion towards these changes. Although not commenting on the South directly, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, have argued that Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is a 'scathing critique of [the] dehumanizing environment within which disabled people function' specifically citing a resistance to institutionalisation.<sup>219</sup> As I discuss in Chapter Five, Faulkner's critique is perhaps not quite as scathing as Mitchell and Snyder suggest. Nevertheless, his early representations of intellectual disability and disability per se do persistently show a concern with the treatment of those deemed disabled. Similarly, though not an intellectually disabled character, the incarceration of the supposedly mentally ill Darl in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) raises analogous questions about the relationship between family and state in controlling the bodies and minds of individuals deemed 'abnormal'. However, as I show in this chapter, Welty and Porter examined this change in southern society more closely, offering critiques that went beyond (and in Porter's case predated) Faulkner's in disturbing the social and legal construction of normality and abnormality in the South and probing the function of institutions in that process.<sup>220</sup>

Both writers present highly ambiguous intellectually disabled figures whose lives invite reflection upon the role their families and communities play in the construction of their disability. Through examinations of two short stories, Porter's 'He' (1927) and Welty's 'Lily Daw and the Three Ladies' (1937), I argue that both

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<sup>219</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, pp. 171-172

<sup>220</sup> London's short story 'Told in the Drooling Ward', with its cynicism towards institutionalisation was a forebear and perhaps an influence on the stories

authors show how the introduction of institutions for the feeble-minded to the South provoked by the eugenic movement reconfigured the role of families and communities as one of the most crucial arbiters of intellectual disability. With the arrival of institutions, decisions about intellectual disability were taken in a new, modern context in which the state played a key role in determining and controlling intellectual disability. Families and communities, however, often made decisions about individuals that predated or informed those of state employed professionals and hence became integral to the process of institutionalisation. These stories examine this process and how modern ideas and practises were integrated into existing attitudes towards intellectual disability in southern towns. By maintaining an ambiguity about their protagonists' disabilities, both authors invite the reader to question the rationale behind institutionalisation and ask who these institutions are for both in terms of who belongs there and who benefits from them.

In discussing these two writers together, it is primarily my intention to note the similarities between their approaches to the representation of intellectual disability and its place in southern society. Lily Daw and He, the intellectually disabled characters in these stories are different to Toby and Stiggins and even Benjy. While they too function as disruptive and ambiguous characters, both Welty and Porter's intellectually disabled figures are stripped of many of the eugenic signifiers integral to most of the idiot figures that appear in the works of their peers. This is not to suggest that the narratives discussed here are emptied out of eugenic readings of intellectual disability; instead, where they do appear, they tend to emerge within the dialogue of the communities represented rather than be signified by an intellectually disabled character. Such readings while not always entirely disavowed are distanced from narrator and author. This emphasis on the role of dialogue is

indicative of Welty and Porter's shared focus on the complex nexus of attitudes, opinions and actions that determine the relationship between the individual and his or her society. To some extent this similarity is unsurprising. The two writers were close colleagues and friends. Porter acted as a mentor to Welty, particularly early in the younger writer's career and wrote the foreword to Welty's first collection of short stories, a collection which begins with 'Lily Daw'. Yet, while drawing attention to their similarities, I also argue there is a distinct and significant difference between how the pair represent intellectual disability and institutionalisation. Porter's intellectually disabled character He lacks agency. He is unable to impact upon the decision-making processes that affect his life and as a result the story is pessimistic and, ultimately, tragic. Welty's Lily Daw, however, resists her community's attempts to define her – she pushes back. She is a far more disruptive character than He and there is a great deal of humour in the story. This comedy is not 'idiot' humour such as seen in Faulkner's *The Hamlet* and numerous other representations of intellectual disability. The joke is at southern society's expense rather than Lily's. Welty's empowerment of her intellectually disabled character conjures a modicum of hope and optimism unseen elsewhere in southern writers' engagement with intellectual disability.

### **'Fine to Have Him Where He'd Get the Best of Everything'**

The emergence of the eugenic movement sparked a dramatic growth in institutions for the feeble-minded across the United States. In 1904 there were just over 14,000 individuals within American colonies, training schools and homes for the intellectually disabled; by 1923, this number had more than trebled and at the end of

World War II, it had swelled to around 116,000.<sup>221</sup> In the American South, both the impact of eugenics and the growth of institutionalisation generally occurred somewhat later than in the rest of the country. While many northern states had opened institutions for the feeble-minded in the nineteenth century, with the exception of Kentucky, every southern state opened its first institution after the end of World War I.<sup>222</sup> Much of the reason for this difference can be understood as economic; southern legislators rarely had as much public money available to them as their counterparts in the North and West. However, progressives within the region allied with eugenically inclined national agencies to advocate strongly for the introduction of custodial care of the South's feeble-minded. Organisations such as, for example, the Rockefeller funded National Committee for Mental Hygiene, conducted surveys of feeble-mindedness across the region advising state legislators of the depth of the supposed problem and recommending that they build institutions to house and contain the South's feeble-minded. Following such interventions southern state governments, determined to keep up with social and medical developments in the rest of the nation, responded and by the middle of the 1920s state institutions had emerged across the region.<sup>223</sup>

As discussed in chapter three, these new southern institutions struggled to meet a multitude of expectations. Eugenic imperatives to take custody of dangerous 'morons' clashed with families' desires for the state to take over the care of family members deemed to be less able 'idiots' or 'imbeciles'. Admission to frequently overpopulated state institutions was an erratic, often ad hoc, process. As Steven Noll notes, institutional leaders in the South often made decisions about who would be admitted to their institutions on the basis of how disruptive an individual might be

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<sup>221</sup> Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind*, p. 188; p. 223

<sup>222</sup> Noll, *Feeble-minded in our Midst*, p. 12

<sup>223</sup> Noll, *Feeble-minded in our Midst*, pp. 11-26



more than any judgement about their disability.<sup>224</sup> However, institutions did not determine who was proposed for admittance in the first place. The family and by extension the community around it were central to the selection of those to be institutionalised. As Michel Foucault argues, disciplinary power transferred from institutions into the family:

On the basis of disciplinary systems, family sovereignty will be placed under the following obligation: "you must find for us the mad, feeble-minded, difficult and perverse and you must find them yourself, through the exercise of disciplinary kinds of control within family sovereignty.... This is how disciplinary power lives off family sovereignty, requiring the family to play the role of the agency that decides between normal and abnormal, regular and irregular, asking the family to hand over its abnormal, irregular individuals."<sup>225</sup>

The introduction of institutions for the feeble-minded into the American South changed families and communities role as arbiters of abnormality, imbuing them with a new power to determine who should or should not be institutionalised. It is the nature of this new power which is, I suggest, explored in 'He' and 'Lily Daw and the Three Ladies'. Recent examinations of the latter have considered the influence of the growth of institutionalisation of the feeble-minded yet the few analyses of 'He' have tended to ignore this historical context. Discussions of 'Lily Daw' have argued it is an anti-eugenic text and I do not wish to underplay the suspicion towards eugenic ideology present in either story. However, I argue that both offer broader examinations of the institutionalisation process, questioning how families and communities expressed the new power afforded to them, and revealing how a multitude of influences and opinions combined within the southern community to inscribe intellectual disability upon an individual and determine their fate. Though eugenic thinking is a part of this process, in Welty and Porter's representations it is

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<sup>224</sup> Noll, *Feeble-minded in our Midst*, pp. 110-134

<sup>225</sup> Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the College De France 1973-1974*, ed. by Arnold I. Davidson (New York: Picador, 2008), p. 115

not always distinguishable from more traditional southern morality and is far from the only factor in institutionalisation. These stories suggest that, despite the foundational role eugenics played in the building of institutions for the feeble-minded in southern states, concerns about heredity were not always central to community decision making about institutionalisation in the region. Community attitudes towards both the institution and those deemed to be intellectually disabled in these stories reveal the regional tensions between new and old ideas and new and old configurations of power and authority. Furthermore, they illustrate how, in a region on the periphery of modernity, eugenics as a modern discourse and institutions as the equally modern manifestation of that discourse, were fitted into existing ideological structures. Ultimately, however, the stories by Welty and Porter's suggest that old moralities could co-exist with or even be empowered by modern moralities in threatening ways that had consequences for how the South treated its most vulnerable citizens.

The expansion of institutionalisation of the feeble-minded may well have reminded Katherine Anne Porter of events from her own life; her maternal grandmother was institutionalised in the Southwestern Lunatic Asylum in San Antonio. Porter never met her, but thoughts of her grandmother's loneliness haunted her.<sup>226</sup> In addition, in 1915 Porter herself, ill with tuberculosis and unable to afford private care, had been placed in a charity run County Home (the name she gives to the institution in 'He'). Her experience there was particularly unpleasant, and she was eventually moved at her brothers expense to a different hospital.<sup>227</sup> For Porter then, the fate that awaits He, the anonymous 'simple-minded' titular character of her short

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<sup>226</sup> Darlene Unrue, *Katherine Anne Porter: A Life* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), pp. 9-10

<sup>227</sup> Unrue, *Katherine Anne Porter*, pp. 55-56

story, was likely one with which she strongly sympathised.<sup>228</sup> The story depicts the early life and eventual institutionalisation of He, focusing on the relationship between him and his mother, Mrs Whipple, and her treatment of him. The majority of criticism on the story has discussed the nature of this relationship and has been very much divided in its moral assessment of Mrs Whipple. For example, Willene and George Hendrick suggested the story shows 'compassion for both mother and child'.<sup>229</sup> Yet Debra Modellmog argued 'Porter shows us not a weak but well-meaning mother of a retarded child, but rather one whose pride and hypocrisy make her a moral monster'. Modellmog claims that more compassionate critical interpretations of Mrs Whipple are 'misreadings' but I would suggest that the author leaves room for a variety of readings of the character.<sup>230</sup> That is to say that Porter does not definitively depict a 'weak but well-meaning mother' or a 'moral monster'. Though Porter's story is undoubtedly critical of Mrs Whipple's treatment of He and his eventual institutionalisation, it suggests that both cannot be understood by simply making a moral judgement of his mother. Instead, it situates the mother/son relationship firmly within the social and ideological contexts of family and community, exposing how this relationship does not occur in isolation. Attempting to make decisions about Mrs Whipple's morality becomes slippery in this context, hence the division amongst critics on this issue.

There is a great deal of irony in Porter's narrative suggesting a disconnect between Mrs Whipple's words and her thoughts. For example, we are told early in

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<sup>228</sup> Two other short stories amongst Porter's work – 'Holiday' (1960) and 'The Downward Path to Wisdom' (1945) – while not about institutionalisation, reflect the author's doubts about how families and communities treat those deemed 'different'. The protagonists in both stories have much in common with He and indeed can be read (though not definitively) as intellectually disabled. 'The Downward Path to Wisdom' also features eugenic elements which the story ironically critiques.

<sup>229</sup> Willene Hendrick and George Hendrick, *Katherine Anne Porter* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), p. 66

<sup>230</sup> Debra Modellmog, 'Narrative Irony and Hidden Motivations in Katherine Anne Porter's "He"' in *Katherine Anne Porter: Modern Critical Views*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), pp. 117-127

the story that 'Mrs Whipple loved her second son, the simple-minded one, better than she loved the other two children put together. She was forever saying so and when she talked with certain of the neighbours, she would throw in her husband and mother for good measure'.<sup>231</sup> It is clear that much of what Mrs Whipple says is for the benefit of her neighbours. While Mrs Whipple is 'forever saying' things, we are not necessarily meant to believe them; the emphasis on Mrs Whipple's repetitive declarations of love for He is ironic. This irony is underlined by her actions. Later in the story she takes blankets from He's bed to give to his sisters and spends money on winter clothes for her daughters but not for him. It is her apparent hypocrisy that invites the reader to see Mrs Whipple as a cruel (rather than unthinkingly neglectful) mother. However, the author's use of irony is even more complex than it first appears; at times it suggests a dissonance between reality and Mrs Whipple's beliefs. By adding this second layer of irony to the text, Porter raises doubts about the extent to which the neglect He suffers can be solely attributed to his mother. Porter reveals external societal pressures and ideologies which seemingly influence Mrs Whipple's thinking. I argue that in doing so, she subtly renders 'He' more than a story about parental neglect, offering a more nuanced representation of how He becomes a victim of maltreatment and institutionalisation.

The clearest example of the influence of external forces upon Mrs Whipple and consequently upon her son, comes by way of the village preacher. Mrs Whipple recounts a conversation she had with him: "'He said, and I'll remember it to my dying day, 'The innocent walk with God – that's why He don't get hurt'" [71-72].<sup>232</sup> This

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<sup>231</sup> Katherine Anne Porter, 'He' in *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), p. 69 [Further references are given after quotations in the text]

<sup>232</sup> The preacher's suggestion that He will not get hurt seems to be of his (and therefore Porter's) own invention. However, his rationale for this claim – the idea that intellectually disabled people were under the protection of God – dates back, as McDonagh notes, at least to Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* (1511). McDonagh suggests in making this assertion Erasmus drew on Paul's writings in Corinthians

brief section on how religious guidance affects Mrs Whipple's treatment of He is far more important than previous critics allow, particularly in light of the religiosity of the 1920s South.<sup>233</sup> The story was written two years after the Scopes trial, in which the state of Tennessee prosecuted school teacher John Scopes for teaching evolution in violation of state law. The trial brought national attention to the South's intense commitment to a fundamentalist strain of 'old time' evangelical Protestantism which was frequently mocked as further evidence of regional 'backwardness'. In Dayton, scene of the trial, eighty-five percent of the inhabitants professed to believe the bible literally.<sup>234</sup> Although not universal, such views were widespread across the whole region. Texas, Porter's home state, followed Tennessee's lead and outlawed evolutionary text books in schools in 1925.<sup>235</sup> The preacher in 'He' thus represents a figure of enormous social and moral power. While his words have limited scriptural grounding, his position and the manner in which he dresses his opinions in religious garb affords them an authority which impacts upon He's mother.<sup>236</sup> We are told she repeats the preacher's words and when she does is clearly affected by them: 'she

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regarding the 'foolishness' of the Apostles and Christ himself in abjuring worldly things. McDonagh, *Idiocy*, pp. 129-133

<sup>233</sup> The relationship between religion and intellectual disability is one which persistently intrigued southern writers of this period. Beyond the examples in this chapter, as discussed briefly in chapters 2 and 3, both Roberts in *My Heart and My Flesh* and Glasgow in *Vein of Iron* use intellectual disability as a means to explore, and to some extent undermine, the South's religious convictions. Similarly, in his short story 'A Christian Education', Robert Penn Warren uses an idiot figure to explore the value of Christian doctrine as does, albeit very differently, Flannery O'Connor in her novel *The Violent Bear It Away*. There is a long tradition of 'holy fools' in literature, and the influence of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (which draws on that tradition) upon many if not all of these authors should not be underestimated, but the southern modernist juxtaposition of intellectual disability and religion has a regional distinctiveness which invites further investigation. (For discussions of the relationship between idiocy and Christianity in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* see Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, pp. 74-76; pp. 84-86 and Ronell, *Stupidity*, pp. 173-177)

<sup>234</sup> Edward Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate with Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 93

<sup>235</sup> Edward Larson, *Summer for the Gods*, p. 204

<sup>236</sup> The preacher has a rather folksy, and perhaps dismissive, attitude towards intellectual disability in Porter's story, yet in reality, in the South and in the nation, religious leaders tended to be more engaged with contemporary debates surrounding eugenics and the control of the 'feeble-minded'. For a discussion of the regional religious response see Edward Larson, *Sex, Race and Science*. For a detailed examination of the relationship between the nation's churches and the eugenic movement see Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement*

always felt a warm pool spread in her breast and the tears would fill her eyes' [72]. Given the narrative's emphasis on Mrs Whipple's selfishness, caution should be exercised in reading this emotional response with anything but cynicism. The preacher's words can be seen as providing an ideological crutch for Mrs Whipple to justify her neglect of her son who persistently gets injured and hurt throughout the story. And yet the narrative raises the possibility that Mrs Whipple may truly believe the preacher and her emotional response may therefore be genuine. This uncertainty regarding how the preacher and religion affects her parenting choices furthers the difficulty in deriving clear readings of her motivations.

The paragraph following the discussion of the preacher begins 'He did grow and He never got hurt. A plank hit Him on the head and He never seemed to know it. He had learned a few words and after this He forgot them.' The lines are clearly ironic; He has obviously been hurt despite the suggestion to the contrary. Crucially, these lines are in the narrative voice, not Mrs Whipple's. Here the purpose of the irony is not to show her attempts to impress the neighbours, it is to reveal a contrast between reality and belief. Distanced from her own dubious voice, the paragraph shows Mrs Whipple's thoughts and assessments of her son. It is not always clear whose perspective is represented by the narrative voice in 'He'. Rachel Lister has discussed its slipperiness, proposing that it is only at the story's conclusion that the voice offers a clear mimetic representation of Mrs Whipple's thoughts.<sup>237</sup> However, the suggestions that 'He never got hurt', 'He never seemed to know it' and (later in the same paragraph) that 'He never seemed to mind the cold,' are so clearly false that the reader is certainly not meant to read them as the opinions of an omniscient narrator.

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<sup>237</sup> Rachel Lister, "'Beyond Human Reach': Silence and Contiguity in Katherine Anne Porter's "Holiday" and "He"" in *Scribbling Women and the Short Story Form: Approaches by American and British Women Writers*, ed. by Ellen Burton Harrington (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), pp. 128-134

Equally, the assessments are so intimate and so inextricably linked to Mrs Whipple's actions that they can surely only belong to her. This second layer of irony points to Mrs Whipple's negligence but it does not necessarily imply intentional cruelty. Instead, it appears she places a great deal of emphasis on the preacher's words making her, at least to some extent, incapable of processing her son's pain. The repetition of 'seemed to' illustrates an internal battle between what she can see and the preacher's rhetoric which she has internalised because of the religious authority attached to it and the comfort it brings her. What Porter offers here is a representation of how delusion or dual thinking occurs. Without excusing it, Porter shows how her character's behaviour has its roots in the values and beliefs of her society; there is a progression from community rhetoric and ideology to action. The preacher's words are linked to He's fate; an accident does ultimately lead to his institutionalisation. Furthermore, through his loss of language in this incident, it is suggested his intellectual disability is exacerbated by the belief 'He don't get hurt'.<sup>238</sup>

Mrs Whipple is persistently aware of and unsettled by her neighbours' interest in how she is raising her son. It is clear from the story's beginning that Mrs Whipple is preoccupied with the perception her community has of her; she is, we are told, 'all for taking what was sent and calling it good, anyhow when the neighbours were in earshot' [69]. Her desire for her neighbours to see her life as 'good' is as, Darlene Unrue has argued, a form of class consciousness. Unrue notes that Porter often wrote of characters for whom appearance was equivalent to virtue. She argues that this moral emphasis on appearances was especially common amongst the middle and aspirant lower classes of the South in which Porter grew up and spent her early

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<sup>238</sup> The implication of religious beliefs in institutionalisation reflects Porter's cynicism towards organised religion. Porter converted to Roman Catholicism in her early twenties, but in later years was uncomfortable with religion and indeed felt the church 'often lent its support to the worst evils in secular government'. Darlene Unrue, *Truth and Vision in Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), p. 9

adult life. Mrs Whipple is certainly such a character; her family are increasingly falling into poverty, yet she wishes to keep up the appearance of middle class life.<sup>239</sup> This class anxiety resembles and intersects with her anxiety about how the community perceives He and her relationship with him. The family's economic problems and He's institutionalisation are not unrelated, as I discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, yet there is more to Porter's juxtaposition of Mrs Whipple's twin anxieties than revealing a causal relationship between poverty and institutionalisation – both show Mrs Whipple's desire to be seen as 'normal'. He's disability and the family's increasing poverty separately and together pose a threat to their social position. A number of Disability Studies scholars have argued middle class identity is linked to able-bodiedness (or in this instance intelligence), in that they constitute parts of a hypothetically 'normal' identity against which difference is pitched and often socially excluded.<sup>240</sup> By depicting how Mrs Whipple becomes similarly anxious and angry when He's ability or her class position is questioned, Porter, to some extent, exposes this linkage, and the precariousness of the 'normate' position. In addition, by juxtaposing the increasing poverty of the Whipple family with intellectual disability, Porter perhaps references contemporary eugenic beliefs about the intelligence of southern poor whites. Mrs Whipple is concerned that the neighbours will "'be calling us poor white trash next'" [80]. Given the contemporary association of 'poor white trash' in the South with feeble-mindedness, Mrs Whipple's need to have the 'simple-minded' He seen as 'normal', might be read as intertwined with the pressure she feels about the perception of her class position.

This concern about appearances and reputations is also connected to Mrs

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<sup>239</sup> Unrue, *Truth and Vision*, p. 95

<sup>240</sup> See for example: Garland-Thompson, p. 8; p. 43 and Lennard Davis, 'Introduction: Normality, Power and Culture', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. by Lennard Davis (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1-16



Whipple's role as a woman in southern society. As Melissa Walker and Rebecca Sharpless have noted, though southern women tenant farmers more often than not worked the farm, their identities were more dependent on ideas of home and the family.<sup>241</sup> Mrs Whipple is aware that the community's judgement of her relationship with and treatment of He is a judgement of her as a mother and therefore a woman. When Mr Whipple complains that her constant public expressions of love for her son make it seem like nobody else cares for him, she rebukes him telling him it is more 'natural for a mother' to feel this way. She states 'people don't expect so much of fathers, some way' [70]. Mrs Whipple underlines the separate spheres of gender roles, marking care for their son as something that falls to her more than her husband.<sup>242</sup> Equally, as a southern wife, Mrs Whipple is responsible for the appearance of virtue and good in the household.<sup>243</sup> Any negative impact on that image by He is a reflection on not only how He does not conform to ability norms but a reflection on her fulfilling the 'normal' role of a woman and mother.

Porter makes it clear that Mrs Whipple's desire to be 'normal' is both powerful and damaging. Early in the story she responds aggressively to a neighbour's concern at He climbing a tree. The neighbour worries that He does not know what he's doing, yet Mrs Whipple loudly asserts "'He *does* know what He's doing! He's as

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<sup>241</sup> Rebecca Sharpless and Melissa Walker, "'Pretty Near Every Woman Done a Man's Work': Women and Rural Field Work in the South", in *Work, Family and Faith: Rural Southern Women in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Rebecca Sharpless and Melissa Walker (Columbia: University Press of Missouri), p. 44

<sup>242</sup> The gendered tension between Mr and Mrs Whipple over the care of their son reflects a real anxiety felt by both parents about mothers' and fathers' roles in care for intellectually disabled children. For some discussion see Janice Brockley, 'Rearing the Child Who Never Grew', in *Mental Retardation in America*, ed. by Noll and Trent, pp. 138-146

<sup>243</sup> For a discussion of traditional gender roles in the South see Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1890* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), pp. 21-38. In the 1920s southern women (in particular middle class women) were increasingly successful at challenging the separation of public and private spheres along gender lines. However, the traditional model remained powerful in the region. See, for example, Mary Martha Thomas, *The New Woman in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992), pp. 204-220 and Martha H. Swain, 'The Public Role of Southern Women', in *Sex, Race and the Role of Women in the South*, ed. by Joanne V. Hawks and Sheila L. Skemp (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1983), pp. 37-58.

able as any other child'" [71 italics in original]. Her anger and declaration of He's ability reflect a concern that He is seen as abnormal. Yet she instructs He to come down suggesting, despite her protestations, that she is unsure of his ability. When He does come down she is annoyed at him 'acting like that before people' [72], her primary concern is appearance and not the safety and well-being of her child. This is typical of her behaviour throughout the story – her worries about He are motivated by fear that he may expose himself as abnormal and that the community will notice. Even when she fears for his safety after leaving him alone to lead a bull home, her concern is fuelled by what 'people will say' [80].

This cruelty invites the reader to judge Mrs Whipple harshly, but Porter offers a means to see Mrs Whipple's need for normality as the result of social pressure. Despite her best efforts to control public opinion of her son, the neighbours do see He as abnormal and problematic:

The neighbours [talked] plainly among themselves. "A Lord's pure mercy if He should die," they said. 'It's the sins of the fathers,' they agreed among themselves. 'There's bad blood and bad doings somewhere, you can bet on that.' This behind the Whipple's backs. To their faces everybody said, 'He's not so bad off. He'll be all right yet. Look how He grows!'. [70]

The references to 'bad blood and bad doings' reveal the presence and impact of eugenic ideology and the belief that 'He should die' shows a eugenic-like desire for the eradication of those seen as different. It is notable that this ideology is couched in religious terms – by citing the 'sins of the fathers', the townspeople draw on a religious reference with eugenic (or perhaps Lamarckian) implications. Equally, it is the 'Lord's' place to perform a mercy killing. Porter shows here both an overlap and a conflict between religious and eugenic ideologies. This awkward relationship between the two ideologies is reflective of religious responses to eugenics in the South in the Twenties and Thirties. As Larson shows, many religious leaders and

communities – particularly Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants – resisted eugenic advances in the region.<sup>244</sup> Despite this resistance, other Protestants were less wary and – following a pattern emerging across the nation – incorporated eugenics into a growing set of Progressive beliefs.<sup>245</sup> Porter shows a community in flux in 'He': although eugenic influences and impulses exist, it is to God more than to science that these southerners turn for solutions.<sup>246</sup> While the community's expressions of eugenic belief occur 'behind the Whipple's backs', the inclusion of this passage highlights that Mrs Whipple's concerns that He is seen as abnormal and that the family are being judged for it are well placed.

Again, this should not be seen as Porter excusing Mrs Whipple's treatment of He, but as contextualising it. Mrs Whipple is of the community, is aware of the meanings it places on intellectual disability and thus understands there is a pressure to be normal. As she says: "'What's done can't never be undone, I know that as good as anybody; but He's my child, and I'm not going to have people say anything'" [73]. She too sees He as abnormal but is not willing to confess that to the community, just as the community is unwilling to directly express their eugenic notions to her. This unwillingness may in part be because, as the neighbours' conversations about 'bad blood and bad doings' suggest, any eugenic reading of He has implications for Mrs Whipple's own heredity. Thus both mother and community partake in an ongoing conversation in which for the sake of appearances they pretend they see He as normal, while the very existence of these conversations are evidence that they

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<sup>244</sup> Edward Larson, *Sex, Race and Science*, pp. 142-145

<sup>245</sup> Edward Larson, *Sex, Race and Science*, p. 13; p. 150

<sup>246</sup> While it is not the only purpose, Porter's capitalisation of 'He', 'Him' and 'His' is perhaps in part subtly mocking the references to God seen here and in the preacher's language, inviting an allegorical reading of He as an 'innocent' Jesus-like figure who is not martyred but institutionalised for the 'sins of the fathers'. Given Porter's ironic style, I am not suggesting the story should be read as allegory in good faith, rather that, by inviting these parallels, she draws attention to the bad faith of the community.

believe the opposite.<sup>247</sup> Porter, as Welty does in 'Lily Daw', offers a representation of how eugenic thought works in the community. It is not a doctor or the leader of the County Home, or a eugenics fieldworker who has decided He is abnormal; it is those around him, the members of his family and community, for whom eugenic thinking provides part of the ideological framework for their decision. Eugenics is never directly expressed as a reason to institutionalise He but it contributes to the social pressures upon his mother, influencing decisions made for and about him which do eventually lead to He being put in the County Home.

Ultimately, it is important to note that economics and the way the family responds to its increasing poverty, has the greatest influence on He's institutionalisation. As the family becomes poorer and the Whipples' daughters move away for work, Mr Whipple needs He to help more around their farm. He slips on ice and has 'some sort of fit' which leaves him confined to his bed for four months [81-82]. While He's earlier accidents or near-misses have seemed to be the consequence of neglect, here Porter invites a more sympathetic reading of the Whipples' treatment of their son. There is an inevitability about He's accident given all that has preceded it, yet the family's economic need seems, in this instance, to have influenced them to put him at risk. With the introduction of these economic factors, tracing who to hold to account for He's life becomes yet more elusive. The story's moral gaze encompasses family, local community and, with the economic dimension, the wider community.

It is as a consequence of this accident that the family doctor advises the Whipples to place He in the County Home suggesting he "'can't do anything more for

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<sup>247</sup> Mothers were frequently depicted in the era as responsible for feeble-mindedness, whether through their own heredity or a lack of vigilance. For a discussion of the relationship between motherhood and feeble-mindedness see Licia Carlson, *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 68-73

him" but also hinting He is a burden to his parents: "He'll have good care there and be off your hands" [82]. This instigates an uncertainty within the story as to who exactly He's institutionalisation benefits. Discussing the doctor's suggestion with his wife, Mr Whipple states "I think it would be fine to have Him where He'd get the best of everything...and besides I can't keep up with these doctor's bills any longer" [82] (ellipsis in original). Mr Whipple initially appears to be thinking of what is best for his son but, as the second clause reveals, he has an additional economic motivation. The ellipsis creates a pause suggesting Mr Whipple is now, almost surreptitiously, revealing his real rationale. Mrs Whipple's response is similarly complex, at first she is opposed, suggesting she wishes to care for He herself but it rapidly becomes apparent that she is equally concerned, as usual, by appearances and does not wish to be seen to be receiving charity. Similarly, she states she wants to bring him home as soon as he is better but when Mr Whipple asserts "He can't never get better" she feels 'almost happy' and begins to imagine summer and that 'things would ease up on them'. Where Mr Whipple anticipates the removal of the financial burden of He, Mrs Whipple's imagined future looks forward to the removal of an emotional burden. She dreams of her family 'all of them happy together', yet this 'all' excludes He and the proposed happiness depends upon his absence [83]. With this daydream, the decision to institutionalise He becomes troubling to the reader. Despite the concern doctor, father and mother express for He's wellbeing, there is a sense that it does not lie at the heart of their decision making process. Nevertheless, within the context of the family's poverty, this selfishness is also mediated and once again Porter renders it tricky to make easy moral judgements. She invites her readers to wrestle with the influences upon He's life, an act which has deeper meaning in a society increasingly placing individuals in County Homes or their equivalent.

Indeed, her imagined scenario adumbrates the increased pressure on southern institutions for the feeble-minded in the Great Depression as many poor families like the Whipples sought custodial care for family members.<sup>248</sup>

He of course has no say over what happens to him. The anonymity Porter gives He reflects his powerlessness in his society. He is someone who is talked about – the other characters and the narrative voice replacing He's voice (or at least a sense of his feelings) with opinions and beliefs about what his needs, desires and emotions might be. By maintaining He's silence, Porter diverts attention onto how his family and community control the direction of his life and, to an extent, how they make meaning from his disability. If, two years later, in *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner sought a means to represent the perspective and feelings of an intellectually disabled individual by providing him with a voice, here Porter does the opposite, closing down our access to He, denying us even his name and restricting the opportunity to form any sense of his character. Disabled characters' voices have traditionally been silenced in fiction, yet the effect here is different. By making He anonymous and so often the subject of conversations in which he does not partake, Porter draws attention to He's silencing. In bringing this to the fore she not only highlights his powerlessness, He's silence also makes his disability ambiguous. When we are told, after the Whipples decide to send He to the County Home, that 'they never knew just how much He understood', Porter makes explicit what has been implied throughout the text – that He is unknown both to his community and to the reader [83]. There is a sense that in He's silence that Porter proposes that He is unknown to the writer, that intellectual disability – particularly in the absence of language – poses a representational problem. He's inaccessibility, therefore, could be seen as rendering

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<sup>248</sup> Noll, *Feeble-minded in Our Midst*, pp. 134-135

him an unknowable other. However, I argue that by making He's silence so central to and prominent in the story, Porter actually invites the reader to empathise with him. The narrative raises moral questions about how much we can assume about someone when we know so little about him or her. In this way, the story becomes inclusive not exclusive. Again, placing 'He' in its historical context makes its calls for empathy and complex meditation on morality all the more consequential. At a point when those deemed intellectually disabled were the subjects of much public debate and action, Porter's story asks how much can be assumed about any individual and to what end those assumptions are made.

He's silence throughout the story is also crucial to its conclusion which shows his journey, driven by a neighbour, to the institution with his mother. He begins to cry which is one of only two occasions we see any real expression of emotion from him (the other being when he sees his mother slaughtering a pig). He's tears are particularly poignant at this moment as they appear to suggest He does have a greater understanding of what is happening and realises his family are sending him away. Yet again Porter does not make this explicit, the reader is invited to join in the interpretive practise that He's tears instigate in his mother. The ideological architecture that Mrs Whipple has erected to prevent her seeing her own cruelty falls away:

Mrs Whipple kept saying, 'Oh, honey, you don't feel so bad do you? You don't feel so bad do you?' for He seemed to be accusing her of something. Maybe He remembered that time she boxed His ears; maybe He had been scared that day with the bull; maybe he had slept cold and couldn't tell her about it; maybe He knew they were sending Him away for good and all because they were too poor to keep Him. [84]

Mrs Whipple's repetition and that she 'kept saying', ironically recall her earlier 'forever saying' to the neighbours. The one person, even including herself, she cannot deceive about He's treatment is He. His tears generate guilt and we are given a list of

all the things she might feel guilty about. As Lister notes, this list, though it is in the narrative voice, adopts a fractured High Modernist form which seems to express the inner thoughts of Mrs Whipple. She argues that 'the shift from a near-diegetic to a near-mimetic perspective prompts the reader to query the autonomy of the narrative voice'. Although I argue the reader is invited to question the narrative voice much earlier in the story, Lister is right to note that this is the fundamental fracturing point of what she suggests is a 'collusion' between reader and narrator.<sup>249</sup> As Mrs Whipple's carapace falls away so does the reader's own. We are invited to follow and agree with the possible reasons given for He's tears but, at the same time, we are made aware that these reasons are only an interpretation and not a fixed truth. That this is an interpretive process is underscored by the repetition of 'maybe He'. The effect is not to lessen sympathy at He's plight (nor for that matter Mrs Whipple's) but instead to highlight our own role in making meaning from the silence of intellectual disability.

Ultimately, it is the final two sentences that make this a tragic story more than He's tears. Despite this process of realisation, Mrs Whipple quickly closes down her own sense of guilt, reassuring herself there was nothing she could have done in her situation. This logic leads her to tell herself 'Oh, what a mortal pity He was ever born'. Echoing the neighbours 'A Lord's pure mercy if He should die', Mrs Whipple finds herself wishing the life of her son away. Porter exposes the eugenic inclination as a means to rid oneself of guilt and emotional burden and to prevent fundamental change. Mrs Whipple has learned nothing and now He is finally to be removed from the community, she ideologically rejoins her neighbours voicing the same eugenic desire. Her expression is followed by the story's last sentence: 'They came in sight of

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<sup>249</sup> Lister, 'Beyond Human Reach', pp. 133-134



the hospital, with the neighbour driving very fast, not daring to look behind him' [85]. It is significant that the story ends with the neighbour and not with He or his mother. The neighbour's refusal to look and his desire to drive him quickly to the institution signifies the community's role in He's exclusion. By uncovering the process of He's eventual institutionalisation, Porter's story invites the reader to dare to look.

### **'Which Was More Terrible?'**

Written a decade after Porter's story, Eudora Welty's 'Lily Daw and The Three Ladies' shares the cynicism about the motivations for institutionalisation seen in 'He'. Where Porter examined southern community responses to intellectual disability alongside and through the familial response, in Welty's narrative the community has replaced the family. Lily's mother is dead and she has been taken from her abusive father, who has apparently attempted to murder Lily, before the story begins. In an early conversation amongst themselves, the three ladies of the story's title – Mrs Carson, Mrs Watts and Aimee Slocum – take credit for saving Lily from her father and for taking care of her since that point. This self-congratulation suggests that the ladies have been *in loco parentis*. However, the whole town of Victory – and in particular the town's women – seem collectively concerned with Lily's fate. The opening paragraphs of the story make this apparent as the 'three ladies' are amongst many other 'ladies' all of whom are intrigued by a letter the three are reading about institutionalising Lily. That the three ladies are at the forefront of this decision making process seems to disappoint the others somewhat as we are told that these 'other ladies...did not go at once to take their mail out of their boxes; they

felt a little left out'.<sup>250</sup> This disappointment suggests that while the three ladies' roles as individuals in the story should not be ignored and each has a specific function, they are representative of their community's desire to be involved in Lily's life. Where Porter's story offered a triangular relationship between the intellectually disabled individual, his parents and the community, Welty collapses the parental and communal roles into one. It is though more accurate here to say maternal rather than parental; the men of Victory, much like Mr Whipple, are marginal figures reflecting both the gendered care roles of the region and period and, specifically in this story, the role women play in policing other women's sexual conduct. In the absence of the mediating parental figure, Welty's story offers a more direct representation of and commentary on community values and morality than Porter's.

In particular, the text examines how Lily's sexual development concerns the community and is the central reason for the three ladies desire to institutionalise her. Noll has discussed how the story reflects the higher incidence of institutionalisation amongst women of child-bearing age on the basis of feeble-mindedness both in the South and elsewhere in the United States.<sup>251</sup> As discussed in earlier chapters, it is difficult to disentangle how beliefs about women's sexual morality and/or intellectual disability influenced this bias in institutionalisation as the two were mutually constitutive with sexual 'immorality' viewed as an indicator of feeble-mindedness and vice versa.<sup>252</sup> Similarly, the ladies' assumptions about Lily's intelligence cannot easily be separated from their fears about her sexuality; the story's humour and morality derives from making the fragility and arbitrary nature of the decision

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<sup>250</sup> Eudora Welty, 'Lily Daw and the Three Ladies', in *A Curtain of Green* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Limited, 1943), pp. 16 [Further references are given after quotations in the text]

<sup>251</sup> Noll, 'A Far Greater Menace', pp. 31-51

<sup>252</sup> For further discussion of the various ways in which women's sexuality was policed in the South in this period see Pippa Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics and Social Control in Virginia, 1920-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006)

making processes behind institutionalisation more explicit. In a recent article, Alison Arant has suggested that the story should be seen as an example of 'eugenic resistance', arguing that the three ladies' desire to institutionalise Lily reflects contemporary eugenic anxieties about poor white women.<sup>253</sup> I am not as persuaded as Arant that this should be seen as specifically an anti-eugenic story. As we have seen, eugenicists undoubtedly saw poor, young feeble-minded women as a distinct threat to the national 'gene-plasm'. Yet the basis for those biases lay in well established moral codes and class and gender hierarchies as much as in new eugenic and quasi-eugenic ideas. It is that morality and those hierarchies that are mocked and critiqued in 'Lily Daw' more than any distinct concerns about heredity. In a sense, Welty bypasses the mythology of eugenic science to suggest that at a community level in the South traditional morality is more explicitly at work in the 'finding' process Foucault describes in determining candidates for institutionalisation. This is not to ignore the eugenic implications Arant reads in the text; instead, it is to suggest that the story should be read more broadly as resisting the social and mental tyranny of institutions, both in the sense of the Ellisville Institute for the Feeble-Minded to which the three ladies plan to send Lily, and in the sense of the ideological structures and social institutions that dominated the small town South.

The story begins with the ladies collecting a letter from Ellisville saying it will accept Lily. A conversation begins amongst them and other townsfolk about what Ellisville will be like and about Lily's behaviour at a tent show the night before. Whether or not Lily behaved like a 'lady' at the show becomes the focus of the discussion and the ideological significance of the word is brought to the fore. A woman who saw Lily at the show states she 'was the perfect lady'. Nevertheless, Mrs

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<sup>253</sup> Alison Arant, "'A Moral Intelligence': Mental Disability and Eugenic Resistance in Welty's 'Lily Daw and the Three Ladies' and O'Connor's 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own'", *The Southern Literary Journal*, 44 (2012), 69-87

Carson suggests there is a question over Lily's ability to always be a lady by saying, "'Oh she can be a lady – she can be'" [16]. Mrs Carson's 'can be' incorporates doubt and contingency to Lily's credentials as a lady. This uncertainty distinguishes her from the other women in the story, who simply 'are' unequivocally 'ladies'. The word lady recurs throughout the story; it is not merely the 'three ladies' in the title who are emphatically described as such by the narrative voice, but also the other women of the town. The 'ladies' of the town are thus a collective; a collective of which Lily, whose ability to be a lady is questioned, is not a part. The very title of the story reflects a divided, if not an oppositional, relationship between 'ladies' and Lily Daw.

It is, as the subsequent conversation makes clear, an uncertainty about Lily's sexual behaviour that creates this division, that makes her an ambiguous lady:

'The point is, what did she do after the show?' asked Mrs Watts practically. 'Lily has gotten so she is very mature for her age.'

'Oh, Etta!' protested Mrs Carson looking at her wildly for a moment.

'And that's how come we are sending her to Ellisville,' finished Mrs Watts. [16]

As Mrs Watts unsubtly suggests, concerns about the newly 'mature' Lily's nocturnal activities are integral to her planned institutionalisation. The rhetorical nature of her initial question indicates that the ladies are unaware of and therefore unable to control what Lily does after the show. The notion of an uncontrolled Lily having sex, particularly unmarried sex, generates a terror among the ladies that is reiterated throughout the story. Arant suggests the animus for this terror is a eugenic concern that Lily will reproduce, yet there is no direct mention of heredity in the text, unlike in 'He' with its references to 'bad blood'.<sup>254</sup> This absence does not close down any readings of the ladies' fears as eugenic and by incorporating a mention of Lily's

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<sup>254</sup> Arant, 'A Moral Intelligence', pp. 73-76

father's violent behaviour, Welty opens the possibility of Lily bearing a familial 'taint'. However, this possibility is not brought to the fore, either within the ladies' own conversations about Lily or in the wider narrative. The ladies' fear of Lily having sex seem more visceral and explicitly moralistic than driven by science. Mrs Carson expresses that kind of fear here, attempting to shut down even Mrs Watts's discussion of Lily's 'maturity'. Welty's use of the word 'wildly' here suggests an uncontrollable, almost instinctive panic is provoked in Mrs Carson by even the slightest reference to sex. The moral panic expressed by Mrs Carson is repeated later in the story when the ladies hear from others in the town that Lily is planning to get married. They '[clutch] one another', corporeally expressing their shared fear and reliance on each other as adherents to the same value system for reassurance. In addition, Mrs Watts begins to 'fan herself at once with the letter from Ellisville' the letter's role as a means of comforting her moral concern becoming actualised in the physical world [17]. These responses reflect a morality integral to the ladies' sense of self and community. A hegemonic understanding of what it means to be a small town southern lady, though in fact a social construction with historical and economic origins, has come to appear utterly natural, almost innate.

This pervasive, deeply engrained and normative belief system strongly resembles religious faith and authority. Thus, it is significant that Mrs Carson is the town's Baptist preacher's wife and as such she is, even more than her companions, the town's female representative of religiously inclined sexual morality. She later reflects in a 'sad voice' all the ladies have done for Lily including having 'sent her to Sunday school to learn the Lord's teachings, had her baptized a Baptist' [18]. The sadness indicates a belief that this attempt to religiously, and therefore morally, educate Lily has failed. Through Mrs Carson, Welty links the motivation for Lily's

proposed institutionalisation to southern Christianity indicating how older codes of understanding than eugenics are at work in the ladies' treatment of Lily. Just as in 'He', the story offers insight into how religious and scientific ideologies could overlap and depend on similar moralistic frameworks. While institutions like the fictional Ellisville emerged in a fanfare of new scientific rhetoric, in Welty's representation the institution is an additional tool of control incorporated into a pre-existing moral landscape. When trying to persuade Lily to accept her incarceration, Mrs Carson makes explicit the southern institution's role as an extension of Christian morality:

'We've all asked God, Lily,' said Mrs Carson finally, 'and God seemed to tell us – Mr Carson, too – that the place where you ought to be, so as to be happy, was Ellisville.' [22]

In this configuration, Ellisville resembles less a secular, governmental institution and more a place performing the work of God as endorsed by Victory's religious authority figure – Mrs Carson's husband, albeit that the words 'seemed to tell us' offer a characteristic Welty hint that God is not really the one making the decision here. In addition, the willingness of Ellisville to accept Lily shows a scientific community whose judgements are in harmony with the religious community as represented by Mr and Mrs Carson. Though the story's focus is on the community's power to decide who or what is or isn't normal, there is an implicit critique of the state institution's readiness to concur.

As the story's plot reveals, the institution may offer a new means of controlling Lily, but a more traditional means, marriage, is also a possibility. Lily declares her intention to marry a xylophone player from the tent show rather than go to Ellisville and the majority of the story focuses on the ladies' negotiations between the two possibilities. Welty pairs the physical institution and the institution of

marriage in the story – a pairing she explores again some twenty years later in *The Ponder Heart*. Both Ellisville and the xylophone player represent, as Michael Kreyling has described, a means by which the ladies can 'coop up Lily...make her conform to the codes of restraint and denial that they represent, impose upon her an external role that will eliminate the danger to their facade'.<sup>255</sup> Kreyling does not make the gendered nature of the 'external role' explicit here. In the 1930s, leaders of southern institutions for the feeble-minded would have been, like husbands, male.<sup>256</sup> Much as Mrs Carson refers to her husband as the voice of religious authority so the ladies, finding Lily resistant to their social pressures to conform as a 'lady', seek a man to impose the discipline on women's sex lives essential to the region's patriarchy. The mostly off-stage presence of these male power brokers (notably it is the unseen Mr Carson who is called at the end of the story to marry Lily to the xylophone player) expands and complicates the community which attempts to control Lily's life. Despite indicating that the ladies have a great deal of power over Lily, Welty does not allow us to forget that they too have forces acting upon them. By making apparent the connection between marriage and Ellisville as means of control, Welty is subtly able to question the purpose of both, fitting them into the region's power structures.

Initially, the three ladies appear strongly opposed to the idea of Lily's marriage. News that Lily may be asserting her independence and not following the plan they have laid out for her worries them and they immediately begin to search for her. Arant suggests the ladies fear Lily marrying for eugenic reasons.<sup>257</sup>

However, as Mrs Carson explains, the ladies do not believe Lily is actually going to

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<sup>255</sup> Michael Kreyling, *Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State Press, 1980), p. 8

<sup>256</sup> Noll, *Feeble-Minded in Our Midst*, p. 115

<sup>257</sup> Arant, pp. 76-78

get married as the 'boys of Victory are on their honour' and it is 'just an idea she's got into her head' [17]. The idea in Lily's head is worrying because it offers further evidence she is having sexual thoughts. When they find her and Lily reveals that there was "'a man last night'" (the xylophone player), the ladies are appalled [20].<sup>258</sup> Despite this response, both Mrs Watts and Aimee consider marriage as a possibility and discuss finding the now departed xylophone player, suggesting that their motivation is more moral than eugenic. Mrs Carson persuades the other two that Lily should still be sent to Ellisville, arguing that the musician 'was after Lily's body alone and he wouldn't ever in this world make the poor little thing happy' [20-21]. This regard for Lily's happiness is indicative of how the ladies own motivation for institutionalising Lily blends with a genuine concern for her well-being. Welty critiques the processes that result in institutionalisation but she does not make villains of the three women, much as Porter offers a morally complex depiction of Mrs Whipple.

Nevertheless, by rapidly shifting the ladies' discussions about how to resolve the 'problem' Lily poses back to institutionalisation, Welty exposes how precarious her position in the town is. In addition the author shows how the rationale for institutionalisation is based not on a scientific or medical 'logic' but upon a multitude of influences and far from fully formed notions. Once Mrs Carson has convinced the other two that Lily should still go to Ellisville, worries about Lily having sex quickly re-emerge:

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<sup>258</sup> In *The Sound and the Fury*, the young Quentin Compson is spotted by her uncle Jason with a man from a travelling show, leading him to speculate on her inherited immorality: 'If it's in her blood, you can't do anything with her'. This episode, if it was not a direct influence on Welty in writing 'Lily Daw' (it is notable too that the colour red is emphasised in the descriptions of both showmen), certainly sees both writers depicting southern communities in which the out-of-town male is suspected of bringing an inherent moral lack in young women to the fore. Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, pp. 231-232



'We've really just got to get her there – now!' screamed Aimee Slocum all at once. 'Suppose –! She can't stay here!'

'Oh no, no, no,' said Mrs Carson hurriedly. 'We mustn't think that.'

They sat sunken in despair. [22]

That Aimee Slocum has quickly become sure once again that Lily must be institutionalised reflects the fluidity of the ladies' mindset on the issue. Her exclamation 'Suppose—!' suggests she is reflecting upon the possible consequences of Lily's encounter and should be seen as her imagining Lily could be pregnant. The suggestion is so horrific to Mrs Carson that she denounces even the possibility, just as she had earlier shut down Mrs Watt's public discussion of Lily's sexual maturation. Lily as an unmarried mother becomes even more of a problem and Aimee's imperative that 'She can't stay here!' is indicative of the extent to which the physical institution exists as a place to which problems can be sent. It is a place in which to banish the morally troublesome. The ladies, who are at this point in the story struggling to persuade Lily to give up her thoughts of marriage and accept going to Ellisville, sink into 'despair' at the thought of a sexually active, possibly pregnant Lily remaining amongst them. Shortly after Mrs Carson's plea to consider Lily's happiness, their desire to institutionalise Lily seems to be most completely emptied of any compassion for her.

The means by which Welty represents and does not represent Lily's intellectual disability is crucial to the story's success as a critique of the treatment of supposedly feeble-minded women in the 1930s South. Where Porter rendered He ambiguous through his silence, here the ambiguity is generated through authorial silence: the author offers limited textual 'evidence' of a disability. The narrator never describes Lily's intelligence or intellectual lack; she is not described as an 'idiot' like

Toby Waters or a 'half-wit' like Stiggins or even 'simple-minded' like He. The only description we get is from one of the women stood at the post office recounting how Lily was going to be charged for the tent show 'until my husband went up and explained she wasn't bright, and so did everybody else' [16]. This comment and the fact that the ladies have applied for her to go to Ellisville, show the community has a certain shared assessment of Lily's intelligence. Yet we mostly get this information through dialogue, a strategy that is typical of the story and of many of the stories in the collection. The dialogue-heavy stories of *Curtain of Green*, show a writer particularly interested in how communities make meaning through conversation. By not giving a name to Lily's intelligence/intellectual disability directly through the narrator, Welty allows the reader to understand that there is an assessment process happening within the community. Taylor Hagood has shown how Faulkner discusses this process in *As I Lay Dying*, noting that Cash's monologue incorporates a reflection on the 'constructedness of normality and abnormality'. Cash states: 'sometimes I think ain't none of us pure crazy and ain't none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him that-a-way'.<sup>259</sup> As Hagood suggests, Cash's (and by implication Faulkner's) ponderings appear 'quite ahead of his time'. Welty – in the context of intellectual disability not sanity – takes this expository reflection one step further by showing how such meaning-making occurs.<sup>260</sup> Within this context, Lily's intellectual lack becomes vague and difficult to pin down and the extent to which it is socially constructed or, more precisely, to which it depends upon evaluative social judgements of certain behaviours becomes more apparent. This in turn serves to make her proposed institutionalisation all the more troubling.

Lily's own dialogue and her behaviour add to the ambiguity. Again, Welty

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<sup>259</sup> Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, pp. 219-220

<sup>260</sup> Taylor Hagood, *Faulkner, Writer of Disability* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2014), p. 122

does not follow what might be seen as the typical strategies of representation of intellectual disability in southern writing. As has been noted, southern writers often chose to represent intellectual disability through limited or unusual communication. Lily's speech is terse and occasionally childish, such as when she describes the xylophone player: "'he had a red coat,' said Lily graciously. 'He took little sticks and went *ping-pong! ding-dong!*'". This example, while suggestive, is unusual and her speech is typical of the rest of the characters for most of the story. Similarly, other southern modernists give certain behavioural or physical traits to their intellectually disabled figures – often including, for example, slobbering, moaning, obsessions with food particularly sweet food, unusual gaits or clumsiness and drooping or glazed eyes.<sup>261</sup> The regularity with which such traits appear suggests a certain accepted set of literary behavioural and physical signifiers for intellectual disability to which Lily does not conform.<sup>262</sup> This is not to suggest that southern modernists relied solely on these traits to represent intellectually disabled behaviour. Still, there are usually clearly identified patterns of behaviour that differentiate intellectually disabled characters from others: nominally non-normative or socially unacceptable predilections, habits and actions that function to represent them as different. Extreme examples of this would be Ike Snopes's sexual relationship with a cow in Faulkner's *The Hamlet* (1940) or Spiros Antonapoulos urinating on the wall of a bank in Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940). Female intellectually disabled characters are rarer than their male equivalents in southern modernism and are

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<sup>261</sup> To offer an illustration, slobbering appears multiple times in Faulkner's representations of intellectual disability as well as in *Vein of Iron*, *My Heart and My Flesh*, Robert Penn Warren's 'A Christian Education' and Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*.

<sup>262</sup> While emphasising the frequency with which southern writers deployed these tropes, I do not wish to suggest that they were all specifically southern in origin. Many of these traits can be found across the history of cultural representations of intellectual disability, particularly from the nineteenth century onwards as pathological understandings of intellectual disability grew. Both McDonagh in *Idiocy* and Halliwell in *Images of Idiocy* offer insight into the proliferation, origins and significance of these recurring tropes.

frequently marked as different by a lack of conventional sexual restraint and morality. As Ike's relationship with the cow suggests, male intellectually disabled figures also break their societies' sexual codes. However, for female intellectually disabled characters, a voracious and uncontrollable sexual desire is particularly common echoing eugenic anxieties about feeble-minded women. In examples such as the 'feeble-minded' Leonora in McCullers's *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941) and Sterling Brown's 'half-wit' Frankie in his poem "Frankie and Johnny" (1932), highly sexualised traits are deployed as signifiers of intellectual and/or moral lack.<sup>263</sup> Welty does not deploy the characteristic tropes of intellectually disabled representation in her depiction of Lily's behaviour. Despite representing Lily as a character with sexual desires, there is a striking absence of authorial suggestion that these desires are in any way 'abnormal' or immoral. She makes it visible that if Lily's behaviour – sexual or otherwise – is unusual at all it is, as in the discussion of her 'maturity', because those around her deem it to be so.

For example, when we first see Lily, as the ladies enter her house 'without knocking' to find her packing a hope chest in preparation for marriage, she is 'sat, wearing a petticoat for a dress, one of the things Mrs Carson kept after her about' [18]. By inserting Mrs Carson's opinion into the description, Welty opens up something of a gap between the narrator and the ladies. In drawing attention to Lily's clothing the narrative voice is not exactly neutral as it notes something unusual; yet it is Mrs Carson who is preoccupied with it and our attention is directed not so much towards the behaviour but towards the reception of it. Given Mrs Carson's concerns about Lily's sexual activity, it is clear she reads the petticoat as representing a moral

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<sup>263</sup> There are a number of other female characters in southern literature of the period whose depiction hints at a dysgenic blend of intellectual disability and promiscuity. Examples include Caldwell's Katy Barlow in *Trouble in July* (1940) and Ellie Mae Lester in *Tobacco Road* and Euna Varner in Faulkner's *The Hamlet*.

lack. The narrative voice is subtly critical of this preoccupation; 'kept after about' indicates an excessive and repetitive intrusion on Mrs Carson's part. The intrusiveness is amplified by the ladies uninvited entrance into Lily's house. In the privacy of her own home, Lily's attire is meaningless, it only becomes unusual once it is observed by the ladies who bring with them their pre-existing attitudes towards Lily's behaviour. Welty suggests a kind of loop here in which the ladies presuppositions about Lily's feeble-mindedness lead them to deny her the right to privacy which in turn feeds those same presuppositions. Already seeing Lily as abnormal, they read her behaviour as abnormal. Yet by making this process apparent, the passage conversely, for the reader, problematises assumptions about Lily's behaviour rendering it difficult to pin down her disability.

Similarly, the concern about clothing is mirrored later in the story revealing the privileged position of the observers to the observed. When the ladies are sat on the train before the ultimately aborted trip to take Lily to Ellisville, Mrs Watts – who, being a widow, wears black – says "'I declare, it's so hot, as soon as we get a few miles out of town I'm going to slip my corset down'" [23]. By citing the heat of the Deep South, Mrs Watts offers a rationale for adjusting her clothing that Mrs Carson ignores in judging Lily's clothing. Equally, Mrs Watts's refusal to slip her corset before they get out of town emphasises the extent to which social convention causes her to be discomforted. In this context, Lily's dress sense in her own home seems less sexual than the ladies assume and more rational than their own choices. The extent to which the ladies wish to force Lily to conform to their less rational choices is emphasised by them making Lily an impractical, uncomfortable, but more demure and lady-like dress from one of Mrs Watt's old mourning dresses.

As a number of critics have noted, Lily's presence in the story disturbs ideas

of the normal or the rational.<sup>264</sup> For Kreyling, this function makes Lily a liberating figure: 'Lily's deficiency, considered less clinically, is not a deficiency at all but a surplus'. He suggests Lily's struggle against the ladies is symbolic of the self's struggle against the conventions of society. This destabilising power is present not only in Lily but in other intellectually disabled characters in Welty's fiction (specifically Daniel Ponder in *The Ponder Heart* and Maureen Fairchild in *Delta Wedding* (1946)) and renders them more empowered figures than Porter's He, for example, while resisting the stereotypical tropes found elsewhere in southern modernism. However, particularly in the case of Lily, reading these characters as a symbolic commentary on the irrationality of 'normal' society can be as reductive as it is informative. Questions of normality, deficiency and rationality had (and continue to have) a unique impact on the lives of individuals deemed intellectually disabled, and in the historical context of growing institutionalisation in the South, Welty's troubling of these concepts has a specific political quality with regard to the treatment of feeble-minded people. By blurring the space between the normal and the abnormal, the rational and the irrational in 'Lily Daw and the Three Ladies', Welty does not only make 'a point about the nature of individual human existence' as Kreyling rightly notes, but shows how for some individuals in the 1930s South, the struggle between freedom and social convention had significantly higher stakes.<sup>265</sup>

Through the relationship between Lily and Aimee Slocum Welty offers further illustrations that the gap between the ladies and Lily is not as big as the former believe. Zelma Howard has noted how Aimee 'the supposedly rational spinster who has gained a victory over sex' is a 'foil' for Lily, arguing that it is the

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<sup>264</sup> See for example: Zelma Howard, *Rhetoric of Eudora Welty's Short Stories* (Jackson: University and College Press, 1973), pp. 11-12

<sup>265</sup> Kreyling, *Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order*, pp. 7-8

supposedly irrational Lily who controls the pair's encounters.<sup>266</sup> I wish to expand on this argument to show the extent to which the two are set up as a pair through mirroring and through Lily's own treatment of Aimee. The story gently implies that it is not only Aimee's rejection of sex that separates her from the fate determined for the more sexual Lily. Aimee's surname Slocum puns on her abstinence – she is *slow* to *cum* – but also hints at a possible intellectual disability: that she may be *slow* to *come* to things. This is not the only playing with names in the story. When the ladies find Lily packing the hope chest to get married, Lily plays with her own name to draw attention to Aimee's mentality:

'Go on and tell us what you're doing Lily,' said Aimee Slocum.

'Packing, silly,' said Lily. [19]

Lily's rhyming of her own name with 'silly' to address Aimee – which she repeats later on the train to Ellisville – invites us to see the two as a pair. Equally, Lily calling Aimee 'silly' inverts the supposed relationship between the intelligent and the intellectually disabled and in doing so draws attention to the inanity of Aimee's question; it is perfectly clear what Lily is doing. This kind of inane statement is typical of Aimee whose 'silliness' is apparent throughout the story. For example, when we first see her she comes 'running out with white powder all over her face' to join the hunt for Lily [16] and her reactions to events always seem excessive – she threatens to faint when she hears of Lily's encounter with the xylophone player [20]. While the first exchange in the two's conversation over the hope chest sees Lily draw attention to Aimee's silliness, the next sees her suggest that by getting married, she will have a better life than Aimee. Aimee asks where she is going and Lily replies "'going to get married, and I bet you wish you was me now'" [19]. The ladies are

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<sup>266</sup> Howard, *Rhetoric of Eudora Welty*, p. 30

greatly concerned that sex and marriage will be Lily's downfall, but Lily suggests that Aimee should be jealous of her. Lily positions her decision as a better and more rational choice than Aimee's unmarried state. Lily's claim that Aimee wishes she was her, hints that Aimee longs to be married. By placing Lily's statements regarding Aimee's silliness and lack of a sexual partner in such close proximity, I argue that Welty invites the reader to reflect on whether, if Aimee had found a prospective husband, her now largely ignored behaviour may have taken on as much meaning as Lily's does. In addition, the passage shows how in Lily, Welty offers a more resistant and rebellious intellectually disabled figure than Porter does. Aimee's sexless life is what the ladies want for Lily, yet in their conversation Lily is openly rejecting and ridiculing it.

However, Aimee, unlike Lily, is not a candidate for institutionalisation. This difference is highlighted when Aimee attempts to persuade Lily to go: "*I wish I could go to Ellisville,*" said Aimee Slocum luringly" (italics in original) [21]. Aimee is seemingly attempting reverse psychology here, yet if we view her statements in the light of her similarity to Lily, we find that two further ironic readings of her words are possible. Firstly, she is, for the reasons discussed above, perhaps closer to going to Ellisville than at first seems apparent and so there is a degree of comedy at Aimee's expense. Secondly, there may be some unspoken truth or fleeting desire in Aimee's wish. Her statement immediately follows Mrs Watts expressing a fear that even in Ellisville Lily will run around 'in a petticoat looking like a Fiji' [21]. Mrs Watts's reimagining of Lily as 'a Fiji' links the intellectually disabled with the supposedly uncivilised racial other.<sup>267</sup> This brief moment in the story is, I argue, the

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<sup>267</sup> The blending of a foreign racial other and the intellectually disabled seen here is not without cultural precedent, albeit in a very different context. Freak show acts often featured intellectually and physically disabled individuals, portraying them as atavistic, foreign 'throwbacks'. Another story in *Curtain of Green*, 'Keela, The Outcast Indian Maiden', in which a black disabled man has been



closest the ladies get to a eugenic-like ideology, loading racism onto intellectual disability and a fear of unmarried sex (represented again by the petticoat) albeit without entering into the actual realm of heredity. Mrs Watts's concern also oddly proposes the institution as a space in which, beyond the ladies' control, Lily – in her petticoat – can have a degree of freedom and perhaps even sexual expression. Just as Lily claims Aimee may wish to be her and get married and thus escape the control of Mrs Watts and Mrs Carson, so Aimee – who is always subservient to her companions – may wish to be free of them, even if that meant going to Ellisville. Kreyling's point that Lily's apparent deficiency is in fact a surplus has particular relevance if we read Aimee's wish to go to Ellisville literally. Even locked up, Lily embodies a freedom that is inaccessible to Aimee.

Aimee's position in comparison to Lily has particular relevance for the story's conclusion. When the ladies affirm that she can take her hope chest with her, Lily is persuaded to abandon her plans of marriage and go to Ellisville. The relative simplicity with which the issue is resolved indicates that although Welty complicates Lily's disability, she does intend for us to see her as having an intellectual lack. Lily's desire to take the hope chest – reflecting some distinctly heavy handed signification from the author – symbolises how any escape from Victory and the ladies offers some hope for Lily. Yet the story suggests the reader should not share any hope about Ellisville. The ladies have seemed throughout more concerned about curtailing Lily's freedom than her wellbeing and cannot actually describe what happens at the institution either amongst themselves [15] or to Lily [21-22]. When Lily is on the

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playing the role of the 'Indian maiden' in a travelling show suggests that Welty was aware of how disability and race were used for this purpose. For some discussion of freaks shows' use of race and intellectual disability see Bogdan et al, *Picturing Disability*, pp. 8-20. It is worth noting too in this context that freak shows regularly featured acts from, or pertaining to be from, Pacific islands like Fiji as representatives of uncivilised primitivism. See Leonard Cassuto, 'What an Object He Would Have Made of Me: Tatting and the Racial Freak in Melville's *Typee*' in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 234-247, (p 241-242).

train with Mrs Watts and Mrs Carson waiting to depart, Aimee is standing on the platform crying and is approached by the xylophone player who has returned to marry Lily. She is forced to make a choice between stopping the train and letting Lily proceed to Ellisville, she looks 'back and forth from the man to the hissing train. Which was more terrible?' [24]. As Arant notes, Aimee's expression that both choices are 'terrible' admits for the first time in the story that any of the ladies are aware of the negative nature of institutionalisation. Arant also argues that the terror the xylophone player inspires in Aimee is mobilised by his possible role in a dysgenic marriage.<sup>268</sup> I do not read Aimee's fear as eugenic here; Aimee's idea of marriage as 'terrible' is perhaps more linked to her own unmarried state. Through her, Welty, who never married, may be incorporating a suggestion that both Ellisville and marriage reflect a similar means of control. Moreover, Aimee has also shown an extreme fear of sex throughout the story and so even the prospect of marriage and therefore sex may be terrifying to her. Given that she is positioned as Lily's 'silly' twin in the story, this terror is perfectly understandable when we consider what is happening to Lily. Aimee is asked to make a decision regarding sex and freedom for Lily that she would understand only too well. Her choice can be seen as a further indictment of the institution; for Aimee (and perhaps in a more buried comedic sense for the author) even marriage is preferable to Ellisville. For Mrs Carson and Mrs Watts, now confronted with the real rather than imagined possibility of marriage, it offers a more acceptable means of controlling Lily and they take her from the train 'struggl[ing] down the aisle' both literally and metaphorically [25].

By this point Lily is committed to going to Ellisville and is disappointed to being taken to be married to the xylophone player. This represents another act of

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<sup>268</sup> Arant, 'A Moral Intelligence', p.78

defiance by Lily, yet she is once again subservient to the ladies' desires. The Victory Civic Band, which has come as part of celebration of Lily's 'big day', plays 'Independence March' as she gets off the train, yet Lily's march towards her future husband is anything but independent and her marriage is not a victory for her. Beyond Lily's own disappointment, the story makes it clear that the prospective husband is not an ideal partner. For example, the xylophone player's initial response to hearing Lily was going to Ellisville was nonchalant, stating that if the band played near there he 'may look her up and [he] may not' [25]. Signifying that Lily has swapped one institution for another, the hope chest disappears on the train while everyone crowds around the xylophone player and Mrs Carson rings her husband to perform the marriage.

The final lines of the story are particularly ambiguous:

The band went on playing. Some of the people thought Lily was on the train, and some swore she wasn't. Everybody cheered, though, and a straw hat was thrown through the telephone wires.

The people here serve a similar function to the neighbour in the car at the end of *He*. They show a collective relief that the 'domestic burden' of Lily is no longer their responsibility. That everybody cheers reflects an indifference whether Lily goes to Ellisville or whether she gets married. In her story's conclusion Welty – as Porter does in *'He'* – renders the entire community culpable for the treatment of its feeble-minded citizens. However, as attention turns towards the xylophone player, we do not see Lily again after she leaves the train. Welty's suggestion that nobody knows where Lily is opens the possibility that she is in fact back on the train with her rapidly disappearing hope case but without the ladies who were travelling with her to ensure her arrival at Ellisville. And so, just as hope seems to be 'moving slowly away', Welty leaves open the possibility that some hope still remains, a possibility

denied to the reader in the more tragic *He*.

The possibility of the intellectually disabled character escaping was one Welty returned to later in her career. In *The Ponder Heart*, the ambiguously intellectually disabled figure Daniel Ponder is taken to an institution because his marriage has failed and his father is unable to find any other way to control him. However, Daniel turns the tables on his father and has him institutionalised for two days while Daniel wanders free. The novel shows an author some seventeen years later still cynical about the value of institutions for the feeble-minded in the American South, and attempting to question the boundaries between normal and abnormal. Like Daniel Ponder, albeit in a more limited sense, Lily pushes back against attempts to contain her in Ellisville or marriage, revealing a desire to make her own decisions and express herself. The story's ambiguous ending does not exclude the possibility that this resistance may be ongoing. Like Porter's 'He', Welty's works expose and condemn the social processes that move 'domestic burdens' into institutions. Porter's story ends at the institution door and, perhaps inspired by her own experience of County Homes and the knowledge that her grandmother died in a Lunatic Asylum, projects a bleak future for its intellectually disabled protagonist. Helpless in the face of his society's assumptions about him, He is seemingly condemned to a life of custodial care. While the story itself resists institutionalisation, the society Porter depicts learns nothing and there is a sense of hopelessness. The celebrating townspeople suggest Welty's town of Victory is equally unchanged by Lily's experience. However, Aimee's realisation that a prospective life in Ellisville is 'terrible' suggests that she has learned something. More importantly, while He rarely seems able to influence events, there is a freedom to Lily that does not seem easily quashed despite the pressure put on her. In

depicting the relationship between disabled characters and their societies as a struggle, *The Ponder Heart* and 'Lily Daw and the Three Ladies' looked beyond the building of institutions for the feeble-minded in the American South to hint towards the possibility of something more. Though barely beginning at the time Welty wrote 'Lily Daw', the struggle against not only physical institutions but the social limitations placed upon individuals was to become integral to disability rights movements in the following decades.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Early Disability Rights organisations like The League of the Physically Handicapped began to form in the mid 1930s. The initial movements demanding changes in the lives of intellectually disabled people were led by parents of those deemed 'mentally retarded' post World War II. For an overview of the history of these movements and others up to the early twenty-first century see Kim E. Neilsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), pp. 131-183 and Paul K. Longmore, *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), pp. 53-118

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **'Pore Ignorant Country Folks': Feeble-Mindedness, Innocence and Modernity in William Faulkner**

William Faulkner's idiot Benjy Compson in his novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is undoubtedly the most renowned and celebrated representation of intellectual disability in all of southern literature regardless of period. Indeed Benjy, alongside Lenny in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and perhaps Boo Radley in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1961), is one of the best known intellectually disabled characters in all of American literature. Certainly, few novels have received as much attention in terms of their use of intellectual disability as *The Sound and the Fury*. In recent years, scholars influenced by Disability Studies in particular have sought to reexamine the role and function of Benjy.<sup>270</sup> This depth of attention has added greatly to our understanding of the novel and the representation of intellectual disability. Yet, despite his fame and these new readings of the character, as I have shown, Benjy is but one of a number of intellectually disabled characters in southern modernism and the trend predates the publication of *The Sound and the Fury*. To add to our understanding of Benjy it is, I argue, necessary to decentralise him both within this chapter and this thesis, revealing the broader contexts of which the character is a part. Accordingly, I do not focus on the novel in this chapter, though I do refer to it and critical discussions of it throughout. Instead, I examine some of Faulkner's lesser discussed representations of intellectual disability, showing how they, like Benjy, were an integral part of the author's depiction of the

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<sup>270</sup> Examples include but are not limited to Hagood, *Faulkner, Writer of Disability* pp. 87-106; Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, pp. 20-25; Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, pp. 171-172; Alice Hall, *Disability and Modern Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 35-41

South and how for him, as for many of his peers, ideas about region, intelligence and morality were intricately interrelated.

To decentralise Benjy is not, however, to dismiss the extent to which *The Sound and the Fury* is exceptional. Benjy's experimental first-person narrative, which makes up the novel's first quarter, gives a voice – albeit problematically from both a textual and ethical standpoint – to an intellectually disabled character in ways that Faulkner's contemporaries did not.<sup>271</sup> This is not the only way in which the novel is unusual amongst representations of not only intellectual disability but disability per se in southern modernism. Faulkner spends a great deal of time discussing the more quotidian aspects of the individual and social response to impairment. The process and practicalities of caring for – feeding, dressing, transporting – a disabled person and, crucially, the experience of receiving that care are to the fore in *The Sound and the Fury*. While Katherine Anne Porter drew attention to the complexity of these needs by depicting the absence of care in 'He', no other southern modernist paid as much attention to these aspects of a disabled person's life. *The Sound and the Fury*'s emphasis on care is rendered even more unusual because discussions of care roles were sorely limited not only in literature but also in America society as a whole until after the Second World War.<sup>272</sup> It was not until the end of the century that voices of disabled individuals themselves began to be heard. This emphasis on the relationship between disabled person and carer(s) is rarely discussed in critical appraisals of the novel. Nevertheless it is crucial in rendering Benjy distinctive and

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<sup>271</sup> The ethics of Benjy's section of *The Sound and the Fury* are contentious to say the least. For example, Maria Truchan-Tataryn has accused Faulkner of 'textual abuse' suggesting he reduces the character to a mere reporter and thus dehumanises those with cognitive disability casting them as 'mindless or thoughtless'. Maria Truchan-Tataryn, 'Textual Abuse: Faulkner's Benjy', *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 26:2/3 (2005), 159-172. Michael Berubè, however, also approaching the novel from a Disability Studies perspective, reads it much more generously, suggesting that by offering a 'democratization of narrative representation' it allows a voice to those otherwise unheard and expands our understanding of narrative and its role in self-representation. Michael Berubè, 'Disability and Narrative', *PMLA*, 120:2 (2005), 568-576

<sup>272</sup> For some discussion of this, see Brockley, 'Rearing the Child Who Never Grew', pp. 138-145

more human than the flatter and, at points, dehumanised 'idiot' characters found elsewhere in Faulkner's work and elsewhere in southern modernism. This is not to ignore the extent to which Benjy carries as much if not more symbolic significance as any other idiot figure in southern modernism; nor is it to suggest that Benjy's narrative substitutes for the legitimate voice of a disabled individual. It does, however, render the novel atypical in ways that go beyond its oft-noted formal experimentation.<sup>273</sup>

If, according to different registers of meaning and form, *The Sound and the Fury* can be considered simultaneously typical and atypical of southern modernism in its use of an idiot then the same might be said more broadly for Faulkner as a writer of intellectual disability. Although part of a regional trend that this thesis has sought to illuminate, his attention to intellectual disability was still quite extraordinary. No other southern writer incorporated intellectually disabled characters into their fiction as frequently as did William Faulkner. Given the extent of this representation, in this opening section I briefly discuss the instances and types of intellectual disability in his work and the role the eugenic movement played in the construction of intellectual disability in his novels. In addition to Benjy Compson, intellectually disabled characters appear prominently in Faulkner's novels *Soldier's Pay*, *Sanctuary* (1931) and *The Hamlet* (1940) and his short stories 'Kingdom of God' (1925), 'Monk' (1937) and 'Hand Upon the Water' (1939). as well as in smaller roles in other works such as *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936) and *A Fable* (1954). Taylor Hagood has suggested that there is a discernible 'Faulknerian idiot' who is

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<sup>273</sup> The novel's form is atypical in that other southern writers from the period discussed in this thesis did not give a first person voice to an intellectually disabled character. However, later lesser known writers from the region did do. Examples include Shelby Foote's *Follow Me Down* (1950) and Byron Herbert Reece's *Better a Dinner of Herbs* (1950). These novels are perhaps best seen as part of the related but distinctive southern literary trend in which Faulkner's aesthetic influence on the representation of intellectual disability is apparent discussed in the introduction.



'cognitively disabled in ways that affect his (all of these characters are male) speech, his movements, his emotions, and the look in his eye'. There are undoubtedly similarities between many of Faulkner's reified idiot figures and, as Hagood suggests, they are often made apparent within the text by their physical appearance.<sup>274</sup> I am more reluctant than Hagood to declare there to be a singular 'Faulknerian idiot'. More precisely, I find intellectual disability appears in a number of different forms, serving a variety of intricately connected narrative and ideological functions in Faulkner's work. For example, Donald Mahon, the white wounded World War I veteran in *Soldier's Pay* has an acquired brain injury. The depiction of his intellectual disability and the responses to it in the novel are very different to the representation of, for example, Jim Bond in *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936). Faulkner's construction of Bond as the last mixed-race scion of a once powerful family, seems influenced by the same eugenic doctrine that Roberts drew on for Stiggins in *My Heart and My Flesh* (and perhaps by Roberts's novel itself). The difference between Mahon and Bond is an extreme example – Mahon's intellectual disability, being acquired, is unlike any other discussed in this thesis.<sup>275</sup> Although, as a vehicle through which Faulkner explores a disabled consciousness, he can be seen as something of a precursor to Benjy, Mahon does not sit easily with other modernist depictions of southern intellectually disabled characters. I make the point to show that intellectual disability appears in a variety of forms in Faulkner's work and his interest in it had multiple purposes and influences. The range of terminology used in Faulkner's works plays a crucial role in defining and producing this difference. He draws on scientific categories of intellectual disability as well as colloquial terms in

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<sup>274</sup> Hagood, *Faulkner, Writer of Disability*, p. 88

<sup>275</sup> This does not mean Mahon is entirely unique in southern modernism. Maureen the 'idiot' child in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding* (1945) also has an intellectual disability that is specifically noted to be the consequence of an accident.

his descriptions: Benjy is an 'idiot' or an 'imbecile'; Tommy in *Sanctuary* is a 'feeb' or a 'halfwit'; Monk is a 'moron' or a 'cretin'. As the variation in terminology used to describe these individual characters suggests, these distinctions do not exactly map onto particular discrete, scientific or pseudoscientific models of intellectual disability but Faulkner's use of these terms is not, as I show, entirely detached from these models and they often indicate and support the textual construction of differences in ability and/or behaviour.

Despite this frequent use of terminology to depict and denote intellectually disabled individuals, Faulkner, like Glasgow, Roberts and to a lesser extent Welty, regularly enmeshed intellectual disability more broadly into his fictional representations of the South. Consequently, making distinctions between a Faulknerian idiot and many of his other characters is not always straightforward. As shown elsewhere in this thesis, intellectual disability in this period's literature invites eugenic readings that spread beyond those marked out as 'idiots' or 'imbeciles' (by narrator or otherwise) to encompass family members or entire communities. As in *Vein of Iron* and *My Heart and My Flesh*, eugenic ideas are present in many of Faulkner's novels. Faulkner scholar Jay Watson has traced family lineages of dysgenic traits in his works of the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>276</sup> Watson persuasively reveals how some of Faulkner's works depicting his most famous Yoknapatawpha families – the Compsons, Snopeses ('Father Abraham'), Sartoris ( *Flags in the Dust* ) and Bundrens ( *As I Lay Dying* ) – along with a more loosely

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<sup>276</sup> Watson limns the role of eugenics in a broad selection of Faulkner's work but he is by no means the only critic to have found eugenic traces in the author's work. See also, for example, Barbara Ladner, 'The Descent of Yoknapatawpha: Eugenics and the Origins of Faulkner's World', in *Popular Eugenics*, ed. by Currell and Cogdell, pp. 164-176; Lancaster, *The Angelic Mother and the Predatory Seductress*, pp.48-61; Alex Vernon, 'The Origin of Story and the Survival of Character in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*', in *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture*, ed. by Cuddy and Roche, pp. 116-132. Though more interested in evolution than eugenics per se, models of heredity in Faulkner's work are also probed in Michael Wainwright, *Darwin and Faulkner's Novels: Evolution and Southern Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

formed Goodwin family or tribe in *Sanctuary*, can all be read as though they were eugenic family studies.<sup>277</sup> Idiot characters appear in the Compson and Goodwin families in the works Watson discusses and, while he does not extend his examination beyond 1931, the later appearance of Ike Snopes in *The Hamlet* strengthens his argument that they too are an archetypal poor white dysgenic family. Similarly, Watson highlights that the promiscuity of the female Quentin and her mother Caddie in *The Sound and The Fury*, particularly when tied to Benjy's imbecility, could, according to the understanding of the time, serve as evidence that they are feeble-minded morons. Certainly Jason Compson reads his sister and niece in this way in his narrative in the novel, telling himself that they too should have been sterilized, like the castrated Benjy.<sup>278</sup> Neither woman can easily, if at all, be described as a Faulknerian idiot, yet seen through a eugenic lens they can be read as feeble-minded, much as Lily Daw is in Welty's short story 'Lily Daw and the Three Ladies'. This is but one example of how, in Faulkner's work, characters who are not textually defined 'idiots' or 'feebies' can become associated with intellectual disability.

However, as Watson makes clear, though we can trace eugenic genealogies in Faulkner's work, this does not mean that the novels always endorse eugenic thinking. Like Roberts, Faulkner incorporates much that undermines eugenic ideology. Environmental explanations for behaviours are often as visible as biological ones.<sup>279</sup> Jason Compson might view his family through a eugenic lens but the novel's depiction of him makes his perspective troubling and the reader is certainly not invited to see his conclusions as definitive. Jason is corrupt and brutal (ironically, both traits are, as Halliwell and Watson note, possible indicators of his

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<sup>277</sup> Jay Watson, 'Genealogies of White Deviance - The Eugenic Family Studies, *Buck v Bell*, and William Faulkner, 1926-1931', in *Faulkner and Whiteness*, ed. by Watson (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), pp. 19-55

<sup>278</sup> Watson, 'Genealogies', p. 37

<sup>279</sup> Watson, 'Genealogies', pp. 54-55

own genetic 'lack') and it is clear from his narrative that his controlling behaviour is at least partly responsible for his niece's need to escape which leads her to run away with a man, the very act upon which Jason bases his desire to see her sterilized.<sup>280</sup> If, through his eyes, his sister and his niece resemble less comically realised versions of Lily Daw, the judgemental and endlessly cruel Jason is himself a harsher, male version of the Three Ladies seeking to control his family's behaviour. There is then a degree of tension and ambiguity about eugenics within the text which allows for both Watson's reading of *The Sound and the Fury* as eugenic family study and Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell's reading of it as an anti-eugenic novel.<sup>281</sup> Despite his works' frequent incorporation of, or hint towards, eugenic logic, Faulkner's use of this logic and his investment in the meanings and symbols of the eugenic movement is rarely uncomplicated.

Given the variety of intellectually disabled characters Faulkner deploys and the slipperiness of his engagement both with intellectual disability and eugenics, it is difficult to draw broad conclusions about the role and functions of his intellectually disabled characters. Equally, given the space limitations of a single chapter, in writing about Faulkner and intellectual disability it is necessary to be selective. Within this chapter I focus primarily on Faulkner's representation of intellectual disability amongst poor whites in the South especially in the novel *Sanctuary*, and the short story 'Monk'. These depictions, both from the 1930s, can be seen as distinctive from Faulkner's writing on intellectual disability in the 1920s. Faulkner's interest in the aesthetic, experimental possibilities of the intellectually disabled first person narrative seen in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Soldier's Pay* seems to have waned. The two texts I discuss show a more explicit engagement with the archetypes

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<sup>280</sup> Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, pp. 20; Watson, 'Genealogies', pp. 37

<sup>281</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, p. 49

and signifiers of the eugenic movement. To a large extent this also makes these texts more problematic ethically. Faulkner's later poor white idiots do not demonstrate the same authorial concern regarding the lived experience of the disabled individual as their precursors. Yet, they do show a writer, like his peers, incorporating intellectual disability into his representations and examinations of southern identity. I argue that Faulkner draws on vexed notions of 'innocence' and eugenic ideology to construct intellectually disabled figures who signify the pre-modern and rural aspects of southern life. This blend of competing constructions of intellectual disability generates enigmatic characters whose innocence critiques the cruelty of the emergent modern South but who also embody hereditary feeble-mindedness and exhibit dysgenic behaviours which the texts – borrowing from and reworking eugenic thinking – link to the origins of that cruelty. These dysgenic aspects cannot easily be explained away and reflect an anxiety in both the fictional Souths Faulkner represents and in the author himself about the threat of intellectual disability to the region.

### **Troubled Innocence**

The confluence of hereditarian beliefs and innocence in 'Monk' and *Sanctuary* has a particular function in those works, but it is not unique to them. Nearly all of Faulkner's intellectually disabled figures show some kind of troubling or immoral behaviour yet nearly all also function as symbols of 'innocence', in fact their innocence is at times explicitly stated within the text. The association of intellectual disability with innocence has been remarkably persistent with a literary heritage dating back centuries that incorporates notions of holy fools, exemplifying Patrick McDonagh's argument that 'older concepts of idiocy resurface within newer

frameworks, or simply refuse to disappear'.<sup>282</sup> Innocence is itself, like intellectual disability, a highly constructed and mobile concept. In the early twentieth century, Freud had done much to destabilise Victorian notions of childhood innocence by discussing infantile sexuality.<sup>283</sup> Despite these complications, Faulkner seems particularly reluctant to let the concept of innocent idiocy disappear. In 1955 Faulkner discussed the importance of the idea of innocence to his characterisation of Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*. While Faulkner claimed not to have read Freud (a claim many scholars have found dubious), it is noticeable that he stressed that idiots and not children were 'true' innocents.<sup>284</sup> His comments are from many years after the novel's publication, yet they offer some perspective on Faulkner's entwining of innocence and intellectual disability, not only in *The Sound and the Fury* but in many other works:

[T]he idea struck me to see how much more I could have got out of the idea of the blind, self-centeredness of innocence, typified by children, if one of those children had been truly an innocent, that is, an idiot. So the idiot was born and then I became interested in the relationship of the idiot to the world he was in but would never be able to cope with and just where he'd get the tenderness, the help, to shield him in his innocence. I mean 'innocence' in that God had stricken him blind at birth, that is mindless at birth, there was nothing he could ever do about it.<sup>285</sup>

There is a certain circularity to Faulkner's discussion of innocence and idiocy here such that the two terms seems to become indistinguishable. It is striking too that by referencing blindness he draws on the language of disability to describe disability, presumably equating lack of insight with lack of sight. Benjy's narrative reflects some of the qualities of the innocence Faulkner describes here. It is self-centred and

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<sup>282</sup> McDonagh, *Idiocy*, p. 15

<sup>283</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey and Anna Freud, 24 vols (Toronto: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), VII, pp. 173-207

<sup>284</sup> Doreen Fowler, 'Faulkner's Return to the Freudian Father: *Sanctuary* Reconsidered', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50:2 (2004), 411-434, (pp. 411-412)

<sup>285</sup> William Faulkner, *Faulkner at Nagano*, ed. by Robert Jelliffe (Tokyo, The Kenkyusha Press, 1956), pp. 103-104

there is a near total lack of judgement or analysis within it. In addition, his description by other characters positions him as an innocent: he is a 'baby' [195] and 'he won't hurt folks' [291].

He is also described as a 'natural', a phrase which adds to the sense of innocence and suggests a premodern (perhaps even prelapsarian) quality to the character. This association with nature emphasises the extent to which Faulkner was drawn to Romantic notions of idiocy, which stressed ideas of innocence and rural simplicity.<sup>286</sup> Halliwell has discussed how Wordsworth used these notions in his poem 'The Idiot Boy' (1798) to 'envisage an idealized rural scene, unspoilt by the noises and pressures of modern urban life'.<sup>287</sup> The motivation Halliwell suggests for Wordsworth's use of the innocent idiot can offer a useful additional perspective on Faulkner's reluctance to abandon the association – it served a purpose in his regional representations. Faulkner does not depict 'unspoilt' rural scenes but rather a rural landscape which is becoming modernised so that the Romantic innocence of his idiot figures is increasingly out of place. As he suggests in his discussion of Benjy, their innocence renders them unable to cope with the world. Indeed an inability to cope with the world is the defining indicator of 'innocence' in Faulkner's intellectually disabled figures, perhaps revealing why he struggled to disentangle ideas of innocence and idiocy – for Faulkner, innocence was the disability.

The 'innocence' which Faulkner's intellectually disabled characters frequently embody exists alongside their function as signifiers of hereditary lack. Beyond their intellectual disability, they often exhibit behaviours which might be considered, by the standards of the period, immoral and dysgenic. To a degree this jarring blend echoes aspects of eugenic logic. A sense of 'innocence' was integral to Henry

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<sup>286</sup> Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, pp. 36-43

<sup>287</sup> Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, p. 37

Goddard's construction of the moron, since the intellectual disability made the individual incapable of a moral choice. The moron he argued 'would lead a life that would be vicious, immoral and criminal, though because of her mentality she herself would not be responsible.'<sup>288</sup> Goddard's work contained a degree of sympathy for the moron he imagined. Nevertheless, despite Goddard's preeminence, this sense of innocence, with its lack of responsibility and, therefore, of grounds for blame, was almost always absent from later eugenic works. Whereas those texts generally abandoned or ignored Goddard's emphasis on 'innocence' and the longstanding connection between intellectual disability and innocence more broadly, Faulkner brought it to the fore. Indeed, as his discussion of Benjy suggests, despite his era's eugenic anxiety surrounding intellectual disability and his own use of these anxieties in his work, older associations of innocence and idiocy were central to his representations. In his work one function consistently complicates the other in ways that problematise both the readers interpretation of the character's nature and the ethical dimensions of Faulkner's use of intellectual disability.

Halliwell has suggested that this awkward marriage is somewhat typical of American literature:

A more useful distinction for determining the ends to which the idiot figure has been put in American writing is between Romanticism and naturalism; but where Romantic writers usually see idiots as symbols of innocence and naturalist writers use them to explore genetic determinism and social malaise, even this opposition is complicated[.]<sup>289</sup>

Yet few writers make both their idiot figure's innocence and their troubling behaviour as prominent, or as difficult to reconcile within their texts as Faulkner

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<sup>288</sup> Goddard, *The Kallikak Family*, p. 12

<sup>289</sup> Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, pp. 135-136



does.<sup>290</sup> In *The Sound and the Fury*, Benjy's innocence is highlighted in a number of ways. Nevertheless, Benjy's narrative reveals an obsessive interest in his sister Caddy foreshadowing the incestuous desires his brother Quentin struggles with in his narrative. Equally, the novel reveals Benjy has been castrated for escaping the yard and chasing neighbouring school girls. Incorporating these suggestions of sexual desire could be seen as the author toying with a remodelled idea of idiot innocence in light of Freud's discussions of childhood. Yet the specific forms they take – incestuous, dangerous, paedophilic, hereditary – when associated with intellectual disability encourage a eugenic reading. Certainly, Faulkner leaves more than enough room in the text for alternative readings of Benjy's behaviour. Yet these hints of sexual immorality generate a sense of biological doubt about Benjy. There is a dissonance between the novel's persistent representation of him as an innocent and his crucial function as an embodiment of hereditarian decline and immorality in the Compson family.

It is this dissonance that is the most consistent characteristic of Faulkner's intellectually disabled figures. To some extent it reflects an author, like Glasgow, working through and at points struggling to contain the multiple meanings associated with intellectual disability. However, particularly in his depictions of poor whites in the 1930s, collapsing the innocent idiot into the dysgenic moron had a regionally specific value. Faulkner was one of a number of writers and thinkers attempting to navigate the socio-economic changes in the South in the period. Faulkner's explorations into the representation of idiocy in *The Sound and the Fury* and the pre-existing associations between the region and feeble-mindedness, perhaps suggested

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<sup>290</sup> Intriguingly, as Halliwell notes, Steinbeck's Lenny is another particularly problematic innocent, inviting speculation, given the fame of the two novels, that this near paradoxical construction of intellectual disability has a distinct critical and popular appeal. Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, pp. 142-149

to him a perfect vehicle through which to examine these tensions. The troubled innocence of Faulkner's intellectually disabled figures allowed them to signify a romanticised sense of a lost past alongside concerns about regional backwardness and a hint of urban, modern danger. The inherent contradictions of these connotations also appealed to Faulkner's modernist aesthetic sensibilities. The idiot figure could suggest but never completely embody or contain any number of the complex and often disingenuous narratives about the South. If when creating Benjy, Faulkner was 'interested in the relationship of the idiot to the world he was in', in his later works he is more interested in using the idiot to represent the world he was in.<sup>291</sup>

### **'Shrewdly Foolish' Monk**

The ways in which Faulkner deployed this dissonant model of intellectual disability in the 1930s can be seen most explicitly in his 1937 short story 'Monk'. Although it is a later work than *Sanctuary*, it offers a useful introduction to key elements of Faulkner's representation of intellectual disability among poor whites in the decade that underpin my discussions of how these elements feature in the longer and more complex novel. The story, recounted by the nephew of lawyer Gavin Stevens, concerns the life of a client of Stevens – Monk Odelthrop, 'a moron, perhaps even a cretin', who is framed and subsequently imprisoned for killing a man.<sup>292</sup> Five years after his imprisonment, the real killer confesses and Stevens obtains a pardon for Monk. Monk declines the pardon. He has become close to Gambrell, the warden of the prison and so wishes to stay. Despite this attachment, Monk kills the warden and is executed for it. Stevens later uncovers that a fellow inmate had apparently taken

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<sup>291</sup> Faulkner, *Faulkner at Nagano*, pp. 103-104

<sup>292</sup> William Faulkner, 'Monk', *Scribners*, May 1937, pp. 16-24 [Further references are given after quotations in the text].

advantage of Monk's disability to persuade him to kill Gambrell.

The narrator, while unnamed in the story is, we can safely presume, Charles Mallison, the nephew who narrates a number of Faulkner's Gavin Stevens stories.<sup>293</sup> Mallison's narration is explicitly subjective adding layers of complexity that render 'Monk' a particularly awkward story to interpret. As Edward Volpe has noted, the story is as much about storytelling as it is about the story itself.<sup>294</sup> The opening paragraph makes this remarkably explicit and hence is worth quoting in its entirety:

I will have to try to tell about Monk. I mean actually try – a deliberate attempt to bridge the inconsistencies in his brief and sordid and unoriginal history, to make something out of it, not only with the nebulous tools of supposition and inference and invention, but to employ those nebulous tools upon the nebulous and inexplicable material which he left behind him. Because it is only in literature that the paradoxical and even mutually negating anecdotes in the history of a human heart can be juxtaposed and annealed by art into verisimilitude and credibility.  
[16]

As Volpe suggests, this emphasis on making something credible and coherent from the paradoxical and nebulous describes Faulkner's own approach to storytelling, not only in 'Monk' but throughout his career.<sup>295</sup> Yet it is no accident that this almost postmodern exegesis on narrative appears at the beginning of a story about an intellectually disabled figure. As Taylor Hagood has argued, Faulkner's use of idiot figures shows an author persistently pointing to the role of narrative in the construction of intellectual disability. Hagood suggests that Faulkner, by drawing attention to the extent to which these characters are, as Hagood describes it 'characterised', invites the reader to contemplate how narrative and characterisation function in the real world to determine the lives of intellectually disabled people who

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<sup>293</sup> Faulkner collected these, including 'Monk', in *Knight's Gambit* (1949)

<sup>294</sup> Edward Volpe, *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner: The Short Stories* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), pp. 222-224

<sup>295</sup> Volpe, *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner*, p. 222

cannot necessarily narrate their own experiences.<sup>296</sup> He proposes that Faulkner seeks to liberate his intellectually disabled characters – and by association those they are intended to represent – from the power of others' narratives about them, even the author's own.

Hagood's argument is generally persuasive, yet his reading does not sit easily with the same author's incorporation of eugenic signifiers into his representation of intellectual disability. To some extent Faulkner's narrative experimentation and ambiguity raises questions about the validity of eugenic science, recalling Roberts's use of Stiggins in *My Heart and My Flesh*. However, the author's recurring use of eugenic motifs in his representation of intellectual disability, particularly when seen amongst poor whites suggests a writer who did not entirely wish to denaturalise, let alone disavow, existing narratives about intellectual disability. As much as Faulkner destabilises or makes apparent the narrative process in his representations of intellectual disability, he also relies heavily upon the narratives attached to intellectual disability to make meaning within his texts. Indeed at times, as in the story discussed here, the destabilising process allows the author to incorporate seemingly incompatible signifiers at the same time. In short, Faulkner's works do as much to perpetuate and contribute to dominant discourses about intellectual disability as they do to unsettle them. Thus, although Hagood is right to note in his examination of Faulkner's intellectually disabled characters that the author is 'keen to expose the processes of narrating', as he does so explicitly in the introductory paragraph of 'Monk', we should also be attentive to what the writer 'makes out of' these processes and, in particular, what he seeks to make 'credible'.

In 'Monk', the initial paragraph's invocation of 'mutually negating

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<sup>296</sup> Hagood, *Faulkner, Writer of Disability*, pp. 127-128

anecdotes' has special salience for Faulkner's stories about intellectual disability and his use of eugenics. Monk is the archetypal troubled innocent; the story is filled with contrasting and conflicting suggestions of innocence and hereditarian danger. The story's opening also invites us to be wary of the narrator's role with his self-confessed use of 'supposition and inference' further complicating the tension between the story's emphasis on innocence and dysgenic inheritance. It is very powerfully brought to the reader's attention that Monk's life history is open to interpretation and that the narrator (and by implication, at a further step removed, the author) provides but one possible reading. This toying with the role of the narrator is typical of the author who only a year earlier had experimented a great deal with the function of the storyteller in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). The uncertainty helps to produce the troubled innocence I describe within the story and certainly complicates any reading of Monk as a definitively dysgenic character. Still, there is a persistent eugenic-like reasoning to the narrator's story which proposes, if not a truth, then a story which makes a eugenic reading credible, to return to the narrator's initial words again.

The influence of eugenic thinking about feeble-mindedness on Faulkner's work is rarely more obvious than in his depiction of Monk. The narrator's use of the specifically eugenic creation 'moron' to describe the character is notable, being the only time Faulkner uses the word and, given the extent to which Faulkner deployed the terminology of intellectual disability, it is fair to assume he knew its implications of hereditary lack and hidden deviance. The following suggestion that Monk is 'perhaps even a cretin', is equally intriguing. Cretinism, or as it is now called congenital hypothyroidism, is an impairment caused by iodine deficiency which was once prominent in many parts of the United States including Appalachia. Once thought to be an untreatable, permanent intellectual disability, by the 1920s across

America iodine was added to salt to prevent hypothyroidism.<sup>297</sup> As Mick Gidley has noted, Faulkner was likely to have been familiar with hypothyroidism from Louis Berman's work *The Glands Regulating Personality* bought for him by his friend Phil Stone.<sup>298</sup> In that work, Berman specifically discusses the recent changes in the understanding of the aetiology of cretinism so it is also fair to assume Faulkner was aware of it. Despite providing this evidence of environmental causation, Berman's book (which is odd even by the standards of 1920s pseudoscience) folds the production of the thyroid hormone back into ideas about eugenics and racial science thereby reestablishing cretinism as a hereditary trait.<sup>299</sup> Berman even suggested threateningly that 'internal glandular analysis may become legally compulsory for those about to mate before the end of the present century'.<sup>300</sup> We cannot be sure to what extent Faulkner drew upon Berman in describing Monk as 'perhaps even a cretin'. Nevertheless, the paradoxes within Berman's discussions of cretinism may well have appealed to the author. Likewise placing a 'type' of intellectual disability that was increasingly understood as environmentally determined and treatable alongside the 'moron' – the archetypal eugenicist model of inherited intellectual disability – in his description of Monk is typical of Faulkner's aesthetic. Even the narrator's typology invites 'inference and supposition'.

Though the story is set in Mississippi, the association of cretinism with the Appalachians and the rural and mountainous South can also perhaps be seen in the narrator's use of the word. Certainly the history he provides of Monk is full of

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<sup>297</sup> Angela Leung, Lewis Braverman and Elizabeth Pearce, 'History of US Iodine Fortification and Supplementation', *Nutrients*, 4:11 (2012), 1740–1746  
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3509517/> [accessed 12/07/2015]

<sup>298</sup> Mick Gidley, 'Another Psychologist, a Physiologist and William Faulkner', *Ariel*, 2:4 (1971), 78–86

<sup>299</sup> Louis Berman, *The Glands Regulating Personality: A Study of the Glands of Internal Secretion in Relation to the Types of Human Nature*, (New York: MacMillan, 1921), pp. 53–59

<sup>300</sup> Berman, *The Glands Regulating Personality*, p. 283

regional eugenic symbolism, recalling the histories of mountain idiocy in Glasgow's *Vein of Iron*. Monk 'emerges' from

The pine hill country in the eastern part of our county: a country impenetrable and almost uncultivated and populated by a clannish people who owed allegiance to no one and no thing and whom outsiders never saw until a few years back when good roads and automobiles penetrated the green fastnesses where the denizens with their corrupt Scotch-Irish names intermarried and made whiskey and shot at all strangers from behind log barns and snake fences. [16]

The imagery recalls that of a eugenic family story with its emphasis on isolation, intermarriage, violence, alcohol and crime. The word 'clannish' both ties to the Scotch-Irish ancestry generating a premodern sense to the people and recalls the frequent eugenicist use of the words 'tribe' or 'clan' to bind a group of individuals into an alien and alienated family of sorts or even, with the suggestion of intermarriage, an actual family.<sup>301</sup> The 'corrupt' names hint, too, at a corrupted and degenerate heredity (and is perhaps also a Faulknerian pun on the eugenic family studies themselves which tended to invent corrupt sounding names for the families they studied).<sup>302</sup> The 'pine hill country' also recalls eugenic family histories. One of the most well known of these dubs the group of people it examines 'The Pineys' while another calls them 'The Hill-Folk'.<sup>303</sup>

This classically dysgenic imagery is merged with Monk's rumoured ancestry. He is first seen as an infant in the house of an old woman who lives as a hermit 'even among those solitary people' with a loaded shotgun by the door. Her son – 'too much even for that country' – had run away after committing a murder, returning ten years later with a woman only to flee again some months before the infant Monk is first seen [16]. The woman represents a different kind of danger. She is 'deadly, too, but

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<sup>301</sup> For a discussion of how eugenicists created these families or tribes see Rafter, Introduction to *White Trash*, pp. 18-19

<sup>302</sup> Watson reflects on the influence of eugenicist naming strategies on Faulkner in 'Genealogies', p. 26

<sup>303</sup> Rafter, Introduction to *White Trash*, pp. 26-27

as a snake is deadly, in a different way from their almost conventional ritual of warning and then powder'. She is also, in key respects, distinctly urban, with 'bright, metallic, city hair' and a 'hard, blonde, city face' [16]. The sense of urban violence that is without 'warning' but also more devious and snake-like and the emphasis on her blonde looks suggests a noirish femme fatale as does the description of her as 'cold', 'sullen' and 'inscrutable'. In positing this more violent, unknowable, city figure as the mother of a 'moron', Faulkner perhaps draws on the eugenic archetype of the 'defective delinquent', a type of criminal feeble-mindedness popular in criminology in the early part of the century. As Nicole Rafter has shown, the 'defective delinquent' was still being discussed in the 1930s, particularly by popular eugenicist Earnest Hooton.<sup>304</sup> Certainly introducing this modern violence to Monk's possible ancestry is intriguing as it suggests a genetic cocktail of mountain, rural idiocy and urban crime and degeneration. The distinction John Fincastle appears to wrestle with between the mountain half-wit and the urban moron in Glasgow's *Vein of Iron* is collapsed in this proposed ancestry for Monk. This history of a 'deadly' mother, an isolated and possibly violent grandmother, and a murderous father, the latter two seen as extraordinary by a community whose own depiction already resembles that of eugenic test subjects, suggests that the murderous Monk could be a third generation of moron.

As discussed in Chapter Three, a third generation was, according to eugenicists and subsequently federal law, evidence of hereditary lack. Watson has suggested that Faulkner's genealogies repeatedly feature three generations of figures who display possibly dysgenic traits and the Odelthrops stand as a further

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<sup>304</sup> Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals*, pp.149-166; pp. 210-211



example.<sup>305</sup> As shown in the discussion of Glasgow's work, Faulkner was not the only southern modernist to draw on this notion. The narrator's account of Monk's homeland and ancestry resembles Abigail's discussion of three generations of mountain idiots in *Vein of Iron*, published only a year earlier. Strikingly, Mallison comes to a similar conclusion as the Fincastle's servant, suggesting in a somewhat detached musing at the beginning of the history that Monk 'should never have lived' [16]. This expression of eugenic desire is unusual in the text: it adds a note of certainty to a life history which is, as the introduction suggests, particularly self-aware of itself as supposition. The dysgenic ancestry limned for the intellectually disabled Monk is continually troubled by the narrator who openly states the account is based on 'half-rumoured information' and we can never be entirely sure if he belongs to the 'clannish people' or even the Odelthrop family or not. The narrator states twice that nobody knows if Monk was 'brought there or born there' [16]. Given this extensive attempt to disrupt the eugenic narrative, it seems odd then that the narrator is so certain in his belief that Monk should not have been born. Indeed the assertion seems odd given the whole narrative appears on the surface to be about Monk's innocence and the injustice of his eventual execution for murdering Gambrell. I argue that the narrator's eugenic desire shows that, despite his epistemological vacillating he believes and intends the reader to believe that there is, at the very least, a kernel of truth to the hereditarian background he reports. Furthermore, as I show later in this chapter, the implications of this history are important to the story's wider intention which is to criticise a changing South. Monk's dysgenic history functions as a means by which to insert biological doubt about the region's poor whites and by implication its nouveau riche into the story. As

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<sup>305</sup> Watson, 'Genealogies', p. 38; pp.48-50

a story in which an innocent intellectually disabled figure is persuaded to commit murder, the story bears comparison to Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. Yet if that novel is, as Halliwell suggests, a 'complicitous critique' of discourses of degeneration and bad breeding then, in drawing on similar discourses, 'Monk' is more complicit than it is critique.<sup>306</sup>

This is not to suggest that Monk is an unsympathetic figure. Faulkner constructs Monk's disability in a way which frequently engenders sympathy. Indeed the word 'sympathetic' appears a number of times in the narrator's description of him. Like Stevie in *The Secret Agent*, his intellectual disability makes him vulnerable to the machinations of others. Monk cannot defend himself when he is framed for the initial murder in the story, he cannot remember where it happened or even who the victim is. In fact, even though he is innocent, he confesses to the crime 'affirming' and 'reiterating' his guilt [16]. Equally, he does not comprehend the consequences of his supposed actions: he has 'no conception of death' and does not understand the 'current of retribution' that follows a murder [18]. By drawing attention to these aspects of Monk's disability, the narrator suggests to the reader that Monk is not only innocent of the crime of which he is accused, but also innocent in a more profound and wide-ranging sense. When Monk commits the second murder and is seen doing so by fifty other prisoners, it is this latter sense of innocence that fuels Gavin Stevens's suspicion that Monk has been coerced into committing the crime. He tells his nephew 'they didn't hang the man who murdered Gambrell. They just crucified the pistol' [21]. Despite his crime, Monk becomes an innocent again in Stevens's formulation, with his use of 'crucified' turning the already religiously named Monk into a Christ-like martyr.

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<sup>306</sup> Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, p. 101

Stevens eventually uncovers the mystery of Gambrell's murder, adding to the sense of sympathy for Monk. On the gallows Monk makes an oblique speech in which he states "'I have sinned against God and man and now I have done paid it out with my suffering...And now I am going out into the free world, and farm'" [20]. This out of character pronouncement creates a mystery for reader and Gavin Stevens. Stevens, attending a parole hearing, three years after Monk's death hears Terrell, a prisoner, speak on behalf of himself and his fellow inmates, finishing his speech with a word-for-word reprise of Monk's final words. Manipulating his position to gain access to Terrell, Stevens pretends he has power over his parole and exchanges an illusory vote on Terrell's freedom for the truth of Gambrell's murder. Terrell admits he persuaded Monk to kill the warden by telling him an agrarian narrative in which 'pore ignorant country folks' like them are being kept from their God given role 'to live outdoors in the free world and farm' by men like the warden [24]. Monk, friends with the warden, knows where he keeps his pistol and, buying into Terrell's narrative, steals it and kills him. Stevens, powerless to actually affect Terrell's parole, threatens him that if he is found guilty of another crime, he will use the story against him.

For Jay Watson, the sympathy the narrative generates for Monk is the story's main purpose. Watson sees the story as revealing the role of narrative in excluding or including individuals from society. Incapable of narrating events himself, Monk – in the attempts to frame him and in the attempts to write his history – is, Watson suggests, a victim of 'narrative tyranny'. Illustrating his lack of ability to tell his own story, when Monk is accused of the first murder he 'trie[s] to make a speech' [16] but cannot account for himself.<sup>307</sup> After he has killed the warden he again struggles to

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<sup>307</sup> A failure of self-expression is highlighted in many of Faulkner's intellectually disabled figures and

articulate his motivation when Stevens asks him. Watson suggests these failed attempts at articulation reflect Monk's attempts to join the community equating the ability to 'tell' with participation in communal life. Finally, the only story he is able to tell is the one he has been told himself by Terrell – a narrative of community that proves to be nothing more than a trick and the cause of his demise. Watson notes there is an irony in this as the telling ultimately leads to the uncovering of the truth. He argues that Stevens and Mallison use their limited power to advocate and narrate for Monk and right the miscarriage of justice suffered by the story's innocent and sympathetic eponymous character.<sup>308</sup>

There is much to admire in Watson's reading of the story and his argument tallies to a large extent with Taylor Hagood's. For Watson, Monk's desire to participate in the community of narrative-makers in the story indicates that Monk is 'one of us'.<sup>309</sup> However, to read Faulkner's representation of intellectual disability in 'Monk' this way is perhaps too sympathetic to author and to character. Much of the story's eugenic imagery suggests that Monk is not 'one of us' at all. Despite the story's emphasis on Monk's 'innocence' (which, though it invites sympathy, is itself a marker of difference) there is also much within the text that suggests he is an 'other' with an associated air of danger. In Faulkner's representation his intellectual lack combines with a probable family history of violence and murder to make Monk a

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often at the precise points when their intentions – and as a corollary their innocence – could be questioned. For example, Benjy is famously 'trying to say' during the approach to the neighbourhood girls that leads to his castration. It is unclear what exactly he is 'trying to say', creating a gap, which while open to reader interpretation, remains unknowable. Intriguingly, the narrator in Monk is also 'trying to tell', perhaps capturing not only the failings of narrative itself, but also reflecting the extent to which the protagonist's motivations are unknowable. For more discussion of the implications for the reader of Benjy's inability 'to say' from see: Ted Roggenbuck, "'The way he looked said Hush': Benjy's Mental Atrophy in *The Sound and the Fury*", *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Cultures*, 58:3/4 (2005), 581–93; Noel Polk, 'Trying Not to Say: A Primer on the Language of *The Sound and the Fury*', in *New Essays on The Sound and the Fury*, ed. by Noel Polk (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 139-176

<sup>308</sup> Jay Watson, *Forensic Fictions: The Lawyer Figure in Faulkner* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993), pp. 148-157

<sup>309</sup> Watson, *Forensic Fictions*, p. 155

murderer, albeit one whose understanding of his crime is limited. Faulkner draws so heavily on the archetypal feeble-minded, dangerous, poor white in his depiction of Monk, that any discussion of the author's narrative enfranchising of his intellectually disabled character must be tempered.

Even the limits of Monk's understanding are questionable. In parroting Terrell's words on the gallows, Monk does reveal his susceptibility to manipulation, however, he also suggests a motivation for his acts, that the prospect of being able to go 'out into the free world and farm' is worth killing the warden for. Before this confession, Stevens visits Monk to discover his motivation. Monk makes a cryptic speech in which he shows 'not bafflement nor indecision, just seeking, groping' [20], offering a further example in Faulkner's work of an intellectually disabled character 'trying to say' when their innocence is tested. This speech revolves around Monk's understanding of what is 'right'. He declares that he knows his past as a moonshiner 'wasn't right'. He also discusses a past need for guidance on knowing the right thing to do, reflecting on a previous inability to get off the train without being told he was at the right stop. He then affirms when Stevens asks him that he 'know[s] right now' [20]. Stevens pushes for more information but Monk expands no further until his comments on the gallows. As we shall see, Monk's use of the word 'right' here is open to interpretation. Yet if we take it to mean morally correct then Monk perhaps proposes here a process of emerging ratiocination. Though previously unable to be sure what is right or wrong, he now claims to be able to do just that. This suggests a change from his earlier confession to a crime he didn't commit to an active choice to do something he thought was right. Monk's 'groping' attempts at articulation make it still more difficult to resolve questions about the nature or extent of his innocence. While Gavin Stevens may feel Monk was only 'the pistol', this is but one more

interpretation in the confused meaning-making process that surrounds Monk.

Equally, though readers are certainly encouraged to follow the narrator and Stevens's belief in Monk's innocence, they are also nudged to believe in his dysgenic background. These threads are, I argue, impossible to disentangle with certainty and suggest the author's explorations with narrative are not as liberating for the intellectually disabled character as Watson claims.

The ambiguity of Monk's motivations and his background is reflected in the narrative's descriptions of him. He is described as having an 'ugly, shrewdly foolish, innocent face whose features rather than expression must have gained him his nickname' [18]. It is an oddly contradictory description, suggesting in part that Monk cannot be read by his face as much as he cannot be read through the narrative.

Monk's shrewdness would seem to undermine invocations of his foolishness and his innocence and vice versa. Equally, the narrator reads Monk's 'features' as monkish but not his 'expression', suggesting a conflict between an external appearance that is in some way holy or at least ecclesiastical, and an internal motivation that is unknown or not described by the narrator. This description is reiterated a mere paragraph later when we are told he has a 'shrewd, foolish face, that face at once cunning and dreamy, pasty even beneath the sunburn with that curious quality of imperfect connection between sense and ratiocination' [18]. The notion that Monk is 'cunning' pushes his shrewdness into a more malevolent space, one which recalls his snake-like mother. Indeed, his very inscrutability recalls his mother's description.

Monk's face, I suggest, captures the complex biological heritage the narrative sketches for him. The difficulty of reading and narrating this complexity is hinted at by the 'curious quality of imperfect connection between sense and ratiocination', a phrase which while it appears to describe Monk's intellectual disability, also

describes the process of interpreting the character himself – what is sensed from Monk cannot easily be rationalised.

The narrative's repeated emphasis on Monk as 'shrewd' has an important role in the text: it links him to the Governor. The Governor is, even more than Terrel, the story's amoral figure. He gives out pardons to increase the number of people who will vote for him and, despite Stevens's outlining of Terrel's role in the warden's murder, is prepared to allow Terrel to go free as part of his electioneering. The Governor is described as 'shrewd' three times in the narrative which – when read alongside Monk's 'shrewdness' – produces a level of repetition within the space of a short story that cannot easily be dismissed as coincidental. Similarly, the Governor is twice described as 'inscrutable', recalling descriptions of Monk and his mother. The narrator invites us to link the two characters and his introduction of the Governor offers a hint as to why:

At that time we had for Governor a man without ancestry and with little more divulged background than Monk had; a politician a shrewd man who (some of us feared, Uncle Gavin and others about the state) would go far if he lived. [21]

The Governor is, like Monk, a white man 'without ancestry' whose background is murky, suggesting he is from poor white stock. The 'shrewdness' described in him and Monk begins in this context to seem like an inherent class trait and a dangerous one in the hands of the Governor, who creates 'fear' amongst Stevens and 'others'.

In my reading, the troubled dysgenic history provided for Monk exists, in part at least, to provide surreptitiously a similar background for the Governor. The Governor represents an emergent class of nouveau riche in the South. Watson links him to Eustace Graham, the corrupt lawyer in *Sanctuary*. I believe he is best seen as a kind of Snopes, Faulkner's archetypal aspirant poor white family at the heart of an

emerging capitalism in the South.<sup>310</sup> In his 1954 essay 'Mississippi', Faulkner used his literary Snopes family to describe the emergent class of white:

[B]y the beginning of the twentieth century Snopeses were everywhere: not only behind the counters of grubby little side-street stores patronised mostly by Negroes, but behind the presidents' desks of banks and the directors' tables of wholesale grocery corporations and in the deaconries of Baptist churches, buying up the decayed Georgian houses and chopping them into apartments and on their deathbeds decreeing annexes and baptismal fonts to the churches as mementoes to themselves or maybe out of simple terror.<sup>311</sup>

Faulkner's description here shows his negative attitude to many of the changes which had occurred across the South since the latter part of the nineteenth century and the emergence of the New South. Written in the aftermath of the *Brown v Board of Education* decision declaring segregated schools unconstitutional, the essay's reflections on the demise of the Old South cannot be detached from the author's concerns about changing race relations in the region. Like the writings found in *I'll Take My Stand* in the 1930s, Faulkner's 1950s essay is as much, if not more, about rising racial anxieties as it is about economic change, although the two phenomenon were inextricably linked. Certainly during the middle third of the twentieth century, the old agricultural and semi-feudal South steadily became more like the rest of the country and embraced or at least succumbed to the major features of capitalist modernity.<sup>312</sup> As Jack Kirby has discussed, the process was patchy and uneven: modernisation, urbanisation and mechanisation came to different parts of the South at different rates. The 1930s and 1940s, he argues, saw the most dramatic period of change. However, many of the transitions to new ways of living, labouring, and

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<sup>310</sup> Watson, *Forensic Fictions*, p. 156

<sup>311</sup> William Faulkner, 'Mississippi', *Encounter*, October 1954, 3-16

<sup>312</sup> For discussions of the emergence of the New South and latterly the modern South, see William Cooper and Thomas Terrill, *The American South: A History, Volume II* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), pp. 452-486; pp. 639-676 ; Jack Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960*, (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987)



leisure had begun much earlier.<sup>313</sup> Though his novels are not always as negative, Faulkner's discussion of the Snopeses in his essay reflects his suspicions about these changes and those pursuing them. The Snopeses – in charge of stores, banks and corporations – represent the emerging cash nexus and with, their destruction of old property, a disdain for the mores of the Old South.

The Governor in 'Monk' is a part of this class. He is cynical and concerned with his own self-interest. He positions himself as a representative of a new South, outlining a class distinction between himself and Stevens who is he says, 'a gentleman...trying to bring the notions of 1860 into the politics of the nineteen hundreds' [22]. He is perhaps something of a mocking representation of the progressive Mississippi Governor of the early thirties Theodore Bilbo, who in his essay, Faulkner suggests was empowered, like earlier Governor James Vardaman, by the support of the 'Snopes who were destroying that little which did remain'.<sup>314</sup> The narrator's fear that the Governor might 'go far' certainly hints at Bilbo who had, when the story was written, progressed from Governor to become senator for the state. There is also a certain irony in representing a Bilbo-like figure as linked to intellectual disability and troubled genetic inheritance. Bilbo was a supporter of eugenics, suggesting in the inaugural address for his second term in 1928 that the feeble-minded were a social and economic burden to the state and signing a sterilisation bill into law months later.<sup>315</sup> In viewing the Governor as a Snopes, I am not only associating him with that Faulknerian family's amoral search for power, but also with the family's dysgenic lineage and history of intellectual disability. Watson shows how the Snopes family – corrupt, 'shiftless' and forever multiplying – can be read as dysgenic in their initial presence in Faulkner's canon and the appearance of

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<sup>313</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, pp. 118-119

<sup>314</sup> Faulkner, 'Mississippi', p. 4

<sup>315</sup> Edward Larson, *Sex, Race and Science*, pp. 104-118

the idiot figure Ike Snopes in *The Hamlet* adds to this reading.

By linking the Governor to Monk through textual echoing and suggestions of a similarly unknowable ancestry, Faulkner makes him Snopesian in heritage as well as action. The Governor's comparison of himself to the 'gentleman' Stevens, reflects a pride in his apparent class victory. However, when discussing his poor white origins, he offers, unknowingly, a further genealogical connection with Monk. He tells Stevens his grandfather would have 'hated you and your kind' and 'might very probably have shot your horse from under you someday from behind a fence – for a principle' [22]. Shooting from behind fences is exactly what Monk's 'clannish people' are described as doing and the Governor's grandfather starts to resemble Monk's shotgun toting grandmother. The '–' is a typical piece of playful and meaningful punctuation by the author. The Governor says his grandfather would shoot Stevens 'for a principle', yet that dash suggests there is a hesitation and an addition. The Governor himself is not convinced his grandfather would need any excuse at all to shoot, much like the clannish people who 'shot at all strangers' [16]. The Governor's pause for thought in turn leads back to Monk who seems to 'try to say' that there is a motivation or a 'principle' for shooting the warden, and also to Stevens who searches for a reason for the murderous act. Yet the possibility remains that Monk may simply be acting upon an inherited violent nature. The Governor's '–' is a textual representation of the whole story's air of doubt about the biological inclinations of poor whites. Reading the characters through a eugenic lens, Monk's murder of Gambrell becomes intertwined with the Governor's corruption. The two embody troubling poor whites whose danger may be inherent. Intriguingly, the narrator's introduction to the two characters hints at similar solutions to the danger. As discussed above the narrator expresses a eugenic desire for Monk never to have

lived. This desire is echoed in his discussion of the Governor who 'some of us feared...would go far if he lived' [21]. This odd reflection on the Governor's mortality is unsupported by anything else in the text – he is not described as ageing or ill, for example. It is, at the very least, indicative of a desire on the part of 'us' – the narrator, Stevens and the old, elite class of whites to which they, like the author, belong – for the Governor to die. Moreover, it can even be construed as a veiled threat. The answer the narrator implies to this dangerous class of whites is death.

I should be clear here that these muted desires belong to the narrator and those he describes. Despite finding them troubling, particularly in light of Faulkner's own class position as part of the old white gentry, I certainly do not wish to suggest that Faulkner wanted poor whites or those deemed feeble-minded, or even Snopes types (whom he did despise) to die. Instead, in this passage, there is a fear that the rise of men like the Governor is, like the onset of profound economic and with it social, including racial change in the region, inevitable and probably irreversible. The eugenic-like reflections on death as a, perhaps the only, solution to these irresistible and, apparently, highly regrettable, developments are indicative of the influence of hereditarian beliefs about poor southern whites in society at the time. Yet they also suggest – like, as we shall see, Horace Benbow's eugenic wonderings in *Sanctuary* – more a feeling of powerlessness or desperation than a sincere wish for euthanasia. The story reflects a failure to find an alternative to the region's changes beyond an Agrarian-like desire for elements of the Old South.

Edward Volpe has highlighted the story's Agrarian elements, limning Monk's longing to restore a connection with the soil lost in the modern world. This is clearly represented in his belief in Terrel's rhetoric and his gallows reiteration of it. Monk's desire to 'go out into the free world and farm' appears to represent his realisation of

what he is 'meant' to do. In this light, his reflection on what is 'right' during his pre-execution conversation with Stevens comes to mean something beyond morality. When Monk states 'I knowed that making and selling whiskey wasn't right', we can interpret this as not only a moral comment but also a statement regarding purpose. As Kirby has noted a number of mountain dwelling people became itinerant workers in the 1920s and 1930s because their rural, agricultural lives at home no longer existed due to industrialisation of those regions.<sup>316</sup> For those that stayed, like other poor, rural southerners in the midst of the Great Depression, Kirby argues, the illegal production of alcohol became a way to supplement income and to cope with the challenges of poverty.<sup>317</sup> Monk seems to personify this kind of dislocated southerner. Whiskey making is 'all that he had ever learned to do' [18]. Abandoned by his mother and father, and eventually left alone through the death of his grandmother and the local moonshiner who took him in and taught him his trade, Monk travels to urban Jefferson for work. Although he finds work at a filling station, Monk's subsequent framing and imprisonment position him as a primitive figure who embodies the kind of 'innocence' Faulkner suggested motivated his writing in *The Sound and the Fury*. He is unable to cope with the modern, urban world and its justice system. Equally, Monk's encounter with modernity sets him on the path to his eventual execution.

The narrative posits Monk as a man out of his time. He comes from a 'country impenetrable and uncultivated' and is only able to reach Jefferson following the arrival of 'good roads and automobiles'. This too reflects the patchy development Kirby describes in the 1930s South, with highland regions late to develop roads. Even his real name links him to the Old South. At his first trial he declares his name

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<sup>316</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, p. 48

<sup>317</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, p. 205

is not Monk but Stonewall Jackson Odelthorp. The narrator reflects that he can never have heard of the Civil War general but suggests that the name was 'inherited from the earth, the soil, transmitted to him through a self-pariahed people – something of bitter pride and indomitable defeat of a soil and the men and women who trod upon it and slept within it' [19]. The name is all that is left to Monk from a connection with the soil that has been 'defeated'. In hearing Terrel's argument that 'pore, ignorant country folk' were made by God to 'live outdoors in the free world and farm', Monk seems to realise what is 'right' and fitting for a poor white like himself. His role in the warden's killing is intrinsically linked to the emergence of modernity and the disappearance of the agrarian life.

Thus Faulkner's troubled innocent comes to embody an awkward relationship between poor whites and modernity. Monk is an innocent primitive who is overwhelmed by modern corruption and limited opportunity and whose desire for a return to the soil becomes so overwhelming that he is vulnerable and eventually manipulated into killing a sympathetic ally. Yet the dysgenic background the narrator sketches for the character also positions him as a dangerous primitive whose heritage suggests a propensity to violence. Through the eugenic logic the text suggests, there is even a sense that it is only Monk's intellectual disability that prevents his corrupt nature from becoming like that of other poor whites like Terrel or even the Governor. There is a confusing and sometimes contradictory blend of signifiers associated with Monk's intellectual disability which reveals the author's uncertainty about the nature of poor whites in the South. Monk's intellectual disability functions to identify poor whites as both victims of socio-economic change and responsible for it.

Monk's function as both innocent and degenerate are perhaps a consequence

of how the author wishes to represent Stevens as much as Monk himself. Each role also serves to highlight the superiority of Stevens and by association the narrator. Proving Monk's innocence and attempting to extract some kind of justice for him, makes Stevens the real hero of the story. He personifies the older gentlemanly way of doing things in the region as opposed to the demagogic Governor. When he seeks to persuade the Governor to not release Terrel, the Governor tells Stevens he must convince not him but the parole board, a 'puppet' board which he controls. Stevens looks at them and sees 'battalions and battalions of factory-made colonels' [24]. Being 'factory made' they are not real colonels, only modern facsimiles, numerous in number – the battalions and battalions again recalling the ever multiplying Snopses. Moreover, these colonels are not, by implication, real southern 'gentlemen' and leaders like Stevens himself. Equally, while Monk's innocence facilitates the heroic role the lawyer is given, the intellectually disabled figure's troublesome heritage functions, as I have shown, to distinguish Stevens, not only morally but also biologically, from the Governor. Watson is right to note that Stevens and the narrator advocate for Monk, but ultimately the narrative itself advocates not for the intellectually disabled poor white but for Stevens and the narrator. It is this valorisation of Stevens that makes this a different kind of story from *The Secret Agent*. Conrad's innocent idiot is both symbol and victim of a world of 'idiots' and 'imbeciles', a world which nobody is outside of or above. Faulkner's story features an elite figure who is above the world of corruption and biological lack and so the story, to some extent, becomes one in which not only biological determinism but biological hierarchies are endorsed.

Ultimately, the story's representation of Monk might be seen as something of a shotgun marriage between Agrarian values and eugenic beliefs. As discussed in

previous chapters, these contemporaneous ideologies were not easily married, particularly in their attitudes towards poor whites. Faulkner's attempt to make the two cohere, or at least co-exist, sees him proposing that it is the arrival of modernity that makes non-elite whites especially dangerous to the region. The Agrarian ideology in the story suggests that had Monk been able to 'go out into the free world and farm' then the story's tragic events may never have occurred. On the surface, the story proposes a world that is too cruel for an intellectually disabled individual to survive. However, by blending innocence and threat in his construction of Monk's disability, Faulkner places the flaw in the individual as much as he does in the world. Monk's own confused heritage even hints at the incompatibility of the rural poor white and the modern world, with his rural father and urban mother producing a moron. Though the narrative's uncertainty about Monk does draw attention to the ways in which intellectually disabled individuals are, as Hagood argues, characterised, it also depends upon eugenic logic and biological determinism to critique the modern South. Monk, as both victim and signifier of all that is wrong about that South, seems to be a figure, like Stiggins in Roberts's *My Heart and My Flesh*, who could not easily be accommodated in any South, Agrarian or otherwise. Monk's death, like Roberts's textual erasure of Stiggins from her novel's pastoral conclusion, seems inevitable – the story's ideological clashes producing a figure who it cannot let live.

### **Modern Cats and Primitive Dogs in *Sanctuary***

Like Monk, Tommy, the intellectually disabled character in Faulkner's 1932 novel *Sanctuary*, meets an early end. He is shot by Popeye, the novel's villain, a third of the way through the text. Tragedy is the norm for Faulkner's intellectually disabled

characters – Tommy is one of a number who die in the author's works.<sup>318</sup> His death is typical, too, of *Sanctuary*, a particularly violent and sensationalist novel that the author famously claimed in an introduction to an early reprint was a 'cheap idea' written for money.<sup>319</sup> The focus of the novel is the rape of a young woman Temple Drake by Popeye at an old plantation house which has become home to a bootlegging gang operated by Lee Goodwin. Stuck at the house overnight because of her boyfriend Gowan Stevens drunkenly crashing his car, Temple is threatened by the men of the gang. The next morning, Goodwin continues to threaten Temple and Tommy, a 'halfwit' who works with the gang, attempts to protect her while she hides in a barn. However, Popeye, already in the barn, kills Tommy and rapes Temple. He then kidnaps her, taking her to a brothel in Memphis where it emerges he is impotent and he watches her have sex with another man, Red, a local criminal. Meanwhile, Goodwin is falsely arrested for Tommy's murder. His common law wife Ruby recruits Horace Benbow, a local lawyer who visits the Goodwin house earlier in the novel to defend him but Goodwin, afraid of Popeye refuses to incriminate him. As the trial gets underway, a bloodied corncob used by Popeye to rape Temple is shown to the jury and she surprisingly appears with her father, a local judge, and lies claiming Goodwin is guilty. The jury convict Goodwin; he is lynched after the trial and seemingly raped with a corn cob himself. Popeye, on his way to see his mother in Florida, is arrested for a crime he didn't commit and hanged, whilst Temple travels to Paris with her father.

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<sup>318</sup> Donald Mahon in *Soldier's Pay* and Lonnie Grinnup in 'Hand Upon the Waters' also die. Other intellectually disabled characters, while not meeting early deaths, have particularly tragic roles. Benjy does not die in the course of *The Sound and the Fury*, but Faulkner's Compson Appendix, added to the novel in 1945, declares he was committed to the State Asylum in Jackson in 1933. He is also, of course, sterilised by means of castration before the novel begins. Furthermore, Jim Bond in *Absalom, Absalom!* is left howling in the ruins of his ancestral home and Ike in *The Hamlet* is made to eat his bovine lover.

<sup>319</sup> William Faulkner, introduction to *Sanctuary*, pp. 321-322



Louis Palmer has suggested that *Sanctuary* is a kind of 'white trash southern gothic'.<sup>320</sup> I am loathe to use the southern gothic as a rubric through which to examine the representation of disability in the South. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, rubrics such as the gothic are limited in the ways in which they can inform our understanding of disability, tending to collapse everything to metaphor. However, the horror elements of *Sanctuary* are unavoidable and disability, which is particularly prominent in the novel, is frequently used to support these elements. The Goodwin house, where the early scenes of the novel are set, is home not only to Tommy but also to Pap, a deaf and blind old man. Both characters are used to generate a sense of otherness and foreboding. The house is also frequented by the psychopathic Popeye, whose physical alterity is emphasised throughout the scenes building to the rape. As I discuss, these descriptions hint at the novel's later revelations that Popeye has an unclear disability which is both physical and intellectual and may be linked to his impotence. As Hagood notes the novel presents an early example of the 'rural house of horrors inhabited by disabled people' and there are a number of similarities between this novel and later horror representations of the South.<sup>321</sup>

Palmer argues that by deploying gothic tropes in *Sanctuary*, Faulkner generates fear around a kind of 'tainted whiteness' reflecting anxieties about the region's poor whites.<sup>322</sup> As he rightly notes, and I discuss in further detail in this

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<sup>320</sup> Louis Palmer, 'Bourgeois Blues: Class, Whiteness and the Southern Gothic in Early Faulkner and Caldwell', *The Faulkner Journal*, 19:1/2 (2007), 120-139

<sup>321</sup> Hagood cites *Deliverance* as an example of later horror set in the South which resembles *Sanctuary*. I would add *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, a film in which the rural house of horrors features a murderous disabled trio of idiot, psychopath and old blind man suggesting an indirect if not direct link to Faulkner's novel. The similarities between *Sanctuary* and these later texts in the representation of dangerous, disabled or 'abnormal' poor whites, shows the persistence of eugenic imagery about the South beyond the eugenic era. Hagood, p. 148.

<sup>322</sup> Palmer, 'Bourgeois Blues', pp. 120-129

chapter, the novel incorporates eugenic imagery as part of this othering process.<sup>323</sup> The disabled figures at the Goodwin house generate a fear that is in part dependant on eugenicist notions of regional biological lack and 'backwardness'. Indeed, as Watson notes, the descriptions of the criminal Goodwin gang closely resemble, like Monk's back story, a eugenic family study. He argues convincingly that they can be seen as a 'tribe'.<sup>324</sup> Published only three years after *the Sound and the Fury*, the disabled figures of *Sanctuary* are much flatter representations than Benjy. They more closely resemble the typical literary use of disability David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder describe in *Narrative Prosthesis* in which 'stories rely upon the potency of disability as a symbolic figure [but] rarely take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions'.<sup>325</sup>

Despite functioning in part to further the novel's gothic elements, Tommy is a more complex character than a simple horror or eugenic archetype. As a troubled innocent, Tommy is predominantly a sympathetic character and unlike like the idiot or psychopath poor white types that stalked later southern horror films and novels. Tommy, like Monk, lacks the ability to cope with the world which Faulkner saw as integral to innocence and to idiocy. This lack ultimately renders Tommy a victim, a role which links him to Temple and, in his analysis of *Sanctuary*, Hagood suggests the two characters are paired. Hagood argues that when she is threatened and unable to escape, Temple becomes disabled by her environment linking her to the disabled Tommy:

That Tommy is attracted to Temple just as the other men are is not surprising – at least one rule remains the same in this world, that of heterosexual male lust. But again he seems to respond to her on another level too, perhaps a subconscious one for him, or (if it seems too much of a stretch to assign this intentionality to the character himself) perhaps on

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<sup>323</sup> Palmer, 'Bourgeois Blues', p. 127

<sup>324</sup> Watson, *Genealogies*, pp. 48-49

<sup>325</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, p. 48

a level of manipulation by the author. That is to say that, even in this land of oppositional abnormality, Tommy himself is more abnormal still and so recognizes Temple's disablement. Or, again, to present this in terms of novelistic construction, Faulkner pairs the two characters – ugly, impeded Tommy with beautiful articulate Temple (both names start with T) – to drive home the point of Temple's new status of abnormality and disablement.<sup>326</sup>

Hagood's suggestion that it is a sense of solidarity in disability that leads him to defend Temple is persuasive and the pairing of the two characters is fruitful.

Considering Temple as disabled by her environment and unable to cope invites, in turn, a rereading of Tommy's own disability as situational. Hagood goes on to link Popeye to Pap (again noting both names begin similarly) in an excellent extended analysis.<sup>327</sup>

However, I wish to explore a different connection – one between Tommy and Popeye – that does not contradict Hagood's pairings but instead operates alongside them.<sup>328</sup> To understand this connection we must first view Faulkner's abstruse depiction of Popeye's disability within its historical context. The novel's conclusion sees Faulkner offer a family history of Popeye which is deeply informed by eugenics and ideas about degeneracy. Popeye is conceived out of wedlock and though the couple marry after his conception, the father abandons mother and child shortly afterwards. Unmarried sex, as I have shown in earlier chapters, could in itself, according to early twentieth century precepts, be read as a sign of degeneracy. So too could the couple's socio-economic status – Popeye's mother is a department store worker and his father an itinerant strike-breaker whose wandering and lack of commitment to new wife and child recalls contemporary concerns about 'shiftlessness' and poor whites. He also leaves the mother with a 'disease' which

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<sup>326</sup> Hagood, *Faulkner, Writer of Disability*, pp. 137-138

<sup>327</sup> Hagood, *Faulkner, Writer of Disability*, pp. 129-148

<sup>328</sup> There are other characters in *Sanctuary* who seem paired on the basis of disability, for example, Horace Benbow at the end of the novel, becomes deaf and oblivious to the horrors of a lynching in front of him, recalling Pap's inability to hear or respond to Temple's screams in the rape scene..

ultimately renders her an 'invalid'. This is presumably syphilis, itself linked to feeble-mindedness in the South, and further evidence of the father's promiscuity.<sup>329</sup> Adding to these hints of hereditary lack, Popeye's maternal grandmother is an arsonist who eventually sets fire to and dies in the boarding house she owns and in which the family live, believing that the tenants are trying to 'get' the infant. Popeye himself is born disabled, we are told that '[a]t first they thought he was blind. Then they found that he was not blind, though he did not learn to walk and talk until he was about four years old' [304]. Hagood uses this temporary assumption about Popeye's blindness to link him to Pap, but this section of the novel also links him to Tommy.<sup>330</sup> Watson notes that Popeye's family history is another iteration of Faulkner's almost formulaic depiction of three generations of dysgenic traits and points out that this description of developmental disability renders Popeye 'precisely the sort of child who in the early decades of the twentieth century would have been diagnosed as feeble-minded'.<sup>331</sup> It is this possibility of a feeble-minded Popeye that invites a connection with Tommy.

Faulkner incorporates further contemporary ideas about intellectual disability into the description of Popeye's childhood. Discussing Popeye's condition a doctor states that "'he will never be a man, properly speaking. With care, he may live some time longer. But he will never be any older than he is now'" [308]. The medical declaration that Popeye 'will never be a man', recalls Popeye's adult impotence for the reader, who has seen what the child will become. However, the medical profession's early classification of Popeye as a permanent child actually more closely resembles the application of 'mental ages' in IQ tests of the period.<sup>332</sup> Similarly, the

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<sup>329</sup> Edward Larson, *Sex, Race and Science*, p. 88

<sup>330</sup> Hagood, *Faulkner, Writer of Disability*, p. 141

<sup>331</sup> Watson, *Genealogies*, pp. 51-52

<sup>332</sup> Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, pp. 149-150

doctor's limited expectations about Popeye's life span, reflect the real life expectancy of intellectually disabled people in the 1930s.<sup>333</sup> Though the passage offers an anticipation of Popeye's impotence, Faulkner incorporates it as irony into a discussion about feeble-mindedness

This ironic reminder of Popeye's impotence in the doctor's discussion further associates his disability with his crimes for the reader. The chapter on Popeye's childhood immediately follows the revelation of Popeye's use of a corncob in the rape, a physical object that ties his impotence to his violence. This association has already been hinted at before the trial. While Temple and Popeye are in Memphis she attacks his masculinity making reference to his impotence and Red's role as his 'replacement'. She tells him "'You're not even a man!'" and states that "'couldn't fool [her] but once'", a reference to the as yet unrevealed corncob which generates dramatic tension for the court scene. Popeye responds to Temple's verbal attack with a violent attempt to silence her, putting his hand over her mouth and digging into her flesh with his nails. This physical response reflects the extent to which the novel suggests Popeye's impotence and the threat it poses to his masculinity are psychologically linked to his violence. The rape, Tommy's murder, the kidnapping and Popeye's later murder of Red have therefore all been associated with his impotence by the time the reader reaches the final chapter on Popeye's history. The similarity of the doctor's claim that Popeye 'will never be a man' to Temple's accusations about Popeye's manliness offers a kind of authorial hint that there is a connection between Popeye's feeble-mindedness and his impotence. Accordingly, this connection suggests that the character's malevolence is not only psychological

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<sup>333</sup> In the 1930s, the average age of death for an intellectually disabled person was 19 years old. A.M.W. Coppel, 'People With Intellectual Disability: What Do We Know About Adulthood and Life Expectancy?', *Developmental Disabilities Research Reviews*, 18:6-16, (2013), 6-16 <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ddrr.1123/pdf>> [accessed 21/07/15]

but linked to a kind of intellectual disability.

This suggestion becomes much stronger as the final chapter progresses and we learn more of Popeye's childhood. By the time he is five, Popeye is institutionalised under a doctor's care. He is allowed limited freedom, being permitted to visit and stay with his mother's neighbour. She has a party for him but he runs away and cuts up two birds with scissors. He later does the same to a kitten. The text has already shown the adult Popeye's cruelty towards animals – Tommy recounts Popeye shooting his dog – and so by revealing similar behaviour in his childhood, the novel suggests Popeye's violence is inherent. Popeye is released from the institution apparently 'cured', nevertheless, the reader is acutely aware that Popeye's adult life shows nothing has changed. Watson suggests that 'in keeping with period anxieties about the feeble-minded, Popeye turns out to be a moral delinquent'.<sup>334</sup> Watson's application of 'moral delinquency' to Popeye is a useful – albeit not entirely satisfactory – way to understand the character as having a kind of intellectual disability. Though I see Popeye's characterisation, as does Watson, as being influenced by eugenic concepts of feeble-mindedness, the character sits outside any modern understanding of intellectual disability. Equally, labels applied elsewhere in the fiction or other sources discussed in this thesis do not seem entirely apposite. Popeye cannot easily be defined as an 'idiot' figure. He might be read as a 'moron', yet Faulkner's application of that description to Monk suggests Popeye's extraordinary level of cruelty and violence would be outwith the author's own framework for that term. Rafter has highlighted the great deal of fluidity in the first four decades of the twentieth century as scientists and criminologists sought to evidence that criminality was an inherent flaw within some human bodies. Mental

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<sup>334</sup> Watson, *Genealogies*, p. 51

illness as well as feeble-mindedness was part of these debates and Rafter maps a tangled journey from the 'moral imbecile' to the psychopath.<sup>335</sup>

Ultimately, the dysgenic heritage Faulkner creates for Popeye is itself inchoate; like Monk's, though not to the same extent, it is open to interpretation. Faulkner himself does not apply any label to the character and it is perhaps best to follow suit as much as possible and see Popeye as reflecting the scientific flux and tensions that Rafter notes. The character of Popeye sees Faulkner exploring and playing with old and emerging ideas about heredity, disability, intelligence and morality without aligning himself or his character with any single or simple understanding of how they worked or interacted. As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the author had, in a very different way, already begun to explore the complexities and contradictions surrounding these ideas of human nature and potential through Benjy in *The Sound and The Fury* – a preoccupation which links Popeye, albeit uncomfortably, to Faulkner's other idiot figures and links him, more pertinently, to Tommy.

Through Tommy and Popeye, Faulkner offers two different kinds of feeble-mindedness. Popeye's, as discussed above, is vague, hereditary, criminal and malevolent but is also fundamentally urban and modern. Popeye is the product of an urban environment and the novel's descriptions of him persistently link him to modernity. Tommy's feeble-mindedness is much more of the typical poor white idiot sort seen throughout this thesis; it is less ambiguous, primitive and mostly innocent. He is the product of a rural environment that is more specifically linked to the South and in particular the South's past. As he does in *Monk*, Faulkner explores the relationship between the changing South, poor whites and intellectual disability.

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<sup>335</sup> Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals*

Modernity produces a new kind of dangerous, inherently lacking, poor white or, more specifically, offers an environment in which an inherent moral/intellectual lack can take on more dangerous forms. This relationship between intellectual disability and modernity wasn't Faulkner's invention. Eugenacists argued that the emergence of modern consumer-driven free market capitalism and its requirements and demands had uncovered a pre-existing but hitherto unappreciated incidence of national intellectual lack.<sup>336</sup> In the South, as elsewhere in the nation, government leaders influenced by eugenics fretted over how new complex urban worlds would inevitably corrupt the intellectually disabled.<sup>337</sup> As Noll has discussed, eugenacists wrestled with the meaning of urbanisation and rurality in their construction of feeble-mindedness. As he points out, despite the concerns over urbanisation, the majority of eugenic family studies were based on rural groups.<sup>338</sup> Faulkner draws on these contradictory notions in eugenic thinking to offer two different versions of feeble-mindedness and subsequently uses them to explore the region's changes in the period. Tommy's troubled innocence is integral to the novel's representation of this change. There are subtle signs that he is not entirely harmless and, in some important ways, like Popeye and vice versa. This suggests a similarity between the two kinds of feeble-mindedness making Tommy a possible primitive or non-modern version of Popeye. Equally, Tommy's 'innocence', like Monk's, functions to reveal the threat of modernity, which is a prominent yet little discussed aspect of the novel. In this light, the death of the rural Tommy at the hands of the modern Popeye marks a changing South and reveals the author's concern about the role of poor whites in it.

The initial descriptions of the two characters certainly work to position one as

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<sup>336</sup> Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, 'Out of the Ashes of Eugenics: Diagnostic Regimes in the United States and the Making of a Disability Minority', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 36:1 (2002), 79-103

<sup>337</sup> Noll, *Feeble-minded in Our Midst*, p. 38

<sup>338</sup> Noll, *Feeble-minded in Our Midst*, pp. 38-39



modern and urban and the other as rural and primitive. Popeye – who has come to the rural Goodwin place to take moonshine back to the city – finds Horace Benbow in the woodland surrounding the house and, suspicious of him, takes him there at gun point. When Benbow first sees Popeye, while drinking from a spring, the description indicates the latter is ill-suited, both in terms of dress and attitude, to the woods:

When he rose up he saw among them the shattered reflection of Popeye's straw hat, though he had heard no sound. He saw, facing him across the spring, a man of under size, his hands in his coat pockets, a cigarette slanted from his chin. His suit was black, with a tight, high-waisted coat. His trousers were rolled once and caked with mud above mud caked shoes. His face had a queer, bloodless color, as though seen by electric light; against the sunny silence, in his slanted straw hat and his slightly akimbo arms, he had that vicious, depthless quality of stamped tin. [4]

Popeye has had to adjust his urban attire for the muddy terrain, and his pale skin also suggests someone who has spent little time outdoors. The straw hat is an unusual addition to Popeye's outfit; while the slanted cigarette and black, tight suit seem to suggest a figure out of gangster movies like the previous year's *The Public Enemy*, the rural hat does not.<sup>339</sup> It is significant that this rural image is the novel's first sign of Popeye, albeit one that it is seen in 'shattered reflection', suggesting it is not indicative of the whole. Without wishing to make too much out of this piece of clothing, its incongruous presence, seems to offer a nod, much like his presence on the Goodwin place at all, that there are still vestiges – shattered reflections perhaps – of the rural poor southern white in Popeye<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> As, respectively, a rural poor white and a slick gangster, Tommy and Popeye also represent the two primary stereotypical participants in the illegal liquor trade in the American imaginary. See Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, pp. 205-214 for a discussion of the archetypes and the reality of bootlegging in the South.

<sup>340</sup> Richard Godden has suggested Faulkner's description of another item of clothing – Flem Snopes's tie in *The Hamlet* – is read by his community as a reminder of his agricultural roots. Godden's reading of Flem, usually seen as a fundamentally modern figure, for his 'residues' – the textual signs of his poor white ancestry – a reading which has influenced my interpretation of Popeye in this chapter. Richard Godden, *William Faulkner: An Economy of Complex Words* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 11-41

Nevertheless, in this natural environment, there is something unnatural about Popeye. His face resembles 'electric light' which not only suggests the indoors but modernity, particularly as parts of the rural South were still without electricity in the early thirties.<sup>341</sup> The 'quality of stamped tin' links Popeye to a manufacturing process and is similar to the Governor's 'factory made colonels' in 'Monk'. This unnatural quality parallels references to Popeye's body which is 'under size' and also 'doll-like' offering a physical indicator of the various ways the character has not progressed to manhood suggested later in the novel. The novel frequently, as here, blends Popeye's physical alterity with his modernity. Benbow notes that Popeye is urban in their conversation. A bird calls and he suggests that Popeye would not know the species and that he would only know birds if they were "'singing in a cage in a hotel lounges or cost four dollars on a plate'" [5]. Benbow's words here not only refer to Popeye's lack of rural knowledge but also point to the cruelty of urban life and, by association, of Popeye. Birds in the city – where everything is valued by utility – are only for capturing or eating. Benbow's words adumbrate how Popeye, as a kidnapper and a murderer, will take this rapaciousness to another level.<sup>342</sup> The conversation is recalled as they walk through the woods. The modern Popeye is again ill at ease, he is 'all angles, like a modernist lampstand' and clings onto Benbow when an owl flies past. He 'crouch[es] against [Benbow] clawing at his pocket and hissing through his teeth like a cat' [7]. Popeye's fear here is atypical of his role as the villain, yet it indicates not only his modernity but also his essentially childlike nature, gripping Benbow as if he were a parent. That Popeye is 'like a cat' also evokes his animalistic

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<sup>341</sup> Cooper and Terrill, *The American South: A History, Volume II*, p. 640

<sup>342</sup> Indeed, as I have shown, but the reader is unaware of at this point, Popeye has been killing birds since childhood.

nature; the threat he poses to birds is instinctive and brutal.<sup>343</sup> Though he might be modern, Popeye is childlike and animalistic. He is, like the archetypal urban moron, not civilised.<sup>344</sup> Despite momentary flashes of weakness, he is highly dangerous, a fact the novel ironically reminds us of when Popeye arrives at the house and tells Ruby, Goodwin's common law wife, that "'There's a bird out front'" [9]. This is a reference to Horace which, given the imagery that has gone before, sees Popeye reassert the power dynamic between the two. The intellectual Horace may be, like birds, alien and intimidating to Popeye but equally he has captured him like the bird in the hotel lounge.

The Goodwin house the two arrive at is isolated, poor and rural making it a seemingly typical site in which to place dysgenic disabled figures such as Tommy and Pap. Its dislocation and disrepair certainly echoes eugenic family studies and Watson is correct that the occupants can be seen as a kind of 'tribe'. Nevertheless, the house is different from the shacks typically seen in such studies. Faulkner borrows from eugenic imagery but he reworks it to create a regionally distinctive environment. While much of the language describing the house emphasises primitivism, the introduction to it is specifically southern and linked to an old form of civilisation that suggests atavism:

The house was a gutted ruin rising gaunt and stark out of a grove of unpruned cedar trees. It was a landmark, known as the Old Frenchman place, built before the Civil War; a plantation house set in the middle of a tract of land; of cotton fields and gardens and lawns long since gone back to jungle, which the people of the neighborhood had been pulling down piecemeal for fifty years or digging with sporadic optimism for the gold which the builder was reputed to have buried somewhere about the place when Grant came through the country on his Vicksburg campaign. [8]

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<sup>343</sup> Animal comparisons with the feeble-minded are pervasive throughout the eugenic era. Intriguingly, Berman, when writing about 'mental defectives', compared the 'explosive discharges from them which appear as overpowering impulses or uncontrollable conduct' to '[t]he wave of fear a cat experiences upon seeing a dog'. Berman, *The Glands in Personality*, p. 200

<sup>344</sup> See Stubblefield, 'Tainted Whiteness' for a discussion of how eugenics sought to exclude those deemed to lack 'civilisation building skills'.

The name the Old Frenchman place links the building to a European sense of civilisation and culture, while as a ruined antebellum plantation house, it is also a symbol of southern defeat and decline. The absence of cotton fields is similarly emblematic of this defeat, recalling an antebellum past when the plantation house would have been sustained by the work of slaves. More importantly, the absence of the South's traditional cash crop in the 1930s suggests the demise of traditional labour roles for many poor southerners. In a later passage, the novel even more explicitly notes the decline of an agricultural economic base, at least for this class of rural southerners (the 1920s had seen a depression in southern agriculture and the end of the decade and beginning of the 1930s saw the consolidation and modernisation of large agribusinesses among major landholders, later to be expedited by New Deal farm policy).<sup>345</sup> We are told 'no-where was any sign of husbandry – plow or tool; in no direction was a planted field in sight' [41]. In the absence of 'husbandry', the 'people of the neighbourhood' are now destructive, tearing down the house. They dig for gold signifying a Monk-like agrarian desire to return to the rich soil of the past but their 'sporadic optimism' also suggests this fool's gold.<sup>346</sup> Foolish and destructive, they seem as atavistic as the 'lawns long since gone back to jungle'.<sup>347</sup>

The Goodwin gang's illegal production of alcohol in the house – like Monk's work as a moonshiner – further emphasises the decline of the South and its rural

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<sup>345</sup> For a discussion of the changes in southern agriculture at this time see: Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), pp. 39-90

<sup>346</sup> In *The Hamlet*, a later novel in which intellectual disability and poverty are closely intertwined, Faulkner depicts a particularly foolish group of nineteenth century poor whites digging for gold at the Old Frenchman's Place.

<sup>347</sup> In addition to echoing the language of eugenic family studies, we might also see Conrad's influence here in this passage. Conrad, who had famously written of the jungle in *Heart of Darkness*, used similar imagery at times in *The Secret Agent* to describe parts of London. As in this section of *Sanctuary*, the atavistic descriptions of the environment mirror those of the inhabitants.

poor. If, as Watson suggests, the Goodwins are a tribe, then they are specifically tied by their environment to a failed and degenerating South, a degeneration symbolised by the disabilities of the two members of the tribe who most clearly belong there – the blind and deaf Pap and the 'feeb' Tommy. Tommy is also shown drinking a number of times, including from secret stashes which he hides from Popeye who, unable to drink himself because of his disability, reacts with fury at anyone else doing so. His alcohol consumption and his description as a 'feeb' suggest a degenerating class of poor white now exists in place of an antebellum southern civilisation. The novel shows little affinity for the modern urban South, which is corrupt and criminal, like the kind of feeble-mindedness it produces in Popeye, but equally, there is an almost Mencken-like concern about the rural South in *Sanctuary* – it is atavistic and naive. Tellingly, it is also increasingly – as the bootlegging enterprise the Goodwin gang undertakes suggests – becoming implicated, in a criminal way, in the cash nexus of the New South. Benbow has wandered to the rural South to escape both his wife and an increasingly modernising Delta region, which is 'flat and rich and foul, so that the very winds seem to engender money out of it'. He seeks a 'hill to lie on', yet he does not find an idyllic, rural sanctuary but rather a degenerate version of the old South in the Old Frenchman Place [15].

If the place is a 'jungle' then Tommy is the animal that lives in it. In a recent article, Stephanie Larson has noted the frequency with which Faulkner uses bestial language to describe his intellectually disabled characters and the extent to which it dehumanises them. Even allowing for this authorial tendency, the number and range of animals to which Tommy is compared is extraordinary. At different points, he is a bear, a dog, a mule, a cat, a badger and a raccoon.<sup>348</sup> This imagery serves a number

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<sup>348</sup> Stephanie Larson, "'I be Dawg': Intellectual Disability and the Animal Other in the Works of

of purposes throughout the novel, but primarily it highlights Tommy as a primitive and rural figure. Though Popeye is also described as a cat – like the straw hat a residual sign of primitivism – his modernity is usually presented in direct contrast to the rural characteristics assigned to Tommy. As Watson suggests, Tommy looks like a stereotypical hillbilly.<sup>349</sup> He is '...in overalls. He was barefoot...He had a sunburned thatch of hair, matted and foul. He had pale furious eyes, a short soft beard like dirty gold in color' [10]. Tommy's 'sunburned' hair suggests he is used to a life led outside unlike Popeye (albeit that the 'thatch of hair' recalls the straw hat). In addition, being 'barefoot' with 'foul' and 'dirty' hair, he seems comfortable and well acquainted with the dirt that Popeye tries to avoid. Tommy later leads Benbow around the grounds of the house and his animal-like body seems equipped for the rural surroundings. He walks on the sand 'like a mule walks in sand, without seeming effort, his bare feet hissing, flicking the sand back in faint spouting gusts from each inward flick of the toes' [20]. Tommy's bare feet in this passage seem not a sign of his poverty but of a lack of need for shoes in his pre-modern environment inviting a contrast with the 'mud caked shoes' of the ill-equipped Popeye. On this walk, Benbow notes the place he saw the owl with Popeye. Tommy guesses that Popeye would have been frightened by it and guffaws, his laughter at Popeye's expense emphasising the novel's oppositional pairing of the two characters as figures of modernity and primitivism.

This primitivism in part enables the novel's representation of Tommy as an 'innocent'. He is described as innocent a number of times in the novel and reacts to the world, particularly anything modern, with awe. When, for example, Gowan crashes the car that brings Temple to the house, he stares at Temple – a young

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William Faulkner', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 34:4 (2014), [n.p.] <<http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3999/3794>>

<sup>349</sup> Watson, *Genealogies*, p. 48

modern woman – with 'his mouth open in innocent astonishment' [39]. Similarly, as he accompanies the couple back to the Goodwin place he is curious about Temple's slippers, asking to look at them and exclaiming "'[d]urn my hide'" as though he has never seen women's shoes before (Ruby, notably wears Goodwin's battered old shoes). Tommy's use of the word 'hide' here is a further animal reference that reiterates his primitive nature, a sense furthered during this exchange when the narrative returns again to describing Tommy's hair which 'gre[w] innocent and straw-like' [41]. The novel binds the character's innocence and primitivism to his intellectual lack. This relationship is illustrated in a scene in which he listens to Gowan talking to Van (another of the Goodwin gang) after the crash:

He squatted against the wall. They were drinking, passing the jug back and forth, talking. With the top of his mind he listened to them, to Van's gross and stupid tales of city life with rapt interest, guffawing now and then, drinking in his turn. [67]

The passage echoes the thinking of eugenicists regarding the complexity of modern city life and how it might overwhelm the feeble-minded. Tommy has to use 'the top of his mind' indicating that following the conversation is difficult for him. And even though Van's tales are 'gross and stupid' Tommy is fascinated and intrigued, showing 'rapt interest' and trying to affect understanding by sporadic laughter. The rural and atavistic Tommy finds even the most stupid elements of city life difficult to process, adding to the characterisation of him as a naive innocent.

Tommy's primitive innocence helps to bring about his death – he is unable to recognise that Popeye is a danger to him. He describes Popeye shooting his dog to Benbow telling him that the dog was old and that "'it wouldn't hurt a flea if it hit could'", an account that alerts the reader and Benbow to Popeye's cruelty and brutality [19]. However, the intellectually disabled Tommy is unable to make this

judgement despite telling the story himself. He tells a disbelieving Benbow that Popeye is "'all right...just a little curious...I be dog if he ain't a case, now.'" [21]. The irony here is that Tommy will 'be dog', he is destined to be killed by the same pistol as the animal was. As Larson notes, the animal Tommy is most often compared to is a dog, frequently in that oft repeated refrain 'I'll be dawg'. She points out that Tommy, throughout the novel but particularly when standing guard over Temple, mirrors the loyal and trusting behaviour of a faithful dog. It is a nature that contributes to his demise.<sup>350</sup> When Popeye emerges in the barn, Tommy does not realise Popeye, like Goodwin, is attempting to assault Temple. Trusting to the last and unable to process events, he continues to look out for Goodwin as Popeye shoots him.

However, like nearly all of Faulkner's idiot figures, Tommy's 'innocence' is not entirely unproblematic. Like Hagood, most critics note in passing Tommy's attraction to Temple. It is an attraction that can be seen in those initial encounters when Tommy stares at her in astonishment and is intrigued by her footwear. Faulkner's reiteration of Tommy's innocence and his role in defending Temple make this attraction seem harmless. Despite this appearance, I argue that in Tommy's response to Temple we can see some similarity to Popeye's reactions. This is not to suggest Tommy is a potential rapist or to overly complicate the harmlessness central to his character; instead, it is to highlight that Tommy's actions towards Temple indicate in him an incipient rural precursor of the different, more modern, dangerous feeble-mindedness we see in Popeye. The overlap between the two kinds of feeble-mindedness in the novel explore similar themes as in 'Monk', that the changing nature of southern social and economic structures has exposed and intensified a once

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<sup>350</sup> Stephanie Larson, 'I be Dawg', [n.p.]



dormant, or at least largely suppressed, inherent threat in the region's poor whites.

The evening that Temple arrives at The Old Frenchman Place, Tommy is aware of the threat the gang pose to her and appears concerned. He curses the men to himself and asks Goodwin why they are 'pesterin" her. He brings her a plate of food and Van mocks him suggesting, mockingly to the others he is doing it to "'get his'". Tommy, does not understand the sexual reference and asks "'Git my whut?'", again suggesting innocence [66]. Despite this concern and lack of awareness, however, it is Tommy who first seeks out Temple when, fearful about what might happen to her, she goes to hide and sleep in a room in the house. When his mind turns to her he feels 'his whole body writhing in discomfort'. Tommy's body 'writhes' a number of times when he thinks of Temple, suggesting a blend of trauma and sexual desire. Indicative of this divide, Tommy leaves his drinking companions and tells himself that he will 'go down to the barn and stay there,' as if he wishes simply to avoid any potential violence towards Temple. Tommy does not follow his own suggestion. He does not go to the barn, instead he notices a light in the room Temple is staying in and looks in through the window. This is followed by nearly three pages of the novel devoted to what Tommy sees through the window. The narrative shows, in a very slow, descriptive and sexualised manner, Temple getting undressed. The voyeuristic nature of the passage suggests the viewpoint is Tommy's, even the length of the description itself suggests he has stayed out of pleasure far more than concern. He again curses the other men's desires towards Temple, saying "'durn them fellers'" but it is him not them who is watching her and once again 'writh[ing] slowly' [70]. By the time Temple has removed her clothing and gets into bed, Tommy's mind is solely focused on watching her and not on the threat posed to her. The voices of the other men are 'still; he had completely forgotten them' [71]. He is only torn away from his

staring by the sound of the other men fighting.

This scene heightens the sense of threat towards Temple in the novel, even the apparently innocent ally Tommy is a peeping 'Tom'. However, it also functions to links him to the impotent Popeye who will later watch Temple in bed with other men. The two characters associated with feeble-mindedness share this voyeuristic trait. Tommy's sexual naivety, as seen in his uncomprehending response to Van's suggestion that he is trying to 'get his', becomes a kind of impotence linked to his intellectual disability. Much like the possible negative interpretation of Benjy's 'trying to say' to the neighbourhood girls, Tommy is unable to act upon his sexual desire and so watches 'writhing'. Tommy, I suggest, experiences two kinds of impotence in the novel – an inability to act upon or even understand his own sexual desire but also an inability to prevent others from violently attacking Temple. Faulkner layers both of these forms into Tommy's bodily response to events.

When Tommy watches Temple at the window, we have, of course, not yet seen Popeye watching Temple with Red. However, the novel explicitly binds the two together as voyeurs soon after Tommy first watches Temple in a scene that is depicted twice. The gang members have placed the drunkenly unconscious Gowan in bed with Temple. Van threatens to touch the half-naked Temple before Popeye gropes her. After they leave, Ruby hides in the room watching over Temple, worried about the threat of Van and Popeye and particularly her own partner Goodwin. As she hides in the darkness, Tommy and Popeye come in:

Tommy's pale eyes began to glow faintly, like those of a cat. The woman could see them in the darkness when he crept into the room after Popeye, and while Popeye stood over the bed where Temple lay. They glowed suddenly out of the darkness at her, then they went away and she could hear him breathing beside her; again they glowed up at her with a quality furious and questioning and sad and went away again and he crept behind Popeye from the room. [77]

Tommy does not challenge Popeye or draw attention to him, instead he becomes just like him, returning to the room surreptitiously to be near the woman he has just been peeping at through the window. Here Tommy is no longer a faithful 'dawg' but instead is like a 'cat', an animal only otherwise linked in the novel to Popeye and his movements, often 'bear like', are now more subtle, but also more predatory. He creeps out of the room moving more like Popeye who is described much later in the novel as having 'cat feet' [210]. The attention the passage pays to eyes underlines the extent to which this is a scene about looking.<sup>351</sup> Tommy's eyes both 'questioning and sad' once again capture that dualistic impotence but are also 'furious', a more Popeye-like quality. His looking, like that of the man he follows and effectively mirrors in this scene, has a predatory and aggressive quality to it.

After both characters leave the room, Tommy waits in the hallway between the room Temple is in and the kitchen Popeye goes to. Here though he 'writhe[s] again in shocked indecision' he seems to be guarding Temple once more, wandering back and forth between the room and the kitchen monitoring Popeye's movements. The novel generates an uncertainty here as to whether or not Tommy's following of Popeye is actually an attempt to protect Temple. It is an uncertainty that ultimately appears to belong to the character more than the narrative. The character's 'indecision' reflects his lack of understanding of his own actions and motivations. The bedroom scene is repeated only a few pages later, in one of the few pieces of temporal fracturing in the novel. This time it is shown more clearly from Ruby's point of view and Tommy's motivations seem much more directed to watching Temple than guarding her from Popeye: 'the woman could then feel him, squatting beside her; she knew that he too was looking toward the bed over which Popeye

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<sup>351</sup> In his comparison between Popeye and the blind Pap, Hagood discusses the extent to which eyes are a recurring theme in the novel, suggesting that Popeye's name indicates he is Pap+eye: Hagood, *Faulkner, Writer of Disability*, pp. 129-143

stood in the darkness, upon which Temple and Gowan lay' [80]. While Tommy seems uncertain of his motivations, Ruby's account does not. Tommy and Popeye overlap in Ruby's account such that she becomes unable to distinguish between them: 'she remained motionless beside the door, with Tommy squatting his face towards the invisible bed. Then she smelled brilliantine again. Or rather she felt Tommy move from beside her, without a sound' [80]. The brilliantine is Popeye's yet it is associated with Tommy's movements. In feeling Tommy move, she smells Popeye indicating the extent to which the two, both gazing at the bed, entering and leaving the room at the same time, are indistinguishable.

By repeating the scene, Faulkner firmly associates Tommy's voyeurism with that of Popeye. The scenes in which he watches Temple are crucial to building the sense of threat that culminates in the rape. Tommy does not at any point directly threaten Temple like the other men in the Goodwin gang do and he too is eventually a victim of Popeye. Nevertheless, the ways in which Tommy functions to generate fear in the novel recall the dread inspired by Popeye, the more modern feeble-minded character. Both dysgenic figures experience the same desire but it is the modern Popeye who becomes more of a tangible and indeed realised threat. This similarity is recalled when Temple argues with Popeye in Memphis and suggests he is "'not even a man'". Recounting how Popeye watches her with Red she says:

You, a man, a bold bad man, when you can't even – When you had to bring a real man in to – And you hanging over the bed, moaning and slobbering like a – You couldn't fool me but once, could you? No wonder I bled. [231]

Here, as it does in 'Monk', the punctuation in the novel invites interpretation. The first two dashes conceal words for sex. Temple's refusal to use a word may reflect both her trauma and class status, but may also indicate the author's reluctance to use

an unpublishable profanity in a novel written with high sales in mind. Yet the third one, while it may also conceal a profanity, hints at something different. The 'moaning and slobbering' suggests a lack of refinement in Popeye despite his cold, modern exterior, pointing to something primitive and instinctive. It is tempting to read it as the 'moaning and slobbering' of a 'dog', a further link to Tommy and an inversion of Tommy's shifting from dog to cat. However, I would suggest that the link goes beyond that connection. In Faulkner's novels descriptions of moaning and slobbering are overwhelmingly associated with idiots, in particular with the similarly impotent Benjy. While Tommy is one of the few Faulknerian idiots who does not moan and slobber, this unspoken suggestion of idiocy is, I argue, a textual hint towards Popeye's similarity to the novel's idiot figure – the primitive Tommy who also watched Temple in bed. Temple's reluctance to call Popeye an 'idiot' reflects her fear of him but it also maintains the novel's representation of his feeble-mindedness as ambiguous and concealed.<sup>352</sup> Popeye's moaning and slobbering, like his straw hat and his animalistic behaviour, should, I argue, be read as evidence of a kind of ancestral link back to the rural poor white idiot figure. He is in many ways the textual embodiment of the very worst fears of eugenicists about feeble-mindedness, poor whites and modernity – a new kind of southern idiot who will replace (and, in the novel, kill) the traditional rural one.

That Tommy is a dying breed is apparent when the coroner examines his body in Jefferson, a town as one in which old ways of living clash with modernisation. In Jefferson, rural people come to town in wagons and watch the 'fretful hurrying of those in urban shirts'. The town is, however, unmistakably and irreversibly modernising with an emphasis on retail, 'finery' and 'competitive radios

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<sup>352</sup> For a broader discussion of the role of ellipses in the novel and their role in generating ambiguity see John T Matthews, 'The Elliptical Nature of *Sanctuary*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 17:3 (1984), 246-265

and phonographs in the doors of drug- and music-stores' [112]. The country people too are modernising albeit at a slower and modified pace. They are shown wearing 'mail-order scarves' and attempting to look urban 'believing that town dwellers would take them for town dwellers too, not even fooling one another' [111]. In this transitional environment, when people come to look at Tommy's laid out body in an undertaker's parlour, the description of Tommy's rural provenance – which echoes his introduction in the novel – seems even more primitive:

He lay on a wooden table, barefoot, in overalls, the sun-bleached curls on the back of his head matted with dried blood and singed with powder, while the coroner sat over him, trying to ascertain his last name. But none knew it, not even those who had known him for fifteen years about the countryside, nor the merchants who on infrequent Saturdays had seen him in town, barefoot, hatless, with his rapt, empty gaze and his cheek bulged innocently by a peppermint jawbreaker. For all general knowledge he had none. [112-113]

Tommy's visits to town were 'infrequent' and he makes no attempt to modify his dress to fit in with town life as other country people do. Though they know him, his lack of a surname indicates his ancestry has been lost. He belongs to a line of people forgotten even by others in the countryside. Here the novel strongly reasserts his primitivism and his innocence (which is directly mentioned) and he seems to be part of a South that is in the process of being left behind. Tommy's intellectual disability, like Monk's, is multi-functional. At points it is indicative of degeneracy and a signifier of a failing old South; at others, it is a symbol of a lost or dying innocence. It is a particularly bleak construction rendering both characters' deaths unsurprising. Unlike Glasgow, Faulkner does not offer a South which can accommodate or rehabilitate his poor white idiot figures.

Popeye's death is a final act of mirroring. In a form of warped justice, indicative of the failing and corrupt South Faulkner depicts, he is executed for a

crime he does not commit while Goodwin is lynched for Popeye's actual crimes. It is tempting, given the extent to which the novel engages with eugenic thinking, to read both Tommy's and Popeye's deaths (and Goodwin's too) as a kind of textual eugenics. Indeed, as Watson has noted, the text incorporates some extreme Nazi-like eugenic speculation. As Horace Benbow, disgusted with the world he is uncovering thinks of '[Temple], Popeye, the woman, the child, Goodwin, all put into a single chamber, bare, lethal, immediate and profound' [221]. And yet Benbow immediately acknowledges this vision or plan is flawed, envisaging himself in there with them for 'thinking that were the only solution' [221]. This interlude almost appears to be a piece of metatextual commentary on the author's own approach to his poor white characters. If the deaths of Tommy and Popeye are a kind of textual eugenics, then they too are a flawed a solution. As the novel shows, nothing changes or improves with their deaths. Indeed they function in part to highlight more individual and regional failings.

It is perhaps the idea of function that best explains Faulkner's use of intellectual disability and eugenics in his representation of poor southern whites in the 1930s. Eugenic archetypes offered useful vehicles to explore and critique the region. Characters like Tommy, Popeye and even Monk are not fully formed and lack the depth of Benjy precisely because they are meant, primarily, to serve broader symbolic and functional purposes in the works they exist in more than be representations of a 'real' intellectual disability. Faulkner admitted as much in a later conversation stating 'of course, there're not as many idiots in Mississippi as in my—my books probably.'<sup>353</sup> Yet, as that 'probably' hints at, there is a nagging sense of belief in these works and in others that there may be some truth in eugenicists'

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<sup>353</sup> William Faulkner, 'Session with the General Public', University of Virginia, 15 May 1957, *Faulkner at Virginia: An Audio Archive*, Audio Transcript, <[http://faulkner.lib.virginia.edu/display/wfaudio14\\_1#wfaudio14\\_1.10](http://faulkner.lib.virginia.edu/display/wfaudio14_1#wfaudio14_1.10)>, accessed 20 August 2011

beliefs about poor southern whites. Both this incorporation of eugenic thinking and Faulkner's use of intellectual disability as symbol complicate more generous readings of the author's use of intellectually disabled figures. In *The Sound and the Fury* in particular, but also in many of his other works, Faulkner introduced the possibility of an intellectually disabled voice to the text and opened up the construction of intellectual disability. Yet he also was probably, alongside Caldwell, the greatest literary contributor to the remarkably persistent trope of the stereotypical southern idiot, reinforcing and adding to negative perceptions of the region, in particular its poor whites and those deemed intellectually disabled. Moreover, like many of his peers, he showed a deeply ambiguous and sometimes plain contradictory attitude towards eugenics. Faulkner was often dubious about its scientific credibility and critical of its impact yet he was equally often dependent on the pseudoscience for the construction of his characters. These tensions in Faulkner's work produce a great deal of ambiguity both between and within his various representations of intellectual disability, making it difficult to define a Faulknerian idiot. Indeed, the representation of intellectual disability in the writer's work is so varied and diffuse that the very category of 'idiot' is too narrow and inefficient to encapsulate it. Many of Faulkner's southern modernist peers were intrigued and inspired by intellectual disability, but for Faulkner its representational possibilities and symbolic potential were a career long preoccupation and often integral to his depictions of the South. If the most famous of these depictions, *The Sound and the Fury*, did not inaugurate the trend for intellectually disabled characters either in southern modernism, its influence can undoubtedly be seen in later works by his peers and subsequent generations. However, only by viewing that novel within the context of Faulkner's



other representations can we understand how his work, more than that of any other writer, best captures the complex nature of that trend and its legacy.

## Conclusion

In 1937, the same year Faulkner's 'Monk' was published, Georgia became the final southern state to enact a sterilisation law. Ten years after the Supreme Court handed down its decision on the *Buck v Bell* case, its ramifications continued to be felt within the South. The anxieties about poor whites seen in Faulkner's story were shared by those in the Georgia legislature. Concern about the eugenic implications of Georgia's poor whites was the driving force behind the legislation. Similarly, that same year, H.L. Mencken, author of the provocative 'Sahara of the Bozart', returned to the theme of southern degeneration. In his essay 'Utopia by Sterilization,' the South, which ten years earlier he mocked as a threat to itself, was now portrayed as a threat to the nation. Something had to be done about the dysgenic South, Mencken claimed: 'there will be a wholesale degeneration of the American stock, and the average of sense and competence in the whole nation will sink to what it is now in the forlorn valleys of Appalachia'. He recast the region as 'Moronia' – the land of the morons – and suggested a government funded sterilisation program for the region's poor. As he had in his earlier essay, Mencken blended genuine belief with satire, yet his argument was dangerously close to those that underscored policy decisions about how to contain or combat the threat posed by southern degeneracy.<sup>354</sup> If anything, Mencken's eugenic proposals were more generous than those actually carried out in parts of Appalachia. Mencken suggested paying the southern poor to volunteer for sterilisation, while, in the mountains of Virginia, sterilisations were enforced with no cash transactions.

This thesis has shown the extent to which eugenic notions appeared in southern modernist fiction. All the authors discussed in this thesis (and other

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<sup>354</sup> H.L. Mencken, 'Utopia by Sterilisation', *The American Mercury*, August 1937

southern writers not included here) were influenced, in differing ways, by eugenic constructions of 'feeble-mindedness' in their representations of intellectual disability. Indeed, as my readings have illustrated, much of the imagery and ideas deployed by Mencken about the South in 'Utopia by Sterilization' – namely intellectual lack, degeneration, 'bad breeding' – was prevalent in southern writers depictions of their region throughout the 1920s and 1930s. It is difficult to measure the extent of the role played by southern modernists in creating and adding to the perception that the South was 'Moronia'. Recent research by Paul Lombardo about Georgia's sterilisation law is insightful on the influence southern literature could have upon perceptions of intellectual disability amongst the region's poor in particular. Lombardo notes how the work of Erskine Caldwell, the state's most famous writer played a crucial role in the law passing. It is easier to trace the influence of eugenics in Caldwell's work than in that of any other southern modernist. Despite his left-wing politics and insertion of socialist polemics into his work, his representations of the working class poor of the South were, as a number of critics have observed, clearly influenced by the eugenic movement. His physically and intellectually disabled, sexually hyperactive, lazy poor whites in *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre* resemble eugenic caricatures. This is, perhaps unsurprising, Caldwell's father Ira, was interested in the relationship between environment and breeding and had published a family study in *Eugenics* magazine on a family he named, in characteristic eugenic fashion, The Bunglers. Recently, critics have begun to examine the extent to which Ira's Bunglers would provide the inspiration for his son's Lester family in *Tobacco Road* and explore the role of eugenics in the author's fiction.<sup>355</sup> Like his father's research, Erskine Caldwell's novel presents a tension

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<sup>355</sup> See introduction to this thesis for a list of such articles

between environmental and biological explanations for southern poverty which, despite the novel's claim that 'co-operative and corporate farming would have saved them all', seems pessimistic.<sup>356</sup>

In the most intriguing of these recent examinations of Caldwell's relationship to eugenics, Lombardo notes how the author's fiction and a series of newspaper reports for the *New York Times* about deprivation and poverty in Georgia encouraged newspapers in that state to carry out their own investigations into the region's poor. Ira Caldwell assisted with these investigations and though he suggested environmental solutions, he was, like a latter day Richard Dugdale, widely ignored and the *Augusta Chronicle* supported the state adoption of a sterilisation law for the feeble-minded. Lombardo discusses how, in a collection of his journalism, Erskine Caldwell's reflections on the matter mirrored the tensions found in his fiction. Despite believing that for some sterilisation might be necessary, like his father, he argued against the state law and for economic intervention. And yet, as Lombardo's research reveals, the author's work had been crucial in mobilising concern about southern poor whites both regionally and nationally.<sup>357</sup> Lombardo's historiography provides a clear example of how southern modernist fiction influenced perceptions of the region and intellectual disability. Equally, it illustrates how, authors' own views on these matters, in so far as we can discern them, did not always tally with how their fictions were interpreted or the influence they might have on the public and the state.

It also reveals the extent to which, by the late 1930s, concerns about regional intelligence had become overwhelmingly about the poor. The southern poor had always been the most prominent focus of these concerns, yet there had also been in

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<sup>356</sup> Erskine Caldwell, *Tobacco Road* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), p. 63

<sup>357</sup> Lombardo, 'From Better Babies to The Bunglers', pp. 56-63

the 1910s and 1920s an anxiety about the region more generally. This shift is reflected in Mencken's two essays, while 'The Sahara of the Bozart' had questioned the whole South, 'Utopia by Sterilisation' centred on sharecroppers and mountain poor whites. Equally, we might see the change in focus in Faulkner's representations of intellectual disability in the same light. In 1929, his incorporation of eugenic logic and imagery into *The Sound and the Fury* expressed concerns about the heredity of elite whites. Yet, a mere eight years later, in 'Monk', Faulkner depicted elite whites as eugenically pure heroes. The inherently intellectually disabled poor white protagonist are linked by ancestry to an inherently immoral nouveau riche while the white elite defend the innocence of the former and attempt to act as a bulwark against the rise of the latter. Certainly, the trope of the poor southern white idiot crafted in fictions like Faulkner's and Caldwell's has had a long legacy. The imagery of 'Moronia', if not the eugenic rhetoric that inspired it, still has some currency. There are rarely calls to sterilise southern poor whites, but, in cultural products, representations of white poverty in the region continue to incorporate depictions of various forms of intellectual disability. These kind of representations are often intended to be comedic and are more commonly found on television and film than in literature. *The Simpsons'* Cletus the Slack Jawed Yokel is a particularly illustrative example of how the tendency to wrap depictions of intellectual disability into representations of the South, that initially flourished in the modernist fiction of the interwar years, persists.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> More modern 'southern idiots' tend to be represented in a somewhat ironic or knowingly referential manner. They do not explore interconnections between disability and region, or indeed the lived experience of intellectual disability, in the same way or with the same sense of seriousness (and at times anxiety) as the works discussed throughout this thesis. However, eugenic traces do appear more prominently on occasion. For example, in the first series of HBO's television show *True Detective* (2014), the serial killer tracked throughout the series is revealed in the final episode 'Form and Void' to be a poor white southerner having an incestuous relationship with his intellectually disabled half-sister. While the show incorporates a great deal of postmodern referencing to earlier cultural works,

However, as this thesis has shown, the 'half-wits', 'idiots' and 'feebs' of southern modernist literature did not function as mere eugenic archetypes. The same year Georgia passed its eugenic legislation and Faulkner wrote 'Monk', Welty's 'Lily Daw and the Three Ladies' was published, a southern modernist story which expressed very different attitudes towards eugenics, intellectual disability and the South. Although Faulkner's story was not without concerns for the treatment of its 'moron' figure, Welty made her worries about the region's response to those deemed 'feeble-minded' the core subject of her narrative. Equally, while Faulkner went on to create Ike Snopes, in *The Hamlet* in 1940, in many ways the most negative representation of intellectual disability in all of southern modernism, Welty continued her critique of institutionalisation and the southern community's response to intellectual disability into the 1950s and the publication of *The Ponder Heart*. One of the conclusions of this thesis is that, amid the wide range of understandings and characterizations of intellectual disability in evidence among southern modernist writers, Welty's critiques of modern society's attitude towards intellectual disability and her apparent contempt for the institutions founded to deal with it are as typical as the poor white idiot to be found in the work of Faulkner or Caldwell. Indeed, sympathy for the plight of those deemed to be intellectually disabled has proved to be a crucial legacy of this southern modernist project. The sympathy for Boo Radley's home imprisonment expressed in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example, recalls the compassion of Welty's 'Lily Daw' or Porter's 'He'.

It is equally important to note that the concerns about the lived experience of intellectually disabled people in Welty's and Porter's stories resemble the attention Faulkner himself pays to depictions of care in *Soldier's Pay* and *The Sound and the*

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the intertwining of region, immorality, intellectual disability and inheritance resembles some of the more egregious aspects of southern modernism more than it satirises them.

*Fury*. Similarly, the Chesser family's treatment and reaction to the intellectually disabled Chick in Roberts's *The Time of Man*, brings a warmth and pleasure not only to the family but to the novel itself. While southern modernists may have contributed to the archetype of the poor white idiot, their works rarely, if ever, depict the 'Moronia' found in Mencken's essay. Even in a novel like *Vein of Iron*, in which eugenic ideas about intellectual disability are woven into every part of southern life, there are questions not only about the validity of these ideas but also what it means to be intellectually disabled. It is only once Ada Fincastle sees herself 'in the skin of the idiot' that she is able to truly grasp the social forces that control her life and that of Toby, the village idiot. Even when it was not the central subject of their works, southern modernists' concern for or interrogations of the lived experience of those deemed intellectually disabled often disrupt or 'short-circuit' the symbolic functions of their 'idiot' or 'half-wit' figures. For example, Ada's realisation of Toby's essential humanity is not entirely reflected within the novel's own symbolic emphasis on the alterity of intellectual disability. There is often a blend of what might loosely be called sympathy and symbolism in southern modernists' representations of intellectual disability and it can be difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile the contradictions between the two. It is a further conclusion of this thesis that representations of intellectual disability in southern modernism serve a multitude of ambiguous symbolic functions which frequently not only contradict each other but also often undermine a narrative's 'realist' depictions of intellectual disability.

Indeed often, as in 'Monk' or in the prologue to *My Heart and My Flesh*, when the narrative voice implies the futility of trying to interpret, prioritise or even decipher any coherence from the plethora of interpretations of intellectual disability the text invites. A number of southern modernists were intrigued by the question of

how to represent intellectual disability. Often, the symbolic cacophony in southern modernist texts appears to be, at least in part, a means to answer this question. There is a sense that for most of the authors discussed here – Roberts and Glasgow in particular – there is a pronounced attempt to capture the socially constructed nature of intellectual disability, to represent the discursive formation. There appears to be a suspicion that intellectual disability is, to quote Luce in *My Heart and My Flesh*, 'not real, scarcely there at all'. However, these attempts to represent the social construction of intellectual disability are not entirely successful. As we have seen in 'Monk', certain essential (and often essentialist) beliefs about intellectual disability are made more credible than others. 'Monk', like *Vein of Iron* and *My Heart and My Flesh*, depends upon aspects of eugenic imagery and hereditarian beliefs in its broader representational aims.

The multiplicities of meanings attached to intellectual disability in southern fiction of the 1920s and 1930s were not simply a way to respond to representational issues. Above all else, in this thesis I contend they were essential to the writers' depictions of the South. Southern modernists found in intellectual disability a remarkably useful vehicle for representing their region. To a large extent this reflected the ways in which the eugenic movement and latterly the nation, had used 'feeble-mindedness' as a means to understand the South. As this thesis has shown, eugenics, and in particular eugenic ideas about intellectual disability, was used both by southerners and other Americans to describe the region. Equally, eugenics offered an explanation for perceived and real differences between the South and most of the rest of the country. Southern poverty especially was often described as a consequence of an inherent intellectual lack. The region's experience of modernity was in some important senses distinctive from much of the rest of the nation yet, as



Leigh Anne Duck has argued, the idea of southern distinctiveness and particularly regional backwardness, was produced as much as it reflected economic and social realities.<sup>359</sup> Thus in writing 'Sahara of the Bozart', Mencken was not so much locating feeble-mindedness in the South as inscribing it upon the region, using it as a means to explain the region's role on the periphery of American life, as perpetually 'other' yet also inextricably linked to the rest of the nation. Likewise, when eugenicists sought to explain the origins of 'un-American' traits in the nation, it made sense that they would trace them to a South that did not easily cohere with national narratives about liberal modernity. From these positions, it was only a short leap to actually locating these traits in real life southerners. Feeble-mindedness signified backwardness, immorality, dependence and defeat and hence functioned almost as a kind of 'narrative prosthesis' for a peripheral South which did not fit into the grand narratives of a nation which prided itself on concepts such as independence, success, civilisation, progress, and modernity. For southern modernists, this metaphorical value of feeble-mindedness was naturally of use to them too in describing and analysing their region and so, much as eugenicists 'found' the morons who proved their suspicions about the South, southern writers created a plethora of figures who could fulfil that role in their fictions.

Feeble-mindedness, however, was but one model of intellectual disability. While eugenicists broadly had to adhere to their hereditarian, biological model to maintain their pseudoscientific ideas, southern modernists were free to explore the vast symbolic possibilities afforded by intellectual disability. Accordingly, as we have seen, intellectually disabled figures were used for a whole host of purposes in southern modernism. Perhaps more importantly, the contradictions in and clashes

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<sup>359</sup> Duck, *This Nation's Region*, pp. 1-14

between many of these meanings allowed southern writers to explore the emerging contradictions and clashes in the American South. Intellectual disabled figures could embody for example both modernity and tradition, innocence and immorality, the rural and the urban. Thus southern modernists used their creations to represent not only the idea that the region was backwards and peripheral but also to explore the experience of being peripheral, of being not quite modern. Furthermore, the eugenic construction of feeble-mindedness inflected intellectual disability with prejudices about class, race and gender. In a racially segregated region in which social hierarchies were often violently maintained, intellectually disabled figures offered a means to explore and frequently challenge those hierarchies. The texts I have discussed in this thesis use intellectual disability in an extraordinary variety of ways to discuss their region highlighting the extent to which it is, as Halliwell describes idiocy, 'an overdetermined concept with multiple and complex causes'.<sup>360</sup>

However, understanding why intellectual disability functioned so well as a vehicle for southern modernists to depict their regional concerns, is also a means to understand why those deemed 'intellectually disabled', or 'feeble-minded', or 'mentally retarded' have historically been marginalised and excluded. If it served as a signifier for a peripheral region, it is because it is a peripheral form of identity, one applied to individuals who are not deemed to fit normative narratives about intelligence whatever they may be at any given historical moment. As I have shown in this thesis, during the eugenic era the consequences of falling outside of those norms were severe. While for southern modernists, the associations between region and intellectual disability were useful to their representational needs, for individuals like Carrie Buck and many others they helped influence decisions about their

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<sup>360</sup> Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy*, p. 2

supposed disability and subsequently condemned them to lives in institutions and, for some, led to sterilisation. Southern modernist texts perpetuated and added to existing stereotypes or negative perceptions of intellectually disabled people in ways which cannot and should not be entirely disentangled from the events of the eugenic era and beyond. The effects of the eugenic era were to outlive southern modernism. Although Georgia was the last southern state to pass a sterilisation law, it ended up being ranked fifth on the list of sterilisations per state. The law was not repealed until 1970.<sup>361</sup> Equally, some individuals were to spend long portions of their lives in southern institutions, leaving them with longstanding problems even if they left. It is only in recent years that some of the most odious and shameful aspects of the South's eugenic history have come to light and States have begun to apologise for the damaging effects laws, policies and procedures informed by eugenic thinking have had on people's lives. During the writing of this thesis, the state of Virginia finally agreed to compensate the victims of sterilisation. Of more than eight thousand victims, only eleven are alive.<sup>362</sup>

This is a grim and salutary story; a story in which I have suggested that modernist writers who explicitly and self-consciously engaged with eugenic thought, or whose work bore its unmistakable influence, were sometimes implicated. However, this thesis has also revealed how southern modernist texts often resisted eugenic ideas and/or attempted to give a voice, in a fictional sense, to those deemed intellectually disabled. Moreover, these works began to explore and represent through formal innovation the ways in which intellectual disability is constructed. In an era increasingly certain about the aetiology of intellectual disability, southern modernists brought uncertainty and ambiguity to their depictions of it. If the

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<sup>361</sup> Lombardo, 'From Better Babies to Bunglers', pp. 62-63

<sup>362</sup> BBC News, *Virginia Eugenics Victims Compensated for Sterilisation*, 27 February 2015 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-31654546>

eugenic-led association between region and intellectual disability provoked southern modernists' representations then it did not define them. In this regard, without ignoring or diminishing the negative implications of their representations, their works can also be seen to leave a positive legacy. In this thesis I have explored how southern modernists persistently ask their readers to question the meaning of intellectual disability, to probe its boundaries and its significance, to be wary of definitive definitions and to be aware of who benefits from the ways in which intellectual disability is understood. These lessons continue to be important as we consider not only future representations of intellectual disability but what it means to be an intellectually disabled person in our own societies.

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