Suicide, Society, and Crisis:
Reading Representations of Suicide in US Novels
From The Great Depression (1929-1941)

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Abstract

This thesis argues that, in American novels of the era of the Great Depression, suicide is characteristically represented as a paradoxical act which at once defies explanation yet reveals an urgent need for social reform. The thesis, by focusing on this characteristic paradox, draws on contemporary critical theories of suicide in literature while returning to Émile Durkheim's pioneering understanding of suicide as a social act. On the one hand, I follow the work of Andrew Bennett and other literary scholars, showing how suicide in the context of the Great Depression novel is often depicted as an act which, in Bennett's terms, "makes and unmakes meaning." Yet I reflect on the creative ('makes') as well as the destructive ('unmakes') aspects of Bennett's phrase, and I do so to call attention to the fact that suicide, in this body of work, takes place within a social context. In the shadow of rising suicide rates during the Great Depression, these novels bring focus to suicide as a particular social concern and highlight the sometimes baffling and sometimes enlightening effects suicide has on others. If suicide "breaks the frames that society relies upon to produce meaning," as Margaret Higonnet has suggested, then I argue here that a similar combination of thwarted understanding and resurgent social critique is characteristic of the novels of William Faulkner, Wallace Thurman, John O'Hara, Horace McCoy, James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, and Carson McCullers. The numerous suicides of interwar American literature will present to us throughout this thesis acts of uncertainty as well as social commentary, which in turn encourages a revision of the apparent impasse that suicide can pose to understanding. The treatment of suicide in these texts foregrounds and realises the possibility of reading this impasse, and the paradoxes of suicide, as a means of provoking and distilling complex, ongoing, and unsettled negotiations of social failings and social change.

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Introduction

This thesis focuses on a range of suicides that occur in novels written in the United States during the 1930s, and places these representations into a dialogue with some of the most important ways of understanding suicide that emerge both from recent scholarship and from foundational works of European sociology. As I consider this dialogue between literary representations and a range of academic perspectives, I will argue that American authors of the 1930s characteristically, and in similarity to contemporary scholarship, negotiate suicide as an unresolvable and disrupting moment of uncertainty. Both deliberate the complexities of representing suicide by calling attention to and interrogating the crisis in understanding that this act entails. Yet I also argue that, even as they imagine the moment of suicide as a crisis of meaning impervious to final explanation, these texts continue to present this as a social crisis that must be understood in social terms, and one for which there may be social responses. They follow the pioneering sociological analysis of Émile Durkheim even as they depict it as an act of 'unmaking' that questions what meaning can be sustained in the social realm.

The challenges of understanding the potential causes and consequences of suicide have become a point of focus of contemporary scholarship on suicide and what Andrew Bennett terms 'literary suicidology.'[1] Literary suicidology turns to the

[1] Andrew Bennett, *Suicide Century: Literature and Suicide from James Joyce to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), 21.

representation of suicide through written language and, in so doing, brings attention to a sense of ambivalence that seems inherent in suicide itself. Such scholarship regularly analyses suicide by stressing the questions the act raises, the impossibility of fully understanding its causes and consequences, and highlighting the disorientation this uncertainty gives rise to. This limit of comprehension, and the attending concern that suicide is a phenomenon that can never be finally understood in social terms, is brought into relief in US literature of the 1930s. Yet the resurgence of didactic or reformist writing that attended the political and social crisis known as The Great Depression also found reflection in these works. Contemporary discourses and commentaries on race, gender, politics, and individualism percolate throughout these novels, and not least in their representations of suicide. As a result, through an emphasis on both ambivalence and social concerns, US representations of suicide of the 1930s at once show that these acts perform a crisis in social meaning and understand this as a crisis requiring a social response. As we will see, when US authors of the 1930s respond to suicide, they often do so in a manner alert to its thwarting of social understanding, yet they place this disintegration of meaning into a context of social disorder, confusion, and change. In so doing, they elucidate the crisis of interpretation identified in literary suicidology by analysing the realisation of such crisis within a particular social moment, and present ways to continue thinking about this crisis in social terms even when any final resolution seems impossible.

This introduction begins with an overview of studies of suicide and suicide representation. Here, I will read a range of key texts from suicidology and identify both what is shared and what differentiates contemporary literary suicidology from a classic Durkheimian analytical approach. I trace this development of suicidology by turning to a series of core studies from the twentieth century, including the work of Maurice

Blanchot, Albert Camus, and Andrew Bennett. A distinctive relationship between literature and suicide, particularly concerning challenges of comprehension and representation, emerges from this discussion. From these studies, a series of central questions for this thesis and a methodological framework through which to negotiate them come to the fore.

This introduction then turns to The Great Depression in the US as a historical period. I follow a convention of using the term 'The Great Depression' to define a period of US sociocultural history from The Wall Street Crash of 1929 to the US entry into World War Two in 1941. This section will explore major studies of US culture during The Great Depression as well as newspaper reporting on suicide from the period. Through this analysis, I draw out discourses concerning suicide occurring in the US during the 1930s as well as ongoing discussions within scholarship about The Great Depression. I then focus on two of the key terms of this thesis: complexity and crisis.

The final section of this introduction will be a chapter summary. The texts to be examined, the order in which they will be analysed, and the justifications for these choices of texts and sequence will be specified. I thus outline what can be expected from the coming textual studies and the hypotheses investigated in this thesis.

Suicidology

The interaction between an individual and their society is a principal concern within suicidology and was a predominant feature of early studies of suicide, such as the work of Émile Durkheim. Durkheim sought to gain a greater understanding of suicide by identifying a series of social causes for the act through a process of analysing suicide statistics. He conducted this analysis by comparing suicide rates and certain group

identifications, such as nationality or religion, before categorising suicides in line with proposed differences between these groups, and thereby specifying social conditions that he argues determine the likelihood of suicide. Durkheim thus approaches suicide as fundamentally related to social and cultural factors. Literary suicidologists of the twenty-first century, in contrast, tend to more heavily emphasise the confusion and ambivalence that suicide seems to entail. Although Durkheim offers them an important, even inspirational precedent, modern literary suicidologists depart most sharply from his original sociological theorisations as they move away from the stress on suicide as a social condition that is most effectively addressed through methodological studies of society. Here, then, a tension can be seen between describing and analysing suicide as a socially influenced or even determined act, and an approach that highlights the challenges of understanding an individual's impulse towards suicide – a tension which operates under the meaning-making and meaning resisting nature of suicide.

The interwar texts considered in this thesis similarly bring this friction between social and more individually focused analytical approaches to the fore. The dialogue between social explanations and literary analysis that is brought to light in suicidology is played out in these novels. Yet, by ultimately focusing on individual-social interaction in a manner reminiscent of Durkheim, these texts also negotiate whether possibilities for social development can be identified and sustained in the face of the confusion and uncertainty that often results from an act of suicide. By presenting a combination of the ambiguity evinced in literary suicidology and a Durkheimian emphasis on suicide as a social phenomenon, they offer discursive responses to how we can think through suicide as a socially provocative act that is at the same time interpretatively obscure with the potential to highlight ways that society may be reformed.

Durkheim's seminal work, *Suicide* (1897), brought forth the problem of suicide as an explicit, independent field of study and stressed reformist possibilities emerging from the consideration of suicide within social contexts. He collated the work of previous scholars who had gathered and interpreted several ranges of suicide statistics.[2] Using this material alongside his own data collection and analysis, Durkheim sought to define a set of social causes for suicide, or what he called an 'aetiological' understanding of suicide. He then presents the frequency of suicide as a risk that could be mitigated by reforming society, before continuing on to identify increased inclusion and enhancing a sense of shared purpose as such remedies. Through this approach, his work is clear that a certain comprehensibility can be attributed to suicide and that it can be better understood and controlled by considering social influences. This determination to gain an understanding of the social phenomenon becomes apparent in many of Durkheim's definitions and accounts of suicide:

> The common quality of all these possible forms of supreme renunciation is that the determining act is performed advisedly; that at the moment of acting the victim knows the certain result of his conduct, no matter what reason may have led him to act thus. All mortal facts thus characterized are clearly distinct from all others in which the victim is either not the author of his own end or else only its unconscious author. They differ by an easily recognizable feature, for it is not impossible to discover whether the individual did or did not know in advance the natural results of his action. Thus, they form a definite, homogeneous group, distinguishable from any other and therefore to be designated by a special term. Suicide is the one appropriate; there is no need to create another, for the vast majority of occurrences customarily so-called belong to this group. We may then say conclusively: the term *suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result.*[3]

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[2] For a history of both Durkheim's predecessors and the development of suicidology, particularly in relation to literature, see: Holly A. Laird, 'Between the (Disciplinary) Acts: Modernist Suicidology', *Modernism/Modernity*, 3 (18) (2011), 525-50.

[3] Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, ed. George Simpson, trans. John A. Spaulding (London: Routledge, 2002), xlii. (Throughout this thesis no emphasis has been added to quotes and all italicisations are as in original versions.)

Durkheim stresses volition in this definition. By downplaying questions of 'what reason may have led him to act thus' he highlights that regardless of idiosyncratic concerns and contexts, suicide is conditioned as a knowing act of absolute self-destruction. As Durkheim consolidates the variable act of suicide, he presents it as a phenomenon that has a certain, identifiable consistency. The term 'author' is repeated here and invokes a sense of mastery and order, which appears to be realised in conjunction with this concept of knowing. In order to be the author of one's death and to exercise this mastery, Durkheim argues, one has to know that the result of one's 'positive or negative act' will be death.

Importantly, however, Durkheim then extends the clarity of this authoring of suicide into its reception at the level of society. As he puts it, the 'volition' of the individual is 'an easily recognisable feature, [that] it is not impossible to discover'. While some hesitation might be discernible in the mismatch between his description of this identification as 'easy' and 'not impossible', Durkheim tends to approach the act of suicide as one that is evident and understandable both in its authorship and its reception. By presenting an aetiological, causal and symptomatic reasoning for suicide, Durkheim suggests that the act, at least in a social frame, coheres with a certain intelligibility. In other words, social influences conditioning suicide rates can be discerned and categorised. The key term 'victim' calls attention to this pre-eminence of society. This word may be primarily employed to denote an individual who suffers, but it also intimates an individual in a subordinate relationship. By bringing the individual who has killed themselves into such a relationship, Durkheim points to the social relations that he will go on to identify as being the principal influences leading to suicide.

Later studies of suicide often revisit the way in which Durkheim emphasised authorship and volition but call it into question. In his consideration of the writing of Mallarmé, for example, Maurice Blanchot comments:

> Can I take my own life? Do I have the power to die? *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* is something like the answer in which this question dwells. And the "answer" intimates that the movement which, in the work, is the experience of death, the approach to it and its use, is not the movement of possibility – not even of nothingness's possibility – but rather a movement approaching the point at which the work is put to the test by impossibility.[4]

Here Blanchot considers whether authorship or 'power' can be realised in death. He notes that the 'work' of writing brings focus to this concern of whether certainty can be found in relation to suicide and, in so doing, calls into question the sense of intelligibility that Durkheim attributes to suicide. Informed by Blanchot's analyses of possibility and impossibility in relation to suicide and writing, Andrew Bennett observes:

> Representations of suicide in literature reflect not only personal or psychological but also social and cultural aspects of ambivalence towards the act. And this ambivalence may also be understood to reflect, fundamentally, the institution of literature more generally: its status as socially and psychologically affirmative and redemptive, on the one hand, and as a discourse and practice that undermines and disturbs personal, social, and cultural certainties, formations, and identities on the other. (*Suicide Century* 7)

Literature, for Bennett, manifests an 'ambivalence' that in itself – in its own all but institutional tendency to 'disturb' and 'undermine' – can only trouble a Durkheimian categorisation of suicide as dependent on 'social and cultural certainties'. Bennett and Blanchot's questions here lead to an emphatic recognition of uncertainty: literature seems in sympathy with suicide, sharing a common ambivalence, even as its ability to depict such acts drifts far from anything like Durkheim's certainty. This sense of

[4] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1982), 44.

complexity appears to continue in the tension between psychological and philosophical questions and analyses highlighted by literary suicidologists as compared with Durkheim's more sociological explanations.

Durkheim's pursuit in *Suicide* of a rational understanding of his subject is not confined to overarching definitions but also extends to his identification of different varieties or types of suicide in practice. This approach, redolent of the classificatory systems employed in Darwinian and Social Darwinian observation, leads him to draw on several ranges of statistics in order to categorise four types: egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic. These types all stem from society's influence over individuals and thus present a set of social causes of suicide. In Durkheim's model, egoistic and altruistic suicides result from too little or too much social integration, respectively. This 'integration' refers to sharing a sense of purpose in life, or a "common cause" (*Suicide* 168). This 'cause', for Durkheim, is society itself:

> Through the very fact that these superior forms of human activity [religious, political, moral activities] have a collective origin, they have a collective purpose. As they derive from society they have reference to it; rather they are society itself incarnated and individualized in each one of us. […] We can cling to these forms of human activity only to the degree that we cling to society itself. Contrariwise, in the same measure as we feel detached from society we become detached from that life whose source and aim is society. (170)

If an individual is 'detached' from 'a collective purpose', then this individual is at increased risk of further detaching from life and society by killing themselves, and thus resorting to a death that Durkheim terms: 'egoistic suicide'. Durkheim goes on to suggest that a 'common cause' can, though, itself be overbearing and result in suicide being perceived as a social "duty" (178). Such deaths form Durkheim's second category: 'altruistic suicide'. Durkheim describes the distinction between 'egoistic' and 'altruistic suicides':

> If, as we have just seen, excessive individuation leads to suicide, insufficient individuation has the same effects. When man has become detached from society, he encounters less resistance to suicide in himself, and he does so likewise when social integration is too strong. (175)

Here Durkheim suggests that a certain commensurability, or a measurable form of 'sufficient individuation' which is proportionate to the likelihood of suicide, can be employed to appraise suicide. In other words, suicides can be compared and better defined by measuring degrees of individuation and by using this intensity of interaction as a standard. This notion of a discernible intensity of social order continues into the next two of Durkheim's types, which concern social regulation, or the control society exerts in managing a 'collective purpose'. Durkheim's third category, 'anomic suicides', happen when society fails to regulate a sense of purpose. He argues:

> when society is disturbed by some painful crisis or by beneficent but abrupt transitions, it is momentarily incapable of exercising this [social regulatory] influence; thence come the sudden rises in the curve of suicides (213)

Durkheim emphasises that society can be 'disturbed' by both positive or negative changes, such as economic booms or depressions, during which conventional social order no longer exercises the same influence. Following the mirroring approach taken with his first two categories, Durkheim then introduces a fourth category, 'fatalistic suicides', which are caused by individuals feeling overly regulated. Durkheim describes such individuals as having their "futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline" (239). This category is relegated to a footnote as he claims, "it has so little contemporary importance" (239). Durkheim's inclusion of a fourth category in a footnote indicates an effort to create a balanced model of binary oppositions. Here Durkheim's model seems to separate from his statistical evidence as he seeks to bring stability and clarity to the troubling act of suicide. Since 'fatalistic suicides' are glossed over in this fashion, it appears that Durkheim is calling for a

strengthening of social order, or social apparatus, to better supervise and manage suicide rates in the contemporary moment. These four categories then present a neat, systematised understanding of suicide as a socially determined phenomenon. In turn, they intimate that suicide is intelligible and can be minimised through social reform.

Much of the new vocabulary and categories that Durkheim developed in this pioneering study remain central to suicidology today. As Holly Laird comments, "Durkheim remains today the best-known thinker on suicide, and his work in 1897 on the sociology of suicide is often thought of as foundational." (529) Indeed, Durkheim's work is not only 'foundational', but his categorisations, while contested, are still used in sociology.[5] However, if, as Bennett argues, 'the institution of literature' tends to 'undermine and disturb' such sociological explanations (*Suicide Century* 7), it follows that Durkheim's concepts of 'integration and regulation' are negotiated in literature with a greater sense of complexity than his ordered model presents. As Margaret Higonnet demonstrates while reading a series of poems featuring female suicides: "In these examples, the rhetoric and imagery of female suicide does not provide textual closure; nor does it determine, finally, a poem's meaning. Rather, the ambiguity of suicide opens up the text."[6] Unlike Durkheim's ordered model, the focus on 'ambiguity' in literature appears to dispense with a final determination and to question any conclusions drawn from any specific act of suicide. This 'ambiguity' then 'opens' a negotiation of the seemingly coherent 'social influences' foregrounded by Durkheim as well as the sense of intelligibility he assigns to suicide. This challenge to Durkheim does not lead to a dismissal of his work, as scholars such as Bennett acknowledge when they refer back to

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[5] See: Matthew D. Moore, 'Durkheim's Types of Suicide and Social Capital: A Cross-National Comparison of 53 Countries', *International Social Science Journal*, 66 (2019-20), 151-61.
[6] Margaret R. Higonnet, '"this winged nature fraught": Suicide and Agency in Women's Poetry', *Literature Compass*, 12 (12) (2015), 684.

Durkheimian vocabulary.[7] Yet these deliberate echoes do not indicate a lingering investment in his empirical or 'aetiological' faith either. Instead, Bennett brings Durkheim's social focus into a more complex space in which his established social categories are always in dialogue with a more robust individualism and the shattering of such categories. Thus, even as the clarity Durkheim ascribes to suicide and its social causes becomes suspect, his types of suicide remain useful descriptive tools that bring focus to key concerns about the relationship between individuals and their societies. If suicide still, though, presents some social commentary, as the novels discussed in this thesis appear to urge, then returning to Durkheim in combination with literary suicidology's recognition of ambivalence could lead to a means of distilling, without simplifying into standard types, the complex sense of social possibility and precariousness within such commentary.

Literary Suicidology and Social Analysis

On the one hand, then, this thesis draws on the intellectual legacy of Émile Durkheim as it too embeds the analysis of suicide and suicide representation alike within a variety of social contexts. It understands suicide as Durkheim understood it: as a social act, and as the result of particular combinations of harmful social forces. 'Social' and 'society' here thus denote interactions between a large community of people and the sense of 'collective purpose' emerging from these interactions. On the other hand, however, this thesis also looks to recent formations of literary suicidology in order to complicate the fixed conception of society that becomes apparent at key moments in Durkheim's work.

[7] For instance, Bennett refers to Durkheim's terms of altruistic, fatalistic, egoistic, and anomic suicides as a means of discussing eighteenth century approaches to suicide (41).

By drawing on the literary suicidology of Bennett and Higonnet among other scholars, this thesis foregrounds an ambiguity which problematises a Durkheimian notion of suicide's social commensurability and the intelligibility assigned to suicide by concepts such as 'sufficient individuation'. It thus investigates how we negotiate suicide as a social phenomenon when Durkheim's overarching social causes and remedies are understood as a simplification of the complexity suicide poses.

Unlike literary suicidology, though, which generally tends to place less emphasis on the language of social reform as it approaches suicide representations, here representations of suicide are considered as a means of identifying complex and discrete possibilities of social change. Higonnet ascribes a similar complex agency – in the form of the capacity to disrupt society – to suicide representation in literature. She argues:

> Suicide is a scandal. It ruptures the social order and defies sovereign power over life and death. […] By cutting short the 'natural' span of life, the person who takes his or her life both turns it into a metaphoric ruin and breaks the frames that society relies upon to produce meaning.[8]

Here Higonnet suggests that suicide presents an individual indictment of society in the form of 'rupture', and particularly so when suicide 'breaks' the 'production of meaning'. From a Durkheimian consideration of suicide as a social phenomenon, Higonnet thus emphasises the disruptive nature of suicide. Rather than a conditioning relationship in which society determines suicide, there is a dynamic interaction in which suicide can also 'defy' society. In arguing thus, Higonnet attributes a certain agency to suicide that, at times, seems to be lacking in Durkheim's formulation. The set of social conditions defined by Durkheim are thus troubled by a form of individualism which defies the implied 'sovereign power' of society in Durkheimian theory. Higonnet goes on to observe, "Because a suicide defies our understanding and eludes a social order,

[8] Margaret Higonnet, 'Frames of Female Suicide', *Studies in the Novel*, 32 (2) (2000), 229.

narratives of suicide are sites of social reconstruction" (241). The challenges of understanding suicide still appear, then, to insist on social thinking in order to address how suicide is managed. The phrase 'social reconstruction' indicates that some form of comprehension may be rebuilt from the disrupting act and 'metaphoric ruin' of suicide. Higonnet thereby suggests that a representation of suicide can invite reflection on how to change society, and thus manage the social influence identified by Durkheim, in more complex ways than his original set of causes for suicide affords.

However, and in contrast with Durkheim's reformist certitude, this 'social reconstruction' appears invariably radical and beyond the scope of contemporary meaning. By breaking the 'production of meaning' it seems inevitable that any social reform resulting from suicide must be in some key ways ambivalent, and that any meaning to be taken from suicide must be outside conventional points of reference. If Durkheim's stress on society's influence on the frequency of suicide is not so fully dispensed with, though, and if it is taken that suicides may not then always 'elude the social order', it appears that suicide may not always result in radical social reconstruction but also in conservative calls for social change as well. It is this sense of complex and varied imaginings of social reform, which are identifiable even if they are unsettled and ongoing, that this thesis focuses on.

This disruption of Durkheim's certitude, and the sense that suicide must be understood as an ambivalent act, is not unique to recent formations of literary suicidology. Rather, as Bennett and Higonnet themselves acknowledge in their work, it is already to be found in the literary tradition, which, unlike Durkheim's *Suicide*, brings forth suicide as a phenomenon that undermines the possibility of certainty. Indeed, it is impossible to fully grasp the significance of literary suicidology's intervention without also considering some of the key formations from modern literature on which it draws.

Yet in literature, and particularly in US novels of the 1930s, the potential for 'social reconstruction' appears to be manifold, and ambivalence seems to act as a provocation for both radical and conservative types of social reform. The return to Durkheim alongside literary suicidology, I suggest, enables a means of identifying and exploring these discrete and unsettled considerations of social change.

Literary Suicidology and Literature

This difficulty of making sense of suicide representation in literature is clarified by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). In this text, Camus defines his understanding of absurdism. He takes a significant step away from Durkheim at the start of his study, noting: "Suicide has never been dealt with except as a social phenomenon. On the contrary, we are concerned here, at the outset, with the relationship between individual thought and suicide."[9] Camus goes on to argue that there is an unresolvable confrontation between each individual and the world. This confrontation is realised in the desire for complete understanding and the impossibility of achieving it (25-26). For Camus, there is a liberation in recognising this state of affairs. He argues:

> To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. The theme of permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience. Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is above all contemplating it. Unlike Eurydice, the absurd dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. […] It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it. This is where it is seen to what a degree absurd experience is remote from suicide. (52)

[9] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2005), 3.

The crucial term ‘revolt’ presents a recognition of the absurd, and the liberation the awareness of absurdity results in, as a form of conscious work. It is toiling in the face of the ‘crushing fate’ that life is absurd that provides life with value. Indeed, for Camus, this “revolt gives life its value.” (53) Suicide amounts to a certain type of failure – a failure to recognise the absurd – because it marks the end of such effort. Suicide remains ambivalent, and for many of the reasons Bennett notes, but it is also understood as a rejection of the constant recognition of ambivalence that the absurd represents. Yet neither approach – the persistent awareness of ambivalence that constitutes the absurd or its refusal in the form of suicide – amounts to anything like a direct call for social change. The prospects of social reform, for Camus, must always remain limited; the absurd nature of the human condition cannot be overcome. Nonetheless Camus here stops short of offering a nihilistic position. Although the absurd state that he describes is ‘devoid of hope’, Camus still proposes that recognising the absurd can, to some degree, alleviate suffering, and not least because it amounts to a means for negotiating a sense of ‘resignation’. It follows that, in his philosophy, certain social changes can and must still be contemplated and undertaken, even though they will never eradicate but only ever ease the confusion and pain behind suicide as an act.

This metaphysical view of life and suicide, and the more limited scope for social reform that it envisages, come to the fore in Camus’s observations about the character Kirilov from Fyodor Doestoevsky’s *Demons* (1871-72). Kirilov, because he is an absurd man who kills himself, presents Camus with a kind of philosophical conundrum: Kirilov realises the absurd condition of life, yet ‘revolts’ against it by killing himself and thereby seeming to succumb to the absurd (*Myth of Sisyphus* 103). Camus then interprets Dostoevsky’s description as presenting suicide to us as a contradictory act

that oscillates between social rebellion and social compassion. First, he describes Kirilov's reasoning:

> he wants to kill himself to become god.
> This reasoning is classic in its clarity. If God does not exist, Kirilov is god. If God does not exist, Kirilov must kill himself. Kirilov must therefore kill himself to become god. (103)

Camus specifies that the small-g god that Kirilov will become is a 'man-god' rather than the absolute Christian God. In essence, by exercising the authority of killing himself, Kirilov evidences a god-like power and freedom. Camus goes on to outline a compassionate purpose in Kirilov's reasoning:

> Kirilov sacrifices himself then. But if he is crucified, he will not be victimized. He remains the man-god, convinced of a death without future, imbued with evangelical melancholy. 'I,' he says, 'am unhappy because I am *obliged* to assert my freedom.' But once he is dead and men are at last enlightened, this earth will be peopled with Czars and lighted up with human glory. Kirilov's pistol-shot will be the signal for the last revolution. Thus it is not despair that urges him to death but love of his neighbour for his own sake. (105)

Through his rebellion against Christian convention by taking the position of a god, Kirilov is presented as a social antagonist. At the same time, this rebellion stems from 'love of his neighbour'. This seeming contradiction is sustained as Kirilov, in Camus' framework, appears to bring about an absurd liberty. As Kirilov ushers in the 'last revolution' against traditional religious dogma by exercising a god-like authority in ending his own life, the 'freedom' or authority of all individuals is realised. But this freedom also comes with a responsibility stemming from the understanding that god can no longer provide life with an identifiable meaning. Since Kirilov's death in some ways indicates that God may not exist, it realises our 'own obscurity', or the absurd "darkness in which we struggle" (58).

Although the focus of his wider study is on 'individual thought', when Camus looks to Kirilov he is more concerned with situating suicide in a social setting. Camus'

reading of Kirilov's death then brings forth seeming contradictions. He disentangles these as his study continues by turning to the larger Dostoevsky oeuvre (107). But Kirilov's death, in isolation, appears to be an inherently paradoxical representation of suicide. Suicide is presented here as both an antisocial act and an act of social love, and the character who performs it does so even though he appears to recognise the absurd nature of life. Of all Camus' considerations of life and suicide, this challenging reading of Kirilov's death perhaps leads to the most direct examination of suicide as an act of reasoned social rebellion. Indeed, as Camus suggests quoting Dostoevsky himself, Kirilov's is a "logical suicide" (101). Through this exploration of Kirilov's death, Camus enacts the possibility of reading suicide as a paradoxical phenomenon. This suicide offers a social indictment, and one which demands the radical reconsideration that life's meaning cannot be dependent on God. Yet it also engenders a sense of meaninglessness as the absurd nature of life comes into view. The 'ambivalence' of suicide itself seems then to be a central component of what this death says about social order: the absurd is recognised when Kirilov kills himself and thus identifies that meaning may not be maintained by God's ultimate power over life, and that man therefore has a certain absurd freedom and control over social order. However, this moment of recognising paradoxicality in essence appears to be where the critique ends – perceiving or conceiving of the absurd is the ultimate goal in Camus' study, rather than the more pragmatic types of social reform urged by Durkheim.

Literature thus plays a crucial role in Camus' analysis. It provides him with an opportunity to investigate how the ambivalence of suicide can be manifested as an identification of freedom, even when it still appears to be a resignation. A similar question of how, and whether, the ambivalence of suicide can be read with a sense of purpose is explored in Maurice Blanchot's *The Space of Literature* (1955). Again, the

work of Mallarmé leads Blanchot to consider the interaction between language and suicide, and he notes:

> words, having the power to make things 'arise' at the heart of their absence – words which are masters of this absence – also have the power to disappear in it themselves, to absent themselves marvellously in the midst of the totality which they realize, which they proclaim as they annihilate themselves therein, which they accomplish eternally by destroying themselves there endlessly. This act of self-destruction is in every respect similar to the ever so strange event of suicide which, precisely, gives to the supreme instant of *Igitur* all its truth. (43)

In this passage, Blanchot finds a parallel between language and suicide. Death and words alike give rise to meaning while simultaneously engendering absence. In essence, Blanchot suggests words and suicide at once produce and dissolve meaning. This paradox is characteristic of Blanchot's theories and the ambiguity he associates with literature and suicide. He goes on to propose:

> Thus one begins to understand what is strange and superficial, fascinating and deceptive about suicide. To kill oneself is to mistake one death for the other; it is a sort of bizarre play on words. I go to meet the death which is in the world, at my disposal, and I think that thereby I can reach the other death, over which I have no power – which has none over me either, for it has nothing to do with me, and if I know nothing of it, it knows no more of me; it is the empty intimacy of this ignorance. (104)

Blanchot describes this state of affairs as a 'strange project, or double death' (103). He then likens this 'strangeness' of trying to grasp the ungraspable to art (105). I argue that turning particular focus towards the concept of 'death in the world', and suicide as a Durkheimian social phenomenon, may provide a means of negotiating this 'strangeness'. By following Durkheim's lead and stressing social relations before and after the act of suicide, alongside Higonnet's indication that social change is often called for in representations of suicide, I intend to analyse if, and how, social meaning remains in this 'strange' situation. Although, as Blanchot suggests, this 'meaning' may only be elusive and ambiguous, to read representations of suicide as complex reflections on

society, I contend, may further open the possibility of identifying distinct negotiations of how social reform may be imagined.

This tension between meaning and the absence of meaning is foregrounded by Blanchot as an inherent aspect of suicide:

> We enter thus the greatest contradictions. The deliberateness in suicide, its free and imposing side, whereby we strive to remain ourselves, serves essentially to protect us from what is at stake in this event. It would seem that through our effort to remain ourselves, we elude the essential; it would seem that we interpose ourselves illegitimately between something unbearable and ourselves, still seeking, in this familiar death that comes from us, not to meet anyone but ourselves, our own resolution and our own certitude. (102)

Like Durkheim, Blanchot underscores volition and 'certitude'. However, in these comments Blanchot situates his analysis of suicide as an internalised, rather than social, debate. In so doing, he brings forth a central question of whether one's self-identity can be realised in death. The social focus of Durkheim, as adjusted by contemporary scholars, offers a means of considering this paradox of self-identification through suicide as a basis from which to elucidate and negotiate social failings. While Blanchot questions the thoughts precipitating suicide and the writing of suicide, this thesis is primarily concerned with the aftermath and the reading of suicide. Although informed by the stress Blanchot places on uncertainty, I want to pursue a less ambiguous style of 'social reading' principally building from this modified Durkheimian theory. In other words, where Blanchot, Camus, and Higonnet present ambivalence as a compressed form a social critique, or a means of fundamentally troubling social order and understanding, I suggest that this uncertainty can be the foundation from which to identify discrete calls for social reform and to define more particular, although ultimately inconclusive, negotiations of how society may be changed.

Bennett's recent study *Suicide Century: Literature and Suicide from James Joyce to David Foster Wallace* (2017) distils the paradoxes highlighted by Camus and

Blanchot, while also bringing a particular focus to how this sense of contradiction regarding suicide plays out as a problem of making sense in both writing and reading. Bennett draws attention to how we imagine the act of suicide and negotiate its apparent ambivalence, as well as how such imagining can potentially help us refrain from resorting to the act itself. Similarly to the social focus I have stressed in reading Camus' and Blanchot's work, I consider Bennett's analyses of twentieth century literature and its handling of suicide as a means of contemplating the social ramifications of the ambivalence associated with suicide representation. This thesis thereby combines the confusion highlighted in contemporary literary suicidology, as well as by critics like Blanchot and Camus, and the possibilities of defining types of social reform brought forth by Durkheim. Bennett emphasises this uncertainty in relation to suicide's potential meaning and ambiguity when he observes:

> Suicide, 'a death like no other', is fundamentally ambivalent and may be considered an instance of the profound and multifaceted undecidability by which literature itself is constituted. Literature, I will argue, engages with the ways in which suicide, as a 'uniquely resonant strand in human behaviour', makes and unmakes subjects, induces and resists empathy, and insists on and makes inconceivable our understanding of ourselves and of others. […] Above all, suicide makes and unmakes meaning. (3)

I too focus on this question of 'making and unmaking meaning', or concurrent creation and destruction. Suicide may 'insist on and make inconceivable our understanding of others', but it still seems to comment on society. Indeed, this 'inconceivability' itself renders a social problem and a troubling of the social 'influence' noted by Durkheim. If this challenge in turn calls for forms of 'social reconstruction', then the 'fundamental ambivalence' of literature and suicide representation may be said to negotiate an urgent and yet elusive and variegated need for social change.

I thus study a number of literary texts in this thesis to ask and respond to a similar problem as Blanchot and Bennett through an adjusted Durkheimian approach.

The central question arising from this scholarship seems to be: how do we read a suicide when the act seems to challenge our capacity to make sense? Both literature and suicide bring forth a problem of 'undecidability'. They appear to have some potential purpose, or, at least, it seems implicit that some 'meaning' could be drawn from representations of suicide. For scholars such as Higonnet, among others[10], suicide appears to be an act that demands a social consideration and a recognition of social failure. It follows that the 'meaning' of suicide representation may be, at least in some cases, a call for 'social reconstruction'. However, the ambivalence of suicide – the need to interpret an act of suicide as it concurrently resists such interpretation – simultaneously intimates that such reform will be limited, and that any call for change will be elusive. By investigating this tension of suicide 'making and unmaking meaning' within literature of the US during The Great Depression, I intend to question this crisis of understanding, explore possible forms of 'social reconstruction', and ask whether, and specifically what types of social change can be insisted on from the complex locus of suicide representation.

The Great Depression

This thesis is focused on close reading representations of suicide and on locating these readings within a social context in order to investigate how the crisis of understanding considered in literary suicidology interplays with suicide as a social phenomenon. In this section, I analyse discussions of suicide in the 1930s and provide a general social context, which will be detailed further in each of the chapters, in order to situate the textual analyses that follow. This consideration of a relatively narrow timeframe has

[10] See, for instance, the discussion between Scott J. Fitzpatrick and R. Srivatsan: Scott J. Fitzpatrick, 'Ethical and Political Implications of the Turn to Stories in Suicide Prevention,' *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 3 (23) (2016), 265-76; and R. Srivatsan, 'Responding to Suicide', *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 3 (23) (2016), 283.

been informed by more extensive histories of suicide by scholars such as Georges Minois, Ron M. Brown, and Marzio Barbagli.[11] But, because the principal aim here is to offer a framework of suicide discourses in the US during the 1930s, I linger within this context. In particular, there is a sense of social crisis which forms a background for the texts analysed in this thesis.

John Kenneth Galbraith's study *The Great Crash 1929*, which was first published in 1954 and has been repeatedly updated in new editions since, is perhaps the most influential analysis of The Wall Street Crash of 1929. Suicide arises in Galbraith's study as a central feature of how The Wall Street Crash was represented, and not least in terms of the myth of bankers jumping from skyscrapers as well as a rising national suicide rate in the early 1930s. As Galbraith studies newspaper reports on suicide, he identifies a narrative use of such deaths to substantiate a sense of social distress:

> The weight of evidence suggests that the newspapers and the public merely seized on such suicides as occurred to show that people were reacting appropriately to their misfortune. Enough deaths could be related in one way or another to the market to serve. Beginning soon after Black Thursday, stories of violent self-destruction began to appear in the papers with some regularity.[12]

The term 'seized' suggests a strong desire, if not a need, to use suicides as part of a social narrative. Like Durkheim, Galbraith analyses suicide from a social perspective, and his turn to 'appropriateness' indicates an identifiable and conventional collective understanding of suicide. Galbraith underscores that suicide narratives were brought into such pre-existing discourses and interpretations of society; indeed, he suggests suicides were made to 'serve' orthodox interpretations of a contemporary sociohistorical situation. This implies a conservative approach to 'social reconstruction' deriving from

[11] Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (London: John Hopkins UP, 1999); Ron M. Brown, *The Art of Suicide* (London: Reaktion, 2001); Marzio Barbagli, *Farewell to the World: A History of Suicide*, trans. Lucinda Byatt (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2015)

[12] John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Great Crash 1929* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 130.

suicide. However, it does not directly acknowledge the complexity of suicide. The adjustments to Durkheimian theory from literary suicidology suggest that such coherency being attributed to suicide when it 'serves' an orthodox notion of society is concurrently troubled by the 'ambivalence' of suicide. There is, then, a crucial, underlying question in Galbraith's study: why suicide? In Galbraith's analysis it seems intuitive that suicide would be an 'appropriate' reaction to economic misfortune. Galbraith is not alone in making this assessment; Malcolm Cowley, for example, similarly turns to suicide as a seemingly intuitive means of describing this period. He calls 1929 "a year of suicides"[13]. However, this association of suicide so closely with financial difficulties and a period of national hardship appears to be complicated through narratives that explore the psychological contexts and consequences of the act.

A traditional Durkheimian approach in which society determines suicide indicates that suicide could be directly linked to the social changes scholars such as Galbraith and Cowley study. However, the 'undecidability' of suicide noted by critics like Bennett and Blanchot troubles such a direct connection. A problem then arises as to what extent suicides can be read as symptomatic and thereby indicative of certain social conditions. Galbraith presents an alternative consideration when he stresses that suicide was part of the narrativising of The Wall Street Crash:

> In the United States the suicide wave that followed the stock market crash is also part of the legend of 1929. In fact, there was none. For several years before 1929, the suicide rate had been gradually rising. It continued to increase in that year, with a further and much sharper increase in 1930, 1931, and 1932 – years when there were many things besides the stock market to cause people to conclude that life was no longer worth living. (128)[14]

[13] Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s*, intro. Donald W. Faulkner (New York, NY: Penguin, 1994), First published 1934, Revised 1951, 306.

[14] Although the two events are ultimately entwined, Galbraith's focus is on the stock market crash rather than The Great Depression. He dismisses the theory that there was a 'suicide wave' relating to The Crash of 1929. He does, though, identify a sharp increase in suicides during the early years of The Depression.

As Galbraith expands his analysis of suicide beyond the myth of bankers jumping from skyscrapers, he highlights the significant contribution of suicide to the narrative understanding and imagined 'legend' of The Crash. Rather than indicating social causes, suicide is understood as a key component in how US 1930s' social conditions are imagined. Considering this social narrative use of suicide alongside the uncertainty noted in literary suicidology, I suggest this focus on suicide in the early 1930s perhaps works to realise and negotiate a sense of disorder and pessimism that is often found in analyses of The Great Depression. In other words, precisely because suicide raises questions of ambivalence, suicide becomes a means of narratively identifying and deliberating a pessimistic recognition of a society in crisis. Rather than presenting Durkheimian causes of suicide, this narrativised understanding of suicide would indicate an inability to fully comprehend a social situation and work to instigate an unsettled discussion of social conditions and social reform.

This uncertainty and pessimism were foregrounded in newspaper reports on suicide during the decade. Galbraith himself talked of 'stories of violent self-destruction' that focused on reports of specific suicides and suicide attempts. While most newspaper reports indeed fell into this category, contemporary newspapers also included numerous articles that considered suicide as a social phenomenon or a growing social problem. These examined the concept of suicide, suicide statistics, how we respond to suicide, and similar, rather than specific instances of suicide. Overlooked by Galbraith, this other kind of newspaper coverage, I propose, offered a broader and clearer overview of national conversations than first-hand reports of suicide events.

The New York Times, for example, ran several articles in the early 1930s exploring whether suicide rates could be explained by referring to economic conditions.

The most frequent source turned to by *The New York Times* was the statistician Frederick Hoffman. Hoffman explains his views succinctly in an article from 1932:

> "It was to be expected," says Dr. Hoffman, "that the suicide record for our American cities for 1931 would show an increase in view of the continued and severe financial and industrial depression, the effects of which in many sections strike deep into the roots of our national life and social well-being."[15]

Hoffman's language underlines the broad impact of The Great Depression. Terms such as 'severe', 'roots', 'strike deep', and the stressing of 'national life', insist that suicide is a grave and urgent problem in the US during the early 1930s. US society here appears to be in the midst of what Durkheim describes as 'a painful crisis'.

A month after this article, the US Health Department offers a rejoinder. Although his work is not explicitly mentioned, Hoffman's views seem to be the primary target of the health department's bulletin. *The New York Times* quotes:

> "The present high rates [of suicide] are sometimes assumed to represent the effect of the economic depression, but this explanation does not suffice.
> "It will be noted that while there appears to be a parallelism of the two curves [comparing business rates and suicide rates] during certain periods, such parallelism is entirely absent in others. […] Moreover, we find the death rate from suicides above the average beginning in 1928 and continuing since that time. Yet 1928 and the greater part of 1929 were a period of great material prosperity. We have no explanation to offer for the course of the death rate from suicide."[16]

This bulletin suggests that Hoffman's work relies on 'assumption' rather than rigorous analysis. The bulletin's final recognition that 'we have no explanation', however, seems to underline the same sense of a serious social problem as Hoffman. Although this question of how economic conditions and suicide interrelate is an ongoing debate,[17] in

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[15] 'Rise in Suicide Rate Laid to Depression', *The New York Times*, 9 June 1932, p. 24
[16] 'Denies Suicide Rise is Due to the Slump', *The New York Times*, 12 July 1932, p. 10
[17] See the work of Bijou Yang, such as: 'The Economy and Suicide: A Time-Series Study of the U.S.A.', *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 51 (1) (1992), 87-99. Durkheim also raises this debate but suggests focusing instead on a broader conception of "disturbances of the collective order." (207)

these *New York Times* articles, this discussion is tied to broad perspectives that denote a relatively coherent understanding of US society. They indicate a Durkheimian understanding in which suicide rates are, or should be considered potentially commensurable to other societal trends, events, and practices. Nonetheless, the debate between these views itself concurrently intimates the complexity of the impulse towards suicide, and thus the limitation of Durkheimian theory that has been brought to the fore in literary suicidology.

In the late 1930s, this emphasis on statistics, as seen in the above passages, drifts into the background. Hoffman's work is no longer returned to by *The New York Times* after 1934. Instead, somewhat psychological arguments relating to suicide focusing on individual idiosyncrasies became more prominent. The most notable effort to analyse suicide in the late 1930s came from The Committee for the Study of Suicide, which was founded in 1935.[18] Gregory Zilboorg was the director of research and his views were foregrounded by *The New York Times* in the latter half of the 1930s. The paper quotes him as arguing:

> the time had come "to discard conventional and time-worn conceptions" of suicide. […]
> "Suicides differ not only in the method of weapon used for the act of self-destruction, but also in the psychological history of the individual and his attitude, conscious and unconscious, toward life and death," he added. "The suicidal drive appears to be a real elemental psychic force, universal in nature."[19]

Zilboorg provides a Freudian understanding of suicide that stresses the role of the 'unconscious'. Indeed, the phrase 'suicidal drive' recalls Sigmund Freud's 'death drive' from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Zilboorg's desire to 'discard' convention points to a change in suicidology. The growing prominence of psychologically based

[18] See: 'Notes', *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 6 (2) (1937), 273
[19] 'Suicide is Called "Instinctive" Act', *The New York Times* 19 February 1937, p. 8.

analyses of suicide is likewise found in the work of other contemporary scholars, such as Karl A. Menninger's *Man Against Himself* (1938), which considers suicide from such a Freudian perspective.

These articles from the *New York Times*, when taken together, highlight the difficulties of analysing suicide and the often-conflicting arguments pertaining to suicide. By presenting an increasing focus on psychology and a turn away from social causes of suicide during the 1930s, I further contend that these articles reveal a troubling of conventional Durkheimian theory. Susan Currell, while analysing suicide representation in the work of Archibald MacLeish in the 1930s, details this uneasy interrelation between individual emphasis and social considerations. She describes MacLeish's play *Panic* (1935), which ends with a banker's suicide, as "a New Deal play, *par excellence*, in its ambivalent depiction of the unresolved tension between the individual and the collective"[20]. Taking the adjusted Durkheim approach presented previously, this 'unresolved tension' can be read as a social criticism and a call to reconstruct the relationship between individuals and society. *The New York Times*' articles similarly indicate that considerations of suicide during The Great Depression were marked by such tension as well as a desire for assurance and a need to attribute some meaning to suicide. Whether in the form of economic conditions or a 'suicidal drive', a clear cause for suicide seems to be urgently sought for in the US in the 1930s. The apparent ambivalence of suicide, though, perennially troubles such an endeavour.

This sense of gravity, uncertainty, a need for comprehension, and incompletion is brought forth in the 1930s most clearly by Louis I. Dublin and Bessie Bunzel. They explain their analytical approach in *To Be or Not to Be: A Study of Suicide* (1933):

[20] Susan Currell, '"Wall Street Lays an Egg": Financial Drama and the 1933 Banking Collapse in Archibald MacLeish's *Panic: A Drama of Industrial Crises* (1935)', *Modern Drama*, 56 (3) (2013), 348.

> if we cannot dogmatize from so hetereogenous a group as these suicides constitute, we can at least clarify the situation by analysing the existing facts. The maze necessitates quantitative study. […]
> After the statistics have given us a clearer picture of the situation, we shall investigate the relationship of the individual to the society in which he lives. Suicide is a complex social phenomenon which is at the same time a personal mode of behavior and the result of prevailing group attitudes. […] We have, therefore, analyzed historical and legal data and insurance practices to discover the effect which the judgement of a community has upon the frequency of self-inflicted deaths. These illuminate social patterns; but far more important are psychological backgrounds, for they determine how any given person will react to the vicissitudes of life. The character, the personality, the temperament and the emotional stability of the individual are the paramount considerations in any attempt to understand suicidal proclivities. These several aspects of our problem will be discussed in succeeding sections.[21]

A fundamental feature of Dublin and Bunzel's understanding of suicide emerges here in the phrase: 'suicide is a complex social phenomenon'. Throughout their study, Dublin and Bunzel repeatedly turn to this complexity and emphasise the difficulties of drawing conclusions about suicide. For instance, as they consider how economic conditions affect suicide rates, they argue:

> Perhaps the one fact that emerges clearly […] is that there is no simple causal relation between economic factors and suicide. Economic stringency is, after all, only one factor among many. Those who commit suicide are frequently persons who are depressed and overwhelmed by conditions which other people are able to surmount; but, it must be admitted, often it is the privations, disappointments and worries resulting from financial troubles that finally make life a burden too heavy for many people to bear. (109)

There are always other 'aspects of our problem' that pull Dublin and Bunzel away from defining any 'simple causal relation'. In the first passage above, they stress 'psychological backgrounds'. However, their study only devotes 60 pages to psychology, while the other 310 pages focus on analysing 'social patterns'. In the second passage, their tendency to conflate possible risk factors leading to suicide is

[21] Louis I. Dublin; Bessie Bunzel, *To Be or Not to Be: A Study of Suicide* (New York: Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1933), 15-16.

demonstrated in the final sentence. This sentence begins by foregrounding psychological aspects. The semi-colon, the word 'but', and the 'admission' then tangles this initial clarity with a socially accentuated perspective and performs the vacillation between psychological and social factors that is a common feature of Dublin and Bunzel's study. I suggest this irresolution and 'complexity' arises from a dissatisfaction with conventional Durkheimian theory. When this desire to acknowledge social conditions moves beyond the implications that a social understanding could provide a means of fully defining suicide, Dublin and Bunzel seem to anticipate the ambivalence highlighted in literary suicidology.

Dublin and Bunzel continue, though, and finally register the possible social indictment being advanced by suicide most prominently at the end of their study by making the need for social change paramount:

> There is finally another element in the situation far more fundamental than any we have yet mentioned and that is the structure of the prevailing social order. We know only too well that many suicides result from the economic and social maladjustments under which we all live. When millions are unemployed and when want is prevalent throughout the land, suicides multiply. Not only abnormal people, moreover, have been committing suicide during the last few years of depression; the economic upheaval through which we are passing has pulled down many whose mental caliber was excellent, but who simply could no longer endure the strain. Many thoughtful students of human affairs believe that before we can make any real headway in solving the suicide problem, we must somehow or other affect the environmental conditions which rule our lives. (364-65)

Through the language of 'social order', 'social maladjustment', and 'conditions which rule our lives', Dublin and Bunzel appear to be indicating that a failure of social governance is the primary cause of a rising suicide rate. There are then seeming contradictions in these passages. In particular, the first describes psychological factors as 'far more important', yet here social order is considered to be 'far more fundamental'. In this final section, Dublin and Bunzel also seem keen to draw a clearer

connection between the economy and suicide rates than they had previously. Psychological explanations are downplayed when they note that even people with 'excellent mental caliber' are killing themselves. These contradictions emphasise Dublin and Bunzel's tendency to be open to multiple interpretations and their hesitancy in defining social causes in the manner of Durkheim. Particularly in ambiguous phrases such as 'we must somehow or other', they intimate a certain pessimism deriving from suicide's complexity. This last passage then suggests that the disorientation of this lack of clarity may be coming into focus because of contemporary conditions.

Dublin and Bunzel thus provide a form of thoughtful and measured indecision in their analysis of suicide, which I propose echoes the ruminations on suicide found in literary suicidology. This considered uncertainty is encapsulated by the phrase 'complex social phenomenon' and in Dublin and Bunzel's oscillations between a myriad of interconnecting factors conditioning the risk of suicide. Yet when it comes to discussing their contemporary society, their language becomes more determined and emotive. Dublin and Bunzel stress unity in phrases such as 'we know only too well', 'maladjustments under which we all live', and 'when want is prevalent throughout the land'. The play on the term 'depression', which has already been used in both a financial and psychological context, underscores a connection between current economic conditions and suicides. By widening the discussion beyond 'abnormal people', Dublin and Bunzel intimate that a peculiar, national crisis is occurring. I suggest, as such, that two principal concepts pertaining to the representation of suicide in the US in the 1930s are highlighted by Dublin and Bunzel: complexity and crisis.

The analysis of such complexity and crisis is at the heart of Michael Denning's, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1996). He describes the 1930s as a period in which there is a 'laboring of American

culture'. This crucial phrase has several definitions in Denning's study, and one of the most prominent is the 'laborious' work that it denotes:

> the laboring of American culture connotes a birthing of a new American culture, a second American Renaissance. But it was also a laboring in that this birth was painstaking and difficult. This was neither a revolution nor a coup d'état; it was not even a transformation. To labor is to plod, to be hampered, to pitch and roll in a storm. In all these senses, the cultural front was a laboring, an incomplete and unfinished struggle to rework American culture, with hesitations, pauses, defeats, and failures.[22]

The social turbulence often associated with The Great Depression is highlighted here in terms such as 'painstaking' and 'struggle'. Denning describes a national 'disturbance' similar to that which Durkheim calls a 'painful crisis'. Since this 'laboring' struggle is 'unfinished' and there is a 'storm' in which one 'pitches and rolls', the cultural backdrop of the 1930s seems fundamentally marked by change, conflict, contention, and precariousness.[23] Dublin and Bunzel's study likewise exemplifies this wide-ranging unsureness.

Denning then brings focus to this irresolution in relation to narrative structures:

> nothing characterizes the works of the cultural front so much as the inability to imagine a completed narrative. The knowable communities and settled social relations that provide the underpinning for realist narrative were themselves in crisis. (119)

Denning calls into question the stability of the 'social order' that Dublin and Bunzel criticise. He is, though, more precise in detailing this feeling of uncertainty. Denning's emphasis on 'incompletion' draws attention to the ongoing 'struggle' occurring as 'social relations are themselves in crisis'. Thus, the social pressures identified by Dublin

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[22] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), xvii.

[23] David Eldridge likewise offers an analysis of 1930s culture that highlights a sense of change and precariousness across the decade. His work, *American Culture in the 1930s* (2008), is broader but less exacting than Denning's. Eldridge's study indicates that the volatility which Denning explores can also be recognised from a less politically accentuated perspective. The notion that US culture in the 1930s has two poles with a complex, 'laboured' transition in between is also particularly prominent in film studies. For instance, such a shift is identified and analysed by Andrew Bergman, Ina Rae Hark, Richard Maltby, Martin Rubin, and Robert Sklar, among others.

and Bunzel, and implied by Galbraith, are not absent. However, these 'knowable communities' – a phrase borrowed from Raymond Williams and associated specifically with novels displaying social relationships as comprehensible and communicable – are in a state of tension.[24] Rather than social 'influence' being abandoned, social order is rendered in crisis. Social order would thus still be paramount in discussions and narrative representations of suicide, even though it does not emphasise social influence or afford the same prominence to sociological explanations as Durkheim.

Denning goes on to highlight this feeling of social disorder in efforts to represent 'the people':

> The extraordinary proliferation of populist rhetorics in the depression was itself a symptom of the crisis. The crisis of 1929 was a crisis of representation, a moment when social groups became detached from their traditional parties. […] This disarray in political and cultural representation generated new forms of politics and culture, each attempting to reconstruct the nation by representing the "people," to speak for the people by depicting the people. (126)

Here it is suggested that acts and conventions of political and cultural representation were thrown into crisis due to the economic and social upheaval following The Wall Street Crash. Denning emphasises language and 'depiction' in identifying this crisis. Likewise, the written representations of suicide discussed in this thesis too seem to be entangled with a sense of crisis. In studying these texts, I question if the 'disarray' of 1930s' US society was negotiated through the complexity of suicide representation and whether, and how, productive social commentary is sustained in the face of such uncertainty.

As we have seen, there is a wide feeling of a multifaceted crisis occurring during The Great Depression. Following the analytical approaches of Galbraith, Dublin and Bunzel, and Denning, I propose that this complex feeling of crisis in the 1930s may

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[24] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973), 165.

have been reflected and negotiated through suicide discourses and representations. This interrelation then brings the possibilities of 'social reconstruction' to the fore as an urgent, contemporary concern. I further argue that this interplay between suicide and crisis is brought to light by literary suicidology and its emphasis on uncertainty.

The emphasis on representation, writing, narrative structures, and social relations in literary suicidology and by scholars such as Denning, lends itself to an analysis of the US novel of the 1930s. While this discussion could occur in relation to other modes of cultural production, I suggest that novels most clearly draw out, interrogate, and respond to the questions I intend to analyse. As already noted, Blanchot and Bennett provide cogent reasons for the emphasis on literature. Within this field, I propose that novels bring forth questions of narrative completion and incompletion, individual and social interactions, and representations of suicide, in the most detail. Such a reasoning follows Camus. He compares novels with poetry and essays before noting: "The novel has its logic, its reasonings, its intuition, and its postulates. It also has its requirements of clarity." (97) The conventional form of the novel, writing in a relatively lengthy narrative, foregrounds questions of understanding and 'clarity'. The production processes of novels, in the form of individuals writing texts for audiences which are usually expected to be read privately, is similarly concerned with some of the questions, relating to the interactions of individuals and groups, that I am focusing on.

Key Terms: Complexity and Crisis

Following the work of Dublin and Bunzel in particular, I read suicide as a 'complex social phenomenon'. The word 'complex' here is used to denote multiplicity and difficulty. As my understanding of Camus indicates, a single suicide can be read in

contradicting ways. Dublin and Bunzel likewise draw attention to the myriad factors that can be intertwined and considered in a representation of suicide. Bennett more directly emphasises the 'multifaceted' nature of suicide representation in literature. He stresses 'undecidability' and the complications of trying to make sense of suicide. I suggest that 'complexity' encourages a less doubtful approach than 'undecidability' may imply, and, since this thesis is focused on whether calls for productive social change can be sustained in the face of 'ambivalence', I favour the term 'complexity'. I then combine this notion of suicide as a 'complex social phenomenon' with a sense of social crisis.

As we have seen, the term 'crisis' is used by several scholars in describing the US in the 1930s.[25] I suggest 'crisis' here tends to refer to an urgent and serious social breakdown in understanding. In other words, conventional social orders of meaning seem inadequate when faced with a grave and pressing challenge, such as, in this case, suicide. My use of the word is particularly informed by the work of Denning. Denning highlights a feeling of struggle and turbulence during The Great Depression and how this was manifested in cultural production. Specifically, he identifies a 'crisis of representation'. I contend that this crisis may have been deliberated in the complexity of suicide representation; or perhaps, as suggested by Dublin and Bunzel, that the complexities of suicide come to the fore under the conditions of crisis during The Great Depression. Holly Laird, in discussing suicide and literature, observes: "For various modernist thinkers and writers, articulation of crisis broke open doors to altered discourse and arenas for speculation, freeing modernists to think anew." (543) I intend here to interrogate such 'thinking anew' while also stretching literary suicidology beyond the 'high modernists' foregrounded by scholars such as Laird and Bennett. I

[25] Such as Denning, Eldridge, Currell, Galbraith, Cowley, Dublin and Bunzel, among many others.

will argue in this thesis that the identification and consideration of crisis given rise to in suicide representation may 'open' possibilities for developing how we negotiate suicide as a 'complex social phenomenon', and the potential for identifying and considering discrete forms of 'social reconstruction'.

Chapter Synopsis

Certain criteria emerge for the selection of texts I investigate based on the core concerns of this thesis as described thus far. First, the texts are US novels published during The Great Depression. Second, they feature prominent representations of suicide. Third, in order to analyse the relationships between individuals and society in connection with suicide representation, I have selected texts that set their action in a contemporary US context and in which major characters kill themselves.

The primary difference between this study and current customs in literary suicidology is that I focus on a comparatively narrow temporal and geographic scale. This approach invites the social reading I pursue by providing a relatively coherent context to situate the negotiations of suicide in these texts. This tighter context also encourages the highlighting of an alternative set of primary texts than those conventionally foregrounded. This distinction is chiefly discernible as I expand the suicide canon; for instance, by calling attention to the regularity of suicide in crime fiction.

Chapter 1 will discuss John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* (1934) and a conflict between an individual and their society that results in a suicide in a Cadillac. In this chapter I argue that O'Hara represents suicide as a form of rebellion against contemporary social changes. Since O'Hara's text focuses on many key concerns that

are at the heart of this thesis, this chapter performs a foundational role upon which the rest of the thesis builds. Chapter 2 turns to William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932). Faulkner's representations of suicide in this novel draw attention to crises in racial and patriarchal social order. I propose these are crises of understanding, which in turn indicate that contemporary racist and patriarchal orders of meaning are inadequate. In Chapter 3, I read the suicide of an African American, bisexual writer, Paul Arbian, in Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932). I examine how Thurman presents suicide as an act of individual artistic expression and read this text in 'black nihilist' terms, as defined by Calvin Warren. In Chapter 4, I study Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935). I read suicide in this text as foregrounding a crisis in expressing and sharing the pain of wanting to die. In these four chapters, I contend that distinct, radical forms of 'social reconstruction' are called for in representations of suicide, but that such change is left ultimately unspecified. Although a crisis of comprehension appears to overwhelm the potential for defining how society should respond to suicide in these texts, they concurrently underscore an urgent need for social reform.

Chapter 5 looks at another crime novella, James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1936). This text again represents suicide in a manner that gives rise to a crisis in social order. However, I propose that this crisis is comparatively mitigated when suicide is rendered as an act that can, to some degree, be controlled by conventional sources of authority. Chapter 6 continues the analysis of the crime genre as I study Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940). Similar to the previous chapter, I propose that Chandler represents suicide as a measured problem that not only brings focus to a crisis in the law, but also a reinforcing of patriarchal control. In the final chapter, Chapter 7, I examine Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940). Although, in my

reading, suicide still gives rise to a sense of crisis, this text appears to establish perseverance as a means of helping to regulate against suicide. In the last three chapters, then, I argue that more conservative forms of 'social reconstruction' seem possible in the face of suicide. Rather than a binary distinction between the novels, I suggest there is a subtle difference in emphasis regarding how suicide is situated within and against contemporary social order and understanding that gives rise to calls for relatively more radical or conservative forms of social change.

The principal argument of this thesis is that US novels during The Great Depression represent suicide as a complex social phenomenon which brings forth a social crisis of understanding, and that this feeling of crisis and potential social responses to it can be discerned in discrete ways in each text. As such, I argue that these novels all represent suicide in a manner that highlights some form of serious and urgent social breakdown, which, in turn, provokes discussions on social reform. In the following chapters, then, I will ask: is there a potential for 'altered discourses', 'social reconstruction', and 'thinking anew' in the face of suicide crises? Can there still be such calls for social change alongside the 'undecidability' identified in literary suicidology? If so, can such change be specified, or is suicide only ever an act that is subsumed by negation and ambivalence? And finally, what, if anything, do representations of suicide say about a society which is itself in crisis?

1. The Cadillac Suicide in John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* (1934)

In this chapter I analyse how John O'Hara negotiates individual and social authority in his representation of suicide by gas in a Cadillac in *Appointment in Samarra* (1934). Automobiles in this text indicate a broad sense of social transformation, and I liken this change to the notion of crisis and a breakdown in social regulation over suicide, as set out in this thesis' introduction. As such, I contend that the Cadillac suicide in this text performs a complex negotiation of social and individual control over how one lives and dies. This representation of suicide and the sense of crisis it foregrounds reads as a social indictment and a call for alternative forms of social understanding. In other words, suicide seems to impel new ways of thinking about social relations and how we empathise with the suffering of others. The crisis negotiated in *Appointment in Samarra* is rooted in the concern of where authority lies when an individual attempts to assert their independent identity within a context that seems to preclude such independence. This tension then brings to the fore questions of how we think about and whether we can understand an individual who has killed themselves.

This chapter begins by considering key features of O'Hara's plot and narrative form, before focusing on the text's principal representation of suicide. Here the importance of the Cadillac and the interplay of individual and social control come to the forefront. The next section builds on this emphasis on the Cadillac as it explores

scholarly literature pertaining to O'Hara's novel and automobiles. I propose a greater emphasis on cars encourages a more unsettled and complex reading of individual and social determination in O'Hara's text than conventionally acknowledged in scholarship. The chapter then continues this discussion by focusing on O'Hara's depiction of contemporary society, experiences relating to the automobile in the text, and finally the aftermath of Julian English's suicide. Through this analysis, I investigate questions of social control and how we think about secluded individuals, and not least how the act of individuals separating themselves from society through suicide can be negotiated.

Suicide in a Cadillac

Appointment in Samarra describes the rapid social decline of a Cadillac dealer in a small Pittsburgh town called Gibbsville. Over the course of three Christmas days, Julian English steadily ostracises himself from his wife and friends. The text recounts his social indiscretions and antagonism towards changes in his society, and, in particular, his discomfort with a broadening of Gibbsville's financial elite. I will read these social changes in similar terms to Michael Denning's discussion of social transformation and crisis as considered in this thesis' introduction. This is a society which seems to exemplify Denning's observation regarding 1930s society that, "knowable communities and settled social relations […] were themselves in crisis."[1]

O'Hara employs a multi-perspective mode of narration to render this turbulent social milieu. Julian's narrative is thus disjointed as O'Hara turns to other characters and reflects on the history of Gibbsville and its once 'knowable communities'.

[1] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 119.

Nonetheless, it is the story of Julian's increasing seclusion that dominates the novel. This narrative form then invites both a personal and social consideration, which in turn draws attention to a problem of individual alienation within a transforming society. As Julian's isolation mounts, he becomes increasingly desperate in his efforts to take a greater control of his life. This endeavour is rendered through attempted affairs, fights, and efforts to drive away from his problems. Eventually, Julian decides to lock himself in his garage, in his Cadillac, and switch on the gas. This death thereby acts as a culmination of Julian's antagonism towards his changing society. The text then ends with a return to O'Hara's multi-perspective form as several characters reflect on Julian's suicide. Here the narrative brings a final focus to a crisis in negotiating suicide as a disruptive phenomenon within a context of significant social change.

The night of Julian's death begins with a failed sexual liaison with a young journalist, Miss Cartwright. Once she leaves, Julian's isolation and confusion are brought to the fore. He drinks heavily while bemoaning his age, marriage, and the way he believes others see him as old and lecherous. In response to these concerns, he decides to go to his car:

> He found he had two cigarettes burning, one in the ash tray on the floor, and the other getting stuck in the varnish on the edge of the photograph. He half planned a lie to explain how the burn got there and then, for the first time, he knew it would not make any difference.
> […]
> He got a package of cigarettes from the table and took the new bottle of Scotch. He wished he had time to look around the room to see if everything was all right, no more cigarettes burning or anything like that, but there wasn't time. There wasn't time to put out the lights or pick up anything or straighten the rugs. Not even time to put on a coat, pull up his suspenders or anything. He went out on the porch and down the steps and opened the garage door and closed it behind him. He shivered a little from the bit of cold, and it was cold in the garage, so he hurried. He had to see about the windows. They had to be closed. The ventilator in the roof was closed for the winter.
> He climbed in the front seat and started the car. It started with a merry, powerful hum, ready to go. "There, the bastards," said Julian, and

> smashed the clock with the bottom of the bottle, to give them an approximate time. It was 10:41.
> There was nothing to do now but wait. He smoked a little, hummed for a minute or two, and had three quick drinks and was on his fourth when he lay back and slumped down in the seat. At 10:50, by the clock in the rear seat, he tried to get up. He had not the strength to help himself, and at ten minutes past eleven no one could have helped him, no one in the world.[2]

At once, this suicide scene suggests Julian's control and a feeling of uncertainty. The phrase, 'he knew it would not make any difference' expresses a sense of fatalism and inevitability. However, the expression is indirect and unclear. The text does not state why 'it would not make any difference'. Although in light of the suicide the line reads as an acknowledgement of the death to come, it also intimates Julian's social atomisation throughout the text. Specifically, it may 'not make any difference' because his wife has left him. The fact that Julian 'knows' may emphasise his volition, but it is uncertain how he 'knows'. The ambiguity of the writing and key terms – such as 'bastards' and 'any difference' – is set against this conviction. In turn, this lack of clarity working alongside Julian's certitude highlights a deliberation of loneliness and individual, agential control as separated from common understanding.

Julian's sense of purpose and agency is more pronounced as the scene continues. It is, again, unclear why there is 'no time' before Julian must go his car, but the confidence Julian has in his urgency underscores his resolve. The lack of time then introduces an abstract threat to his resolution. It is suggested that he must act quickly or not at all. Yet when his course of action is underway, the narrative slows and there does seem to be time. The repetition of the word 'closed' then traces a mental checklist as Julian ensures his suicide. His thoughtfulness, even though he is drunk, is foregrounded by this care and by his decision to break the clock. By smashing his timepiece, Julian

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[2] John O'Hara, *Appointment in Samarra* (London: Vintage, 2008), 232-33.

takes a form of control. It is an action which allows him to 'give' something and marks the end of his hurry. As he breaks the clock Julian provides the clearest explanation as to why he is killing himself: 'There, the bastards'. This amorphous, aggressive term 'bastards', and the vague but focusing term 'there', suggests that Julian sees himself against an abstract social whole. His suicide is directed as a challenge against these unnamed 'bastards'. Because this antagonism between Julian and his society culminates in suicide, it is a confrontation that is finally marked, paradoxically, by ambiguity, uncertainty, and an aggressive resolve.

Since this representation of suicide ends by drawing attention to Julian's isolation through the repetition that 'no one' could help him, a sense of social failure lingers in the aftermath of the death. Likewise, Julian's separation from society is emphasised by his seclusion in his closed garage, in his closed car. While this isolation at first appears to enable Julian to exercise some control as he smashes the clock and ends his haste, it is also evident that his loneliness is a weakness. It is stressed that 'he had not the strength to help himself'. The line 'he tried to get up' similarly brings forth a question of Julian's command in this scene. Julian's physical position, 'slumped down in his seat', then implies that he may be overcome by the car. Maurice Blanchot emphasises such questions of control in relation to suicide:

> suicide is a leap. It is the passage from the certainty of an act that has been planned, consciously decided upon, and vigorously executed, to something which disorients every project, remains foreign to all decisions – the indecisive and uncertain, the crumbling of the inert and the obscurity of the nontrue.[3]

Julian's volition at the start of the suicide scene leads to a sense of 'the indecisive and uncertain'. The inability to 'help' Julian is then intertwined with an inability to

[3] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1982) First published 1955, 104.

understand him. His suicide ‘remains foreign to all decisions’, and the conviction evinced in his ‘planned, consciously decided upon, and vigorously executed’ suicide is marked by uncertainty. I propose this ambiguity arises particularly as a question of individual and social control, and a concern over who is responsible for ‘helping’ Julian. Indeed, the Cadillac underscores this tension between autonomy and social determination, as the vehicle both empowers its driver while being socially regulated through a system of traffic, road related rules, and social expectations.

This tension, and the uncertainty noted by Blanchot, is elicited by the absence of a clear and singular reason as to why Julian kills himself. Andrew Bennett, as first considered in this thesis' introduction, similarly observes:

> Suicide, ‘a death like no other’, is fundamentally ambivalent and may be considered an instance of the profound and multifaceted undecidability by which literature itself is constituted.[4]

This ‘profound and multifaceted undecidability’ is brought to a critical juncture in the representation of Julian's suicide. Indeed, such ‘undecidability’ is routinely emphasised by the ambiguity in the text, and not least in this depiction of suicide. In particular, the roles of self- and social-determination are called into question. On the one hand, social influence, in a Durkheimian sense, appears to be fundamental to Julian's suicide: it is a death which is directed against others. The phrase ‘the bastards’ highlights this interaction with social governance. On the other hand, the text's complexity renders this confrontation as an uncertain negotiation. It seems to insist on a coherent social interpretation, and the possibility that Julian may be ‘helped’ before he dies, while undermining the possibility of such an understanding. O'Hara then adds a particular

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[4] Andrew Bennett, *Suicide Century: Literature and Suicide from James Joyce to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), 3.

distinction to this consideration of suicide as conditioned by complex individual-social relations through his figuration of the automobile.

In this scene, and I will argue in the text as a whole, the automobile has a dual function. At once, Julian is in command of the machine and yet simultaneously his actions appear to be manipulated by it. In the passage narrating the suicide, the question of control between Julian and his Cadillac comes to the fore in the descriptions of humming. Initially it is the car that hums. Indeed, it produces a 'merry, powerful hum, ready to go', as if it is encouraging the suicide. Moments later, Julian joins in and hums himself. This shared activity may seem innocuous, but it mirrors a broader sense that Julian is succumbing to the car. He 'slumps' and sinks and dies within it. Julian's individualism and attempt to break from society, in Durkheimian theory, is likewise socially conditioned. Émile Durkheim comments:

> As these currents are collective, they have, by virtue of their origin, an authority which they impose upon the individual and they drive him more vigorously on the way to which he is already inclined by the state of moral distress directly aroused in him by the disintegration of society. Thus, at the very moment that, with excessive zeal, he frees himself from the social environment, he still submits to its influence. However individualized a man may be, there is always something collective remaining – the very depression and melancholy resulting from this same exaggerated individualism.[5]

Julian's suicide can be read as a rebuke to a 'disintegration' of social relations as it marks an 'exaggerated individualism' which results in death. Although Julian is suffocated by his automobile, in many ways this smothering seems to be an exacerbation of his own 'distress'. The car, in such a framework, can thus be understood as a social object that is used to negotiate and help define individual purposes, such as, in this case, suicide. Following this Durkheimian line of thinking, Julian's death seems

[5] Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, ed. George Simpson, trans. John A. Spaulding (London: Routledge, 2002), 173.

to insist on a social response which could better manage his antagonism. The complexity of suicide, though, and as discussed in this thesis' introduction, concurrently troubles such social reform.

The Cadillac brings particular focus to this unsettled social relationship. It is Julian's choice to close himself away and alone in his parked car. Yet he also uses the automobile as a means of communication by breaking the clock inside. This act, and the suicide which follows, thus bring forth a tension between isolation and interaction. The focus on the clock and the garage prompts a reading that foregrounds time and place in negotiating this tension. I argue, as such, that Julian's suicide is a complex deliberation of a contemporary crisis in individual agency. This suicide sets independent agential authority against social governance, and the Cadillac highlights this confrontation as a particular, contemporary, and ongoing problem. The question ultimately raised by this suicide, then, is: how can it be responded to when it is mired in such uncertainty?

Scholarship on *Appointment in Samarra* and Automobiles

In the relatively limited scholarship on *Appointment in Samarra*, the automobile has had little prominence.[6] This may be surprising given O'Hara's insistency that, "There is no other ending for this story […] This man has to die by motor car, by Cadillac motor car. It is equally true that the whole thing must take place in 1930"[7]. I propose that the

[6] Matthew Bruccoli notes: "a car is never just a car" (114) but does not go much further in assessing what the car is. John Updike likewise acknowledges but does not interrogate the constant presence of cars. Dorothy Lehman Hoerr and Scott Donaldson only mention the car as a matter of fact. Jesse Bier shows greater interest in the Cadillac but only in terms of Julian's role as a car salesman and how this socially positions him. Matthew J. Bruccoli, *The O'Hara Concern: A Biography of John O'Hara* (Pittsburgh, PA: U of Pittsburgh P, 1975); John Updike, 'O'Hara's Messy Masterpiece', *The New Republic*, 198 (18) (1988), 38-41; Dorothy Lehman Hoerr, 'O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* (Fate and a Sense of Belonging)', *Explicator*, 62 (3) (2004), 167-69; Scott Donaldson, 'Appointment with the Dentist: O'Hara's Naturalistic Novel', *Modern Fiction Studies* 14 (4) (1968), 435-42; Jesse Bier, 'O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra*: His First and Only Real Novel', *College English*, 25 (2) (1963), 135-41
[7] Frank McShane, *The Life of John O'Hara* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), 188.

Cadillac is often overlooked as it compels a sense of contradiction between individual and social authority over Julian's suicide. Critics such as Matthew J. Bruccoli, Dorothy Lehman Hoerr, and Lee Sigelman, among others, have attended to the conflicts in Julian's social experiences. They evidence and stress how important communal relationships are in *Appointment in Samarra*. The tendency, though, to suggest a singular reason for the suicide, be it alienation, competition, or class pressure, has, I argue, led to a downplaying of the automobile. The car does not allow for such particularity and resolution due to its paradoxical functions within the text. By foregrounding the automobile in reading O'Hara's representation of suicide, the social relations that have been emphasised in scholarship on *Appointment in Samarra* may be recast as a more complex, unsettled negotiation of individual agency.

The quote above from O'Hara is firm on two key points: the Cadillac and the year 1930. Since O'Hara was writing in the early 1930s, and *Appointment in Samarra* was not published until 1934, the setting of 1930 is one that is written and read in light of The Great Depression. O'Hara is not explicit as to why setting the text in 1930 was essential. The most likely explanation is that the year 1930 calls attention to The Wall Street Crash and the beginning of The Great Depression. At various points in the novel O'Hara mocks the optimism that still held in 1930 that The Crash was just "a strong technical reaction." (*Appointment* 54) With the hindsight from 1934, the moments of despair in the text can be read as premonitions. Julian's personal financial difficulties and feelings of social breakdown then seem to be harbingers of what is to come. Julian is himself repeatedly troubled in the text and particularly before his suicide by the fact that he too is about to turn thirty (231). O'Hara's emphasis on the year, and the setting of 1930, as such, encourages a reading of Julian's personal crisis as a negotiation of a broader social crisis.

The Cadillac urges likewise, but it also draws attention to a more complex multiplicity. Indeed, the automobile highlights a similar sense of contradiction and plurality in the 1930s as stressed by Louis I. Dublin and Bessie Bunzel, as discussed in this thesis introduction. I linger here on the Cadillac as it is not only a pervasive figure throughout the text, but also because it plays such a crucial role in Julian's suicide. The Cadillac brand, in particular, advances a complex reading of Julian's suicide. Benjamin and Christina Schwarz observe that O'Hara "was fascinated by the pattern of a necktie, the make of a car, the brand of Scotch […] the club joined, the college attended, and how these define – in fact, determine – character."[8] Julian's ownership of a Cadillac, particularly as he drives a "demonstrator" (*Appointment* 16), similarly indicates this role of objects in defining personality. The Cadillac brand in the 1930s was associated with innovation and luxury. The production of the first 16-cylinder engine, the Cadillac V-16, in 1930 was an important step in the production of high-end automobiles. Julian's profession as a Cadillac dealer and owner thus intimate a respected social position associated with newness and wealth.

The Cadillac thereby underscores a sense of social and physical comfort. Advertisements for Cadillacs in the 1930s frequently appeared in magazines such as *Vogue* and stressed this 'luxury' above all else. As Heon Stevenson notes, "Among upmarket automobile makers, Cadillac's advertising was probably the most consistently and brazenly snobbish, and copywriters concentrated on appealing to a desire for social acceptability and public recognition."[9] A characteristic advert from 1931 reads:

> To ride in the Cadillac V-12 is to know at once why it is ranked so highly among the fine cars of the world – for the appeal of its 12-cylinder performance is well-nigh irresistible. Even those who are accustomed to the foremost automobiles are finding in the V-12 a new conception of

[8] Benjamin and Christina Schwarz, 'John O'Hara's Protectorate', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 285 (3) (2000), 109

[9] Heon Stevenson, *American Automobile Advertising, 1930-1980: An Illustrated History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 99.

> motoring luxury. In fact, a V-12 demonstration, almost without exception, makes conventional conceptions of performance and luxury seem commonplace.[10]

This passage seems lost for words, forced to repeat 'luxury' while at the same time viewing the term as 'commonplace'. The stress on being beyond 'convention' is typical of the Cadillac approach to advertising. But this advert simultaneously creates the 'common' by demarcating a shared understanding of what a Cadillac represents. This friction between being special and yet ordinarily recognisable, I propose, is akin to the individual-social interaction being negotiated in Julian's suicide.

This tension is brought to the fore in this advert from 1933:

> Just as certain types of habiliment are made practically obligatory by the occasion, so does the event of unquestioned refinement dictate a motor car of unquestioned prestige. … For years it has been Cadillac's privilege to build for the select occasions of American society a motor car eminently befitting the need. Indeed, it is doubtful if any commercial commodity is more eloquent of its owner's position in life than a Cadillac automobile. … Such prestige, of course, can be born of one thing only – a well-nigh universal agreement that Cadillac cars represent the highest attainable perfection in every phase of their excellence.[11]

This extravagantly written advert, which verges on parody, again stresses individuality through social hierarchy. Terms such as 'privilege', 'prestige', and 'select occasions', underline that Cadillacs are only for a certain tier of society. These adverts produce a 'common' class that cannot afford a Cadillac in order to outline a 'privileged', more autonomous group that can choose to identify themselves through the automobile. Julian belongs to this latter class, and, thus, his use of the Cadillac, not least in his suicide, can be considered a 'privileged' means of publicly demarcating his identity.

This division between public and private perception is highlighted by the 1932 Cadillac adverts in *Vogue*. These adverts focused on the interiors of Cadillacs and were

[10] 'Advertisement: Cadillac (Cadillac Motor Car Company)', *Vogue,* 78 (3) (Aug 1st 1931), 72a.
[11] 'Advertisement: Cadillac Motor Car Co. (Cadillac Motor Car Company)', *Vogue*, 81 (7) (Apr 1st 1933), 80a. (Ellipses in original)

explicitly directed at women. It is in these advertisements, though, that the individual authority afforded by an automobile is accentuated: "In one Cadillac you might find edges piped in a contrasting color; in another the tailoring is finished with flat French seams. By these and other means, exceptional character is given to the interior of each Cadillac"[12]. The outside of the Cadillac displays one's social role, while the inside represents a discrete personality. By reading these Cadillac adverts alongside one another, a negotiation between individual and social control comes to the fore in relation to the Cadillac brand. Following Durkheimian theory, the Cadillac can be understood as regulating an 'owner's position in life'. With this reading in mind, Julian's death in his Cadillac suggests it is an imbalance in social regulation that is the principal influence conditioning his suicide. His 'position in life' is not effectively maintained, which, in Durkheim's terms, increases the risk of an 'anomic suicide'.

Such a negotiation of social regulation can be found in other contemporary literary representations of automobiles. US novels in the 1920s and 1930s both celebrated and warned of the power of the car. Frequently motor vehicles were represented as offering new social possibilities, be they signifiers of wealth or a means of earning. Cars also, though, isolate individuals, fracture communities, and cause death. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930-1936), motor vehicles indicate and enable economic success but also violence and ruin (Myrtle and arguably Gatsby in the former, Charley Anderson in the latter). John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) presents the automobile as necessary for the survival of the Joad family while at the same time being the site of the grandfather's death. Similarly, Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932) describes a

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[12] 'Advertisement: Cadillac Motor Car Co. (Cadillac Motor Car Company)', *Vogue*, 80 (5) (Sept 1st 1932), Cover 2.

motor vehicle fragmenting the Lester family, causing multiple deaths including that of the grandmother, while still providing an opportunity for Dude to explore his autonomy. In these novels, the car destabilises traditional forms of community while affording a new means to exercise individual self-determination.

Cars proliferated in US literature as well as in everyday life during this time. Between 1920 and 1940 the number of State Motor Vehicle Registrations in the US increased from 9.2 million to 32.5 million.[13] As scholars such as Richard Longstreth and Christopher Wells detail, the considerable rise in car use led to a physical remodelling of US towns and cities.[14] This sense of dramatic change in the landscape, as roads and parking lots began to dominate, is also discernible in the emergence of a car culture. This new culture, or way of living, became visible in the transformation of social interactions. I suggest this substantial and complex change can be read through the terminology of crisis. As discussed in this thesis' introduction, Denning describes the 1930s as a period in which there was a broad cultural change. In his terms, the reworking of US society was a laborious, "painstaking and difficult [birth]" (xvii), which led to new forms of representation and behaviour. This change can be termed a "painful crisis" or 'disturbance' (213), in Durkheim's language. Such a crisis, in Durkheimian theory, results in an imbalance of social regulation and an increased risk of 'anomic' suicides. Julian's suicide seems to result from both this crisis and, in Durkheim's terms, "excessive individuation" (175). It can thus be described as both 'anomic' and 'egoistic', and, like the car, a combination and negotiation of social and individual control.

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[13] Statistics from Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/summary95/mv200.pdf> [accessed 18 October 2016]
[14] Richard Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920-1950* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); Christopher W. Wells, *Car Country: An Environmental History* (Seattle, WA.: U of Washington P, 2013)

Raymond Williams specifies this paradox of communal and independent authority in automobile practices. Like Durkheim, Williams highlights how individuals interact with society:

> Looked at from right outside, the traffic flows and their regulation are clearly a social order of a determined kind, yet what is experienced inside them – in the conditioned atmosphere and internal music of this windowed shell – is movement, choice of direction, the pursuit of self-determined private purposes. All the other shells are moving, in comparable ways but for their own different private ends. They are not so much other people, in any full sense, but other units[15]

Within what Williams' calls the 'windowed shell' there is a double experience. The driver is at once aware of signs outside the vehicle while being enclosed in their own 'conditioned atmosphere'. There is a regulated flow of 'self-determined private purposes'. The public order and private shell identified by Williams, prompts an interpretation of the practice of driving as an unsettled negotiation between social and individual determination. As Andrew Warnes comments, "The open and unlocated nature of [Williams'] description certainly recognizes that the tensions of modern city traffic […] are becoming symptomatic of a global landscape based on groupable forms of individual passion."[16] Williams' passage identifies a strong sense of feeling in the car experience that, at once and in similarity to suicide, arises for the individual yet dissipates in the public realm.

This privacy or isolation in automobiles has also been read as actively restricting alternative forms of communal identification. Paul Gilroy, building on Williams' theories, proposes that cars engender "a privatisation that confiscates the possibility of collective experience, synchronised suffering, and acting in concert."[17] Gilroy suggests

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[15] Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (London: Hogarth, 1983), 188.
[16] Andrew Warnes, *How the Shopping Cart Explains Global Consumerism* (California: U of California P, 2019), 106.
[17] Paul Gilroy, *Darker than Blue: The W. E. B. Du Bois Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2010), 22. Gilroy goes on: "Mass automobility posed fundamental problems of social solidarity and political connection." (23)

that privatised automobile experience actively takes away the possibility of collective opposition from those whose suffering could otherwise be shared. Such isolation is stressed by O'Hara as he repeats the term 'closed' in his representation of Julian's suicide. Julian's suffering in his car occurs in a fashion that cannot be 'synchronised' or alleviated by others. The final affirmation that there is no one that can help him while he dies in his Cadillac, highlights the social breakdown that is coterminous with this detachment.

These scholars, and particularly Longstreth and Wells, further outline that cars brought forth a change in conceptions of space. John Urry specifies this new perception:

> Automobility is a Frankenstein-created monster, extending the individual into realms of freedom and flexibility whereby inhabiting the car can be positively viewed, but also constraining car 'users' to live their lives in spatially-stretched and time-compressed ways. The car, one might suggest, is more literally Weber's 'iron cage' of modernity, motorized, moving and privatized.[18]

Williams consolidates the new perceptions, paradoxes, and practices of automobile living under the term 'mobile privatisation'. This concept, I suggest, entails both the 'spatial stretching' observed by Urry and the sense of enclosure implied by 'privatisation'. In *Appointment in Samarra*, this duality is seen in Julian's negotiation of his individual authority and social control through his suicide. Urry's turn to Max Weber and 'modernity' brings attention more directly back to the early twentieth-century. Indeed, the first English translation of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), and the introduction of the term 'iron cage', was by American sociologist Talcott Parsons in 1930. O'Hara's emphasis on the Cadillac thus stresses a context in which concepts of time and space are changing. Julian's suicide in

[18] John Urry, 'Inhabiting the Car', *The Sociological Review*, 54 (1) (2006), 20.

the closed, relatively stable space of the garage then seems an attempt to find some control during this period of flux.

The car, as such, has a dual role in providing individual freedom and also new forms of social order. Stephen Groening particularly underscores the role of autonomy in 'mobile privatisation', which he describes as an 'ambivalent identity': "The new freedoms and mobilities available through this identity are crucial for Williams, because, in his view, mobile privatization is an identity chosen by people, rather than one forced upon them."[19] Another parallel between Williams' and Durkheim's theories highlighted here is the emphasis on volition. This conscious choice when manifested in suicide leads to what Blanchot describes as 'the greatest contradictions': "The deliberateness in suicide, its free and imposing side, whereby we strive to remain ourselves, serves essentially to protect us from what is at stake in this event." (102) 'Remaining ourselves' through suicide seems impossible. If automobiles provide a means of creating and practicing a mobile privatised identity and, as Blanchot indicates, suicide calls self-identity into question, then Julian's suicide in his Cadillac presents a distinct and complex problem. Julian appears to communicate an identity that is defined by marking the end of his communication. This death, due to the negotiation of individual and social control, echoes the creative and destructive aspects of suicide analysed by Bennett. I argue that this complexity being foregrounded in the Cadillac suicide thus gives rise to a crisis in agential authority. This crisis as manifested through the Cadillac suicide appears to be an urgent, contemporary concern that demands a social response.

[19] Stephen Groening, 'From 'a Box in the Theater of the World' to 'the World as Your Living Room': Cellular Phones, Television and Mobile Privatization', *New Media & Society*, 12 (8) (2010), 1341.

Julian's Society

Julian's most consequential act, prior to his suicide, is to throw a drink at Harry Reilly. This act of social indiscretion and aggression begins Julian's ostracisation that is traced throughout the rest of the novel. Harry is almost certainly one of 'the bastards' being referred to by Julian when he kills himself. In this section, I want to focus on the characterisation of Harry, and Julian's violence towards him, as a means of distilling the phrase 'the bastards' and the social antagonism that leads to Julian's suicide. The narrative lingers on Julian's thoughts about throwing a drink in Harry's face:

> Why, he wondered, did he hate Harry Reilly? Why couldn't he stand him? What was there about Reilly that caused him to say to himself: "If he starts one more of those moth-eaten stories I'll throw this drink in his face." But he knew he would not throw this drink or any other drink in Harry Reilly's face. Still, it was fun to think about it. […] At least one lump would hit Reilly in the eye, and the liquid would splash all over his shirt, slowly wilting it as the Scotch and Soda trickled down the bosom to the crevice at the waistcoat. The other people would stand in amazed confusion. "Why, Ju!" they would say. Caroline would say, "Julian!" Froggy Ogden would be alarmed, but he would burst out laughing. So would Elizabeth Gorman, laughing her loud haw-haw-haw, not because she enjoyed seeing her husband insulted, nor because she wanted to be on Julian's side; but because it would mean a situation, something to have been in on. (11-12)

As in the suicide scene, this passage invites a consideration of individual practice and social interpretation. Here, though, Julian's understanding of how his peers will react, later revealed to be his misapprehension, is stated more clearly. Julian expects his attack on Harry will be a welcome social rupture. As he imagines the event unfold, the physical action plays out 'slowly'. Terms such as 'wilt' and 'trickle' depict a gradual and detailed vision. The lump of ice that will hit Harry's eye and the liquid that will 'splash' brings out the more violent side of Julian's intentions. This lengthy sentence suggests a pause before the 'other people' break out into an 'alarmed' laughter. However, in much the same way that Julian isolates himself in his car prior to his

suicide, he ultimately does not see the audience on his ‘side’. Instead, this passage suggests that Julian enjoys being in control and creating a ‘situation’. The shifting pace of the narrative underscores a sense of division. Even here, as Julian imagines his peers enjoying his aggression, he pauses and separates himself from ‘the other people’.

This separation evokes what I propose is the central problem of agential control in the text. Julian is insistent to himself that ‘he would not throw this drink’, yet, moments later, he does just this. His change of mind is perhaps less surprising than the absence of justification. The narrative jumps from the denial in the passage above to the realisation of the highball already having been thrown two pages later. The text describes the thoughts before the drink is thrown and the aftermath of the following day, but the encounter itself is omitted. By only partly outlining his mental processes, O’Hara raises the question of what ultimately makes Julian act. Here the ‘profound and multifaceted undecidability’ of suicide and literature, as described by Bennett, is brought to the fore. In the suicide scene, Julian’s intentions when he ‘tried to get up’ are likewise unclear. This absence of complete explication brings focus to a crisis of comprehension, which, in turn, encourages a new, unspecified, alternative understanding. Such ‘thinking anew’, to recall the phrase from Holly Laird, is of central import in navigating the concerns at the heart of this thesis in terms of whether social reform can be identified in the face of suicide’s complexity.

This writing style, with its omissions of key events and emphasis on varied points of view, stresses an exploration of social governance. The multi-perspective mode employed by O’Hara, moving between narrators and points of view, enables an exploration of the ‘other units’ in Gibbsville. This narrative form highlights comfort and order, as the various characters are separated yet function as a controlled whole. There is a significant sense of breathing space within the text when it shifts to different

viewpoints. These varied perspectives only intermittently engage with the suffering that Julian's story evokes, and such moments of relief undercut the tension of the novel. However, this decentred form also underlines the collective governance in the society that O'Hara depicts. Every individual explored in the text works alone and in tandem with others to create a seemingly stable construction. This structure in turn spurs a consideration of Julian's isolation as well as the struggle of his society to understand his actions, and not least his suicide.

O'Hara's narrative process of organised disunity appears to recall and adapt Henry James' point of view focalisation. Roslyn Jolly describes the effects of James' approach between 1895 and the early 1900s:

> Whether in 'subjective' third-person narratives organized around limiting centers of consciousness, or in possibly unreliable first-person narratives, the characters' privilege of seeing their lives from their own perspectives displaces the authorial privilege of omniscience as the dominant mode of perception and narration.[20]

Appointment in Samarra's use of restricted third-person and moments of first-person narration enacts a 'displacement of omniscience'. O'Hara, though, goes further than James with this destabilisation of central control through a process of omission. At key instances the narrative shifts focus away from the interior thought processes of characters and even, on occasion, from any point of view. Examples of such absences include when Julian throws the drink at Harry, the absence of Julian's thought process in the suicide scene, and, as will be discussed later, whether Julian has an affair with Helene. These moments when the text evades expected explications undermine not only a sense of 'omniscience', but also the 'limited centres of consciousness'. O'Hara does not sustain 'the characters' privilege of seeing their own lives from their own

[20] Roslyn Jolly, *Henry James: History, Narrative, Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) <www.oxfordscholarship.com> [accessed 11 March 2017]

perspectives'. Instead, *Appointment in Samarra* offers incomplete glimpses of lives driving past, which are only partly articulated and partially comprehensible.

This narrative process then brings to the fore the effects and failures of social governance. *Appointment in Samarra* is marked by a lack of communication and a sense of social breakdown. This is seen in unfinished storylines, the omission of key details, the role of the automobile, Julian's isolation, his misapprehensions, and so on. Most prominently, this breakdown is realised in the complex representation of suicide. Julian's death is both an act of communication, particularly emphasised in his exclamation 'There, the bastards' and in breaking the clock, as well as a failure of communication, as the secluded, 'closed' setting highlights. It is such complexity that brings forth a crisis in agential control – this is a crisis of understanding and regulating an individual which arises from the multifaceted nature of the text and Julian's actions. The references to financial difficulties, the Cadillac, and the importance of 1930 then situate this crisis as a contemporary challenge during The Great Depression.

This emphasis on individual authority during The Great Depression is also found in Julian's confrontation with Harry. In the aftermath of Julian's throwing of the drink, his wife Caroline warns, "there's a depression in this country, and Harry Reilly's practically the only man around here with any money." (*Appointment* 28-29) She suggests "the real reason why [Julian] threw the drink" (28) is that he and his friends all owe Harry money. While the practicalities of financial concerns seem to be of some import, Caroline stresses that it is the feeling of social embarrassment that is of most concern: "The things you called me on the way home – whore and bitch and a lot worse – they weren't anything compared to the public humiliation." (29) The misogyny and abuse described by Caroline is presented as an aside against the more important concern of social perception. Caroline ultimately draws attention not to financial worries,

personal invectives, alcoholism, or impoliteness, but to how Julian is viewed by his peers. This 'public humiliation' is a form of social regulation, but Julian does not change his behaviour in the face of such social reprimands. Following Durkheimian theory, the failure of this social governance would be a principal cause of his suicide.

In addition to Harry's financial authority, heritage is an important driving force for Julian's antagonism that also reflects this problem of social regulation. Julian regularly highlights Harry's Irish background (i.e. 24). The Schwarz's consider the importance Harry's financial power, his heritage, and the 1930s: "By the 1930s the local elite had lost so much ground that in *Appointment in Samarra* the aptly named Julian English's rash compulsion to put the Irish arriviste Harry Reilly in his place leads to English's demise rather than reinforcing his position in society." (110) Because Harry's wealth places him above Julian in Gibbsville's hierarchy in the context of The Depression, there is a new social structure that Julian has to contend with. The drink throwing scene, both in its original narrative form and in the Schwarz's subsequent retelling of it, brings to the fore these changes to white capitalistic culture as represented in *Appointment in Samarra*. Specifically, Julian seems preoccupied with and suspicious of a broadening conception of 'whiteness'. His apparent fears that he no longer has the same agential authority in the contemporary context of the 1930s is particularly highlighted in these musings on race and heritage. This diminished control, in turn, seems to lead to his suicide.

Harry is characterised in many ways as a stock Irishman. This depiction brings the discourse on 'whiteness' to the forefront:

> Reilly told stories in paragraphs. While he was speaking he would lean forward with an arm on his knee, like a picture you have seen of a cowboy. When he came to the end of the paragraph he would look quickly over his shoulder, as though he expected to be arrested before finishing the story; he would finger his tie and close his mouth tight, and then he would turn back to his audience and go into the next paragraph:

> "…So Pat said…" It was funny to watch people listening to Harry telling a story. If they took a sip of a drink in the middle of a paragraph, they did it slowly as though concealing it. And they always knew when to laugh, even when it was a Catholic joke, because Reilly signalled the pay-off line by slapping his leg just before it was delivered. […] Harry had a great reputation as a wit – a witty Irishman. (11)

Reilly is portrayed as a stereotype: the 'witty Irishman' telling comic stories to a drunken audience. This typecasting is emphasised by his desire to be like a 'cowboy', an established US figure, but only appearing as a 'picture' of one. Harry is vilified within the novel through a negative representation of an Irish character that is typical in the O'Hara oeuvre. As Joseph Browne notes, "as the reader progresses through the O'Hara canon, he begins to wonder, not only why the novelist so despises Harry, but why he is repelled by anyone who is Irish."[21] Nonetheless, this passage highlights a sense of comfort around Harry. The fact the audience 'always knew when to laugh' indicates an organised atmosphere governed by appropriate social cues. As with Caroline's assessment of 'humiliation', the narrative here emphasises 'reputation'. Harry, unlike Julian, fits into these new social norms.

Julian ties these changes in social hierarchy to the early 1930s when he insults another one of his peers, Bobby Herrmann:

> "Depression or no depression, I think the membership committee ought to draw the line somewhere," said Julian. "I don't mind Jews or Negroes, or even a few people with leprosy. They have souls, the same as you or I. But when a man goes to his club he likes to think he's going to associate with human beings, and not some form of reptile life. Or is it insect? Turn around, Herrmann, till I decide just what you are." (77)

In a similar manner to when he throws the drink at Harry, Julian here tries to secure a position of authority over others. He appeals to racial hierarchy in order to suggest that Herrmann is outside of conventional social order. Ironically, it is Julian who has crossed

[21] Joseph Browne, 'John O'Hara and Tom McHale: How Green Is Their Valley', in *Irish-American Fiction: Essays in Criticism*, eds. Daniel J. Casey, Robert E. Rhodes (New York, NY: AMS Press, 1979), 130.

'the line'. As Julian notes how The Depression has resulted in changes to the club's social structure, the advance of Harry's social position due to the financial collapse is recalled. Julian's throwing of the drink appears then to be a direct challenge to these contemporary social changes. In turn, his suicide can be clarified as a similar rebellion against this reformed social structure, and, in Julian's terms, these 'bastards', and thus another act that appears to seek a form of control that Julian feels has been lost.

This social antagonism is foregrounded when Herrmann goes on to admonish Julian for throwing the drink. In his rejoinder, Herrmann particularly emphasises his own feeling of membership as well as the wider contemporary US context:

> "When there was a war, I was in it. I wore a uniform. I wasn't one of these God damn slackers playing sojer boy at some college. […] Yes, sir. When old Uncle Sam needed me, I heeded the call and made the world safe for democracy, and when the war was over I stopped fighting. I didn't do like some people that put on a uniform back in 1917 and then did their fighting by throwing drinks around in the presence of respectable people at a country club, thirteen or fourteen years after the war was over. Nineteen-thirty. That's what some people are. Veterans of 1930. The Battle of Lantenengo Country Club Smoking Room. Surprise attack."
> The others were laughing, and Julian knew he was coming off a very bad second best. He finished his drink and rose to go.
> "Not driving you away, are we?" said Bobby (78)

Herrmann highlights his sense of belonging by stressing his 'uniform' and how he 'heeded a national call'. Herrmann's language of making 'the world safe for democracy' echoes orthodox political rhetoric, while Julian is implied to have fallen short of such conventional order by not taking a greater part in the war effort.[22] The short sharp sentences as Herrmann turns to 'Nineteen-thirty' highlight this separation. By mocking Julian's throwing of a drink as a petty, personal war compared to The First World War, Herrmann indicates that Julian is seeking to claim an authority through violence which he does not deserve. The use of the term 'driving' at the end of this

[22] Julian had been part of the Student Army Training Corps (81).

passage then seems prescient. Julian is both choosing to go and being pushed away in an experience which is akin to how he feels in his Cadillac. Echoing the structure of the novel itself, I will return to this parallel between Julian's violence, driving, and the war later in this chapter. Here, though, I want to underscore Julian's isolation in this social milieu and how it is manifested in his suicide.

Hoerr describes this problem as Julian's confusion "between feeling a strong affinity for Gibbsville and an uncertainty about whether he belongs there." (168) The insecurity displayed when Julian throws his drink at Harry, both in acting impulsively and in misapprehending other people's reactions, stems from this unsettled social positioning. His suicide likewise results from this sense of insecurity and the failure of social governance which attends it. The considerations of racial and financial hierarchy in the text give rise to this question of social integration and regulation, while Julian's discomfort with contemporary social changes exacerbates his sense of diminished control in the text. He then appears to desire greater independence, but his efforts to exercise his own agential authority results in him becoming increasingly alone. These confrontations between Julian and his peers finally, and directly, lead to his suicide; these 'others' of the country club are 'the bastards' that Julian challenges.

Julian thus appears to be responding to changes in his society with his suicide. The transformations of social hierarchy as based on wealth and heritage in the 1930s, are problematic for Julian as they arrive alongside his declining authority. Harry's new money or Herrmann's involvement in the war are privileged above Julian's familial background. Such change, in the sense of significant social transformation, is akin to the crisis and social breakdown of The Great Depression as described by Denning. Indeed, Julian's views on heritage and wealth indicate that he seeks a nostalgic return to the past. As Julian himself comments as he overlooks a golf course: "This was real. […]

The farmlands that once, only a little more than a century ago, and less than that in some cases, had been wild country, infested with honest-to-God Indians and panther and wildcat." (*Appointment* 94-5) However, the automobile and the suicide prompt a more complex reading than this fanciful nostalgia proposes. The car is not simply a negative force in the text, and Julian does not appear to be calling for a complete restoration of a pre-car past. Instead, the novel seems to invite a new, unspecified alternative to this crisis of agency, which would retain the independence found in the car while managing its social influence.

Driving and the Automobile

The problems Julian has with his contemporary society continue to play out in his interactions with his automobile. But there is greater emphasis on Julian's autonomy when he engages with his car. As with the characterisation of Harry, Wild West imagery is employed as a contrast to the motor vehicle: "English was an artistic driver, as good to a car as men used to be to horses." (19) The implication in this comparison is that the mechanised relationship of human and car replaces the living companionship of horse and rider. Julian expresses a form of autonomy here, as an 'artistic driver'. But the participation of the motor vehicle is of a different nature to that of a horse. The fact Julian's action to be 'good to' remains the same, suggests the automobile is being treated as if it were alive. Julian then imposes his personality upon the vehicle while sustaining a feeling of companionship. This comparison between cars and horses again invokes a sense of contemporary social change. Although Julian is seemingly comfortable driving it is evident that with the car comes a similar degree of uncertainty. He confesses later that "I never was meant to be a Cadillac dealer or any other kind of

dealer." (96) Much like the question of 'social belonging' raised by Hoerr, the automobile foregrounds a tension in Julian's self-identity. As in the suicide scene, when he hums along with the car while being suffocated by it, Julian seems at once to be at ease within his Cadillac and yet simultaneously unsettled by it.

A key scene in the novel comes as Julian considers this paradoxical nature of the car:

> So long as the engine did tricks for him he knew he was safe, but when he discovered this about the car, that it was occupying his mind and keeping it off the events of the last hour, two hours, twenty-four hours, forty-eight hours – although it was not forty-eight hours since he had doused Harry Reilly with a highball – the discovery forced his eyes to the clock. And the clock said three-eleven. It was three-eleven back at the garage, and he had to get back to see Lute Fliegler. […] There was something awfully good and lucky for him in being guided out of the club and into the car and away, but something else had pulled him back. You did not really get away from what he was going back to, and whatever it was, he had to face it. His practical sense told him that the idea of going away, writing checks, selling the car and so on, eventually would catch up to him. He probably would break a law. Oh, more than that. The way things were now at the garage, he had no right to sell this car, nor even to run away. He was too tall to run away. He would be spotted.
>
> And so he kept his foot on the accelerator, hurrying back to Gibbsville. The cigarette burned down to his glove – he could not remember putting the gloves on – and made a little stink. He threw the cigarette out and yawned. Always when he felt sleepy while driving he would light a cigarette and it would revive him, but now he was sleepy and tired and did not want to be revived. Even the little fight in him annoyed him. He did not want to fight and he did not want to be awake. (202-03)

Julian's realisation arises from a narcotised state of driving and an isolated experience in which he does not know where he is going. The car initially provides a means of mental escape by 'occupying his mind' and making him feel 'safe'. O'Hara's language here suggests this safety is, however, misleading. The engine seems to manipulate as it does 'tricks' and the term 'occupy' denotes invasiveness. As Julian makes this 'discovery' he looks to the same clock that will become so prominent in the suicide scene. The clock here brings his focus back and provides a social connection by

reminding Julian of his responsibilities. When he smashes the clock later, Julian appears to be severing this interaction and abandoning the question of whether he belongs. In this passage, social regulation is a more compelling force. Julian feels there is no option but to 'face' his society. Society would inevitably 'catch up to him' if he tried to run. The reference to the 'law' and this feeling of being chased invokes a similar sense of social order as the phrase 'the bastards'. The fact Julian believes he has 'no right' to do anything but return, indicates that he is at least partly succumbing to social order.

At the same time, this passage begins to point to Julian's refusal to entirely yield to his society. The suggestion that he has 'no right' is to some degree undermined by the farcical reasoning that 'he was too tall to run away'. The next paragraph then intimates an alternative motive for Julian's return to Gibbsville – Julian here appears to give up. The fact he 'did not want to be revived' insinuates suicidal intentions. This feeling of hopelessness is compounded by the admission that even the 'little fight' left annoys him. He seems to be obliged by his society in this scene to return home. In turn, however, it is also indicated that Julian has already formulated his suicidal response to this pressure from social order. As such, the regulation of his society here fails to entirely control Julian even though it is able to direct him back to Gibbsville.

I propose that this complex negotiation in which Julian at once seems socially compelled and yet independent is akin to the multifaceted descriptions of driving from Gilroy, Groening, Urry, and Williams. These scholars stress the appeal and potential threat posed by cars. Julian, likewise, appears to find both solace and despair in his automobile. In particular, this negotiation of desire and fear occurs in relation to Julian's efforts to exercise greater independence. The Cadillac is often the locus for Julian's mediation of 'public' responsibilities and 'private' intentions. Indeed, throughout *Appointment in Samarra*, cars are used for privacy and for public communication. This

tension between, in Williams' terminology, 'public order' and 'private ends' comes to the fore in Julian's attempted affair with the lounge singer Helene. As he dances with Helene, Julian propositions her:

> "I wanted to ask you to go out with me. Will you?"
> "When do you mean? Now?"
> "Yes."
> "It's awful cold out," she said.
> "But will you?" he said.
> "I don't know," she said. "I have a room here."
> "No, I want to go outside. Out in the car."
> "Well, maybe that'd be better. We can't stay long. I have to sing again in half an hour. Oh, I better not go. Your wife will see, and so will Al."
> "Will you go?" he said.
> "Yes," she said.
> They glided to the edge of the floor and broke into a walk and disappeared. Three persons, over and above all the others in the big room, saw them go. Three persons: Caroline, Al Grecco, Foxie Lebrix. In a little while Julian fell asleep in the car, and Helene went back to the house by herself. (151)

Julian's insistence that he wants to go 'out in the car', suggests a desire for the control and comfort he finds in his car. In this scene, the public watches the unfolding of a conventionally private act: an affair. This affair follows a relatively impersonal, emotionless, and formulaic pattern. Helene and Julian's conversation is repetitive, to the point, and stresses pragmatism. What actually happens in the car, however, is not detailed in the narrative. Later, Julian tells Lute:

> "I didn't lay the girl."
> Lute hesitated before answering. "Well, maybe you didn't, but everybody thought you did and that amounts to the same thing. She was in the car with you long enough" (177)

Regardless of what happens within it, the Cadillac here is interpreted as a space of intimacy, while meaning is defined by social understanding and what 'everybody thinks'. In practice, though, the car seems to be a place of separation. Julian is leaving his wife by going to the car with Helene and, in turn, Helene leaves him alone inside it.

This rendering of the car as a catalyst for the breakdown of intimacy recurs within the novel. For example, following his final argument with Caroline, the narrative observes, “Julian got afraid of something the moment he walked away from Caroline and climbed into his own car. He never looked her way again after he left her. He treated his car more considerately.” (218) This is the moment that Julian is most aware of the choice he makes by returning to the privacy of his car. He abandons his marriage and social relations as he cares more for the vehicle and the independence it provides him. Julian, though, and unlike the other characters, is ‘afraid’. Much like when he realises the ‘tricks’ the car does, Julian appears to resent the automobile. Yet he still returns to the Cadillac time and again. In the end, he seems to replace the intimacy of other people with his car because the car affords him a form of autonomy and authority that his society no longer offers.

The final time a car signals a breakdown of intimate relations occurs just prior to the suicide. After Julian kisses Miss Cartwright, she spurns his further advances and goes to her car. This failure to consummate an affair appears to finally overwhelm Julian and, moments later, he kills himself. The challenges of social expectations and failings are underscored as Miss Cartwright leaves:

> He heard the wurra-wurra starter in her car, but he was not thinking of her. He was thinking of the time after time he was going to hear those words in the future. “You’re married to a swell girl. I don’t know her at all (or, “Caroline’s one of my best friends”) […] There could be a divorce, Caroline could marry again for that matter, but no girl in Gibbsville – worth having – would risk the loss of reputation which would be her punishment for getting herself with him. He recalled a slang axiom that never had any meaning in college days: “Don’t buck the system; you’re liable to gum the works.” (230)

Julian’s misogyny and desire to control women is highlighted in the term ‘having’. His comfort with the notion of extramarital affairs, even with Caroline’s ‘best friends’, emphasises his egotism. The key point that troubles him, however, is social governance.

It is not that women would be averse to Julian, but that they would 'risk the loss of reputation' by being with him. He realises that he has 'bucked the system', and his 'private ends' have resulted in him 'gumming the works'. The car, though, continues to provide Julian a last semblance of control. He does not succumb to social order and try to change his behaviour. Instead, he drinks heavily and, three pages later, he is back in his Cadillac ending his life. The suicide can then be read as a call for an alternative social 'system' that will not be 'gummed' by Julian's efforts towards greater independence. This individual authority is further intimated in the originality that is associated with Julian's death in the parked Cadillac. The choice to die by motor vehicle asphyxiation is described as "the first [suicide] of its kind in the history of the county" (235). Julian does not drive off a bridge, as the minor character of Joe Schermann is supposed to have done, or shoot himself like his grandfather. "[O'Hara] claimed", Bruccoli notes, "that *Appointment* was the first novel to employ this form of suicide." (115) This novelty indicates a need for new alternatives, rather than the nostalgic return that Julian calls for elsewhere. Indeed, it invites a radical consideration of social reform.

The Aftermath of the Suicide

In the final chapter, the privacy of Julian's suicide is set against the public aftermath of his death. Caroline ironically asks, "If he wanted to kill himself whose business is it but his own?" (242) Inevitably the act becomes everyone's business, as Julian's suicide demands understanding. The relatively calm account of Julian's suicide is unsettled in the opening of this chapter by the image of a grenade detonating:

> Our story never ends.
> You pull the pin out of a hand grenade, and in a few seconds it explodes and men in a small area get killed and wounded. That makes bodies to be buried, hurt men to be treated. It makes widows and fatherless

> children and bereaved parents. It means pension machinery, and it makes for pacifism in some and for lasting hatred in others. Again, a man out of the danger area sees the carnage the grenade creates, and he shoots himself in the foot. Another man had been standing there just two minutes before the thing went off, and thereafter he believes in God or in a rabbit's foot. Another man sees human brains for the first time and locks up the picture until one night years later, when he finally comes out with a description of what he saw, and the horror of the description turns his wife away from him… (234)

Here Julian's 'war of 1930' that Herrmann ridiculed is returned to. While the first line of this chapter foregrounds literary 'undecidability', the following description of an explosion suggests a particular and complex irony. The blood and violence of this scene are in distinct contrast to Julian's suicide as he closes himself away for a secluded death by gas. The grenade, on the other hand, creates a rippling effect for its witnesses as the impact on one 'man' follows 'another man' and so on. The opening 'you' implies that the reader may desire this horror. This passage thus seems to be satiating a bloodlust that the rest of the text avoids. With this interpretation in mind, Julian's quiet suicide in his closed garage appears to be a challenge to the reader. There are no comparable witnesses to Julian's death, and the consequences of Julian's suicide seem muted in contrast to this explosion. As Herrmann suggests, this violence in 1930 lacks the consequential gravitas of the First World War.

As the chapter continues, the irony of this opening description becomes more pronounced. Just as in this passage, the narrative observes a sequence of responses to an act of violence by detailing reactions to Julian's suicide. However, these responses to Julian's death are comparatively mundane. For instance, instead of being conventionally 'bereaved', Julian's parents seem to only imitate grief. His father, "thought of himself as crushed by Julian's death. He knew people would understand that; crushed." (239) Likewise, the narrative suggests Julian's mother provides a gesture of grief without the feeling: "She cried, but [her husband] did not think he heard pain in her cry." (239)

Harry offers to send flowers in a stereotypical response to death. These reactions lack an engaged emotional resonance. They appear to follow normalised patterns of behaviour through actions conditioned by whether other 'people would understand' them.

Caroline's reaction to the loss of Julian is more emotional and personal. Perhaps this is because the domestic, shared privacy of the home has been violated. But it is still weighed down by an overwhelming sense of order:

> It was a lively, jesting grief, spritely and pricking and laughing, to make you shudder and shiver up to the point of giving way completely. Then it would become a long black tunnel; a tunnel you had to go through, had to go through, had to go through, had to go through, had to go through. No whistle. But had to go through, had to go through, had to go through. Whistle? Had to go through, had to go through, had to go through, had to go through. No whistle? Had to go through, had to go through, had to go through. (240)

Caroline envisages a single path of coming to terms with Julian's death that is presented as an almost unbroken train journey. Unlike driving, there is a single track for the train that must be followed – a track that is traced by the chugging phrase 'had to go through'. The potential pauses of whistles are only inquisitive and momentary, while the following of a set path orders the distraction of Caroline's 'lively, jesting grief'. She eventually appears to understand her husband's decision and remarks, "Of course he killed himself" (242). Caroline comes to terms with Julian's death by accepting it is part of his identity. She concludes, "There, that was settled. Now let the whole thing begin again." (245) Julian's wife, friends, family, and society continue without him. O'Hara's use of the collective term 'our' at the start of this final chapter indicates this sense of continuity for everyone but Julian. The other characters appear to decide to continue in the face of Julian's suicide, but they principally do so by not engaging with the potentially explosive violence of his death.

Julian's assertion, 'There, the bastards', seems overly ambitious in light of this social continuity after his death. Yet Julian does affirm a sense of rebellion. He does not

entirely give in to social expectations and instead maintains his individualism and privacy. I propose that Julian's death can be read in Scott Spehr and John Dixon's classification as an example of a type of suicide that they term 'homo existentialis':

> In committing protest suicide, their personal aspirations and goals would be related to terminating their meaningless and empty lives, thereby taking ownership of self, perhaps, after realizing their life's ultimate true purpose is self-actualization through a death that is symbolic to them.[23]

Julian takes control through a 'symbolic' death in his parked car and terminating a life he sees as 'meaningless'. In this sense, suicide in *Appointment in Samarra* is a means of 'self-actualisation'. Julian defines himself as an autonomous individual who does not conform to social norms. Williams describes the appeal of such a death, "A new consciousness is then shaped: that of the victim who has no living way out, but who can try, in death, to affirm his lost identity and his lost will."[24] Julian's suicide enacts a 'new consciousness' and the possibility of an alternative identity. The term 'victim' recalls Durkheim's definition of suicide and further encourages a reading of Julian's death as a response to social influence. Yet, unlike and in a development of the deterministic implications of Durkheimian theory, this 'new consciousness' suggests a more radical type of social reform.

Walter Benjamin notes, in a similar vein to Williams and Spehr and Dixon, the potential for self-killing to be a means of self-identification: "Modernity must stand under the sign of suicide, an act which seals a heroic will and makes no concessions to a mentality inimical toward this will."[25] It is the logic of 'sealing' an identity through suicide that I propose governs the end of *Appointment in Samarra*. In 'The Storyteller',

[23] Scott Spehr, John Dixon, 'Protest Suicide: A Systematic Model with Heuristic Archetypes', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 44 (3) (2014), 380.
[24] Raymond Williams, 'From Hero to Victim', *New Left Review*, 20 (1963), (no page numbers available).
[25] Walter Benjamin, 'Paris in the Second Empire of Baudelaire', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006), 45.

Benjamin emphasises this role of death as a means of character identification in literature. He begins by quoting Moritz Heimann, "A man who dies at the age of thirty-five is at every point of his life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five," which leads him to propose that "The nature of the character in a novel cannot be presented any better than is done in this statement, which says that the 'meaning' of his life is revealed only in his death."[26] It follows that the 'meaning' or 'will' of an individual can be self-identified and expressed through suicide. Similar to how Benjamin calls attention to 'modernity' and the early twentieth-century, I have suggested that Julian's suicide can be read as a particular response to a crisis of agential authority in 1930. Julian's suicide seems thus to be an attempt to 'seal' an opposition to the social changes just preceding and occurring during The Great Depression that appear to diminish his individual control. Even if Julian expresses a form of individualism through his suicide, though, this is an expression that is coterminous with his death. This contradiction reads as both an indictment of Julian's contemporary society, and also a recognition of its mastery. Julian is unable to wrestle complete control from his peers and their judgments of him. His suicide can thus be understood as an act of despair which calls attention to a crisis that seems insurmountable within the current remit of his society. As such, this identification of a need for social reform is entangled with a sense of 'undecidability'.

Conclusion

Julian's suicide as a means of self-identification through self-destruction, echoes the construction and undermining of meaning by suicide, as analysed by Bennet, in the

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[26] Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in *Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, NY: Shocken Books, 1969), 100-01.

form of a rebellion that is ‘made and unmade’. Julian’s rebellious identity is at once actualised and ended in his death. The ambiguity of the suicide scene and whether Julian ‘tried to get up’ to save himself or die, brings this unsettled contradiction to the fore. I suggest this ‘undecidability’ is complex and gives rise to a crisis in individual autonomy. Julian exercises a capacity to ‘make’ his social defiance and, at the same time, he seems to be ‘unmade’ in the car. Individual autonomy and agency are thus concurrently realised and lost. By highlighting this crisis of agential authority as such a paradox of realisation and dissolution, the text brings certain problems into focus. Because Julian exercises his social opposition through suicide, he neither conclusively asserts his independent agential authority nor does he entirely succumb to social expectations. However, the seriousness of this crisis in individual agency is revealed and a discussion of social reform is urged. Reading this suicide through an adjusted Durkheimian framework thereby calls attention to a negotiation of individual autonomy and social control as a contemporary challenge that requires a social response.

Appointment in Samarra does not offer a solution to this agential crisis. Foregrounding this crisis, though, registers a call for an alternative approach to social governance. I have suggested this alternative would accommodate Julian’s desire for greater independence. This alternative, though, exceeds the apparently insurmountable authority of society as realised in the text, and particularly in the final chapter narrating the aftermath of the suicide. The novel impels an understanding of Julian, while rendering such understanding either impossible or unfulfilled. This crisis of comprehension thus reads as a call for a new alternative understanding that goes beyond the remit of current empathy as portrayed in the text.

2. Social Murder and Suicide in William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932)

In this chapter, I focus on William Faulkner's novel *Light in August* (1932). Suicide is frequent in Faulkner's work, and characters that can be considered as in some way resorting to suicide include: Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Popeye in *Sanctuary* (1931), Joe Christmas and Mrs Hightower in *Light in August*, Coldfield and Clytie in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Rider and Eunice in *Go Down, Moses* (1942), Crawford in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), Nancy in *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), and Eula in *The Town* (1957). Within the Faulkner oeuvre, *Light in August* draws attention to suicide in an especially complex fashion through the deaths of Joe Christmas and Mrs Hightower. In particular, the lynching of Joe, when read as a representation of suicide, gives rise to a significant tension in understandings of race and social order.

This chapter begins by reading the lynching of Joe as a murder and a suicide, before situating such an interpretation within scholarship on Faulkner, lynching, and race. This opening consideration is then developed through analyses of race, gender, and the language of suicide in *Light in August*. Joe's lynching, when read as such a suicide/murder, foregrounds the social rebellion he practices throughout the text and renders a complexity that challenges conventional and dominating forms of racial determination. In the section on gender relations, I read the suicide of the comparatively minor character Mrs Hightower in a similar manner as an opposition to patriarchal order. These rebellions and their culmination in forms of suicide bring forth a crisis of

understanding for Joe's and Mrs Hightower's society. In turn, the inability to manage these oppositions indicates a failure of social integration and regulation. Finally, I argue that this collapse of comprehension and control realises a crisis in how we make sense that works to encourage radical social reform. Such a reading is akin to the previous chapter; however, here the discussion progresses through a focus on racial and patriarchal social order and a more defined call for social change.

The interpretation to follow also builds on Margaret Higonnet's studies on femininity and suicide. In particular, I develop Higonnet's suggestion that certain texts:

> deploy the motif of female suicide as a way of interrogating the processes of social construction. Because they put into play the problem of reading a life and death, from an evacuated site of the feminine and the symbolically racial other, they also put into play *the problem of reading* itself. These texts help us see the cultural, racial, and gendered limits of our tools of interpretation.[1]

Light in August exemplifies this mode of 'interrogating social constructions', and the text regularly scrutinises how people make sense of events in racial and gendered terms. By baffling the townsfolk of Jefferson, the suicides of Mrs Hightower and Joe call into question 'the processes of social construction' in a manner that highlights the 'limits of our tools of interpretation'. I will suggest that in registering such a crisis of understanding, Faulkner's novel calls for an alternative way of thinking about social relations that might more effectively manage the problems suicide can pose.

Reading Joe Christmas' Lynching as a Suicide

Light in August is written from multiple perspectives and inhabits the voices of several different characters who live in the fictional Mississippi town of Jefferson. This multi-

[1] Margaret Higonnet, 'Frames of Female Suicide', *Studies in the Novel*, 32 (2) (2000), 241.

perspective form allows the text to carry out a socially focused interrogation of its central events, and in particular of the lynching of Joe Christmas. Although these multiple viewpoints sometimes contradict and challenge each other, it is possible to identify from them a central line of narrative development organised around Joe. Multiple perspectives brood on the indeterminate nature of Joe's race, variously suggesting he is white, black, or mixed race. This indeterminate heritage, causing unease for all the other characters, seems to be connected to his eventual lynching, which the novel presents as a termination of the social antagonism Joe has presented throughout the novel. Yet a melodramatic plotline also parallels these racial sentiments. The novel gives the impression that Joe has murdered his white lover, Joanna Burden and, as a result, Joe is hunted by a white mob led by Percy Grimm. By fleeing the town only to return unexpectedly to it, Joe appears to provoke, or even somehow summon, Grimm's lynch mob. In the process, almost spurring a lynching through this return, Joe becomes oddly, disturbingly, complicit in his own death. His lynching becomes, in the world of the text, at once a racist murder and a solicitation of death, even a suicide.

This deadly symbiosis, I want to suggest, reveals a crisis in the social order that Faulkner is depicting. *Light in August* identifies a lynching and a suicide with each other, and this identification means that Grimm, in essence, can only discipline Joe socially by appealing to a legalised system of anti-black violence and killing him. However, this death does not resolve the problems Joe poses to the social orders in which he lives, and instead the townsfolk continue to question how and even whether Joe could be situated within a conventional racial framework. The lynching paradoxically requires Joe's participation while concurrently attempting to bring forth an 'evacuated site of a racial other'. This contradiction speaks to the central concerns that Joe routinely brings forth in the novel; namely tensions between being potentially

white or black, criminal or innocent, and passive or active. This sense of complex multiplicity brought forth in Joe's actions throughout the text, and not least his suicide, blur the boundaries of conventional Jim Crow segregation and lead to the town's ongoing discomfort and confusion. Furthermore, interpreting this death as a suicide draws a parallel with the suicide of Mrs Hightower and a comparison that I return to in a later section of this chapter. Through this reading of Joe's death as a murder/suicide as well as Mrs Hightower's suicide, I will propose that the 'limits of interpretation' based on racial and patriarchal order, and 'the problem of reading' identified by Higonnet, are elicited through Faulkner's representations of suicide as a challenge to conventional conceptions of social control.

Scholarship on *Light in August* often characterises it alongside 'Dry September' (1931), *Sanctuary* (1932), *Go Down Moses* (1942), and *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) as a study of the logic of lynching.[2] As Edward Clough suggests, "In 'Dry September,' *Sanctuary*, and *Light in August*, Faulkner typically read lynching as a white phenomenon, as a communal and exclusionary act."[3] In this chapter, however, I want to present an alternative way of understanding Joe's violent death. Without precluding those analyses which consider *Light in August* as a contemplation of lynching violence, I propose that Joe's death also corresponds in key features to Émile Durkheim's canonical understanding of suicide. The basis for this additional way of thinking about Joe lies in the text's frequent imputation to him of a prophetic capacity to anticipate the

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[2] See for instance: Nathan Tipton, 'Rope and Faggot: The Homoerotics of Lynching in William Faulkner's *Light in August*', *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 64 (3) (2011), 369-91; and, Lisa K. Nelson, 'Masculinity, Menace, and American Mythologies of Race in Faulkner's Anti-Heroes', *The Faulkner Journal*, 19 (2) (2004), 49-68, 121.

[3] Edward Clough, 'Violence and the Hearth: Lynching and Resistance in *Go Down, Moses*', *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 65 (3) (2012), 391-412.

circumstances of his future death. When Joe first runs after Joanna's murder, he appears to consider his own demise as inevitable:

> It seemed to him that he could see himself being hunted by white men at last into the black abyss which had been waiting, trying, for thirty years to drown him and into which now and at last he had actually entered, hearing now upon his ankles the definite and ineradicable gauge of its upward moving.[4]

I would argue that the 'black abyss' that comes at the end of this 'hunt' is the lynching and a death that appears to be preordained and 'ineradicably' haunting the entirety of Joe's life. Joe goes on to repeatedly offer himself up for this capture by engaging with people he expects will recognise him:

> They all want me to be captured, and then when I come up ready to say Here I am *Yes I would say Here I am I am tired I am tired of running of having to carry my life like it was a basket of eggs* they all run away. Like there is a rule to catch me by, and to capture me that way would not be like the rule says. (253)

Joe's thoughts here, in its repetitions and spilling in and out of italics, reflects an intense conviction, as if two internal voices are confirming the intention of Joe to present himself to his would-be captors. Indeed, the repeated 'here I am' emphasises Joe's volition, which corresponds to Durkheim's definition of suicide in terms of stressing action, determination, and knowledge. Joe's recognition that he is precariously carrying his life like a basket of eggs by running, indicates that Joe is well aware that he is giving up his life by choosing to present himself to the mob. Directed toward his 'capture', the 'rules' clearly suggest the prelude to a lynching. Joe's volition then appears to be aimed towards a form of surrender to the lynch mob. However, precisely because he intends to present himself to his captors through his own free will, the surrender can no longer take place within the conventional 'rules'. The 'rule says' that Joe should not give

[4] William Faulkner, *Light in August*, Vintage edn (London: Random House, 2005), 249.

himself up but instead must be hunted. By offering himself to the 'white men', Joe presents a complex complicity in his death and prevents this traditional hunt.

When Joe travels to the nearby town of Mottstown, the fear of his racial indeterminacy is combined with this volition and is perceived as a particular social threat:

> And then he walked the streets in broad daylight, like he owned the town, walking back and forth with people passing him a dozen times and not knowing it, until Halliday saw him and ran up and grabbed him and said, "Ain't your name Christmas?" and the nigger said that it was. He never denied it. He never did anything. He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made the folks so mad. For him to be a murderer and all dressed up and walking the town like he dared them to touch him, when he ought to have been skulking and hiding in the woods, muddy and dirty and running. It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too. (263)

Joe maddens the townsfolk because he does not adhere to expected norms of behaviour. Scenes such as this manifest Joe's rebellion towards conventional racial orders of meaning in a manner that highlights his control over his body and how he is identified. The text stresses that "It looked like he had set out to get himself caught" (263). This 'setting out' implies that Joe faces his death with a sense of expectation and understanding. This 'setting out' then seems to baffle the townsfolk as Joe, at once, acts 'like he never knew' and yet 'dares'. These contradicting terms, which indicate both ignorance and knowledge, lead to a bafflement that seems akin to the confusion often associated with suicide. As Andrew Bennett notes, "suicidal death *has* to be explained and cannot be; it both offers and removes a dream of coherence."[5] Joe's death brings focus to this challenge of coherence and the socially problematic aspects of suicide, as discussed in this thesis' introduction and the previous chapter.

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[5] Andrew Bennett, *Suicide Century: Literature and Suicide from James Joyce to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), 20.

This suicidal dimension of Joe's tragedy is not limited to his offering himself up to capture. The people of Jefferson, when contemplating Joe's decision to 'walk the streets in broad daylight', similarly interpret it as a form of suicide:

> About the suppertables on that Monday night, what the town wondered was not so much how Christmas had escaped but why when free, he had taken refuge in the place which he did, where he must have known he would be certainly run to earth, and why when that occurred he neither surrendered nor resisted, It was as though he had set out and made his plans to passively commit suicide. (333) [sic.]

The construction 'as though' indicates the same bafflement described above. It is a phrase which simultaneously endorses and disavows an interpretation of Joe's death as a 'passive suicide'. If Joe is not deemed ignorant and is taken to be aware of the probable consequences of his actions, then his return to Mottstown to be lynched can be read as invoking a form of suicidal intent. The confusion evinced by the townsfolk here, thus appears to stem from Joe's suicidal choice to 'not surrender or resist'.

This apparent volition on Joe's part echoes Durkheim's definition of suicide: "a *death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result.*"[6] Joe's actions, as characterised by the observing townspeople, oscillate between Durkheim's negative and positive polarities. His decision to return to the town is nothing if not 'positive'. In 'neither surrendering nor resisting' the running 'to earth' that he foresees, Joe presents a negation of negative actions. Through this oscillation between positive and negative acts, Joe moves inexorably towards his violent death. Indeed, these acts seem to make this death inevitable. As the townsfolk stress, Joe 'must have known he would be certainly run to earth'. Joe's knowledge, status as a 'victim', and purposeful acts encourage a reading of his death as a murder and a suicide. While Faulkner continues to focus on the violence

[6] Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, ed. George Simpson, trans. John A. Spaulding (London: Routledge, 2002), xlii.

of lynching through terms such as ‘run to earth’, Joe’s complicity exceeds the conventional parameters of the lynching. In so doing, this representation of a murder/suicide creates a surplus which problematises the capacity to make sense of the death. As such, the bafflement of suicide could be here understood as a challenge and a means of social indictment.

This sense of order that is thus troubled by Joe’s action was, of course, particularly pronounced in the deep US South, and not least in Faulkner’s home state of Mississippi. The most commonly used definition of lynching used in scholarship, set by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), highlights this sense of order, as Lisa Cook et. al.’s summary of the NAACP criteria suggests:

> (1) there must be evidence that someone was killed, (2) the killings must have occurred illegally, (3) three or more persons must have taken part in the killing, and (4) the killers must have claimed to be serving justice or tradition.[7]

The death of Joe fulfils all of these criteria – Joe’s body provides evidence of the killing, the murder is illegal, the group led by Percy Grimm who murder Joe is comprised of three people, and Grimm, as described later in this chapter, views himself as a proponent of justice. The last of these criteria brings focus to the order that lynching was intended to ‘serve’ and renders lynching as part of an established frame of reference in the form of ‘justice’. Partly this notion of ‘justice or tradition’ seems to have been upheld by the activity of lynching, and the practice itself shows certain repetitions which indicate a form of order through reproduction. Andrew Ritchey and Barry Ruback identify some of these “norms”[8]. They interpret these conventions as providing a means of social discipline, control, and substantiation.

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[7] Lisa D. Cook; Trevor D. Logan; and John M. Parman, ‘Racial Segregation and Southern Lynching’, *Social Science History*, 42 (4) (2018), 647.
[8] Andrew J. Ritchey; Barry R. Ruback ‘Predicting Lynching Atrocity: The Situational Norms of Lynchings in Georgia’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 44 (5) (2018), 629.

Amy Louis Wood similarly notes:

> even the most perfunctory lynchings were performative and spectacular. Lynchings, of all kinds, were ritualistic, drawing from longstanding cultural traditions, and they were performed to convey powerful messages about white domination and black inferiority.[9]

Key to such readings is that lynching is ‘performed’ in a readily intelligible manner. The ‘spectacle’ of lynching then works to reinforce a broader social system of racist oppression and violence. Wood continues and stresses the narrative functionality of lynching:

> In this respect, lynchings did not arise out of spontaneous outbursts of emotion. They were orchestrated rituals that functioned as political theater, or to be more exact, collective melodramas in which white heroes vanquished black demonic forces. (773)

The terminology of ‘melodrama’, ‘political theatre’, and ‘orchestrated rituals’ calls attention to lynching as having its own conventions or ‘rules’. A significant component of lynching can here be interpreted as its narrative intelligibility. In order to be a lynching, the violence must be presented and interpreted as ‘serving justice or tradition’. I propose that Faulkner ironises this ‘theatre’ of lynching by highlighting Joe’s capacity to disrupt such order through suicide. This death, when read as a suicide, thus undermines the logic of lynching.

This logic is akin to what Calvin Warren discusses as an ‘anti-black’ understanding of existence. This ‘anti-blackness’ at least partly stems from a differentiating process within a white humanist tradition that identifies ‘man’ against a racial ‘other’:

> It is through difference that man experiences uniqueness, and this uniqueness, established against an “other,” provides the necessary building blocks for ontological development and self-actualization. To *be* human is to carry out the task of endless differentiation, through what Gianni Vattimo (2003) would call “projectionality,” or man’s unique lifelong project of self-actualization. Differentiating is a *human*

[9] Amy Louise Wood, ‘The Spectacle of Lynching: Rituals of White Supremacy in the Jim Crow South’, *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 77 (3-4) (2018), 759.

> *entitlement*. In short, we might understand humanism, then, as a philosophy of difference, where difference is the foundation on which man emerges as a unique being in the world.[10]

This process of 'differentiating' enables the construction of a white identity against a black 'other': a white, 'human' 'self' is 'actualised' through an anti-black othering. In Warren's understanding, then, the distinction between whiteness and others, and 'self-actualisation' through 'differentiation', is a foundational premise of how humanity and identity are commonly understood.

Warren then clarifies how lynching is a particular and violent manifestation of this process of existential differentiation:

> Can we make a distinction between diurnal/everyday violence (e.g., lynching) and a violence that structures the world as it concerns antiblackness? I would argue that antiblack violence is *gratuitous* precisely because it blurs the distinction between the "everyday" and "world constituting" violence. Following the ontic/ontological distinction, everyday violence (ontic) follows the logic of transgression (even the transgression of nonnormative behavior). But antiblack violence *cannot be explained ontically because it is not predicated on transgression but existence itself*. (411)

In such a reading, the anti-black violence of lynching is predicated on more than just a simple form of racist social order. The logic behind lynching is a fundamental part of an anti-black understanding of 'existence itself'. Lynching thus realises a form of 'world constituting violence'. In other words, lynching works to enforce an anti-black ordering of meaning that is pervasive within ways of thinking that 'structure the world'. World constitution, at least as it has been traditionally practiced in the Western humanist tradition as discussed by Warren, is therefore itself at stake in discussions of lynching. Joe's death similarly calls attention to a broad context of such world-building interpretative practice. Following the adjusted Durkheimian theory proposed in this thesis' introduction, this problem of world-constitution can be focused on in terms of

[10] Calvin Warren, 'Onticide: Afro-Pessimism, ~~Gay~~ Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 23 (3) (2017), 395.

social regulation. As such, emphasis can be placed on the regulating of what Durkheim calls a 'collective purpose', in the form of a 'white humanist' construction of race, and how such regulation is troubled by suicide.

This perspective of race as an existential concern that speaks to how meaning is produced and society is regulated, in the terms of antiblack ways of thinking as envisaged by Warren, is also often apparent in Faulkner's text. For instance, the novel combines religious and racial discourses when the lynch mob find Joe:

> It was upon them, of them: its shameless savageness. Out of it their faces seemed to glare with bodiless suspension as though from haloes as they stooped and raised Hightower, his face bleeding, from the floor where Christmas, running up the hall, his raised and armed and manacled hands full of glare and glitter like lightning bolts, so that he resembled a vengeful and furious god pronouncing a doom, had struck him down. (348)

The term 'savage' foregrounds colonial discourses of primitivism. These are echoed in the implications of a confrontation between Christianity and Joe. The description of Joe as a 'furious god' striking down an ex-reverend, appears to be akin to the small-g god found in Albert Camus' reading of Kirilov's death, as analysed in this thesis' introduction. The sense of contradiction that Camus draws from Kirilov's death is evident here in the clash between the 'haloed' lynch mob and Joe the 'furious god'. Camus proposes that Kirilov "wants to kill himself to become god"[11]. This action is problematic as it evinces a god-like authority over life but only through Kirilov's simultaneous death. Joe's death gives rise to a similar sense of contradictory authority, or a form of control that is only identifiable at the moment of its end.

This god-likeness brings world-constitution and questions of existence to the forefront of the lynching scene. The term 'haloes' being used to portray the lynch mob then takes this religious framework to a critical juncture. At the same time that

[11] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2005), 103.

‘shameless savageness’ becomes part of the mob; they are likened to saints. The term ‘glare’, which is repeated in relation to both the mob and Joe, calls attention to this juncture. This word intimates the tension of the scene as it not only denotes anger, brightness, but also a light that is potentially blinding and oppressive. On the one hand, the lynching seems to work to ‘constitute’ an anti-black world, and on the other hand, Joe problematises this construction through his own violence. His position as a ‘god’ ‘pronouncing doom’, as well as his own ‘world constituting violence’ through this lynching/suicide, encourage a reading that underscores Joe’s battle within an oppressive racist order of meaning. The religious imagery, and the sense of authority that it imparts on both Joe and his murderers, draws out this tension between individual agency and the denial of agency in an anti-black lynching.

Amy K. Bailey and Karen A. Snedker highlight the role of religion and this racist ordering of meaning in relation to lynching in the Jim Crow South. They borrow a phrase from Durkheim and propose that lynching was used to perpetuate a racist social order that can be considered a “moral community”[12]. Bailey and Snedkar observe:

> It is out of shared experiences of the sacred in a ritually activated group that moral communities form and reproduce themselves over time. In this sense, the culture of white supremacy was no different from what Durkheim observed in other settings. Central to white supremacy was the notion that the demands of Christian morality and good citizenship necessitated racial separation and white social and political dominance. Miscegenation and “race mixing” of all kinds, black criminality, and defiance of the racial order were all constituted as grave threats to the moral community of Southern society. (850)

Within this framework, Joe’s very existence as a potential example of ‘race mixing’ appears to be a ‘grave threat to the moral community of Southern society’. He thereby challenges a conventional understanding of ‘white supremacy’. Although the lynching

[12] Amy Kate Bailey, Karen A. Snedker, ‘Practicing What They Preach? Lynching and Religion in the American South, 1890-1929’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 117 (3) (2011), 846.

is an act of traditional social regulation, which is employed to discipline Joe and reassert a racist 'moral community', when this death is read as both a murder and a suicide, the effect of this regulation is called into question. If Joe is interpreted as committing a form of suicide, then, in a Durkheimian sense, the 'moral community' has failed to appropriately regulate him. The processes of anti-black world constitution would thus likewise be thrown into crisis as a violent, failed form of social governance.

As the scene unfolds, and as the procedures of racist violence remain apparent, Joe's own agency also becomes more apparent, and upholds the implication that this might be a kind of suicide as well as a murder. The violence becomes more pronounced, but the lynching begins to seem particularly formulaic:

> When the others reached the kitchen they saw the table flung aside now and Grimm stooping over the body. When they approached to see what he was about, they saw that the man was not dead yet, and when they saw what Grimm was doing one of the men gave a choked cry and stumbled back into the wall and began to vomit. Then Grimm too sprang back, flinging behind him the bloody butcher knife. 'Now you'll let white women alone, even in hell,' he said. But the man on the floor had not moved. He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness, and with something, a shadow, about his mouth. (349)

On the surface, this scene appears to insist on being read as a conventional lynch murder to the exclusion of other additional possibilities. Grimm speaks a customary justification for his brutality as a need to protect white women 'even in hell'. The castration is not specified because it can be assumed. Such assumption indicates the ordered nature of the scene as the lynching adheres to a sense of protocol and 'norms'. Terms such as 'choked', 'vomit', 'bloody', and 'butcher' concurrently highlight the graphic horror that is occurring. Through this lens, the scene reads as an indictment of an 'orchestrated ritual'. At the same time, Joe seems to evince a kind of complicity through his silence.

The fact Joe is 'not dead yet' and 'just lay there' indicates a disconcerting form of volition. His eyes being 'open' and the acknowledgement that he is still 'conscious' as his body is mutilated, is horrifying. It also, though, draws attention to how Grimm's performance of racist order is reliant on Joe. The 'But' at the start of the penultimate sentence of this passage highlights the distress and confusion that Joe creates. Grimm 'springs back' and 'flings' the table as well as the knife in a fashion that indicates shock. Joe's lack of response, and the shift from being a 'furious god' to a 'man' who does not move, suggests a feeling of disorder that is subverting this lynching scene. I propose this is a manifestation of the 'strange' doubleness associated with suicide by Maurice Blanchot. Joe's choice to do nothing as he dies suggests, in Blanchot's terms, a "power to make things 'arise' at the heart of [his] absence"[13]. Joe's silence elicits a 'strange' refusal in his refusal to exist. The description that he is 'empty' highlights this 'strange' situation where Joe gives rise to an identity through its absence. I contend that what 'arises' here, this 'emptiness', is perhaps unspeakable within the constructs of what Warren elsewhere describes as "anti-black grammar"[14].

Such a 'strange' contradiction exceeds the conventional, anti-black logic of lynching. Warren, discussing the murder of a gay black man, Steen Keith Fenrich, by his homophobic stepfather in 2000, writes:

> Given the impossibility of the existential "ends" that set this violence into motion, the brutality must continue past death, outside "the normative times of life and death," beyond utility and reason, and incessantly encircle the impossible object of its drive. Overkill, then, is the social materialization of the drive. It is surplus violence (and surplus pleasure) that is caught in the circuit of failure, and the disavowal of such a failure – where failure is registered as success – that is, each additional stab, laceration, puncture, and dismemberment, brings one

[13] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1982) First published 1955, 43.
[14] Calvin L. Warren, 'Black Mysticism: Fred Moten's Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit', *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 65 (2) (2017), 220.

> "closer" to achieving the unachievable. Thus this excessive violence is the symptom of an impossible existential aim.[15]

The murder of Joe is represented as an act of 'overkill'. The 'surplus violence' of lynching, and Grimm's act of castration in particular, seems to be an attempt to 'achieve the unachievable'. Dismembering Joe appears to be an effort to control him; but if Joe is in some way complicit then this control is impossible to fully substantiate. The castration exceeds 'utility and reason' and, in so doing, reveals a 'circuit of failure, and the disavowal of failure'. The 'impossible existential aim' of securing anti-blackness through lynching then appears to be undercut by the practice and violence of lynching itself. Joe's death, when read as both a suicide and a murder, foregrounds this 'failure'.

Faulkner's text brings this problem to light as it reflects on the lasting effect the lynching has on the lynch mob:

> Then [Joe's] face, body, all, seemed to collapse to fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant. Again from the town, deadened a little by the walls, the scream of the siren mounted towards its unbelievable crescendo, passing out of the realm of hearing. (349-50)

'Pale body' and 'black blood' immediately foreground the question of Joe's race. This passage unfolds from the perspective of the lynch mob. From this point of view, the repetition of the blood being 'black' seems to be an appeal to secure Joe's race. In order to justify the lynching, the mob requires Joe to be black. The sense of convention that has led to this violence is only sustained so long as the lynching enacts a traditional

[15] Calvin Warren, 'Onticide: Afro-Pessimism, ~~Gay~~ Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 23 (3) (2017), 402.

racist hierarchy. If Joe is exposed as white, then the castration, for instance, would be implicitly self-directed. The 'released breath' can be read as echoing a sigh of relief in response to the 'black' blood that emerges from the site of the genitals. However, the blood also stresses how problematic the logic of the lynch mob is: all blood is red.

The lynch mob then seems already to be haunted by the violence they have committed. The 'peaceful valleys', 'placid and reassuring streams', and thoughts of 'children' are a striking contrast to the blood and violence of the castration. Indeed, the indication that such serene images will be forever marked by the lynching invokes an unsettling horror. Terms such as 'musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatful' to describe the memories of the lynching suggest a muted intransigence. They echo the description of Joe 'laying there' as he is attacked. Since Joe appears to be the memory which the lynch mob cannot lose, it seems that he is 'musing, quiet, steadfast'. The final description of the memory as 'of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant' raises a central question: who here 'triumphs'? Implicitly it is Joe who is 'alone', 'serene', and therefore 'triumphant'. But such a description of a man who has been lynched seems suspect and inappropriate.

I propose that what is ultimately 'triumphant' in this scene is indeterminacy. In turn, this indeterminacy highlights a crisis within an anti-black world constitution. The lack of Joe's 'fading' underscores a feeling that is akin to Blanchot's and Andrew Bennett's descriptions of the uncertainty and 'undecidability' associated with suicide. Bennett's interpretation that suicide "insists on and makes inconceivable our understanding of ourselves and of others"[16] is thus played out here. This inability to understand Joe, and the simultaneous demand for understanding challenges the anti-

[16] Andrew Bennett, *Suicide Century: Literature and Suicide from James Joyce to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), 3.

black world constitution of lynching. The last sentence of the passage above, and the end of the lynching scene, draw attention to this breakdown in understanding. ‘Unbelievable’ directly indicates uncertainty, but it is the siren that is beyond hearing which foregrounds a sense of disorder. The ‘crescendo’ of the lynching has likewise reached a point where it no longer seems to make sense within conventional terms.

Joe’s suicide, then, fastens the indeterminacy of his race as a challenge to a racist social order, and thus a confrontation manifesting a contemporary crisis in Durkheimian integration and regulation. Specifically, the monstrosity of racism as realised in lynching is highlighted and undermined by Joe’s seeming complicity in his death. Joe refuses to adhere to expected ‘rules’ of behaviour. By voluntarily going to his own lynching, ‘laying there’ and ‘soaring into memory forever and ever’, Joe underscores a social problem of making sense of his existence. Because he is not integrated, and his society can no longer order his position within an orthodox racist hierarchy, there is a collapse of understanding which intimates a failure of social regulation and anti-black world constitution. The combination of murder and suicide, alongside Joe’s abnegation of his assigned role as a social monster, thereby hollows out and renders self-conscious the lynching violence even as it is being perpetrated. Lynching then appears to be a desperate attempt to re-establish a racist order that is being undercut by the lynching itself. The escalating violence stresses this impossible effort to secure an anti-black existential understanding. I thus propose that reading Joe’s death as a murder and a suicide brings forth a crisis in anti-black existential world constitution as described by Warren. Therefore, this death can be described as giving rise to an ontological crisis.

Scholarship on *Light in August*

Although Joe's lynching is not always read as a suicide in scholarship, his social antagonism is routinely emphasised. In particular, the negotiation of social order in relation to racial and religious practices has been brought to the fore in readings of Joe's death. Richard C. Moreland, for instance, describes the lynching as "Christmas's crucifixion"[17]. Irene Visser likens such interpretations to discourses of social control:

> [Joe's] lynching has often been read as a sacrificial murder or crucifixion, in alignment with the text's many Christian references. Primarily, I would state, it is a social act, a communal execution performed outside of the law, implementing the lynch-law that allows whites to murder blacks on suspicion of crime. Lynching, according to anthropologists, is a form of social control; an ultimate sanction reserved for those who have acted against the welfare of society.[18]

The association of 'haloes' with the lynch mob encourages interpretations such as Visser's. Indeed, the conventional nature of much of the lynching scene, and particularly the castration, indicates that it is being played out as a traditional 'sanction' and a performance which is claimed to 'serve justice'. When Visser notes that lynching is seen as a punishment against 'those who have acted against the welfare of society', she draws attention to a sense of obligation that is similar to Bailey and Snedkar's suggestion that lynching can be considered a ritualised act within a racist 'moral community'. Although Joe's murder can be situated within these readings as an act of social order, by drawing on the 'undecidability' of suicide as described in literary suicidology, a complex form of disruption also arises in this death. From this

[17] Richard C. Moreland, 'Faulkner and Modernism', in *The Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner*, ed. Philip M. Weinstein, 1st edn (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) *Cambridge Companions Online* <http://0-dx.doi.org.wam.leeds.ac.uk/10.1017/CCOL0521420636> [accessed 01 January 2016], 23.
[18] Irene Visser, 'Getting Ready to Stay Dead: Rites of Passage in William Faulkner's Novels', *English Studies*, 93 (4) (2012), 482.

perspective, one of the primary actions Joe commits against society is to emphasise his indeterminacy within a racist social order.

Richard Gray underscores the problems that such uncertainty creates:

> [Joe] is a subversive agent: an indeterminate figure whose indeterminacy, and whose willingness to bring that indeterminacy into issue, calls into question the fixities and definites, and the exclusions, of the communal language.[19]

Gray's description of Joe as a 'subversive agent' brings focus to the manner in which Joe undermines social practices from within his society. Similar to Gray, Richard Godden's reading of Joe's use of the word 'nigger' stresses that Joe's social rebellion is particularly linguistic. Godden proposes that "by manipulating a white skin and a black word [Joe] debilitates Jefferson's confidence about its distribution of meaning."[20] Following Visser's account of lynching as a social act, Gray and Godden's descriptions of Joe's subversive 'debilitation', alongside my own reading of the lynching scene, Joe's death when interpreted as a suicide can be distilled as a disruptive act challenging social regulation. In other words, the complexity associated with suicide contributes to a destabilising of Joe's society's 'distribution of meaning'. This disruption then calls attention to the problems of anti-black world constitution as outlined by Warren, and highlights a certain irresolution, and precariousness, at the heart of such a racist existential understanding

Bethany Lam, in developing the work of Thadeus Davis, details the connection between the uncertainty of Joe's racial positioning and this problematising of meaning:

> ultimately [Joe] does not make a choice between his races; as shown above, he cannot. Therefore, as Davis predicts, he is left as before with his own destruction. This option is in fact Joe's salvation, […] in death,

[19] Richard Gray, *The Life of William Faulkner: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 187.
[20] Richard Godden, 'Call Me Nigger!: Race and Speech in Faulkner's *Light in August*', *Journal of American Studies*, 14 (2) (1980), 240.

> Joe defeats society, finally creating a successful merger of black with white and exploding the racial binary.[21]

Lam's essential argument is that the normalising power of society, based on Foucauldian theory, forces Joe into a position of racial categorisation. US Southern conventions require Joe to choose to be either black or white, or at least not one of them. But Joe does not choose, instead he dies. Through this death, Lam argues, Joe "has escaped Foucault's normalizing and normalized prison; he has won freedom from societal power" (65). Here, Joe's 'triumph' is accentuated. However, even though Joe may have 'won freedom' from a 'racial binary', he only manages this through death. I propose that while Joe does to a degree 'escape societal power', his death produces a more complex sense of crisis than the term 'freedom' implies.

Godden suggests, "A language community is […] of necessity a system of naturalized collusion and constraint." (237) Gray then takes this further noting that "lynching, too, can be seen as part of the communal language" (186). The act of lynching is a means of control and of substantiation. While 'punishing' the black individual, lynching also situates authority with and reinforces relations within the white mob. As such, it is an act of 'collusion and constraint'. Joe is not integrated within his society's racial hierarchy or its taxonomy of race, nor is he regulated by an appropriate sense of social purpose. Instead, he appears overly individuated and responding to his society's violent conception of race. In Durkheim's terms, this suicide suggests "excessive individuation […] a man [who] has become detached from his society" (175), as well as an individual who is the subject of "oppressive discipline" (239). I propose, then, that Joe's suicide can be read as both 'egoistic' and 'fatalistic'. Such a failure to integrate and regulate Joe not only brings focus to the limits of a

[21] Bethany L. Lam, '*Light in August* in Light of Foucault: Reexamining the Biracial Experience', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture and Theory*, 64 (4) (2008), 62.

conventional ‘anti-black grammar’, but also a more pessimistic conclusion than ‘freedom’ as it seems marred by a certain fatalism. Gray goes on:

> This time the language fails, however; the collaborative ritual is botched. What happens to Joe, when he is taken back to Jefferson, cannot be accommodated within the traditional vocabulary of crime and punishment. (186)

The reason I suggest the language here ‘fails’ is that Joe has not entirely subsumed power but retains a ‘strange’ self-identification through his death as a suicide. This death can thereby be interpreted as Joe problematising a ‘traditional vocabulary’. The ‘collaborative ritual is botched’ because Joe chooses to return to Jefferson and ‘lays there’ as he is murdered. This is a social crisis as the community is unable to fully ‘constrain’, understand, define, and appropriately regulate a ‘detached’ individual. Joe, though, is left in a position that seems to be beyond understanding, and that cannot be defined in conventional language.

Michel Foucault details the conflict between individuals and communities inherent in this ‘traditional vocabulary of crime and punishment’:

> It is an unequal struggle: on one side are all the forces, all the power, all the rights. […] the offender becomes the common enemy. Indeed, he is worse than an enemy, for it is from within society that he delivers his blows – he is nothing less than a traitor, a ‘monster’.[22]

Joe is considered both a ‘traitor’ and a ‘monster’ by the people of Jefferson. However, he has not relinquished ‘all the power’ and ‘all the rights’ even though he is engaged in an ‘unequal struggle’. Instead, ‘he delivers his blows’ from within by taking authority of his own body. This command is counter-intuitively realised when Joe enables his body to be destroyed in a lynching. This death, and the blurring of determination between lynch mob and victim, destabilises conventional racial classifications. In such a traditional racist structure, Joe’s retention of control implies that he is white, while

[22] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), 90.

being lynched implies he is black. The lynching thus reiterates the indeterminate racial position that Joes lives throughout the novel. This, in turn, troubles the performance of white supremacy and anti-blackness being brought forth in the practice of lynching. Joe's death finally secures this uncertainty as a permanent state of irresolution. As such, this lynching, when read as a murder and a suicide, is a complex subversion that foregrounds a crisis in racial order. This subversion draws attention to a certain linguistic and social failure and an ontological crisis. With some similarity to the previous chapter, then, this identification of crisis implicitly calls for an alternative, non-anti-black 'social reconstruction' that could accommodate Joe's indeterminacy within its 'distribution of meaning'.

Joe's Death in Relation to Race and Religion

The complexity which I suggest is manifested most clearly when Joe's death is considered a form of suicide, is initially indicated in his gait and mismatched clothing when he first appears in Jefferson:

> Byron Bunch knows this: It was one Friday morning three years ago. And the group of men at work in the planer shed looked up, and saw the stranger standing there, watching them. They did not know how long he had been there. He looked like a tramp, yet not like a tramp either. His shoes were dusty and his trousers were soiled too. But they were of decent serge, sharply creased, and his shirt was soiled but it was a white shirt, and he wore a tie and a stiffbrim straw hat that was quite new, cocked at an angle arrogant and baleful above his still face. He did not look like a professional hobo in his professional rags, but there was something definitely rootless about him, as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home. And that he carried this knowledge with him always as though it were a banner, with a quality ruthless, lonely, and almost proud. (25)

This passage, surprisingly considering what follows, begins with a declaration of knowledge. Most information in *Light in August* is heard or told and often based on

speculation, such as Joe's past, Mrs Hightower's suicide, or the gossip of the townsfolk which surrounds each major event. But, as a rarity in the novel, 'Byron Bunch knows this'. Joe's appearance is, though, marked by contradiction. He manages to 'look like a tramp, yet not like a tramp'. As the view progresses up his body the image shifts from 'soiled' to 'decent' to 'quite new'. Attention is directed to Joe's head with his 'cocked' hat, and away from the feet that highlight 'something definitely rootless'. The fact he is 'almost proud' of his lack of home does not indicate contentment. Instead, this same 'banner' of non-location is 'lonely'. Terms such as 'cocked', 'arrogant', 'baleful', and 'ruthless', emphasise social antagonism being presented through visual cues. Joe is even wearing an inappropriate outfit as he is dressed in a suit for a job at a sawmill.

This opening description stresses discordance; the new hat does not fit with the worn clothes, and the 'soiled shirt' is a 'white shirt'. One of the workers notes the social implications of Joe's appearance, "'that's a pretty risky look for a man to wear on his face in public,' one said: 'He might forget and use it somewhere where somebody won't like it.'" (26) Joe's initial appearance is a challenge that suggests he cannot be easily defined, nor does he wish to be. In a similar manner to the representation of Joe's lynching-suicide, complexity here is a form of social antagonism and underlying this challenge is a focus on Joe's race.

Byron more directly highlights Joes race as he considers Joe's name:

> 'His name is what?' one said.
> 'Christmas.'
> 'Is he a foreigner?'
> 'Did you ever hear of a white man named Christmas?' the foreman said.
> 'I never heard of nobody a-tall named it,' the other said.
> And that was the first time Byron remembered that he had ever thought how a man's name, which is supposed to be just the sound for who he is, can be somehow an augur of what he will do, if other men can only read the meaning in time. It seemed to him that none of them had looked especially at the stranger until they heard his name. But as soon as they heard it, it was as though there was something in the sound of it that was

> trying to tell them what to expect; that he carried with him his own inescapable warning (26-27)

Christmas, as a festival, is repeatedly foregrounded in Faulkner's fiction. Many key scenes happen during Christmas; particularly in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) where Christmas is a pivotal period during which relationships are developed or breakdown, such as that of Charles Bon and Judith Sutpen, and Henry Sutpen leaving. Primarily, Christmas suggests social interaction and confrontation; for instance, the return of dominating figures such as Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*, or the development of Harry's and Charlotte's love in *The Wild Palms* (1939). Joe's name similarly appears to indicate the conflicts approaching with the murder of Joanna and his own crucifixion-styled death. Byron here calls attention to an ability to 'read the meaning' of a name and, in so doing, suggests an intelligible linguistic order. This nominative determinism is, though, implicitly an understanding to be negotiated: Joe's name is a 'warning' rather than fate, and this is 'an augur' that is to be socially deliberated and managed. Joe is, though, a 'stranger' who is interpreted as a threat to the community since he does not correspond with this conventional comprehension. The 'inescapable warning' of Joe thus seems to be his position outside of, and in excess of, expected norms. This inability to define Joe then culminates in the lynching-suicide, and an event that collapses into unmanageable violence.

This initial emphasis on how Joe dresses and the look on his face stresses uncertainty, which is foregrounded by the consideration of racial indeterminacy. This opening characterisation of Joe thereby gives rise to a feeling of social disruption that will go on to become the focal point of the lynching scene. Reading his death as a Durkheimian suicide underscores this turbulence in the community. Indeed, the millworkers reactions to Joe indicate a struggle to integrate and regulate him, and they seem unable to govern Joe in a peaceful manner. This effort of the community to

manage Joe eventually culminates the extreme form of lynching. Joe, though, continues to challenge communal norms of behaviour by attending this lynching and not resisting the violence against him. In so doing, he brings forth a tension where social regulation appears to be enacted and yet failing. As such, Byron and the millworkers' confusion here is never settled. The complexity of suicide is thus manifested by Faulkner in this novel through a social and existential confrontation within the racialised context of the Jim Crow South.

The depiction of Grimm particularly highlights this sense of crisis in racial order. Where Joe stands out as an unclear mystery, the most prominent feature of Grimm's life is his certitude. This conviction, though, begins with a feeling of despair:

> It was as though not only could he see no path ahead of him, he knew that there was none. Then suddenly his life opened definite and clear. The wasted years in which he had shown no ability in school, in which he had been known as lazy, recalcitrant, without ambition, were behind him, forgotten. He could now see his life opening before him, uncomplex and inescapable as a barren corridor, completely freed now of ever again having to think or decide, the burden which he now assumed and carried as bright and weightless and martial as his insignatory brass: a sublime and implicit faith in physical courage and blind obedience, and a belief that the white race is superior to any and all other races and that the American is superior to all other white races and that the American uniform is superior to all men, and that all that would ever be required of him in payment for this belief, this privilege, would be his own life. (339)

Grimm is presented as an opposite to Joe. He wears a uniform with pride and his social position seems certain since he has found himself on an 'uncomplex', singular path. He knows his place within a racial hierarchy and this 'frees' him from ever 'having to think or decide'. Such confidence and thoughtlessness outline a coherent and intuitive social order of meaning. Grimm does not have to consider how he should act because he feels his society has created a role for him. He need only offer his 'blind obedience' to this order. Grimm thus sees and presents himself as a soldier who will ensure a continuing white supremacy.

Like the complex lynching, though, this description is laced with irony. Grimm's 'privilege' is not to 'pay with his own life' but to become a murderer. The sense of a white man's burden is undermined as it is 'weightless', 'implicit', and based on 'blindness'. Faulkner here writes in a lengthy sentence that builds and layers multiple meanings: the uniform that is at once 'weightless' is also 'bright', the 'implicit faith' is also 'sublime', and the feeling of superiority is built on a tangible racist hierarchy. Indeed, Grimm's resolute faith is set within a social order that appears to support him and no one stops his violence in the lynching scene. Unlike Joe, Grimm is integrated within a straightforward racist hierarchy. He is regulated by this order, and it supplies him with a raison d'être. In turn, he assists this order by punishing Joe. The problem that the lynching scene poses, particularly when it is read as a suicide, is that the order Grimm follows is rendered as inadequate. Since Joe's race cannot be singularly defined, the racial hierarchy that Grimm adheres to is undercut. The 'surplus violence' of lynching alongside the characterisation of Grimm as 'blind', as well as Joe's 'strange' agency, intimate a serious crisis in this racist social structure. As in this multi-layered description of Grimm, and in relation to several suicides discussed in this thesis, complexity and uncertainty are wielded to perform social critiques.

This racial order is presented in its most extreme and violent form by Grimm. However, the failure of conventional order to regulate individuals arises in a variety of ways in *Light in August*. As indicated in the lynching scene, this crisis in racial order seems to be coterminous with a crisis of religious order. Perhaps this is because both racist and religious orders are part of an 'anti-black grammar' in the racially segregated deep US South. For instance, Joe's lover, Joanna Burden, expresses her racial and religiously charged worldview:

> I thought of all the children coming forever and ever into the world, white, with the black shadow already falling upon them before they even

> drew breath. And I seemed to see the black shadow in the shape of a cross. And it seemed like the white babies were struggling, even before they drew breath, to escape from the shadow that was not only upon them but beneath them too, flung out like their arms were flung out, as if they were nailed to the cross. I saw all the little babies that would ever be in the world, the ones not yet even born – a long line of them with their arms spread, on the black crosses. (190-91)

Crucifixion is a motif in *Light in August* that is regularly paired with Joe Christmas. There is a key difference, though, between the image above and the eventual fate of Joe: he does not 'struggle'. In fact, in his youth, as he is beaten by his religious foster father, Joe's response contradicts the assumption of crucifixion as something to work against; "The boy's body might have been wood or stone; a post or a tower upon which the sentient part of him mused like a hermit, contemplative and remote with ecstasy and selfcrucifixion." (122) This understanding of the martyr death of Christ as a 'contemplative', self-controlled, and desired event is not limited to Joe. Gail argues that a masochistic want for self-punishment is found within the people of Jefferson: "their escape from [pleasure] is in violence, in drinking and fighting and praying; catastrophe too, the violence identical and apparently inescapable *And so why should not their religion drive them to crucifixion of themselves and one another?*" (276) Setting 'praying' alongside 'fighting' associates religion with a repeated, and wished for, violence. This desire for self-destruction is similar to the volition of suicide. Religion as practiced in the US South at this time appears to be caught up, like racist social order, in its own circle of violence, or 'circuit of failure'.

These descriptions of Joe, Grimm, race, and religion suggest a form of social determination. Struggle and violence are 'apparently inescapable' within this structure. The people of Jefferson seem compelled to punish and work against each other by these social orders. This tension in turn indicates a wide-ranging crisis. Even though the term 'escape' is repeated within the text and these passages, few characters appear able to

find an outlet, except, as Gail notes, in 'catastrophe'. Joe's death when read as a suicide foregrounds this problem in a complex fashion. Precisely because it seems Joe can escape, and instead chooses to neither resist nor surrender, the lynching is no longer a traditional act of social discipline. Joe's death seems to exceed the conventional 'anti-black world constitution' of race and religion in the US South. The expected meaning to be played out in the lynching of a rebellious individual, the social regulation and disciplining of such an individual, is thus troubled. The association of religion and racist social order thereby draws attention to the breadth of the ontological crisis provoked by Joe's death. In particular, there appears to be a fundamental, existential social problem that is highlighted in Joe's lynching that would require a radical social response.

Language in *Light in August*

Faulkner renders this unsettling of traditional authority in *Light in August* by contrasting and conflating words and images. This is seen, for instance, in the introductions to Joe and Grimm or the compounding of certain words: 'womanshenegro', 'Augusttremulous', 'pinkwomansmelling', 'selfcrucifixion'. This active, ongoing negotiation in and of language is then exacerbated in the structure of the text. Multiple storylines – Lena and Byron, Joe and Joanna, the Hightowers – intertwine and embed within one another. The compaction of words and imagery, alongside this juxtaposing of narratives, calls language itself into question. Byron explicates:

> *It was like me, and her, and all the other folks that I had to get mixed up in it, were just a lot of words that never even stood for anything, were not even us, while all the time what was us was going on and going on without even missing the lack of words* (302)

The question of whether the 'lot of words' 'even stood for anything' brings language to a critical juncture. Byron points to some form of consistent meaning in the phrase 'what

was us was going on’. This ‘us’ is abstract, but it denotes a nucleus of identity, yet this identity also seems inexpressible. As such, this tension echoes the complexity associated with suicide in the novel. At once, meaning and identity appear to be asserted and undermined – a state of affairs I am describing in this text as giving rise to an ontological crisis. Here, this crisis seems ultimately linguistic in nature.

As discussed previously, Gray and Godden stress the negotiation of language in *Light in August*. Godden emphasises Joe’s use of racially charged terms such as ‘nigger’, while Gray highlights Joe’s ‘indeterminacy’ and how this challenges communal linguistic practices. Faulkner similarly brings the terminology of suicide into question. Specifically, as quoted previously, the people of Jefferson wonder if Joe had “set out and made his plans to passively commit suicide.” (333) ‘Passive suicide’ is a relatively common phrase in suicidology referring to the use of an external agent to kill oneself, such as ‘suicide by cop’. This differentiates it from ‘active suicide’ or taking one’s life with one’s own hand.[23] *Light in August* draws out the inadequacy of the term ‘passive’ in the troubled context of Joe’s lynching. Using an outside agent does not necessitate the submissiveness implied in the term ‘passive’. Indeed, the extreme violence of a lynching ironises this sense of inactive acquiescence. Due to the inadequacy of the word ‘passive’ to describe this death, as well as others that will be discussed as this thesis progresses, I propose an alternative term: displaced suicide.

This term stresses the physical displacement of the act of suicide onto an outside agent. By suggesting a sense of authority being in negotiation, it invokes the indeterminacy emphasised in Joe’s death. The term derives from psychoanalysis:

> Displacement:
> Moving something from its current position. In psychoanalysis, a defence mechanism involving redirection of emotional feelings from

[23] ‘Passive’ and ‘active’ are also used with greater clarity in discussing suicidal ideation, but this is essentially a different discourse. The discourses are separated between pre- and post-act of suicide.

> their original object to a substitute object related to the original one by a chain of associations. Although not essential to the concept […] the substitute object may be less threatening than the original one[24]

The examples I read of displaced suicide, such as Joe here or Gloria in Chapter 4, use suicide as a ‘defence mechanism’. In these cases, the choice to die is rendered as a means of securing self-identity from an outside threat; for instance, racist hierarchies or the law. Frequently these external forces are highlighted by the agents engaged to do the killing, such as a lynch mob. Employing an alternative killer is always in some ways ‘less threatening’ as it engages suicide in a social exchange in which power is spread. Ahab in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851)[25] is a characteristic example. Ahab, if one accepts that he knows he will die in his battle with Moby Dick, secures his identity as a warrior whaler, reconnects with the natural world, and negotiates the power dynamics of hunter and hunted by enacting a displaced suicide with the white whale.

The language of *Light in August* frequently calls attention to uncertain definitions, such as the use of racist and religious terminology. On top of this, the novel consistently gives rise to uncertainty as events are retold and very little is stated with sureness in the novel. This irresolute approach reaches a climax with Joe’s lynching and his suicidal complicity within it. I propose that this complexity can be read in a similar fashion to the work of Louis I. Dublin and Bessie Bunzel, as discussed in this thesis’ introduction. Suicide seems to be a “complex social phenomenon”[26] in Faulkner’s novel. The layering of multiple meanings, storylines, compaction of words, and the complex suicide exceed convention, disrupt how sense is made, and pose an urgent problem by framing these challenges in such a violent context. In Higonnet’s terms, this

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[24] Definition from: *A Dictionary of Psychology*, ed. Andrew M. Colman, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015) <http://0-www.oxfordreference.com > [accessed 17 Feb 2016]

[25] Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; or, The Whale* <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2701/2701-h/2701-h.htm> [accessed 24 September 2017]

[26] Louis I. Dublin; Bessie Bunzel, *To Be or Not to Be: A Study of Suicide* (New York: Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1933), 15.

‘puts into play the problem of reading itself’. *Light in August* would thus be understood as calling for a necessarily undefined and radically alternative mode of interpretation to negotiate the crisis of an anti-black world constitution, or, a non-anti-black grammar.

Mrs Hightower’s Suicide and Patriarchal Order

The suicide of the comparatively minor character, Mrs Hightower engages in a similar complexity and social commentary as the death of Joe. Here, though, rather than race, gender roles appear to be the focal point of a crisis of interpretation. In a manner akin to most of the major events within *Light in August*, the death of Mrs Hightower is presented in a fashion that stresses uncertainty. The strongest evidence, though, indicates that she leaves her husband and jumps to her death from a hotel in Memphis. The doubt arises, as is frequently the case in the novel, when events are retold by the town and by strangers:

> his wife went bad on him. She would slip off to Memphis now and then and have a good time. About twenty-five years ago, that was, right after he come here. Some folks claimed he knew about it. That he couldn’t or wouldn’t satisfy her himself and that he knew what she was doing. Then one Saturday night she got killed, in a house or something in Memphis. Papers full of it. (46)

Conventional gender roles come to the forefront as Mrs Hightower is marginalised in this passage. She is ‘his wife’ and the focus is on her husband, Gail. While blame appears to be laid on Gail in the remark ‘he wouldn’t satisfy her’, it is still his wife who is the subject of the most scorn. It is she who is having the ‘good time’ and she who ‘went bad on him’.

In the passage above the death is reported as a murder or an accident. A few pages later, the story is recounted in greater detail:

> It was Sunday morning's paper which they [the town] saw, telling how she had jumped or fallen from a hotel window in Memphis Saturday night, and was dead. There had been a man in the room with her and was arrested. He was drunk. They were registered as man and wife, under a fictitious name. The police found her rightful name where she had written it herself on a piece of paper and then torn it up and thrown it into the waste basket. The papers printed it, with the story: wife of the Reverend Gail Hightower, of Jefferson, Mississippi. (52)

Here it is more heavily indicated that Mrs Hightower kills herself. Mrs Hightower's name is never revealed to the reader in the novel and, in this passage, Faulkner draws particular attention to this nameless state. The colon in the final line suggests that Mrs Hightower's name is perhaps about to be revealed; however, she is once again referred to by her position as Gail's wife. This is not a position Mrs Hightower seems to respect. The narrative notes that Mrs Hightower registers with her presumed lover 'as man and wife, under a fictitious name'. She can thus be understood as a character, like Joe, who opposes her society by undermining conventional terminology.

This absence of Mrs Hightower's name is associated with a 'strange' authority that she seems to manifest through her suicide. In the act of writing and tearing up her name, Faulkner intimates Mrs Hightower's control. She independently determines her identity: 'she had written it herself'. Writing the name is a means of self-identification, and so is abandoning it 'into the waste basket'. Mrs Hightower, by identifying and destroying her 'rightful name' embraces a nameless state and severs the ties that her name associates her with. She thus enacts a social opposition and a separation from her previous married life. The affair and the suicide are linked, then, not just by the setting but also by a comparable urge. The suicide, like destroying her name, elicits an irrevocable absence through an erased identity. In a manner that is akin to Joe's death, Mrs Hightower's suicide then destabilises conventional social order by engendering a moment of irresolution. Her death demands discussion, as the town's reaction shows, yet the suicide disrupts the possibilities of this negotiation. The failure to integrate and

regulate Mrs Hightower, emphasised by the absence of her name and as suggested by her suicide, calls attention to this social crisis. Her erased identity through suicide, in similarity to how I have described Joe's death, seems to exceed a conventional 'distribution of meaning'.

The passages above highlight that Mrs Hightower's life is dominated by her marriage and marital affairs. Later in the text, as the town continues to talk, the term 'suicide' is used. Again, the stress is on the Hightower's relationship and there is talk, "About how he had made his wife go bad and commit suicide because he was not a natural husband, not a natural man" (55). Here it is repeated that Mrs Hightower is the one who 'goes bad', although there is greater emphasis on Gail's apparent failings. Judith Wittenberg draws out a parallel between Mrs Hightower and Edna Pontellier, who kills herself at the end of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). In this reading, Wittenberg highlights Gail's inadequacies as well as the wider social failing intimated by the failure to integrate or regulate Mrs Hightower:

> The lives of both women […] constitute a resounding refusal to conform to restrictive community mores or to tolerate their husband's self-absorbed failure to comprehend their complex needs and psychological makeup.[27]

Wittenberg argues that Mrs Hightower's suicide is a protest against society. The manner in which Mrs Hightower's death is only ever reported, and always reported with an emphasis on her husband, indicates the 'restrictive community mores' that she acts against. Her suicide, in Wittenberg's reading, draws attention to Mrs Hightower's 'complex needs' and how they are not satisfied by her husband. This suicide can thus be said to intimate a failure in patriarchal order, which is similar to the undermining of racial order in Joe's death.

[27] Judith Bryant Wittenberg, 'The Women of *Light in August*', in *New Essays on Light in August*, ed. Michael Millgate (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), 113.

Wittenberg suggests that there is "little access [provided by Faulkner] to female subjectivity and sensibility" (106) in *Light in August*. This absence of information is evoked by Mrs Hightower's 'torn up' name. Perhaps, then, this is a self-conscious highlighting of the absence of female subjectivity by Faulkner in order to make a deeper critical point. Such absence is unsettling as it gives rise to a perilous uncertainty. It is the omission of any clear, singular explanation for the suicide that highlights this feeling of distress. It is this absence, for instance, which leads to the town's ongoing gossip. This lack of understanding, again akin to the awkwardness found in the townsfolk's encounters with Joe, seems to present a challenge to deep US Southern conventions – in this case of patriarchal control rather than race.

Furthermore, suicide here once again draws attention to a surplus of violence which exceeds traditional understanding. By writing her name and tearing it up before killing herself while another man shares her room, Mrs Hightower breaks from accepted behaviour. This affair and the suicide are autonomous acts that separate her from her husband and her assigned role as a wife. As Wittenberg argues, this suicide is thus a 'resounding refusal'. Mrs Hightower's society then seems at pains to reconnect the pair. The stress on Gail in the reports of Mrs Hightower's death and the narrative as a whole underscore this effort. But this connection has been severed by the suicide. There is, therefore, a problem of irresolution intertwined with an inability to interpret her death. This uncertainty appears to be the root cause of the town's confused reports of the suicide.

The rest of the novel continues to highlight this irresolution through the narrative of Gail. In particular, patriarchal order and Gail's struggle to practice the implied authority of patriarchy, are regularly foregrounded. Gail's sexual failure to

satisfy his wife is indicated by her affairs and phrases such as ‘not a natural man’. He then tries to substitute this sexual role with financial power:

> When he quitted the seminary he had a small income inherited from his father, which, as soon as he got his church, he forwarded promptly on receipt of the quarterly checks to an institution for delinquent girls in Memphis. Then he lost his church, he lost the Church, and the bitterest thing which he believed that he had ever faced – more bitter even than the bereavement and the shame – was the letter which he wrote them to say that from now on he could send them but half the sum which he had previously sent. (45)

His wife, with her extramarital affairs in Memphis, is implicitly one of these ‘delinquent girls’. This language is infantilising and suggests a patriarchal idealisation, which is echoed by Gail’s use of the money ‘inherited from his father’. It is, though, the fact that Gail is more disappointed by his financial failure than the ‘bereavement’ of losing his wife which forefronts a significant breakdown in conventional gender relations.

Gail’s ‘bitterness’ seems to stem from a compounding of his sexual impotence with his financial loss. Because these failings are both sexual and financial, there is a stress on Gail’s inadequacy as an orthodox patriarchal protector. Gail’s wife, on the other hand, replaces one man for another and controls the break-up of the marriage by leaving her husband. Although the suicide implies Mrs Hightower’s new life ends in frustration, it is still an expression of her autonomy. Indeed, her death seems to secure a ‘refusal’ that means Gail will never have conventional patriarchal authority. The rippling consequences of this relational breakdown is then realised by Gail leaving the Church. Mrs Hightower’s suicide is thus presented as having a significant, lasting, and disorientating effect on Gail. It throws him into a state of unresolved bafflement akin to the ongoing uncertainty and desire to know that has been highlighted by Bennett.

With his last thoughts in the novel, Gail tries and fails to negotiate this uncertainty as well as where responsibility lies for his wife’s suicide:

> 'I have bought my ghost, even though I did pay for it with my life. And who can forbid me doing that? It is any man's privilege to destroy himself, so long as he does not injure anyone else, so long as he lives to and of himself-' He stops suddenly. Motionless, unbreathing, there comes upon him a consternation that is about to be actual horror. […] 'Then, if this is so, if I am the instrument of her despair and death, then I am in turn instrument of someone outside myself. And I know that for fifty years I have not been clay: I have been a single instant of darkness in which a horse galloped and a gun crashed. And if I am my dead grandfather on the instant of his death, then my wife, his grandson's wife… the debaucher and murderer of my grandson's wife, since I could neither let my grandson live or die' (368-69)

Gail begins this line of thinking by questioning the 'privilege', or right, to kill oneself. He wants to assert that people can live as individuals; yet this isolation and living 'to and of himself' seems impossible. The fact Mrs Hightower kills herself problematises the degree to which Gail is 'the instrument of her despair and death'. But Gail still feels that social relations are inescapable. This realisation, in a similar manner to Durkheim's understanding of suicide, embeds the act of suicide within a social context. As such, suicide does not here seem to be a 'privilege' or a valorised, independent right, but rather a socially disruptive act.

As suggested, the suicide troubles the patriarchal framework dominating Gail and his wife's narrative. This unsettling of authority culminates here in Gail's conflation of himself with his grandfather. Gail attempts to regain a perceived patriarchal command by identifying himself as his grandfather. But he can only make this identification in 'the instant of his death'. His confusion, stressed by the contradiction 'I could neither let my grandson live or die', indicates a discord similar to the self-identification and self-destruction of suicide. Gail appears to be trapped in a loop of negotiating how his wife's suicide manifests his failure to perform a traditional patriarchal control. This can be described in Warren's terms as a 'circuit of failure' deriving from 'surplus violence'. In the light of Mrs Hightower's suicide, the ontological crisis proposed previously can be understood as a challenge that undermines

oppressive social orders of meaning. Race, religion, and gender would thus be recognised as being in a coterminous crisis in which violence escalates in a desperate attempt to secure an insecurable structure of white male supremacy. The suicides of Joe and Mrs Hightower at once realise the pervasiveness and violence of this patriarchal and anti-black 'world constitution', while also undermining its basis by manifesting an alternative self-determination.

Conclusion

In both of these suicides, unorthodox individuals assert a problematic independent authority against communal control. At the same time, these characters die and so their autonomy is likewise ended in these acts of rebellion. Such a paradox seems to draw out a similar sense of contradiction as discussed throughout this thesis in relation to the work of Camus, Blanchot, and Bennett. Here, I have read this contradiction as resulting in a crisis of anti-black and patriarchal understanding. The irresolution of this contradiction given rise to by suicide can thus be said to be a challenge that undermines certain oppressive structures of control by exceeding conventional intelligibility.

The suicides of Mrs Hightower and Joe Christmas are represented with an emphasis on social interpretation – both deaths are reported and debated by the townsfolk of Jefferson. However, the orthodox reasonings of racial and patriarchal orders seem inadequate when confronted by these deaths, which leads to a problem of comprehension. Because this crisis strikes at the heart of certain oppressive forms of world constitution it can be considered an ontological crisis. Both suicides, I have argued, exceed the grammar of conventional understanding. As such, this ontological crisis draws attention to a pervasive and pernicious problem of, in these cases, racial and

gender oppression, and, likewise, language in the text seems to be in a similar, if not coterminous, crisis of comprehension. In turn, I propose that *Light in August* calls for an alternative understanding, but that this alternative exceeds the language of the text itself. Faulkner's representations of suicide thus insist upon a necessarily new, unspecified, radical understanding, or a radical 'social reconstruction', by escaping the confines of anti-black, patriarchal world constitution.

3. Suicide and Artistic Expression in Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932)

In this chapter, I argue that Paul Arbian's suicide at the end of Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932) foregrounds a crisis in individual artistic expression within an oppressive racial system. I will consider how Paul's life and death is read in terms of a decadent rebellion by critics such as Granville Ganter, Steve Pinkerton, and Elisa Glick. This reading of Paul as challenging certain social expectations of identity construction during The Harlem Renaissance, though, will be situated alongside suicide's complexity. By bringing observations from literary suicidology in to play, I propose that this death is perhaps more pessimistic, and yet still productive, than conventional readings suggest. This chapter goes on to interrogate this productive pessimism in terms of 'black nihilism', as defined by Calvin Warren. In so doing, I do not deny the decadent identification of Paul or present Paul as a nihilist; instead, I argue that the representation of suicide in *Infants of the Spring* gives rise to a crisis of comprehension. This crisis indicates that conventional notions of racial identity in The Harlem Renaissance may themselves contribute to a form of what Warren describes as anti-black violence. In reading the text in this fashion, I intend to draw attention to and clarify the problems Thurman associates with individual, African American artistic expression during The Harlem Renaissance.

As discussed previously, Andrew Bennett proposes: “Above all, suicide makes and unmakes meaning.”[1] Paul’s suicide brings this contradiction of creation and destruction to the fore as a crisis in artistically expressing individual personality within a racist context. By situating this crisis within the adjusted Durkheimian approach defined in this thesis’ introduction, I contend that *Infants of the Spring* gives rise to an unresolved and urgent problem which insists on a social response. This challenge can be read as an identification of an ‘anti-black world’, similar to that outlined in the previous chapter, which solicits new non-anti-black ways of thinking.

This chapter begins by considering Paul’s suicide in relation to suicide discourses. I then turn to scholarship on Thurman’s text and suggest how Warren’s understanding of ‘black nihilism’ can help advance conventional readings of Thurman’s novel. Critical orthodoxy has tended to consider Paul’s death as an instructive problematising of certain racist and homophobic forms of identity categorisation. I want to take this thinking further and propose that Paul’s suicide presents a nihilistic challenge to the processes of how we understand identity, which invites a particularly radical social response. Finally, this argument is developed through an interrogation of how Paul is located within debates pertaining to The Harlem Renaissance as well as the text’s negotiations of individualism and death.

Paul’s Suicide

Thurman’s novel employs a technique of focalisation to narrate the life of Raymond Taylor, who is a young, talented, black writer in Harlem. The text is primarily written in

[1] Andrew Bennett, *Suicide Century: Literature and Suicide from James Joyce to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), 3.

the third person and occasionally slips into free indirect discourse. Although the third person narrative structure emphasises a distanced consideration of the society Ray inhabits, the focus on Ray, as well as the occasional expression of his thoughts, invites an intimate experience of his perspective. Conversations about art, racial identity, individualism, sex, and parties, dominate the novel. These explore the differing views of Ray and his contemporaries on discourses pertaining to race, social relations, and artistic expression. This use of focalisation to examine controversial discourses related to African American experiences in Harlem is akin to other contemporary texts, such as Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). These novels have differing interests, but their similar narrative styles invoke personal reflections on the consequences of social struggles. Likewise, the focalised narrative on Ray encourages the reader to share his sympathy for certain individuals, and in particular Paul, as well as situating these characters on various sides of social discussions. Paul's suicide then acts a complex and critical climax to these debates. In turn, this death seems to render both an intimate, personal tragedy for Ray, as well as a distanced, studious consideration of identity expression within a charged racial context.

The principal social discourse occupying Ray, and the novel as a whole, concerns artistic expressions of identity and whether art should be a collective or independent practice. Ray tends to appreciate individualism and seems to admire Paul, who often draws phalluses, suggests he is openly bisexual, regularly seeks controversy, and is suspicious of the comparatively conservative understanding of Dr Parkes: a black patron of the arts modelled on Alain Locke. Parkes' expectations of racial uplift through a collective return to African traditions is then set against Ray's and Paul's stress on independence, and the opposing views draw each other into relief. Indeed, the narrative focus on a hedonistic artist such as Ray, and his support for Paul, in and of itself marks

a detachment from an older, established generation of African American writers including Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois. By encouraging the reader to share Ray's sympathies for decadence and independence, the text works to challenge the relatively conservative optimism of Locke and Du Bois.

Ray's concerns are shared by the artists he lives with in 'Niggeratti Manor': Eustace, Pelham, and Paul. The text's nuanced interests in differing approaches to African American art are then foregrounded in this shared space of decadent parties. Thurman's focalised narrative style draws attention to these differences as a social discourse with personal consequences by emphasising the negotiation of varying perspectives on race and art provided by Ray, Paul, Parkes, and their white friend Stephen. When Niggeratti Manor disbands near the end of the novel, it seems that the more traditional views of Parkes and Stephen overcome the decadent lifestyles of Ray, Paul, Eustace, and Pelham. In turn, Paul's suicide acts as a response to this failure to establish an alternative to conventional understanding.

This suicide also occurs within a generally bleak conclusion that brings focus to endings and death. Stephen's mother is dying, and he returns to Denmark. Aline, Stephen's black ex-girlfriend, decides to pass for white. Pelham had been arrested for statutory rape earlier in the novel and now decides to take up an alternative trade to art once he is released. Eustace fails an audition he spends much of the text preparing for and, in response to this failure, he gives up his desire to live before being taken to hospital. This emphasis on ending, alongside the narrative's intimate and social considerations, presents Paul's suicide as a critical moment in both Ray's personal life and the broader context of The Harlem Renaissance. Questions of whether Paul 'makes' or 'unmakes' his identity, and a decadent rebellion against more conservative

considerations of art, as well as whether Ray can understand his friend's final act, then come to the fore.

This sense of distance and closeness, that is brought forth in Thurman's narrative style, is highlighted when Ray hears of Paul's suicide through a phone call. Paul's death takes place at a distance but, concurrently, its impact is registered in its immediate effects on Ray:

> The tone of horror in the voice at the other end of the wire both stimulated and frightened him. He had a vague, eerie premonition of impending tragedy.
> "What is it? What's happened?" he queried impatiently.
> "Paul's committed suicide."
> Raymond almost dropped the receiver. Mechanically he obtained the address, assured Artie Fletcher that he would rush to the scene, and within a very few moments was dressed and on his way.
> The subway ride was long and tedious. Only local trains were in operation, local trains which blundered along slowly, stopping at every station, droning noisily: *Paul is dead. Paul is dead*.
> Had Paul the debonair, Paul the poseur, Paul the irresponsible romanticist, finally faced reality and seen himself and the world as they actually were? Or was this merely another act, the final stanza in his drama of beautiful gestures? It was consonant with his character, this committing suicide. He had employed every other conceivable means to make himself stand out from the mob. Wooed the unusual, cultivated artificiality, defied all conventions of dress and conduct. Now perhaps he had decided that there was nothing left for him to do except execute self-murder in some bizarre manner. Raymond found himself not so much interested in the fact that Paul was dead as he was in wanting to know how death had been accomplished. The train trundled along clamouring: *What did he do? What did he do?*[2]

Here the intimate consideration of Ray's experiences is set against the social separation and confusion created by Paul's suicide. Ray's question of whether Paul had 'finally faced reality' or if this death was 'the final stanza in his drama of beautiful gestures' calls attention to the central friction of Thurman's representation of suicide: is this violence due to social pressure or is it an individual artistic expression? Ray explicitly wonders whether this suicide is an act resulting from Paul succumbing to 'the world' or

[2] Wallace Thurman, *Infants of the Spring* (London, UK: Black Classics, 1998), 184.

a result of his artistic sensibility. Artie's 'stimulating' and 'frightening' voice emphasises that this tension is both compelling and troubling. Suicide, an act that is 'consonant' with Paul's 'character', is rendered as captivating, anti-social, and a way to 'stand out'. As Bennett comments, suicide can be considered "the ultimate assertion of selfhood just at the point of its decisive end." (*Suicide Century* 1) Paul's suicide is such an act of individual autonomy and assertion, which, at the same time and paradoxically, marks the end of his autonomy. This death thus brings focus to a sense of tension, and not least a struggle between personal identification and social influence – Paul's 'drama' or the 'reality' he perhaps faces.

This contradiction of self-identification through self-destruction is particularly called into question by Ray's language. Terms such as 'irresponsible', 'poseur', and 'artificiality' highlight that Paul performs an imprudent identity. Implicitly, then, Paul seems to assert an 'artificial' self. He would thus be understood as 'making' an identity that is concurrently undermined by its apparently superficial nature. The intimation that Paul has not yet 'faced reality' stresses this sense of disconnection and a potential irrationality. The probability that he had killed himself in a 'bizarre manner' likewise suggests that this death may be an expression which is separated from the immediate concerns of 'reality'. Nonetheless, Ray indicates that this suicide can still be read as a successful act. He describes death as something to be 'accomplished', and the phrase 'execute self-murder' similarly presents death as an act which can be performed. This combination of failure and success, or disconnection and achievement, 'drama' and 'reality', invokes a crisis of understanding. Paul at once appears to create an identity but, since it is manifested through an act of suicide, this identity is simultaneously 'unmade'. Paul's suicide, as such, exceeds conventional intelligibility.

Ray's initial reaction when he 'almost dropped the receiver', moves 'mechanically', and 'rushes', brings forth a sense of shock and 'horror' in response to this crisis of understanding. The term 'tragedy' initially seems to refer to this feeling of discomposure. However, as the passage continues and Ray contemplates Paul, it appears that the term 'tragedy' may be drawing attention to Paul's suicide as part of a 'drama'. In turn, the suicide reads as a 'gesture' within a coherent narrative form and structure. It is still recognisably tragic, but this language invites a complex reading within conventional modes of literary interpretation. Bennett observes:

> Suicide, 'a death like no other', is fundamentally ambivalent and may be considered an instance of the profound and multifaceted undecidability by which literature itself is constituted. (3)

'Ambivalence' works in tandem with 'tragedy' in Paul's suicide as the latter term brings focus to a sense of 'undecidability' surrounding this death – is this 'tragedy' disorienting or an intelligible drama? Ray's questions of whether this death is a 'final stanza' or a moment of 'facing reality', alongside the notion of an identity concurrently 'made and unmade', marks this suicide with a 'profound' and unresolved friction.

This problem is drawn attention to through the shift in Ray's thinking. At first, the surprise and trauma of suicide is foregrounded. The repeated phrase '*Paul is dead*' indicates this sense of loss. But as Ray mulls on Paul's life, the emphasis moves from the shock of death towards the question of how to interpret Paul's suicide. The train now evokes the question: '*What did he do?*' This question is jarring. It implies a consideration of the means of Paul's death, yet this would be phrased 'how did he do it?' Ray knows 'what' Paul has done; he has killed himself. The 'what' construction poses a more fundamental question than the 'how' of Paul's suicide. It suggests a querying of what suicide is. It seems that by finding out 'how death had been accomplished', Ray hopes to better understand 'what' suicide is. These questions then, like the paradoxes

discussed by Bennett, suggests a need to comprehend suicide. This need, though, has been brought to an impasse precisely because Paul is dead.

When Ray reaches the site of Paul's suicide, his questions are not resolved and this dead end of comprehension comes into focus:

> The bathroom, it seemed, had been occupied for almost two hours and there was no response from within. Finally someone suggested breaking down the door. This had been done. No one had been prepared for the gruesome yet fascinating spectacle which met their eyes.
> Paul had evidently come home before the end of the party. On arriving, he had locked himself in the bathroom, donned a crimson mandarin robe, wrapped his head in a batik scarf of his own designing, hung a group of his spirit portraits on the dingy calcimined wall, and carpeted the floor with the sheets of paper detached from the notebook in which he had been writing his novel. He had then, it seemed, placed scented joss-sticks in the four corners of the room, lit them, climbed into the bathtub, turned on the water, then slashed his wrists with a highly ornamented Chinese dirk. When they found him, the bathtub had overflowed, and Paul lay crumpled at the bottom, a colorful, inanimate corpse in a crimson streaked tub.
> What delightful publicity to precede the posthumous publication of his novel, which novel, however, had been rendered illegible when the overflow of water had inundated the floor, and soaked the sheets strewn over its surface. Paul had not foreseen the possible inundation, nor had he taken into consideration the impermanency of pencilled transcriptions. (185-86)

Again, a sense of tension is highlighted when the death is described as a 'gruesome yet fascinating spectacle'. The term 'spectacle' stresses the notion of performance that pervades this representation of suicide. Paul's staged death inextricably ties his identity with his art. Such performance also implies a potentially coherent understanding similar to the description of Paul's life as a 'drama of beautiful gestures'. At the same time, the violence and distressing nature of suicide is suggested in the fact that 'no one had been prepared'. This 'spectacle' of violence presents suicide as a 'fascinating' and unsettling event that demands interpretation because it is compelling in its 'gruesome' horror. But this staged suicide, concurrently, seems to challenge the possibility of making sense of

it. The destroyed, 'illegible' novel particularly brings this problem of intelligibility to the fore and presents Paul's death as a perhaps failed, incomplete and yet final expression.

This problem of understanding likewise arises in the use of East Asian imagery and Paul's globally influenced symbolism. The 'mandarin robe', 'batik scarf', 'joss-sticks', and 'Chinese dirk' indicate that this suicide is guided by Asian ceremonial practices. However, this invocation of Asian ceremony seems 'artificial': the dirk is 'highly ornamented', while the paintings hang over a 'dingy' wall. This is not a recreation of established Asian practices; instead, there is a combination of East Asian tradition, particularly the use of 'joss-sticks', and Paul's own artistic expression. This fusion is presented in a violent form when the 'crimson' robe blurs into the bloody 'crimson streaked tub'. Earlier in the novel, Ray provocatively comments:

> Can't you see that my generation, or at least the more forward of my generation, is tired of being patronized and patted on the head by philanthropists and social service workers? We don't always want to have to beg and do tricks. We want to lose our racial identity as such and be acclaimed for our achievements, if any. (129)

Paul too seems to 'want to lose his racial identity' and is similarly suspicious of a Lockean paternalism implied in phrases such as 'patronised and patted on the head'. By turning to Asian cultural objects, Paul identifies himself outside of these expected racial parameters. Yet the blurring of his blood and his 'mandarin robe' indicates that Paul's 'colorful, inanimate corpse' is still deeply involved in this identification. Indeed, Paul is situated here within an established contemporary artistic practice, and a discourse that Bill Mullen has termed 'Afro-Orientalism'.[3] Several writers during The Harlem Renaissance negotiated parallels between African American and Asian cultural

[3] Bill Mullen, 'Du Bois, *Dark Princess*, and the Afro-Asian International', *positions: east asia cultures critique*, 11 (1) (2003), 223.

practices; including: W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, George Schuyler, among others.

Allan Borst distils some of the key features behind Mullen's 'Afro-Orientalism':

> in particular-Mullen's Afro-Orientalism denotes both an historical African-American fantasy of escape from the black-white binary of American racism and also "a speculative bridge" that understands African and Asian diasporas as proximate, synchronous experiences produced along the pathways of Western imperialism, slavery and indentured servitude, and institutionalized global racism.[4]

Rather than an interrogation of 'imperialism', Paul's apparent 'artificiality' indicates a greater concern with aesthetics and the 'speculation' of a 'speculative bridge'. The Asian imagery, though, seems to be used by Paul as a means of artistically expressing a complex identity that similarly exceeds a conventional 'black-white binary'. Such an identification with Asia particularly presents an imaginative effort to go further than Locke's focus on Africa and Harlem. In his essay 'The New Negro' (1925) Locke suggests, "The pulse of the Negro world has begun to beat in Harlem."[5] Paul's invocation appears to look beyond this version of Harlem as the heart of a black diaspora, and yet is still positioned within an 'Afro-Orientalist' discourse that is most prominent in Harlem. While apparently 'losing his racial identity', Paul's suicide in some ways still insists on his racial identity.

This complexity and excess is intertwined with a surplus of violence as Paul and his art are 'inundated' by the bloody water. Similar to Ray's questions then, the staging of this suicide draws attention to an impasse where contradicting conceptions arise together – an identity made and unmade, and an independence from collective artistic forms realised through a shared artistic discourse. If Paul is read as seeking to 'lose his

[4] Allan G. Borst, 'Signifyin(g) Afro-Orientalism: The Jazz-Addict Subculture in *Nigger Heaven* and *Home to Harlem*', *Modernism/Modernity*, 16 (4) (2009), 697.
[5] Alain Locke, 'The New Negro' in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 14.

racial identity', as I argue throughout this chapter, and his death is marked by a surfeit of cultural symbolism and brutal self-destruction, then this 'overflow' and suicide may mark the brim where a complex identity meets an inability to express identity.

This tension is highlighted in the ironic destruction of Paul's art by his suicide. In apparently trying to publicise his novel, he destroys it. In an act designed to call attention to his work, and thereby to his identity, Paul renders both 'illegible'. Maurice Blanchot considers such contradiction, excess, and overflow in relation to suicide:

> Rilke also says, "Death is not beyond our strength; it is the measuring mark at the top of the vase; we are full each time we want to reach it, and for us to be filled means to be heavy: that is all." Here, death is the sign of a full existence: the fear of dying would be fear of that weight by which we are plenitude and authenticity; it would be tepid preference for insufficiency. The desire to die would express, on the contrary then, a certain need for plenitude; it would be the aspiring movement toward the brim, the impulse of liquid that wants to fill the vase. But is reaching the brim enough? "To overflow"; that is the secret liquid passion, the one that knows no measure. And overflowing does not signify plenitude, but emptiness, the excess by comparison to which fullness is still lacking.[6]

In wanting to 'lose his racial identity', and in 'making and unmaking' his self, Paul seems to seek a point that 'knows no measure'. His suicide could thus be understood as the moment when he exceeds 'the measuring mark' and his 'aspiring movement' goes beyond the brim. In so doing, though, and as Paul's now 'illegible' novel suggests, this excess and overflow results in a crisis of understanding. In turn, this crisis deriving from Paul's excess can perhaps identify the ways in which 'fullness is still lacking'. More precisely, Paul's suicide seems to question whether conventional ways of understanding identity are rendered 'lacking' through the 'overflow' of his death.

In the final passage of the novel and the end of this suicide scene, this challenge is directly associated with race and 'Niggeratti Manor':

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[6] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1982), 130.

> Ironically enough, only the title sheet and the dedication page were completely legible.
> The book was titled: *Wu Sing: The Geisha Man*
> It was dedicated to: *Huysman's Des Esseintes and Oscar Wilde's Oscar Wilde. Ecstatic Spirits with whom I Cohabit and whose golden spores of decadent pollen I shall broadcast and fertilize. It is written. Paul Arbian*.
> Beneath this inscription, he had drawn a distorted, inky black skyscraper, modeled after Niggeratti Manor, and on which were focused an array of blindingly white beams of light. The foundation of this building was composed of crumbling stone. At first glance it could be ascertained that the skyscraper would soon crumple and fall, leaving the dominating white lights in full possession of the sky. (186)

The title of Paul's book highlights a blurring of gender in the phrase 'Geisha Man'. 'Wu Sing' further indicates a sense of multifaceted complexity as it, most likely, refers to 'wu xing' (the five elements). This process of amalgamation emphasises Paul's expression of his own difference. He is queer, black, and combines unconventional sources of inspiration. Calvin Warren notes that scholarship on queer black identities has often struggled with grammatical problems due to this feeling of a complex excess:

> in Afro-pessimism the violence that we docket as "antigay" or heterosexist violence gets subsumed implicitly under the banner of anti-blackness because the fungible black is placed outside difference and identity. And since antigay violence targets *humans* with a uniqueness and individuality that we call "gay," blacks become disqualified from the human identity "gay," and consequently, antigay violence would become somewhat of a misnomer to describe Steen's murder, since the black is excluded from this identity. Thus we are without a grammar to describe the uniqueness of this brutality, and it is *more* than anti-blackness – a surplus violence to anti-blackness.[7]

'Steen' refers to Steen Keith Fenrich, a gay black man who was horrifyingly murdered by his homophobic stepfather in 2000. While the contexts are different, the problem of discussing gay black identities, as Warren considers them, are pertinent to Paul's suicide. The problem Warren points to is a lexical challenge of categorisation that seems to at once include and exclude identities. Paul likewise exceeds orthodox classifications

[7] Calvin Warren, 'Onticide: Afro-Pessimism, ~~Gay~~ Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 23 (3) (2017), 399-400.

of identity. Paul's dedications encourage this reading of his suicide as an articulation of transgressive identity as he turns to the subversive figures of Des Esseintes and Oscar Wilde. The phrase 'Oscar Wilde's Oscar Wilde' suggests that identity can be a purposeful performance. Such a performance is presented by Paul as a means of extending beyond, and thereby rendering inadequate, expected parameters of identity categorisation. His suicide, as an overflowing staged act of creation and destruction, then brings this challenge of identification to a critical juncture.

Although Paul's novel asserts 'it is written', this writing has become 'illegible'. The phrase 'it is written' implies inevitability and intelligibility, yet this writing has already come undone through Paul's suicide. Paul's self-identification is thus obscured by his death, and the 'surplus violence' noted by Warren seems to be turned inward. The final paragraph of Thurman's text highlights this crisis of interpretation. The building drawn by Paul is set to 'crumple and fall', but since it has been drawn, it stands at this moment of breakdown. The repetition of the term 'crumple' brings forth a parallel between Paul and this building: they are both present and yet absent. Paul's body and his artistic expression are both realised and ended in his suicide. The colours in this paragraph then bring this sense of impending doom into a racial context. The 'black skyscraper' seems oppressed by the 'dominating white lights'. Because this skyscraper stands tall but on the verge of collapse, it exudes a fragile power. The skyscraper is Nigeratti Manor, and thus a potential stand-in for a generation of young black artists. Its collapse in turn seems to suggest the denouement of The Harlem Renaissance. The Renaissance is therefore characterised as imposing and yet vulnerable. As it ends, only the 'white lights' will be left. Thurman's conclusion thus points to a pessimistic reading in which African American art will soon be subsumed under white domination.

In a scathing attack on the inhabitants of Niggeratti Manor, a journalist characterises Paul's social milieu by linking 'white lights' and publicity:

> They [decadent black artists such as Paul] should be taken aside and reasoned with, then if this failed the white light of publicity should be shed upon their activities and their innate viciousness and duplicity exposed to the world. (128)

Ray's initial querying of whether Paul 'had faced reality', the emphasis on 'publicity', the crowd that is 'fascinated' by the death, and the narrative style of the text, all stress a social consideration of Paul's suicide. Here, this focus on society is cast in a racial context in which 'white lights' discipline black artists. Paul's eventual suicide indicates that the effort to 'reason with' him has failed, and that these 'white lights' are to some degree the root cause of his suicide. This failure to influence Paul away from suicide and discipline him through 'exposure', in Durkheimian theory, is an inadequacy of social 'regulation'. His death can thereby be described as an 'anomic suicide'. At the same time, Paul's isolation in the locked bathroom indicates an "excessive individuation"[8] in Émile Durkheim's terms, and therefore a form of 'egoistic suicide'. This failure of 'integration' and 'regulation' brings forth a social crisis that the text associates with race relations, 'publicity', and art. Paul's suicide thus poses a problem of 'undecidability' that challenges how we understand his identity. The combination of this 'undecidability' with such a social crisis, suggests that Paul's suicide demands a complex reading in which his racial identity may be, at once, recognised and yet not defined to the point of constriction. This challenge then brings to light a fundamental irresolution that problematises an oppressive system of racial identification. But this is a challenge that is only realised through a pessimistic and violent suicide.

[8] Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, ed. George Simpson, trans. John A. Spaulding (London: Routledge, 2002), 175.

Scholarship on Thurman

As the 'white lights' and 'black skyscraper' suggest, Thurman's novel negotiates a multifaceted world of interracial relations. George Hutchinson has detailed this mixing as a principal feature of The Harlem Renaissance. He particularly notes that "The Harlem Renaissance was in fact a striking experiment in cultural pluralism"[9]. Directly following on from Hutchinson's work, Granville Ganter emphasises the debates relating to racial representation that dominate Thurman's writing:

> Part of Thurman's defense of authorial freedom was rooted in a specific debate carried on in the columns of the *Crisis* between February and November 1926 about how black Americans should be represented in fiction. Rejecting the propagandist philosophy of Du Bois's program of racial uplift, Thurman's literary journal, *Fire!!*, took an avante-garde approach toward fostering social equality.[10]

The Crisis was a magazine which began in 1910 and featured several prominent writers during The Harlem Renaissance. The 1926 debate noted by Ganter refers to W. E. B. Du Bois' proposition that African American art should present African American lives positively in a knowingly propagandist manner. Thurman, particularly in his representation of controversial characters such as Paul, stands in contrast to this position. Nonetheless, both Du Bois and Thurman, among others, are clear that The Harlem Renaissance emerges at a time of crisis for race relations in the US that followed World War One. They then engaged in a debate that stressed competing notions of how, and indeed whether, 'social equality' may be forged in the midst of this crisis.

In a study of skyscrapers in Du Bois' *Darkwater* (1920) and *Infants of the Spring*, Adrienne Brown considers their differing views:

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[9] George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1995), 90.
[10] Granville Ganter, 'Sexuality, and the Bohemian Vision of Wallace Thurman', *MELUS* 28 (2) (2003), 90.

> In opposition to DuBois's faith in mass movements, writer and journalist Thurman fiercely criticized DuBois and the broader New Negro movement for privileging massness over singularity.[11]

Brown goes on to suggest a similarity beyond these differences:

> the skyscraper emerges within both of these works as a projection of a yet-unrealized democracy premised on the elastic skin and "inky" indeterminacies within blackness itself. (558)

The notions of democracy 'unrealised' and 'indeterminacies within blackness' point to a particular sense of crisis in which 'social equality' appears a possibly indefinite struggle. Brown here casts the skyscraper in Paul's novel as a 'projection of democracy' that presents hope for some form of equality. With greater focus on Paul's suicide rather than the skyscraper, I read the text in more pessimistic terms as a challenge against conventional political constructs such as 'democracy'. In so doing, Thurman's 'fierce criticism' and 'avant-garde approach' would be understood in *Infants of the Spring* as a cogitation on anti-black violence within traditional notions of racial identity during The Harlem Renaissance, such as those proposed by Locke and Du Bois.

Steve Pinkerton suggests that the interracial relationships and interactions within *Infants of the Spring* invoke a sense of contradiction and excess. For Pinkerton, such complexity itself works against the more direct 'propagandist philosophy' of Du Bois. While discussing a donation party in the novel, Pinkerton notes:

> That this raucous party's "merger" miraculously outpaces the efforts of mundane propaganda highlights Niggeratti Manor's ritual and symbolic function as a space where boundaries and limits become porous, where sacred and profane, angelic and forbidden, are allowed to interpenetrate and meld.[12]

Such 'interpenetration and melding' in the novel contributes to the feeling of excess in Paul's suicide, and not least in the blurring of 'Afro-Orientalism'. The 'merger'

[11] Adrienne Brown, 'The Black Skyscraper', *American Literature*, 85 (3) (2013), 548.
[12] Steve Pinkerton, '"New Negro vs Nigeratti": Defining and Defiling the Black Messiah', *Modernism/Modernity*, 20 (3) (2013), 551.

discussed by Pinkerton refers, at least in part, to interracial interactions. The 'boundaries' made 'porous' and suspect within the text can thus be considered to be constructions of racial identities. Earlier in his study, Pinkerton comments:

> in his extravagant self-sacrifice at novel's end, Arbian fulfills his role as the novel's half-baked Christ. Having covered the bathroom floor with his novel manuscript, he slashes his wrists with "a highly ornamented Chinese dirk," dying a martyr to decadent art (546)

Taking Paul as a 'half-baked Christ' combining the 'sacred and profane', and his death as a culmination of this characterisation, his suicide appears to penetrate the 'limits' of orthodox understandings of identity. Following Bennett, an additional problem then arises: Paul's 'making' of his self, and his 'decadent art', is matched by a concurrent 'unmaking' of his self in death. Such a contradiction problematises the term 'martyr'. Martyrdom implies a more coherent interpretation or ready intelligibility than is invoked in the complex representation of Paul's suicide. As is often the case in this thesis, by allowing the complexity of suicide to operate in full view, a deeper challenge of interpretative possibility may come to the fore. I further suggest that such a reading brings focus to the violence of Paul's suicide. It would thus evade a potential valorising of his final act as intimated in terms such as 'martyr'.

In a pedagogical reading of Thurman's novel, David Jarraway stresses this challenge of interpreting identity categorisations within the text:

> what drifts in and leaks out in the gaping holes that Paul's bloody death tears into the penultimate page of Thurman's text is the uncertain knowledge as to what his own identity actually might be. Yet precisely with this very conundrum, it seems to me, Thurman's urban discourse comes into its own. […] the presentation of racial, and, especially in Arbian's case, sexual difference conduces students perhaps now to think that the unthinking fixture of identity can never be quite so safely ordered or unified.[13]

[13] David R. Jarraway, 'Tales of the City: Marginality, Community, and the Problem of (Gay) Identity in Wallace Thurman's "Harlem" Fiction', *College English*, 65 (1) (2002), 43.

Jarraway argues that the ‘conundrum’ of Paul’s suicide calls into question the ‘unthinking fixture of identity’. Jarraway thus reads the ‘undecidability’ of suicide in Thurman’s novel as a productive challenge to overly restrictive conceptions of racial and sexual identity. I want to extend such an interpretation by proposing that Paul not only disrupts existing identity categorisations, but also presents the fundamentals of this way of thinking as a form of anti-black violence. In so doing, I emphasise a productive but pessimistic intent of concurrently expressing and ‘losing’ racial identity in the representation of Paul’s suicide. In registering a violent crisis of racial identification, this suicide then distils the need for a radically alternative conception of identity. By considering ‘undecidability’ as a challenge to certain discourses within The Harlem Renaissance, I stress that this alternative is conceived of as an approach to artistic expression that problematises the expectations of conventional politics.

These concerns of ‘merging’ and identity categorisations raised by Pinkerton and Jarraway are brought together by Elisa Glick:

> the complexities and contradictions of dandyism as symbol and oppositional act make legible not simply the bifurcation of race and sexuality but rather their interrelation. Furthermore, this epistemic relation between racial and sexual categories emerges out of the dialectic between primitivism and decadence that defines the construction of modern African-American identity and cultural modernity itself.[14]

Dandyism is here presented as making ‘legible’ certain intersections of race and sexuality. Paul’s suicide brings this legibility to a juncture in which such tensions in conventional identity categorisations collapse in a violent act and the paradoxical construction and dismantling of understanding that Bennett highlights. The ‘dialectic between primitivism and decadence’ recalls Thurman’s criticisms of collective

[14] Elisa F. Glick, ‘Harlem’s Queer Dandy: African American Modernism and the Artifice of Blackness’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 49 (3) (2003), 415.

identifications as proposed by scholars such as Locke and Du Bois. Glick's consideration of the relationship of racial and sexual identity alongside this concern of independent and group identifications suggests 'the construction of cultural modernity' may likewise be at stake in Paul's suicide. As noted previously, Warren reads the efforts to negotiate such intersections of 'racial and sexual categories' in pessimistic terms as leading to an ongoing grammatical challenge in how gay black identities are discussed. By following Warren's thinking, I argue that Paul's suicide renders a particularly radical, nihilistic contention to 'constructions of African American identity' during The Harlem Renaissance.

As Jarraway acknowledges, though, there is a potential risk of unintentionally promoting suicide in these productive readings of Paul's death:

> My attempt in the first part of this essay to impart a certain heroic dimension to the only assertively gay character in Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* at its conclusion is unquestionably darkened by Paul Arbian's spectacular suicide. (43)

The violence of Paul's act continues to trouble readings that impart upon him 'a certain heroic dimension'. Thurman's narrative form, which invites the reader to sympathise with Paul through Ray's personal affection for him, similarly presents a possibly affirmative interpretation of suicide. Warren's 'Afro-pessimism' provides a means to retain focus on the violence of Paul's death without denying his agency in choosing to die. Indeed, Warren's stress on the seeming inescapability of anti-black violence enables a reading in which the sense of productive disruption ascribed to Paul by scholars such as Pinkerton, Jarraway, and Glick, need not subsume the brutality of his final action.

The conventional interpretative mode of identity categorisation in Thurman's novel can be read as form of what Warren discusses as an 'anti-black ontology', and, thus, the concept of an 'ontological crisis' raised in the previous chapter on William Faulkner can here be developed. By extending Thurman scholarship in this fashion and

highlighting a nihilistic, metaphysical consideration of racial identity, I intend to bring focus to a productive pessimism in the representation of Paul's suicide. In his consideration of 'humanist' philosophy, Warren suggests:

> To establish uniqueness, man must also establish an "other"; the process of differentiating and "othering" are mutually constitutive and ontologically necessary, as G. W. F. Hegel has taught us in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As Wilderson (2010: 84) suggests, "Violence is a paradigm of ontology," and at least for the human-being, this violence entails the work of securing the boundaries of the self against ontological assault, fixing the other in a space of alterity, and constantly negotiating this boundary with an arsenal of destructive practices. ('Onticide' 395)

The principal 'other' in Warren's argument is a black 'other'. In such a framework, white identity, and a modern sense of self as based in a white humanist tradition, are built through a violent differentiation against black 'others'. Paul turns such violence against itself – his self-directed, suicidal violence leads to an identification of him as an unknowable other. Ironically, in asserting his difference through suicide, Paul undermines the differentiating process required to 'establish' the identity of 'white lights'.

These 'white lights', following Warren, appear to operate through a 'world constituting' anti-black violence of differentiation. Warren proposes:

> that antiblack violence is *gratuitous* precisely because it blurs the distinction between the "everyday" and "world constituting" violence. Following the ontic/ontological distinction, everyday violence (ontic) follows the logic of transgression (even the transgression of nonnormative behavior). But antiblack violence *cannot be explained ontically because it is not predicated on transgression but existence itself*. ('Onticide' 411)

The excess associated with Paul's suicide is an example of such 'gratuitous violence'. Paul's suicide would thus be understood as a challenge not just to certain identity categorisations, but to the overarching 'world-constituting' thinking behind conventional identifications. If Paul's suicide troubles the ways in which we conventionally make

sense of identity via such differentiating by 'overflowing' to a point of unintelligibility, and this crisis of comprehension is considered a social crisis in understandings of racial and sexual identity, then his suicide can in turn be described as an 'ontological crisis'. In other words, this death registers a metaphysical challenge against how the world is conventionally understood, and not least in contemporary collective understandings of African American identity prominent in the milieu of The Harlem Renaissance.

This argument echoes that of my previous chapter regarding Faulkner's Joe Christmas. I now want to take this notion of 'ontological crisis' arising in suicide representation further by considering it in conjunction with Warren's understanding of 'black nihilism'. Paul's decadence seems to preclude him from being a nihilist. However, the contradiction of his self-identification through self-destruction, alongside the pessimism of the collapsing 'black skyscraper', invites a black nihilist reading. "Black nihilism," Warren writes, "is a 'demythifying' practice, in the Nietzschean vein, that uncovers the subjugating strategies of political hope and de-idealizes its fantastical object."[15] I propose that the 'fantastical object' in Thurman's text is a conception that there can be a singular African American aesthetic. In other words, the 'political hope' being 'demythified' is an expectation that African American art and identities during The Harlem Renaissance can be described within catch-all or propogandist terms. Warren goes on:

> A hermeneutical practice that acknowledges the impossible translation of blackness without forcing its annihilation (through translation/domination) is the only way we can understand the nihilist. Put another way, black nihilism shatters the coherence of anti-black epistemology and cannot be "known," or rendered legible, through traditional epistemology. ('Black Nihilism' 241)

[15] Calvin L. Warren, 'Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 15 (1) (2015), 221.

Paul's suicide is represented in a manner that foregrounds such an 'impossible translation'. His self-identification through individual artistic expression exists in its dissolution. As an act of self-identification that also dissolves this same self, and in similarity to the previous two chapters, Paul's suicide thereby foregrounds the tension of meaning being realised and made elusive in the same moment as discussed by Bennett. I suggest this death can then be read in black nihilist terms as a 'shattering of coherence' and a 'demythification' of restrictive renderings of African American identities. The crisis of interpreting individual artistic expression that is brought forth in the representation of Paul's suicide, could thus be understood as a productive act of negation and a disruption of an 'anti-black epistemology'. Such a nihilistic interpretation proposes that a radical alternative epistemology is required. Paul's death raises not only an issue of the 'ordering of fixtures of identity', but also a coterminous presence and absence of 'blackness'. This would be an identity expressed but not 'translated'.

For Warren, 'black mysticism' opens possibilities that work beyond conventional thinking and this apparent insistence on 'translating blackness':

> Part of the difficulty, then, with the contemporary debate is that it suffers from what I will call grammatical paucity – it relies on an anti-black grammar that does not easily fit the black being under investigation. The semantic confusion and tension between the terms social life, political death, and social death that obfuscate and organize the debate between Afro-Pessimists and black optimists is a deep symptom of this grammatical paucity. What black mysticism offers is a lexical imagination that aims to take us outside of political ontology and into the mystical (or the spiritual).[16]

The anti-black world that lies at the basis of Warren's thinking is marked by a 'grammatical paucity' and a linguistic challenge. A form of 'lexical imagination' and looking beyond conventional understanding through 'black mysticism' offers a potential

[16] Calvin L. Warren, 'Black Mysticism: Fred Moten's Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit', *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 65 (2) (2017), 220.

route through the mire of anti-black 'political ontology'. In the 'overflow' of his suicide, I suggest Paul may exceed such traditional 'anti-black grammar'. This excess would then be indicative of an 'imaginative' route that works against conventional anti-black legibility. In turn, it calls for a radical, alternative form of identity expression and interpretation. But even here when Warren is at his most optimistic, it seems that the challenges of defining this alternative are still debilitating. 'Black mysticism' offers a 'mystical', speculative and apparently inevitably undefined, or untranslated, understanding. Thurman seems to encounter a similar linguistic problem in which an alternative way of thinking is present, but necessarily unspecified.

As Ganter notes:

> in Thurman's work (and in the decadent writers he admired), failure can carry the positive value of having gone to the limit. Modem scholars of the Harlem Renaissance complain that *Infants* has not much of a plot and ends with an uninstructive nihilism […] Paul's suicide must be pathetic and nihilistic: anything less would be a concession to the moralistic literature Thurman was at pains to criticize. (97)

Ganter's comments bring this discussion of identity expression back to debates in The Harlem Renaissance. In this framework, Thurman invariably cannot define a cogent form of hope without conceding to his critical adversaries. Instead, his novel results in a nihilistic tension in which anything 'made' in Paul's suicide is concurrently 'unmade'. If, however, the text is read as not only 'having gone to the limit', but also 'overflowed', then there is an indication of an alternative, perhaps 'mystical', way of thinking suggested in Paul's suicide. Through its excess the representation of Paul's suicide evinces a necessarily undefined potential for considering a new conception of racial identity that continues to recognise anti-black violence. This formation would cast racial identity as both 'lost' and insisted upon; or expressed and yet 'untranslatable'.

The writing of *Infants of the Spring* likewise tends towards an extravagant mode of expression which elicits this sense of 'overflow'. Terrell Scott Herring observes:

> the lack of unity and thematic incoherence that continue to trouble the novel's critics are precisely its central point. Mimicking the style of one of Thurman's favorite writers, Thomas Mann, *Infants of the Spring* is a novel of and about conflicting ideologies – The Magic Mountain transformed into the Racial Manor. And since Thurman's novel operates as a modern allegory, his characters do function as "ciphers" in order to illuminate the various clashing problematics of the New Negro Movement.[17]

Herring argues that the contradictions within the text work as an "indictment" (588) of The Harlem Renaissance. Thurman's language compounds this challenging 'incoherence'. Thurman writes in lengthy sentences and with a particularly broad vocabulary, and he calls attention to this style with a sense of irony. During a key scene, Stephen tells Ray that he has 'learned his lessons well'. As Ray mulls on this description, he mocks both his own pretensions and those of Thurman's narrative style:

> Stephen's phrase irritated him, impinged itself upon his consciousness and bored in relentlessly. He was uncertain whether it was meant to be an aphoristic jest or a sarcastic jibe. Was it a meaty phrase carrying the sting of an adder? Or was it a listless phrase coined to discourage further boring conversations. He did not know, and he had no insight into the machinery which had produced it. But he could not aerate it from his mind. Insistently it flashed across his brain, formed itself into flaming letters before his eyes, and dinned its searing way into his ears.
> He soon came to the conclusion that he was cutting a ridiculous figure. On three distinct occasions now, twice with Stephen and once with Lucille, this unwelcome characterization had seemed apt in the light of what they had said on those occasions. He was a self-deluded posturer. A consummate jackass. (93)

The words used to describe Ray's thinking are elaborate: 'impinged', 'aerate', 'dinned its searing way'. As is characteristic of the text as a whole, Thurman's language tends towards ornateness. For instance, the novel begins, "Raymond opened the door with a flourish, pushed the electric switch and his two guests into the dimly illuminated room." (1) Such 'flourishes' both in action and rhetoric – such as 'Paul the debonair, Paul the poseur, Paul the irresponsible romanticist' – go on to pervade the text. This language

[17] Terrell Scott Herring, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Manor: *Infants of the Spring* and the Conundrum of Publicity', *African American Review*, 35 (4) (2001), 588.

echoes Paul's desire for showmanship and, in turn, this extravagance in the writing acts as a similar manifestation of 'overflow' as that found in Paul's suicide.

In the passage above, the text turns to a critical commentary of this decadent excess. The lengthy sentence noting 'three distinct occasions' is followed by Ray's sharp rebuke of his own character. He sees himself in much the same way that others criticise Paul. The aesthetically minded performances and posturing of the text's central characters is implied to be rooted in 'self-delusion'. The passage eventually turns to a colloquialism that stands against the extravagant terminology when Ray calls himself a 'consummate jackass', and this passage concludes by bringing forth the sense of 'clashing problematics' dominating the novel. As Herring argues, this inconsistency makes a point, and, I propose, this point is an instructive black nihilistic one. By 'overflowing', Thurman's writing, like Paul's suicide, exceeds, and thus renders suspect, conventional reasoning. This reasoning is cast in racial terms as the orthodox comprehension of 'white lights of publicity' as well as constrictive, collective notions of African American identity. The language, the suicide, and the discourses on race, appear then to result in a surplus which calls attention to a critical 'emptiness' in traditional understandings of identity. It follows that the text calls for an alternative that would 'take us outside of' such an anti-black 'political ontology'.

Artistic Influence

Within *Infants of the Spring*, social influence is brought to the fore primarily in considerations of artistic inspiration and The Harlem Renaissance. Frequently in the text, characters debate whether African American art should be a collective enterprise deriving its forms and content from African traditions, or if black artists should follow

more independent, individual paths. As Ganter and Brown note, Thurman sits on the latter side of this debate. Paul's suicide particularly highlights the importance of individualism in the text. However, as I will discuss in this section and the next, the suicide also problematises this consideration of independent artistic expression.

This discussion of heritage and influence becomes most prominent in the novel when an African American writers' salon is held by Ray. Several real-life Harlem Renaissance writers appear at this conference under pseudonyms, such as Dr Parkes who is modelled on Alain Locke. Locke was a principal figure in The Harlem Renaissance and the driving force behind a conception of 'The New Negro'. 'The New Negro' refers to new forms of expression and identification, and specifically a growing public outspokenness, in African American literature in the 1920s. The concept contained a hope for 'racial uplift' which echoed Du Bois' more explicit 'propogandist philosophy'. Locke suggests this new identity emerges from an influential but constrictive older US black writing tradition:

> the mind of the Negro seems suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority. By shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation. ('New Negro' 4)

Thurman calls this 'spiritual emancipation' into question. He does not deny the newness that is the central focus of Locke's argument; instead, Thurman seems concerned by the optimism and collective nature of Locke's project. Dr Parkes' proposals for African American art are, though, simpler than Locke's, and work as a caricature in contrast to which Thurman clarifies a more pluralistic understanding than 'The New Negro'.

Dr Parkes defines his philosophy in *Infants of the Spring*:

> "You are", he perorated, "the outstanding personalities in a new generation. On you depends the future of your race. You are not, as were your predecessors, concerned with donning armor and clashing swords with the enemy in the public square. You are finding both an

escape and a weapon in beauty […] your pursuit of beauty must be vital and lasting. I am somewhat fearful of the decadent strain which seems to have filtered into most of your work. Oh, yes, I know you are children of the age and all that, but you must not, like your paleface contemporaries, wallow in the mire of post Victorian license. You have too much at stake. You must have ideals. You should become well, let me suggest your going back to your racial roots, and cultivating a healthy paganism based on African traditions." (152)

A sense of crisis is brought forth in this passage when the 'fear' of a new 'decadent strain' is set against the statement that there is 'too much at stake'. A conservative, non-decadent artistic practice is identified here by Parkes as a means of progressively 'uplifting' the 'future' of African Americans. His assessment that the 'pursuit of beauty must be vital and lasting' is in stark contrast to Paul's eventual suicide. Paul's 'contrariness' in his death appears then to be an alternative and more pessimistic means of negotiating what is at 'stake' in contemporary African American art. It is a direct rebuke to Lockean 'uplift' as well as the 'white lights of publicity'.

As the salon continues, this opposition of Paul to Parkes' philosophy is explicated. DeWitt Clinton (Countee Cullen) takes over from Parkes to argue for the importance of African roots influencing contemporary African American art. Here, then, the debate over artistic influence is framed as a social confrontation between an established and a new generation of African American artists:

Paul had ceased being intent on his drawing long enough to hear "pagan heritage," and when DeWitt finished he inquired inelegantly:
"What old black pagan heritage?"
DeWitt gasped, surprised and incredulous.
"Why, from your ancestors."
"Which ones?" Paul pursued dumbly.
"Your African ones, of course." DeWitt's voice was full of disdain.
"What about the rest?"
"What rest?" He was irritated now.
"My German, English, and Indian ancestors," Paul answered willingly. "How can I go back to African ancestors when their blood is so diluted and their country and times so far away? I have no conscious affinity for them at all." (154)

Paul's 'inelegance' and DeWitt's 'irritation' and 'incredulity' intimate that Paul's oppositional stance is a youthful needling of conventional expectations. Paul not only suggests a multifaceted range of influences, but directly rejects turning to African traditions. In his suicide, though, rather than turning to his 'German, English, and Indian ancestors', or his African ones, Paul engages with Asian cultural practices. His primary inspirations come from France (Huysmans) and Ireland (Wilde). Through this turn towards alternative sources than one's own heritage, Paul foregrounds a comparatively individualistic approach to artistic expression. In turn, the text renders interpreting artistic production from a traditional understanding principally based on an artist's racial background as inadequate.

As this debate goes on, Ray stresses this individualism:

> One cannot make movements nor can one plot their course. When the work of a given number of individuals during a given period is looked at in retrospect, then one can identify a movement and evaluate its distinguishing characteristics. Individuality is what we should strive for. Let each seek his own salvation. To me, a wholesale flight back to Africa or a wholesale allegiance to communism or a wholesale adherence to an antiquated and for the most part ridiculous propagandistic program are all equally futile and unintelligent. (156)

The 'movement' being discussed is The Harlem Renaissance. In the text, this 'movement' is referred to as 'the Negro renaissance'. This title identifies The Harlem Renaissance primarily with Locke's conception of 'The New Negro'. Ray's call for a more individualistic approach seeks to break the notion of a simple, collective 'movement'. His pessimism is then foregrounded when he suggests that trying to forge an entirely coherent form of African American artistic expression is 'futile'. However, as the text unfolds, the individuality espoused by Ray reaches its own moment of crisis in Paul's suicide. Paul, as indicated in his opposition to Parkes and Clinton, 'strives' for individuality like Ray. Although his suicide marks an end to this effort, it is unique in its ornate styling. In an ironic sense, then, Paul 'seeks his own salvation' in his death. This

artistic expression or 'salvation' fails as his art and self is destroyed. As such, the individuality promoted here by Ray seems to reach its own point of futility. A nihilistic understanding is thus intimated in the apparent futility of both collective and individual strategies of artistic expression as a response to an anti-black world.

This questioning of 'wholesale' modes of interpretation is akin to the refutation of what Warren describes as 'political hope'. Paul's suicide can be better understood in this framework as a challenge which recognises anti-black violence within conventional 'politics'. Warren argues:

> The field of permissible action is delimited and an unrelenting binary between action/inaction silences critical engagement with political hope. These exclusionary operations rigorously reinforce the binary between action and inaction and discredit certain forms of engagement, critique, and protest. Legitimate action takes place in the political – the political not only claims futurity but also action as its property. […] A refusal to "do politics" is equivalent to "doing nothing" – this nothingness is constructed as the antithesis of life, possibility, time, ethics, and morality (a "zero-state" as Julia Kristeva [1982] might call it). Black nihilism rejects this "trick of time" and the lure of emancipatory solutions. To refuse to "do politics" and to reject the fantastical object of politics is the only "hope" for blackness in an anti-black world. ('Black Nihilism' 223)

Paul's suicide, as a rejection of the 'vital and lasting', is an alternative form of 'engagement, critique, and protest' which combines 'action and inaction'. He refuses to 'do politics' and, in so doing, appears to disavow 'emancipatory solutions'. The 'spiritual emancipation' called forth by Locke can be read in this framework as a 'futile', 'fantastical object' of 'political hope'. Such a reading suggests, at least in black nihilist terms, that the expectations for what can be achieved through 'wholesale' approaches to African American art are part of an anti-black world constitution. If 'The New Negro' is read here as a 'fantastical object', then Paul's rejection of this model through his decadently styled suicide can be said to be a rejection of conventional, anti-black forms

of interpretation. His death thus calls attention to both an inherent anti-black violence in orthodox politics, and a, perhaps 'futile', struggle for a radical alternative.

This question of The Harlem Renaissance's political impact is foregrounded during a donation party held at Niggeratti Manor. As Pinkerton suggests, there is an 'interpenetration' of 'boundaries' as white and black individuals celebrate together. Ray considers the scene:

> Whites and blacks clung passionately together as if trying to effect a permanent merger. Liquor, jazz music, and close physical contact had achieved what decades of propaganda had advocated with little success. Here, Raymond thought, as he continued his search for Stephen, is social equality. Tomorrow all of them will have an emotional hangover. They will fear for their sanity, for at last they have had a chance to do openly what they only dared to do clandestinely before. This, he kept repeating to himself, is the Negro renaissance, and this is about all the whole damn thing is going to amount to. (120)

The crisis of The Harlem Renaissance, as presented in the text, is highlighted in this passage. In Ray's estimation, The Renaissance appears to be preoccupied with racial mixing. Through alcohol, music, and 'close physical contact' a form of interracial 'social equality' is momentarily forged. This success is, however, tentative, brief, and fuelled by an alcohol induced respite from conventions. Ray already foresees that the next day will be marked by 'an emotional hangover'. He goes on to excoriate The Renaissance itself. If this is 'all the whole damn thing is going to amount to', it is a failure. Physically bringing together white and black individuals does not appear to be a requisite response to a crisis in race relations. Ray seems, then, to demand that the art of The Harlem Renaissance provide more than racial interaction and mixing, and thus more than the 'interpenetration' of 'boundaries'.

Ray continues and confesses that he is deeply troubled by this 'social equality' of debauchery, as well as The Renaissance more broadly. The narrative describes:

> Raymond felt nauseated. The music, the noise, the indiscriminate love-making, the drunken revelry began to sicken him. The insanity of the

> party, the insanity of its implications, threatened his own sanity. It is going be necessary, he thought, to have another emancipation to deliver the emancipated Negro from a new kind of slavery. (120)

The phrase ‘a new kind of slavery’ is a severe criticism of the ‘social equality’ of the drunken party. The relative ‘equality’ in debauchery emerging in this late stage of The Renaissance appears to be identified as a ‘new kind of slavery’. The language of ‘slavery’ renders the ‘spiritual emancipation’ hoped for by Locke as suspect. Indeed, Thurman’s use of the phrase ‘the emancipated Negro’ seems to be a satirical comment on Locke’s ‘New Negro’. Since ‘the insanity of its implications’ is, though, an ambiguous phrase, it works as a provocation rather than a conclusion. The calling forth of a ‘new kind of slavery’ is an incendiary remark, and by tying this remark to a sense of ambiguity, Thurman appears to throw The Renaissance into an undefined yet urgent and serious crisis. This lack of definition further highlights the core problem identified by Warren of expressing ‘blackness’ within an anti-black context.

It is because the oppositions brought forth by Ray and Paul do not offer solutions that this crisis seems ultimately nihilistic in nature. Although they may only highlight problems and inadequacies, emphasising these challenges is itself portrayed as valuable. Paul’s rejection of collective interpretations of African American art, for instance, opens a broader space for expressions of identity. I argue that the productive intent in the text is a ‘demythification’ of the optimism often associated with The Harlem Renaissance, and the ‘political hopes’ of ‘spiritual emancipation’ this identification of a ‘Renaissance’ seems to entail. Paul’s excess in his ‘overflowing’ artistic suicide elicits this ‘shattering of coherence’. It follows that the death is a productive disruption of a social order which tries to determine racial identity in catch-all terms, as well as a pessimistic registering of an inability to continue to exist while making such a disruption.

Individualism and Death

Here I want to focus on the failures of the individualism proposed by Ray and Paul as a counterpoint to the challenges to collective identifications. This individualistic approach finds itself being enacted involuntarily at the salon. Each of the writers puts forward a different view; such as returning to African heritage, communism, individualism, and propaganda. The result of these differences is that "Pandemonium reigned" (158) and the writers disperse with little agreement having been found. This breakdown acts as a microcosm of the wider disintegration of groups within the text. Niggeratti Manor and its inhabitants, for instance, drift apart at the end of the novel. This final separation is, as Paul's suicide exemplifies, intertwined with death. In this section consider how the productive breaking of constrictive collective interpretations of African American identity is matched with a similar undercutting of individualism. This dual disruption then encourages a nihilism which points to a need for new, radical ways of thinking and conceiving of identity.

Paul's suicide directly brings death to the forefront at the end of the text. Before Paul kills himself, though, Eustace is described as having a similar desire to no longer live:

> As for Eustace. Well, Eustace did not exist any longer. Even the shell had begun to shrivel to a mere shadow of its former self. He had no spirit left, no vitality, no part of life. […] He lived mechanically, animated only by a frugal stream of blood which his weary heart worked manfully to keep in action. Raymond had become so alarmed at his physical and mental apathy that he had called in a physician. As a result of this, Eustace had been forcibly carried to the city hospital, forcibly because he had no desire to live, and resented any artificial attempts to delay the end.
>
> His unsuccessful ambition had certainly been a stunning blow, one from which he would never recover. All of his life, the number of years were still a mystery, he had planned and studied, determined to become a figure on the American concert stage: The encouragement and acclaim

> from his uncritical Negro audiences had urged him on, given him confidence and an exaggerated conceit of his talents. (178-79)

Eustace fails in a manner that Paul does not when his art is judged and he is found wanting by a white audience at an audition. Eustace then desires to no longer live, yet his absence from life means that he seems incapable even of suicide. Paul, in contrast, continues to express himself artistically through his death. Nonetheless, Eustace's living death similarly draws attention to a crisis in artistic interpretation. He appears to lose the will to live due to his interactions with an overly critical white audience, and an 'uncritical' African American one. Unlike Paul, who can be read as 'anomic', under and over regulation seem to be at the crux of Eustace's suicidal feeling. This dual problem is another 'surplus' that exceeds conventional understanding. A Durkheimian deterministic categorisation, for example, seems to be inadequate if Eustace is considered to be at once over and under regulated. In essence, Eustace appears to be simultaneously subject to two societies: white and black. Durkheim's theorisation does not readily leave room for such multiplicity. Eustace's living death then calls attention to the sense of 'accomplishment' associated with Paul's suicide: Paul evades these same 'white lights of publicity' through his death.

Isolation and abandonment dominate not only Eustace's and Paul's 'deaths', but much of the conclusion of the novel. Pelham abandons his artistic pretensions (174). Aline leaves Harlem in order to pass for white (170). Euphoria decides to embrace a financial conservatism and declares, "Money means freedom. There's nothing to this art stuff." (176) Ray finds himself "very much alone." (178) Stephen is also set to return to Denmark and attend to his dying mother. Again, as with Eustace and Paul, death is brought to the foreground:

> "Assuredly," Raymond agreed, "dying is an event, a perversely festive occasion, not so much for the deceased as for his so-called mourners. Let's forget it. You've got to adhere to the traditions of the clan to some

> degree. Let's drink to the day when a person's death will be the cue for a wild gin party rather than a signal for well meant but purely exhibitionist grief." (183)

This discussion of death focuses not on those who die, but on survivors. Ray suggests that the 'event' of death could lead to a celebration. Moments after this conversation, Ray is called by Artie Fletcher and informed of Paul's suicide. It follows that Paul's death could be such a 'cue for a wild gin party', while 'grief' would be an inappropriate and 'exhibitionist' response. This potential for celebration, though, is troubled not only by the bleakness of the concluding chapters of *Infants of the Spring* but Ray's own criticisms of the party at Niggeratti Manor. The individualism espoused by Ray and Paul is realised in the atomisation that follows the collapse of Niggeratti Manor. The loneliness of Ray and the despair of Eustace, Stephen, Aline, and others, as they embark on independent paths, does not indicate an 'emancipatory solution'. Instead, this atomisation leads to Paul locking himself alone in his bathroom and ending his life. Paul's suicide, as such, renders the individualism promoted elsewhere in the text as being at a critical moment. Individualism may offer a productive critique of collective traditions, but it does not present a solution to a crisis in race relations.

Ray's narrative underscores this complex understanding of individualism and again associates it with death. Following the donation party, and facing his own 'emotional hangover', Ray finds himself on the streets of New York. He appears to have a fever dream:

> He pressed harder and harder against the surface of the building. After what seemed hours of effort, it gave way, and his body began to penetrate into its stone. He became chilled. The buildings across the way toppled crazily downward. Let them fall. He was safe in his cranny. The protective stone had entombed him. He had achieved Nirvana, had finally found a sanctuary, finally found an escape from the malevolent world which sought to destroy him. He sank back into his protective nook. The opening through which he had bored closed as if by magic and shut him out from insensate chaos. Oblivion resulted. His body

> slumped to the pavement, lay inert, lifeless, and was booted by the careless, rushing feet of passing pedestrians. (135)

Ray briefly finds his ‘own salvation’ in the ‘sanctuary’ of isolation. By leaving ‘the malevolent world’ and ‘escaping’ other people he finds a momentary respite. The language in this passage – ‘entombed’, ‘Nirvana’, ‘lifeless’, ‘inert’ – suggests that Ray finds solace in an imagined death. This passage then implies a potential reasoning for Paul’s suicide beyond dramatic ‘gesture’ – he too embraces ‘oblivion’ and ‘shuts himself out from insensate chaos’ through a rejection of an anti-black world. Ray, though, emerges from his imagined death and returns to the world. These associations between individualism and death suggest that an escape from social pressures is only possible in absolute terms. Paul’s suicide then calls into question what such an extreme individualist expression can achieve.

The limits of this achievement are at least partly set by the ‘white lights of publicity’. Stephen calls attention to Paul’s awkward relationship with racial identity and the implications of ‘white lights’ disciplining him:

> Paul has never recovered from the shock of realizing that no matter how bizarre a personality he may develop, he will still be a Negro, subject to snubs from certain ignorant people […] He sits around helpless, possessed of great talent, doing nothing, wishing he were white, courting the bizarre, anxious to be exploited in the public prints as a notorious character. Being a Negro, he feels his chances for excessive notoriety a la Wilde are slim. Thus the exaggerated poses and the extreme mannerisms. Since he can’t be white, he will be a most unusual Negro. To say ‘nigger’ in the presence of a white person warms the cockles of his heart. It’s just a symptom of some deep set disease. (32)

Paul’s ‘courting’ of the ‘bizarre’ to enable his ‘exploitation in the public prints’ recurs when he kills himself for ‘delightful publicity’. Here this effort is suggested to be futile because Paul is black. Although Stephen presents Paul as having a ‘deep set disease’, a diagnosis redolent of Durkheim, this passage also indicates that Paul offers a complex opposition. His refusal to accept the ‘shock of realising’ he will still be subject to

‘snubs’ due to his race, enacts a resistance to oppressive racial order. By being a ‘most unusual’ black man, Paul rebuffs the standardisation found in racist discourses. His independent, aesthetic approach to life may be ‘futile’ since he will not overcome ‘snubs’. However, by engaging in ‘exaggerated poses and extreme mannerisms’ Paul poses a challenge to ‘wholesale’ understandings of race. Yet this independence culminates in death, rather than change.

This striving for independence is still, even against this pessimism, rendered as necessary in the text. In comparing Paul and Pelham, Ray declares:

> You should be thankful there is only one Pelham in this house. Now don’t start preaching about the virtue of his persistence. I know all that. But if this Negro renaissance is going to actually live up to its name and reputation, it’s going to be Paul’s we need, not Pelham’s. We have too many of them now – too many like both him and Eustace, striving to make a place for themselves in a milieu to which they are completely alien. (31)

It is Paul’s exploratory attitude towards independent artistic expression that Ray sees as necessary. In his foregrounding of individualism against African traditions, his courting of the ‘bizarre’, his appeal to alternative sources of influence, and his rebellious contrariness, Paul presents a possibility that The Harlem Renaissance may live up to its ‘reputation’. However, it is precisely these qualities and Paul’s desire to achieve ‘notoriety’ that lead to his suicide. This death thus brings forth a particular crisis in The Harlem Renaissance: if Pauls are ‘needed’, and yet his lifestyle leads to the destruction of his art, then The Harlem Renaissance can be said to realise its internal contradictions, as shown at the salon, in this suicide. In other words, Paul’s death reflects a crisis of independent African American artistic expression being negotiated in a context which seems to overwhelm such expression by demanding that it be ‘translated’ into a coherent anti-black order. Evading this translation and the pressures of ‘white lights’ apparently results in death. The suicide manifests this contradiction of autonomous identity being

expressed and negated in the same moment. Individual and collective responses to this crisis are thus rendered suspect; they are both 'equally futile'. This seemingly inevitable failure may be pessimistic, but, nonetheless, the realisation of this crisis is itself presented as productive and necessary. I suggest such a productive negativity is best described in the terms of black nihilism.

Conclusion

The title of Thurman's novel – *Infants of the Spring* – highlights that the text is concerned with newness and growth. As Parkes stresses, "This is a new day in the history of our race. Talented Negroes are being watched by countless people, white and black, to produce something new, something tremendous." (128) This newness is similar to Locke's 'shedding of the old chrysalis', although it also indicates a need for 'something new' on top of 'The New Negro'. The novel describes its setting as a "transitional age" (92). Such change and newness are akin to Michael Denning's descriptions of crisis in the 1930s, as discussed in this thesis' introduction and Chapter 1. This need to produce 'something tremendous' in a time of volatility suggests, as previously considered in relation to Denning's work, 'labour', urgency, and difficulty. I argue that this new 'something' and the result of this laborious work, as realised in Thurman's novel, exceeds conventional ways of thinking.

Reading this text in black nihilist terms clarifies how Paul's suicide brings focus to a crisis in African American artistic expression in an anti-black world. In turn, the identification of this crisis calls for an alternative mode of interpretation. This challenge to contemporary understanding is, though, brought forth precisely because of the lack of a solution. As Ganter argues, if Thurman were to present a cogent, coherent

‘emancipatory solution’, the text would fall into the ‘moralistic literature that Thurman was at pains to criticise’. The Harlem Renaissance is, instead, taken to a moment of crisis, which is encapsulated by the ‘black skyscraper’ that stands in for the young group of artists and is perilously close to collapse. Paul’s suicide is at a similar precipice: it could be subsumed in the ‘reality’ of an anti-black world, or it may be a ‘final stanza’ of an artistic expression. This unresolved state is a surplus which problematises conventional intelligibility; it ‘overflows’ the brim of contemporary understandings of identity.

By ending the text at this moment of ‘undecidability’ with Paul’s suicide, his almost entirely destroyed novel, and the collapsing skyscraper, and thereby refusing to ‘do politics’, there is a final possibility of what Warren calls a ‘‘hope’ for blackness in an anti-black world’. This evincing of a crisis, as such, presents a productive but complex problem, and this problem goes further than the previous two chapters by intertwining suicide with a more pronounced pessimism. The various responses considered in the text – returning to African traditions, individualism, communism – all seem ‘futile’. The ‘hope’ arising in relation to this apparent nihilism is then marked in the text by a current inexpressibility. To try to define this ‘something new’, this ‘hope’, concisely would seem to bring it into an ‘anti-black grammar’ or ‘moralistic literature’, and therefore deny it. Indeed, such ‘translation’ would run the risk of potentially denying the pervasiveness of anti-black violence, and the violence of suicide, that Paul’s suicide insists on recognising. Thurman’s representation of suicide thus invites a recognition of a crisis of expression and interpretation of identities, art, and politics, and, in so doing, ignites the difficult task of thinking beyond an anti-black world. Thereby, as in Paul’s suicide, racial identity may be, at once, insisted upon and ‘lost’.

4. Communicating Suicidal Desire in Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935)

In this chapter I read the suicide of Gloria Beatty in Horace McCoy's novella *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935) as an effort to express an overwhelming pain. Gloria tries to communicate a feeling of suffering throughout the text; however, she seems unable to fully share this pain. In the text's final chapter, her dance partner Robert Syverton appears to understand her distress, and, at Gloria's request, he shoots her. He is then arrested, sentenced to death, and is unable to explain his understanding of Gloria's suffering to a judge. As Andrew Bennett describes, suicide "induces and resists empathy, and insists on and makes inconceivable our understanding of ourselves and of others."[1] McCoy's novella brings these contradictions to the fore and encourages a multifaceted understanding of Gloria's suffering in a representation of suicide that seems to both 'induce and resist' a comprehension of her pain. In turn, this problem of understanding highlights a broader sense of social crisis – the inability to fully express suffering except through suicide indicates a fundamental breakdown in communication. I go on to suggest that this crisis presents 1930s' US society as being at an impasse in which empathy is both necessary and elusive.

This chapter initially builds on the previous by considering Gloria's suicide in relation to nihilism. I then develop this discussion by turning to scholarship on McCoy's

[1] Andrew Bennett, *Suicide Century: Literature and Suicide from James Joyce to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), 3.

text and likening the challenges of interpreting suicide to Elaine Scarry's theories on the expression of pain. Here I look to advance scholarship on the unsettling nature of McCoy's novella by considering Gloria's suicide as a nihilistic struggle and a crisis in empathy. The chapter then continues this combined analysis of suicide, nihilism, and expressing pain through a focus on Robert and Gloria's relationship, as well as the broader sense of social collapse within the novel. By bringing this question of understanding pain within a context of social breakdown to the forefront, I argue that McCoy's text and its representations of suicide elicit a pessimistic crisis of communication, which in turn renders a call for a radical, urgent, non-linguistic alternative to expressing suffering.

Gloria's Suicide

McCoy's novella has a distinct and fractured form. There are thirteen chapters, which vary in length from eleven lines to fourteen pages. Interspersed between these is the reading of Robert's death sentence in an ever-increasing font. The text jumps back and forth in time, while Robert's thoughts as he stands in court awaiting his sentence are italicised within the chapters. This broken structure traces a feeling of increasing disorder within the novel, and foregrounds Robert's confusion in his efforts to understand how events lead to murder and suicide. McCoy's distinct style appears then to indicate that new forms of expression may be required to communicate Robert's thinking. Although the novella is written from Robert's perspective and reads as if it is an internal confession, he does not ask for forgiveness. Since Robert does not show regret, and the narrative highlights the thinking behind his decision to shoot Gloria and

thereby be sentenced to death, the text reads as a negotiation in which it seems that suicide may in some disturbing ways be considered reasonable.

Notwithstanding McCoy's manipulations of form, the majority of the narrative focuses on a dance marathon that unfolds in a linear fashion. Robert and Gloria first meet in a park and her suicidal feelings become apparent almost immediately as she confesses a wish to die. Out of hunger and desperation, they decide to enter a marathon that is taking place nearby. Although their feelings of distress are echoed by other dancers, and the competition begins to play out as a struggle between poor and suffering individuals, Gloria still further antagonises those around her with her cynicism. Her suicidal feeling, like the many criminal acts within the text, seems to exacerbate a broader sense of crisis in her social milieu. The violence implied in the struggle of the marathon, Gloria's desire for death, and these crimes, initially appears to climax in the shooting of a dance marathon fan, Mrs Layden. Indeed, this accidental murder marks the end of the competition. The text's escalating violence, though, continues: Gloria and Robert step outside, she presses a gun into his hands, and asks him to shoot her. His decision to finally agree with her suicide indicates an understanding and sharing of her pain, but only through the concurrent end of such sharing. The fractured form of the novel is thus intertwined with a distressing and violent conclusion in which Gloria's suffering seems only to be fully registered, paradoxically, through her death.

This sense of contradiction also arises in Gloria's request for Robert to kill her:

> 'Anyway, I'm finished. I think it's a lousy world and I'm finished. I'd be better off dead and so would everybody else. I ruin everything I get around. You said so yourself.'
> 'When did I say anything like that?'
> 'A few minutes ago. You said before you met me you never even thought of failing…. Well, it isn't my fault. I can't help it. I tried to kill myself once, but I didn't and I've never had the nerve to try again…. You want to do the world a favour?…' she asked.

> I did not say anything, listening to the ocean slosh against the pilings, feeling the pier rise and fall, and thinking that she was right about everything she had said.
> Gloria was fumbling in her purse. When her hand came out it was holding a small pistol. I had never seen the pistol before, but I was not surprised. I was not in the least surprised.[2]

As is often the case in the novel, Gloria here expresses a deep sense of despair. Her feelings are, though, complex and layered. At once she appears to blame the 'lousy world' and herself. Although she feels she 'ruins everything', she also suggests 'it isn't my fault' and that she 'can't help it'. There is significant tension in this confession: Gloria asks Robert to do the world she dislikes a 'favour'; she claims that she does not have the 'nerve' to try and kill herself while she asks Robert to shoot her; she suggests everyone would be better off dead while being particularly concerned with how she upsets other people. These seeming contradictions are paralleled in the undulation of the pier which 'rises and falls'. Like this setting, Gloria's contradictions and ambiguity are disorientating. Robert, however, responds with certitude. This combination of ambiguity and certainty brings focus to a question of how pain is communicated. Since Robert seems to understand and yet cannot fully understand Gloria's suffering, this is another instance in which suicide's creative and destructive aspects, as Bennett describes them, as well as the need and the impossibility to know, come to the fore. Here, though, such paradox is cast as a particular linguistic problem of expressing empathy and pain.

The repetition that Robert was 'not surprised' indicates that he attributes a certain rationality to Gloria's decision to die that works against this sense of contradiction. Indeed, he believes she is 'right about everything'. There is thus a shared cynicism and despair, which is underscored as the scene continues:

> 'Here – ' she said, offering it [the pistol] to me.
> 'I don't want it. Put it away,' I said. 'Come on, let's go back inside. I'm cold – '

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[2] Horace McCoy, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (London: Serpents Tail, 2010), 119.

> 'Take it and pinch-hit for God,' she said, pressing it into my hand.
> 'Shoot me. It's the only way to get me out of my misery.'
> 'She's right,' I said to myself. 'It's the only way to get her out of her misery.' (119-20)

Robert initially tries to dissuade Gloria but he changes his mind when she draws attention to her 'misery'. This word triggers a memory for Robert, and he goes on to recall how his grandfather shot a horse that had broken its leg. His grandfather had explained to a young Robert about the horse: "*She was no more good. It was the only way to get her out of her misery.*" (120) The likening of Gloria to a horse that has broken its leg intimates that there is no possibility in the text for healing or redemption. While Robert sympathises with Gloria and wishes to help her, the only way he sees to alleviate her 'misery' is to shoot her. This leads to a dead end: Robert may express certainty and a logical thought process here, but the sympathetic connection 'made' in this shared understanding of pain is inevitably 'unmade' in the subsequent death.

This seeming absence of possibility alongside Robert's somewhat rational approach invites a nihilist reading. Calvin Warren consolidates a particular understanding of nihilism, as discussed in Chapter 3. I want here to return to Warren's consideration of nihilism as a productive recognition of failure and crisis, but in a context that is less explicitly concerned with race. Warren writes:

> Frederick Nietzsche is credited with the term "Nihilism" and describes it as a particular crisis of modernity. The universal narratives and grounds of legitimation that once secured meaning for the modern world had lost integrity. In the absence of a metaphysical grounding of social existence, we were left with a void – a void that dispenses with metaphysical substance, even as this substance unsuccessfully attempts to refill this void. Nihilism, then, presents itself as the philosophical reflection of social decay; it offers politico-philosophical death (the death of ground) as the only "hope" for the world.[3]

[3] Calvin L. Warren, 'Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 15 (1) (2015), 224.

Robert's assessment that the only reasonable course of action is to assist Gloria's suicide invokes such a 'void'. An alternative 'meaning' for Gloria, through a 'universal narrative' or 'ground of legitimation', does not seem possible. This insecurity, I will argue, is the principal driving force leading to Gloria's death. Nihilism, though, is not in and of itself fatal. Instead, as Warren argues and as discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, nihilism can be a productive means of identifying alternative forms of 'hope' outside conventional understanding. Reading *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* in this framework emphasises McCoy's reflections on 'social decay' and clarification of a particular crisis in expressing pain. The recognition of this crisis and the absence of resolution it implies, could then be understood to be an ironic instance of 'hope'.

Friedrich Nietzsche links nihilism specifically with a feeling that there may be no purpose: "What does Nihilism mean? – *That the highest values are losing their value.* There is no bourne. There is no answer to the question: 'to what purpose?'"[4] Such an absence echoes a breakdown in 'social regulation', in Émile Durkheim's terms, and thus 'social decay'. Following Durkheim, there is a dynamic in which detachment from society corresponds to a detachment from collective purpose. Nihilism can be then considered indicative of a social breakdown that increases the risk of suicide: when social bonds weaken, a sense of purpose similarly depletes and 'egoistic suicides' are more likely. But Nietzsche stresses a more hopeful possibility than suicide arising from this state of social disintegration:

> the reader must not misunderstand the meaning of the title which has been given to this Evangel of the Future. '*The Will to Power: An Attempted Transvaluation of all Values*' – with this formula a *counter-movement* finds expression, in regard to both a principle and a mission; a movement which in some remote future will supersede this perfect Nihilism; but which nevertheless regards it as a *necessary step,* both logically and psychologically, towards its own advent, and which

[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power: An Attempted Transvaluation of All Values, Book I and II*, ed. Oscar Levy, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (T. N. Foulis: Edinburgh, 1914), 9.

> positively cannot come, except *on top of* and *out of* it. […] Sooner or later we shall be in need of *new values.* (3)

Nihilism is cast by Nietzsche as a 'necessary step' that will enable the ushering in of new understanding and an alternative purpose. The importance of nihilism is thus as a disruptive way of thinking from which 'new values' may arise. Suicide is contradictory to this inherent sense of possibility that follows nihilism. As Nietzsche comments:

> People have not yet seen what is so terribly-obvious – namely, that Pessimism is not a problem but a *symptom,* – that the term ought to be replaced by 'Nihilism,' – that the question, 'to be or not to be,' is itself an illness, a sign of degeneracy, an idiosyncrasy. (33)

The question of suicide is a 'sign' of the social breakdown that appears coterminous with nihilism, rather than being a result of nihilism. These sentiments share much with Durkheim's diagnostic language, and both Durkheimian theory and Nietzsche's nihilism treat suicide as a symptomatic disease. Indeed, here suicide can be read as a 'symptom' of 'social decay' that identifies a problem in the loss of 'purpose', while at the same time being a 'step' towards an alternative future. Such an understanding is also not dissimilar to Margaret Higonnet's notion of 'social reconstruction' considered previously. It follows that a representation of suicide within a nihilistic rendering of society may offer an ironic form of hope, and specifically a hope for social change. As we will see, McCoy's novella presents suicide in such a fashion as a nihilistic recognition of the inevitability of suffering and the impossibility of fully sharing pain.

While the 'loss of integrity' implied in Robert's agreement with Gloria's suicidal despair seems to work in conjunction with certain canonical understandings of nihilism, I am going to focus on the possibilities of this more 'hopeful' reading of the text. Such 'hope' is always troubled by the irreparable violence of suicide, but I suggest recognising this sense of possibility can assist in negotiating the 'social decay' that pervades McCoy's text. This potentially more positive interpretation arises in the shared

understanding percolating through McCoy's representation of suicide. Power, for instance, is shared in this suicide scene. The phrase 'pinch-hit for God' calls attention to Robert's authority as he determines whether or not to kill Gloria. At the same time, she is 'pressing' the pistol into his hand and asking for her death. Robert agrees with Gloria, and her death leads directly to his own execution. This act of displaced suicide thus registers a sharing of suicidal feeling. The final lines of the novella foreground Robert's reasoning:

> One policeman sat in the rear with me while the other one drove. We were travelling very fast and the siren was blowing. It was the same kind of a siren they had used at the marathon dance when they wanted us to wake up.
> 'Why did you kill her?' the policeman in the rear seat asked.
> 'She asked me to,' I said.
> 'You hear that, Ben?'
> 'Ain't he an obliging bastard,' Ben said, over his shoulder.
> 'Is that the only reason you got?' the policeman in the rear seat asked.
> 'They shoot horses, don't they?' I said. (121)

A cold logic to Robert's thinking is brought forth here. He kills Gloria because, at least to an extent, she manages to communicate her feeling of hopelessness. The comparison between Gloria and a horse similarly denotes a sense of intelligibility. Indeed, the phrasing of the question 'they shoot horses, don't they?' intimates acceptance and shared understanding. This connection, I argue, is a form of ironic hope. Even though the text ends in suicide and a justification for suicide, the sense that Gloria's pain is finally understood, that empathy is still possible, concurrently presents a strange ''hope' for the world'.

This shared comprehension and Robert's rationalisation for killing Gloria is, though, directly called into question by the police officer. The policeman's crude and curt remark, 'ain't he an obliging bastard', mocks Robert's reasoning. From its title to the final line which repeats the title, McCoy's text explicates and, like the police officer, questions Robert's logic. In light of this final scene, the title can be rephrased: is it

reasonable to kill someone to put them out of their misery? When attention is turned to reading Gloria's death as a suicide, this question then becomes: is it reasonable to agree with Gloria's wish to die? Robert's decision to shoot Gloria not only expresses a shared understanding in respecting her desire to die, but also leads to his death. As such, Robert seems to likewise want to die, or at least see his own death as a reasonable response to the 'lousy world'. Gloria's suicide, then, foregrounds a complex, pessimistic and problematic sense of community and connection. Pain may be shared, but since it is only realised in death this sharing also marks a fundamental separation and disconnection. This contradiction intimates an existential, metaphysical isolation and loss of purpose, or a nihilistic crisis. In turn, recognising this crisis may invite a consideration of 'new values', and an effort to find something that may remain in this state of paradox and absence.

Scholarship on *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*

Lee J. Richmond provides a reading of McCoy's text that calls attention to a parallel with Albert Camus and absurdist thinking. As noted in this thesis' introduction, Camus' absurdism begins with a recognition of a similar 'death of ground' as that identified in nihilism, although it is not itself nihilistic. Richmond emphasises the strength of Gloria's cynicism in responding to this 'void' through suicide:

> Gloria does not, like the atheistic existentialism of Sartre or Camus, deny God and wish to go on facing the abyss with stoic fortitude. That would in itself be a bizarre form of salvation. But Gloria can find nothing to save – either in herself, in others, or in the world of things. She is the most tough-minded heroine in absurdist literature. Her only request of a fellow-human being is made to Robert when she asks that

> he "pinch-hit for God." Nor does she manifest inner revolt: only revulsion for what life does not mean.[5]

Gloria's isolation as a 'tough-minded heroine' who 'can find nothing to save' highlights what Durkheim refers to as a lack of social integration and regulation. Her 'revulsion for what life does not mean' forefronts a reading in which society has failed to provide regulated meaning. Rather than 'stoic fortitude', then, it could be said that she embraces an 'anomic suicide'. Such a reading suggests a social and metaphysical indictment on Gloria's part. Although Richmond describes Gloria as a 'heroine in absurdist literature', and thus intimates that she expresses a logical challenge to life, he is attentive to the fact that she does not respond to her seemingly meaningless world with an absurd resolve. Instead, her death registers an absurd or nihilistic condition in which life does not have an adequate sense of purpose. In turn, this recognition of a lack of purpose invites a response of 'social reconstruction', or a search for 'new values', and a means of addressing this apparent absence of purpose. While Gloria does not take part in such an endeavour, the text still encourages such a reading by emphasising social breakdown and outlining the potential for empathy when encountering suicidal distress.

Richmond, in setting his perspective against other interpretations of McCoy's text, indicates such a potentially productive deliberation in Gloria's suicide:

> A simplistic approach to the novel invites the reader to regard it as a satire on the exploitation by racketeers of a desperate, debilitated society, or as a scathing parody of the Hollywood dream-factory, or, worse, as a severe reproof of the social system that produced bread lines and relief agencies during the Great Depression. Though these motifs are peripheral to McCoy's meaning, none provides proper access to the author's timeless emphasis. Nor does the outline of the action stand as his central propulsion to relate the down-and-out condition of the novel's anti-heroes. (92)

[5] Lee J. Richmond, 'A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance: Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 17 (2) (1971), 94.

Richmond stresses that McCoy's novella has a broader impact than its context may imply. He does not deny that The Great Depression provides a setting for a 'down-and-out condition', but he also notes that this condition has a 'timeless emphasis'. I will go on to argue alongside Richmond that reading the text only as a political 'reproof' is problematic due to the unsparing violence in the text. Richmond, though, indicates that McCoy has an evident, metaphysical 'meaning'. Such clarity seems inconsistent with the baffling nature of suicide as identified in literary suicidology. By highlighting a crisis of communication, I intend to underscore the complex and contradictory nature of McCoy's text, and the problems this unsettled complexity foregrounds.

Stressing negativity within the text, Andrew Pepper's reading highlights a contemporary, political subversion that contrasts with Richmond's 'timeless emphasis':

> what marks the dance marathon as different is both its unpredictability – the fact that any of the contestants might fall or collapse at any moment – and its inherent nastiness. It is an uncomfortable truth that some people might take pleasure in watching or indeed reading about the suffering of others, but McCoy is making an important point: life is constant struggle and art needs to reflect some of this unpleasantness. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, he offers us what amounts to a Marxist critique of capitalist society but with no unrealistic revolutionary hopes. As with *Red Harvest*, McCoy's is a critique which, in the end, yields nothing and goes nowhere: capitalism is not about to implode under the weight of its contradictions. What *Horses* demonstrates, and what Horkheimer and Adorno fail to see, is the subversive possibilities inherent in a popular form that is somehow able to reflect upon, or compel its readers to reflect upon, its own grimly exploitative vision.[6]

Here McCoy's novella, taken as a whole, is read as enacting a social protest. The experience of the novella is likened to being a member of the dance marathon's audience. In the end, the reader is 'compelled to reflect upon' the 'inherent nastiness' and 'exploitative' nature of the entertainment. Pepper thus intimates a political undercurrent that contributes to Gloria's 'tough-mindedness'. However, if McCoy's

[6] Andrew Pepper, 'The American Roman Noir', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, ed. Catherine Ross Nickerson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 61-62.

‘critique’ ‘yields nothing and goes nowhere’, then Gloria’s death appears to offer little more than an example of ‘unpleasantness’ in this political framework. By recasting this dead end of McCoy’s ‘critique’ as a nihilistic impasse, however, the text would be understood as providing a more complex problem. Beyond reflecting upon exploitation, McCoy’s novella would demand a more radical and fundamental rethinking of values in the aftermath of Gloria’s suicide.

Pepper’s analysis lingers on this tension between absurdist and Marxist interpretations:

> The dance marathon in McCoy’s *Horses* can be read in one of two ways; either as a particular response to the stultifying effects of the Great Depression and the barbarity of life organized under capitalism, or as a general response to a world that, as Richard Pells puts it, has grown “pointless and absurd.” By the same logic, the alienation experienced by the contestants is either a direct product of their commodification within a highly diversified capitalist economy or a general condition of existence in an absurd universe. […] *Horses* ultimately favors a Marxist rather than an existentialist reading (62)

In this passage, Pepper sets out the distinction between his reading and Richmond’s. The key question is to what extent ‘the stultifying effects of the Great Depression’ condition the novella. This question, and the differences between Richmond’s and Pepper’s interpretations of the text, draw attention to the varied concerns of the novella. At once the text seems to interrogate contemporary and existential challenges in Gloria’s suicide. This ambiguity of focus, and the uncertainty it leads to, recurs in the problems Gloria finds in expressing her suicidal intentions and Robert finds in expressing his understanding of this desire to die. I thus argue that foregrounding Robert and Gloria’s efforts at communication can assist in responding to this debate between political and existential readings. Specifically, this struggle for understanding between Robert and Gloria brings together Pepper’s ‘capitalist’ stress and Richmond’s ‘timeless’ emphasis as a universal crisis that is intertwined with a contemporary social framework. It follows

that a social reconstruction of communication may respond to both the Marxist and existential challenges identified by Pepper and Richmond.

David Wyatt considers such communication in the text while suggesting a certain emptiness to the novella:

> It is a novel of speed. The novel of speed takes as given a background that must be inferred. It tends to be short, and to be marked by striking economies of style. It leaves little room for the direct expression of emotion, preferring fascinating surfaces to mere depth. It can also question these efficiencies, and come to know that there has to be a better, more life affirming way.[7]

Wyatt, like Pepper, advances a productive reading of McCoy's text by emphasising implied alternatives. In other words, by highlighting suffering, the novella indicates that there must be 'a better, more life affirming way'. Wyatt's argument that the text is focused on 'surfaces' is also found in the work of other critics, such as Paul Warshow[8]. In Gloria's suicide, this limitation on emotional expression gives rise to a specific linguistic challenge of how to share pain. As suggested in my reading of the suicide scene, the apparent nihilism in the text seems to derive from this linguistic challenge and the social breakdown that attends it. These concerns regarding how to communicate suffering, evinced by the narrative of suicide and McCoy's writing style, thus indicate both immediate and metaphysical challenges. There is a crisis of understanding that is coterminous with contemporary 'social decay' and an existential loneliness.

Durkheim suggests that such social breakdown, as presented in the 'nastiness' of the dance marathon, is dynamically related with a private 'egoism':

> But society cannot disintegrate without the individual simultaneously detaching himself from social life, without his own goals becoming preponderant over those of the community, in a word without his personality tending to surmount the collective personality. The more weakened the groups to which he belongs, the less he depends on them,

[7] David Wyatt, 'LA Fiction Through Mid-Century', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles*, ed. Kevin McNamara (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 38.
[8] Paul Warshow, 'The Unreal McCoy', in *The Modern American Novel and the Movies*, eds. Gerald Peary, Roger Shatzkin (New York, NY: Frederick Ungar, 1980), 29-39.

> the more he consequently depends only on himself and recognizes no other rules of conduct than what are founded on his private interests.[9]

Gloria's 'private interests' appear to be an abandonment of life, yet she still 'depends' on a social connection to fulfil her desire to die. Her displaced suicide then intimates a negotiation of the isolation occurring alongside social 'disintegration'. At the last, she still seems to require communal relations but not a community. In this manner, I suggest the social crisis noted by scholars such as Pepper and Wyatt works alongside the existential crisis outlined by Richmond. Gloria combines an immediate rebuke of her society, by insisting she dies after the marathon, with a deliberation on whether empathy, and some forms of community, are still viable by asking Robert to shoot her. In so insisting that her pain is shared in her death, Gloria seems to present a nihilistic understanding that life has no meaning while concurrently indicating that sharing this understanding is of value. Therefore, this text reflects on a contemporary political situation of 'social decay', while also considering an existential concern of inherent loneliness. The contradictions often associated with suicide are thus negotiated in McCoy's novella through the paradox of a desire to die being at once recognised and lost, or a communal interaction being 'made and unmade'.

Because Gloria's suicide is an act of sharing and a breakdown of a relationship, it brings focus to a contemporary social 'disintegration' and a universal problem of expressing pain. Therefore, rather than simple taking 'pleasure in the suffering of others', the novella can also be said to encourage empathy in the face of 'undecidability'. At the same time, this potential for empathy is limited. Following Richmond's and Pepper's lead, I do not suggest that the novella offers 'salvation' or 'revolutionary hopes'. Instead, the text elicits an instructive, nihilistic sense of despair.

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[9] Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, ed. George Simpson, trans. John A. Spaulding (London: Routledge, 2002), 167.

Furthermore, reading this distress not in the Marxist terms highlighted by Pepper, nor the 'revulsion for life' noted by Richmond or 'life affirming way' of Wyatt, but rather as a question of empathy and communication, sheds a light on the contradictions of suicide and the challenge of sharing a desire to die.

Pain is central in all of Gloria's efforts to share her suicidal feeling. Indeed, pain and suicide are often intertwined. Bennett's observation that suicide "makes and unmakes subjects, induces and resists empathy, and insists on and makes inconceivable our understanding of ourselves and of others" (3), is, for instance, akin to the manner in which Elaine Scarry discusses pain. In both of these scholars' works paradoxes of communication are brought to the fore. Scarry explicates:

> pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed.
> Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language.[10]

Pain 'resists language' and seems impossible to fully share. At the same time, it is recognisable. Bennett comments similarly on suicide in late twentieth and early twenty-first century narratives:

> Suicide is not just a thematic or representational question in these texts but also a narratological and therefore empathic dilemma, as well as, at the same time, an ordering and structuring device. Suicide produces a crisis in language and in representation, an epistemological as well as an empathic aporia that both orders and disorders narrative. (159)

Both pain and suicide seem, to an extent, to be inexpressible, or at least not fully expressible. However, they are also undeniable. Combining these challenges, I suggest another problem can be distilled: how does one communicate the pain of wanting to die? This question is the central concern of McCoy's novella and representation of suicide.

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[10] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985), 4.

Gloria's death brings forth an 'empathic dilemma' in which the text demands and yet seems to render impossible a shared understanding of her suffering.

The structural form of *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* underscores this sense of 'order and disorder'. The text is fractured into short chapters, with Robert's italicised thoughts creating a further disjunction. The ever-increasing font of the judge's sentence, which is interspersed between the chapters, reads as a crescendo. Various chapters also provide a countdown of dancers left in the competition as well as noting the number of hours that have elapsed. Although Gloria's murder-suicide then provides a violent culmination to this increasing intensity, this climax does not offer a solution. Instead, the complexity of the novella's central concern is brought to the fore. The questions of whether pain can be shared and whether Robert can justifiably understand Gloria's desire to die to the extent that her murder is akin to putting a horse out of its misery, are focused on. The disjointed nature of the text's structure, alongside its use of different font sizes, italicisation, and chapter lengths, its 'ordering and disordering of narrative', draw attention to the unsettling nature of these questions and the unlikelihood of resolution. Furthermore, this fractured expression of the story in and of itself suggests a fraught communication. This difficulty, as evinced through complexity, reads as a crisis of representation – a phrase which recalls Bennett's descriptions of suicide potentially evoking a 'crisis of representation' as well as Michael Denning's proposal that the early 1930s in America saw a 'crisis of representation'. In McCoy's text, and in a development of the crises discussed in the previous chapters, this crisis of representation becomes self-reflective as McCoy's novella seems to question its own ability to express its central concerns: pain and suicide.

McCoy's hardboiled writing style further encourages a reading emphasising this crisis. Warshow describes McCoy's style as one of "superficial, ready-made, adolescent

tough-guyism and sentimentality" (31). This 'superficiality' and the focus on 'surfaces' noted by Wyatt forefront the problems of communication that the text explores. McCoy's extensive use of repetition, as I will show, likewise calls attention to this crisis of expression. In particular, Gloria's recurring attempts to communicate her desire to die seem to realise the 'unsharability' of pain observed by Scarry. The novella varies the language, but Gloria's suicidal intent is ever-present in phrases such as: 'I want to die', 'I wish to die', 'morbid', 'I'm through with it', 'I'm finished', 'I'm better off dead' and so on. Because these phrases seem 'ready-made', and since the phrase 'I want to die' is at once deeply personal and yet, particularly in its repetition, it seems generic, this reiteration of meaning with a variation of terminology suggests that the language, to an extent, may be failing. This problem of communicating a desire to die then reaches a dead end when Robert does appear to share Gloria's feeling and kills her.

The differences in readings of the text from Richmond, Pepper, and Wyatt indicate the complexity of the novella. The suicide, and the novella's title, draw out a similar sense of interpretive uncertainty by raising the question of how reasonable Robert's decision is. Whether or not Gloria is read as a 'heroine' or her refutation of society is considered as 'going nowhere', appears to depend on the extent to which the text is able to express her pain. If her pain and thus suicide is in a state of 'empathic aporia' and doubt, Robert's reasoning seems equally dubious. Combining the scholars' works discussed in this section, I suggest the crucial question raised by McCoy's novella is: can we understand, conceive of, and share the pain of Gloria's desire to die as Robert claims to? In turn, the text seems to lead to a fundamental conundrum, which reads as a nihilistic crisis: if the text explores how the pain of a desire to die cannot be fully communicated in present language, what can the text itself express?

Gloria and Robert: Discussing Suicide

McCoy's novella opens with Robert standing in court and internally recounting the suicide scene as a snapshot. However, at this stage in the narrative it is unclear that the death is more complex than murder. I quote this chapter in its entirety:

> *I stood up. For a moment I saw Gloria again, sitting on that bench on the pier. The bullet had just struck her on the side of the head; the blood had not even started to flow. The flash from the pistol still lighted her face. Everything was as plain as day. She was completely relaxed, was completely comfortable. The impact of the bullet had turned her head a little away from me; I did not have a perfect profile view but I could see enough of her face and her lips to know she was smiling. The Prosecuting Attorney was wrong when he told the jury she died in agony, friendless, alone except for her brutal murderer, out there in that black night on the edge of the Pacific. He was as wrong as a man can be. She did not die in agony. She was relaxed and comfortable and she was smiling. It was the first time I had ever seen her smile. How could she have been in agony then? And she wasn't friendless.*
> *I was her very best friend. I was her only friend. So how could she have been friendless?* (3)

There is a physical and emotional violence brought forth in this image of murder-suicide that pervades the rest of the narrative. In particular, the Prosecuting Attorney's account stresses 'agony' and loneliness. Likewise, the description of a woman being shot in the head presents a social breakdown. Robert forcefully asserts that such an interpretation is 'wrong', but this insistence is undermined by his desperate repetitiveness. Similarly, Robert's emphasis that Gloria was 'completely relaxed and completely comfortable' is incongruous in the context of a murder. It draws attention to a passivity on Gloria's part that will be complicated later by her suicide. Such interpretative tension, misunderstanding, and the struggle for clear expression continue from this opening chapter throughout the text.

Robert's account here is likewise ambiguous. His suggestion that 'everything was plain as day' is called into question by the fact it is night. He acknowledges that he

‘did not have a perfect profile view’ and that he cannot entirely see Gloria’s face, and yet he is still confident that he knows she was smiling. This smile appears to be particularly significant for Robert and he repeats the word three times. However, even this certitude seems misplaced. The admission that he had never seen Gloria smile before indicates that they do not have a longstanding relationship. His following assertion that he was ‘her very best friend’ brings to the fore the central concerns of the text and the final representation of suicide: considering the complexity of suicide, to what extent can this murder be considered a ‘friendly’ act?

This opening chapter provides two clear readings of Gloria’s death. The Prosecuting Attorney offers a conventional social perspective. He is faceless, nameless, and recounts the scene based on probability. Robert’s rejoinder and insistence on an opposing interpretation presents the reader with a distinct alternative. His account is, though, unsettled. Robert’s repetitive, incongruous descriptions are disquieting, and not least within this context of murder. The implications of what he does not know, for instance never having seen Gloria smile before, as well as Gloria’s passiveness, engenders a further discomfort. As the passage concludes, Robert’s discomposure comes to the fore as he too begins to ask questions. Because he stresses that he was Gloria’s friend and her ‘only friend’, and yet he is killing her, it appears that Robert is deranged. As the text goes on, however, and this murder is realised to be a more complex form of suicide, Robert’s account does not seem as confused. The possibility that he does understand Gloria and is her ‘friend’ is ironically brought forth in his decision to shoot her.

Since McCoy’s novella returns to this depiction of Robert in court, and indeed this specific scene of murder on the pier, the reader is invited to reconsider this opening chapter at the end of the text. With the knowledge of Gloria’s desire to die, and Robert’s

claims to understand this feeling, his confusion in the court room prompts an alternative interpretation. Rather than being deranged, he seems unsettled by his inability to express his comprehension. Specifically, he is unable to make it clear to the Prosecuting Attorney that he was Gloria's friend. He cannot demonstrate that he understood Gloria, and the principal reason he cannot communicate this shared feeling with Gloria is that he has killed her. In other words, Robert agrees with Gloria's desire to die and thus kills her; in turn, he can no longer verify this shared agreement because he has killed her. He is then unable to communicate this feeling of despair and the desire to die to the Prosecuting Attorney. The rest of the novella presents an effort to share Robert's understanding not with the court but with the reader. The text, as such, is an account of how Robert came to feel he was Gloria's 'friend' and a rationalisation for why he becomes an accomplice in her suicide. The contradictions and tension of this opening chapter imply that this comprehension, however, may be inherently inexplicable.

McCoy thus brings this shared understanding of pain to a critical juncture rather than a resolution. This opening passage suggests such uncertainty in Robert's repetitions and denials, as well as indicating a similar turbulence in the setting of 'the edge of the Pacific'. As the end of the frontier, this setting foregrounds questions of resolution. The persistence of this interrogation is accentuated by the dance hall, which, as Robert explains, "was built out over the ocean on pilings, and beneath our feet, beneath the floor, the ocean pounded night and day. I could feel it surging through the balls of my feet." (15) These same swaying foundations are highlighted in the final account of the suicide when Robert realises that he agrees with Gloria. Such turbulence seems akin to the 'unpredictability' that Pepper stresses as the cornerstone of the dance marathon. This uncertainty also seems to reflect the 'undecidability' associated with suicide by Bennett and Maurice Blanchot. As discussed previously, Blanchot

emphasises the "ever so strange event of suicide", which, like words, "make[s] things 'arise' at the heart of their absence"[11]. In McCoy's novella, such irresolution is brought forth in the challenges of sharing the pain of wanting to die. This pain 'arises' most clearly in Gloria's death, and therefore in the final 'absence' of her pain. It is a suffering which, like the 'strange event of suicide', is realised by its simultaneous ending. In similarity to Blanchot's considerations of suicide, the problem in McCoy's novella appears to be found in the effort to grasp the ungraspable.

This difficulty of knowing another person's pain arises early in the text when Gloria first expresses her desire to die in conversation with Robert:

> 'I'll tell you what I would do if I had the guts: I'd walk out of a window or throw myself in front of a streetcar or something.'
> 'I know how you feel,' I said; 'I know exactly how you feel.'
> 'It's peculiar to me,' she said, 'that everybody pays so much attention to living and so little to dying. Why are these high-powered scientists always screwing around trying to prolong life rather instead of finding pleasant ways to end it? There must be a hell of a lot of people in the world like me – who want to die but haven't got the guts – '
> 'I know what you mean,' I said; 'I know exactly what you mean.' (12-13)

As she will repeat just before her death, Gloria stresses a need for 'guts' or 'nerve' in order to complete the act of suicide. The necessity of 'guts', and a confidence in self-determination, highlights the 'strange', contradictory autonomy of suicide. In a sense, Robert provides Gloria with this confidence through his willingness to shoot her: because he agrees with her feeling, her desire to die can be realised. However, here the problem of communicating this suicidal intent is brought to the fore in Gloria's acknowledgement that 'there must be a hell of a lot of the people in the world like me'. This recognition intimates a shared but unexpressed feeling. Even though she is trying to articulate her suffering directly, Gloria renders her emotional state by outlining

[11] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1982), 43.

uncertain actions and desires: ‘I’d walk out of a window […] or something’. In turn, Robert seems only able to affirm that he agrees without explicating this shared feeling. He repeats time and again that he ‘knows’, but this knowledge is not defined.

This passage draws out the key problem negotiated in the suicide scene. Robert here acknowledges Gloria’s feeling; however, he is only able to share his understanding by saying that he understands. By the end of the text, Gloria asks for a greater assertion of shared feeling by asking Robert to kill her. Language appears then to be at a problematic juncture. Linguistically expressing a shared understanding through phrases such as ‘I know exactly what you mean’, no longer seems adequate and Gloria urges action instead. In a similar fashion to the repetitions in Robert’s opening account of the murder, words do not appear to have enough power to persuade and bring clarity. At the same time, Gloria asks to be shot. Indeed, it is the repetition of the word ‘misery’ which convinces Robert that Gloria’s death is appropriate. In similarity to Blanchot’s discussion of language in terms of simultaneous assertion and absence, McCoy’s text evinces understanding while being unable to, or refusing to, secure it. As such, the complex representation of suicide in this novella brings forth a crisis in expression.

For Robert, fully understanding Gloria’s pain of wanting to die seems to be possible only by killing her. He then appears to be unable to express this comprehension as it is realised through death. In Scarry’s terms, it cannot be ‘denied’, nor can it be ‘confirmed’. Gloria’s suicidal intent at once ‘arises’ and is shared, and yet is concurrently lost in the moment of her death. While the final sharing and understanding of Gloria’s desire to die results in both her death and Robert’s, this pessimistic construction still evinces a strange ‘hope’ that empathy can be found even within this collapse of social relations. A key feature of what the text expresses then, by bringing this paradox into focus through its representation of suicide, is that this pessimism is a

‘symptom’ of a nihilistic ‘social decay’ in which a value of empathy seems at once viable and elusive.

Motion and Crime in Hollywood

The dance marathon, in particular, brings a form of social turbulence and ‘social decay’ to the fore. I have likened what Pepper describes as the ‘unpredictability’ of the dance marathon to the ‘undecidability’ of suicide. In particular, the marathon provides an inadequate sense of order that reads as a failure of integration and regulation. Here I want to emphasise the relationship of the marathon and Gloria’s suicide in order to explore how the crisis of communication manifests in broader US society.

Early in the novella, physical space seems to encourage a social disconnection akin to the ‘social decay’ that will pervade the text. Robert describes the park in which Gloria first confesses her desire to die, as discussed previously:

> It was always nice there. It was a fine place to sit. It was very small, only one block square, but it was very dark and very quiet and filled with dense shrubbery. All around it palm trees grew up, fifty, sixty feet tall, suddenly tufted at the top. Once you entered the park you had the illusion of security. I often imagined they were sentries wearing grotesque helmets: my own private sentries, standing guard over my own private island. (9)

Initially Robert portrays the park in positive terms. However, his language quickly shifts as he depicts a space that is ‘very dark and very quiet’, while the word ‘grotesque’ stands out against the earlier terms ‘nice’ and ‘fine’. This sense of tension in the terminology is paralleled in the emphasis on being isolated from a busy world. Robert seems to like the park for its ‘privacy’ and a form of secluded safety. At the same time, however, the park only provides ‘the illusion of security’. Indeed, throughout the text, security and stability only ever appear to be illusory. This guarded, ‘private island’ is set

against the end of the pier where the rest of the novella, and the suicide, takes place. In turn, the challenge, and apparent inability, of finding a stable sense of 'security' seems to recur in both public and private environments.

The dance marathon likewise offers a similar 'illusion of security'. The marathon provides rules, regulations, food, and warmth, as well as presenting a defined sense of purpose. As Gloria suggests: "All you have to do is keep moving." (13) This unambiguous rule imparts a clear motivation and feeling of purpose that is supplemented by the competitive nature of the marathon. The marathon's organisers, Rocky and Socks, also devise various activities to enhance the entertainment, such as weddings and races around the dance hall. It is during one of these races, though, that the mental cost of the marathon is revealed:

> I knew Gloria and I were in no danger as long as we held our own but you never could tell when your partner would collapse. Past a certain point you kept moving automatically, without actually being conscious of moving. One moment you would be travelling at top speed and the next moment you started falling. This was what I was afraid of with Gloria – collapsing. (98)

Here the 'unpredictability' of the marathon is rendered through Robert's anxiety. Theoretically he knows that he is 'in no danger' as they are far ahead of other couples in the race, but the marathon does not allow for such certitude. There is always a risk of 'collapse'. Although Robert describes his body in robotic terms 'moving automatically', his key concern seems to be a mental agitation. While Robert spends most of his time worrying and feeling 'afraid', the physical motion of the marathon becomes second nature. Implicitly the marathon should bring partners together as they compete as a pair. It is evident, though, that this partnership is marked by disconnection. Robert is not worried about Gloria's health if she collapses, but that they might lose the race. Even events such as the weddings, when couples are officially brought into union together, are described as "just a showmanship angle" (66) and their impermanence is stressed.

As Pepper notes, this dance marathon and the various activities within it are thus both repetitive and unpredictable. Although the routine of movement and short breaks creates a sense of structure and order, this regime is always at risk of collapse. Unlike Robert, Gloria is not afraid of breaking down but is fundamentally concerned with the machine-like repetitiveness delaying this end. This frustration with regularity and continuity is intertwined with her desire to die:

> 'What are you going to do when this thing is over?' she asked.
> 'Why worry about that?' I said. 'It's not over yet. I don't see what you're kicking about,' I told her. 'We're better off than we've ever been – at least we know where our next meal is coming from.'
> 'I wish I was dead,' she said. 'I wish God would strike me dead.'
> She kept saying that over and over again. It was beginning to get on my nerves.
> […]
> 'I don't know why you're so morbid,' I said. 'You'll be all right in a couple of days. You'll feel better about it then.'
> 'That hasn't got anything to do with it,' she said.
> 'I don't even get backache from that. That's not it. This whole business is a merry-go-round. When we get out of here we're right back where we started.'
> 'We've been eating and sleeping,' I said.
> 'Well, what's the good of that when you're just postponing something that's bound to happen?' (65)

Robert is here notably less sympathetic to Gloria's suicidal desire. His changing attitude over the course of the novella draws attention to the difficulties of sharing the pain of wanting to die. Eventually, Gloria's cynicism and melancholy seem to wear Robert down. In the suicide scene, his agreement with 'everything' Gloria has said appears to recall her argument in the passage above. Indeed, Gloria prophetically observes that when they 'get out of here' they'll be 'right back where they started'. The murder-suicide, as noted previously, occurs when they leave the dance hall and find themselves back outside where the narrative began with little changed in their lives. The food and sleep provided by the marathon may enable Robert and Gloria to live for longer, but the world outside remains the same. Echoing the rules of the dance marathon, they keep

moving for the sake of keeping moving in a manner that Gloria perceives as a meaningless effort to delay death.

Following Durkheimian theory, this acknowledgement of a lack of change and meaningless action indicates a social failure. Durkheim comments:

> For individuals share too deeply in the life of society for it to be diseased without their suffering infection. What it suffers they necessarily suffer. Because it is the whole, its ills are communicated to its parts. Hence it cannot disintegrate without awareness that the regular conditions of general existence are equally disturbed. Because society is the end on which our better selves depend, it cannot feel us escaping it without a simultaneous realization that our activity is purposeless. Since we are its handiwork, society cannot be conscious of its own decadence without the feeling that henceforth this work is of no value. Thence are formed currents of depression and disillusionment emanating from no particular individual but expressing society's state of disintegration. (172)

The 'inherent nastiness' that Pepper attributes to the dance marathon can be read as indicating such a social 'disease'. There is a dynamic interrelation between individuals and society brought forth in Durkheim's comments. This 'disease' 'infects' individuals, and as society further 'disintegrates' due to despairing, 'infected' individuals, the 'disease' spreads. Robert and Gloria are 'infected' as they do not appear to have a sense of purpose outside of the marathon. As we have seen, Gloria directly questions whether continuing in the manner demanded by the marathon is worthwhile. The aimlessness of the marathon thus calls attention to a general 'purposelessness'. As Pepper argues, the entertainment of the dance marathon centres around the moments that movement stops. It is an event that is predicated on ongoing suffering with periodic instances of ending. The marathon, as such, presents a social crisis of 'disintegration'.

The breadth of this crisis, as a social rather than personal problem, is particularly highlighted by the prevalence of crime in the text. There are several criminal acts in the novella: Gloria's first attempt to kill herself, abortion, Mario the murderer, intimate relations between a man and an underage girl, the shooting of Mrs Layden, and the final

suicide-murder. These moments punctuate the text alongside the sentencing of the judge and the italicised thoughts of Robert on the inevitability of his execution. The sudden killing of Mrs Layden by a random stray bullet shot into a crowd foregrounds the erratic yet seemingly inescapable violence in *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*. The final suicide reads as a response to this generalised social 'suffering' in a 'lousy world'.

Mrs Layden is a lonely, elderly dance marathon fan. She is comical, and almost contemptible, in her doddery mannerisms. Near the end of the text a fight breaks out amongst the dance marathon audience in which a shot is fired and the bullet strikes Mrs Layden in the head. The narrative links this violence to Gloria's suicidal feeling:

> It was Mrs Layden, a single hole in the front of her forehead. John Maxwell was kneeling beside her, holding her head… then he placed the head gently on the floor and stood up. Mrs Layden's head slowly turned sidewise and a little pool of blood that had collected in the crater of her eye spilled out on the floor.
> John Maxwell saw Gloria and me.
> 'She was coming around to be a judge in the derby,' he said. 'She was hit by a stray bullet – '
> 'I wish it was me – ' Gloria said under her breath. (112)

The connection between Gloria and Mrs Layden is initially found in Gloria's admission that she wished she had died. Later, another parallel arises as both Gloria and Mrs Layden are shot in the head. The hierarchical structure of the marathon, as outlined by Pepper between audience and dancers, is then problematised in this scene. Mrs Layden is an audience member and a judge. Indeed, she is caught by the bullet as she goes to perform her role as a judge. The voyeuristic enjoyment of the competition is thus interrupted and yet exacerbated as the voyeur becomes the victim. This extension of the violence indicates a broader social breakdown than a simple, conventional political reading of the novel may present.

It is only the physical trauma, however, that transcends the gap between audience and dancers in this scene. There is no emotional sharing of pain as Mrs Layden

dies instantly. The suffering of the contestants is not communicated in this killing; it is repeated elsewhere. The dance marathon ends due to the death of Mrs Layden, but the violence continues as Gloria is shot and Robert is sentenced to execution. Even the repetition of Mrs Layden and then Gloria being shot in the head does not realise a sharing of pain. Mrs Layden does not partake in Gloria's suicidal ideation and, in both cases, death is instant. The recurrence of the killings of these opposed characters – old vs young, audience vs dancer, wealthy vs poor – suggests that their differing lifestyles are ultimately inconsequential. The randomness of a 'stray bullet' produces a sense of erratic threat. The apparent security of the dance marathon and a stable hierarchy of audience and dancers is thus revealed as another 'illusion'. If the suicide is read as conditioned by a failure of social integration and regulation, and the negative consequences of the dance marathon transcend its internal structure, then the sense of crisis which is given rise to by the suicide appears to be wide-ranging, if not universal. Such breadth is akin to Durkheim's dynamic escalation of suffering between society and individuals, as well as Nietzsche's symptomatic reading of suicide as indicative of a nihilistic crisis. Therefore, the seemingly inconsequential nature of life in this milieu of social collapse appears to be intertwined with a sense of disconnection and a need to forge an alternative purpose through new values and social relations.

Although Gloria is the character to most frequently and directly bring forth this feeling of crisis through her suicidal intentions, almost every character in the novella struggles: Ruby is strained with her pregnancy, her husband hits Gloria and Robert fights with him, Rocky's lasciviousness leads to violence, Pedro attacks his partner Lillian, the celebrities in the audience seem desperate to garner attention, Mario is arrested, and so forth. These narratives of distress work together to build the 'lousy

world' that Gloria is jaded by. Robert brings attention to this sense of a despairing world when he describes a film he intends to make:

> Well, like a two – or three-reel short. What a junkman does all day, or the life of an ordinary man – you know, who makes thirty dollars a week and has to raise kids and buy a home and a car and a radio – the kind of guy bill collectors are always after. Something different, with camera angles to help tell the story. (107)

While Robert refers to his film as 'something different', it is about normalcy and what 'an ordinary man does all day'. The lack of a narrative is emphasised when he vaguely appeals to 'camera angles to help tell the story'. Trying to express a lifetime in a 'two or three-reel short' without needing a storyline, intimates that this financially struggling 'ordinary man' is another hopeless, stock character whose life cannot be fully conveyed in language. This proposed film underscores the 'ordinariness' of discontent and struggle in the text.

Robert's desire to put this life on film also calls attention to the Hollywood setting that the novella elsewhere indicates is paramount:

> 'This motion picture business is a lousy business,' she [Gloria] said. 'You have to meet people you don't want to meet and you have to be nice to people whose guts you hate. I'm glad I'm through with it.' 'You're just starting with it,' I said, trying to cheer her up. *I never paid any attention to her remark then, but now I realize it was the most significant thing she had ever said*. (105)

The 'business' of Hollywood forms the principal background for the 'merry-go-round' and the 'lousy' world that Gloria regularly laments. These three terms – 'business', 'lousy', 'merry-go-round' – are repeated in the novella and often in conjunction with Gloria's suicidal ideation. Robert's comment that Gloria's remarks here are the 'most significant thing she had ever said' demands a focus on the interconnection between Hollywood and Gloria's desire to die. Partly this 'significance' arises as Gloria affirms her suicidal intent here in certain rather than exploratory language. She is definite that she is 'through with it'. Her comments, though, also foreground a breakdown in social

interaction. While elsewhere Gloria criticises the ‘world’, ‘this whole business’ and other all-encompassing phrases, in this passage she particularly denounces the ‘people’ of Hollywood and the need to interact with them. As such, the central crisis in the text seems to be found not only in communication, but also in the ‘business’ of Hollywood. It seems then that culture, whether in the form of movies or literature, is at the crux of the novel’s negotiation of communication. The text itself, or in Higonnet’s terms as considered in Chapter 2, ‘the problem of reading’, appears here to be interlaced with the social breakdown that McCoy explores. If language and cultural forms are at the heart of the crisis, it follows that any ‘social reconstruction’ that may result from the representation of suicide is likely to exceed the parameters of the novella.

I have proposed that the core concern throughout McCoy’s text is a problem of expression, which culminates in the suicide and is primarily manifested between Robert and Gloria. However, here it appears that this crisis of communication is a broader social ‘disintegration’. The failure of the dance marathon to securely integrate and regulate its competitors, the prevalence of crime, and the wider dissatisfaction with Hollywood, all indicate an extensive crisis. This wide view of a ‘lousy world’ seems to work in conjunction with the problem of expressing pain. In both cases, the central issue is an inability to forge a stable communal connection. The need to find an alternative expression, an expression perhaps to a degree realised in the displaced suicide, would thus seem to be an urgent challenge that threatens interactions beyond those of Gloria and Robert. The breadth of this ‘social decay’ indicates a nihilistic understanding, which is further registered by Gloria’s pessimism. Finally, then, while the text can suggest a need for new values following this nihilistic crisis, it cannot itself fully express such values because to do so would lose sight of the instructive nihilism at its core.

Conclusion

By shooting Gloria, Robert intimates a shared understanding. Indeed, through this action, he too sets in motion his own death by execution. However, precisely because Gloria's desire to die now appears to be entirely shared, it can no longer be verified. This sharing of pain is marked by its own breakdown. In other words, a relationship, or 'friendship' to use Robert's term, is realised by its simultaneous destruction. This contradiction echoes the complex readings of suicide from Camus, Blanchot, and Bennett. Suicide here appears to, at once, 'affirm and deny' or 'make and unmake'. McCoy, though, presents this contradiction within a social relationship rather than in the conventionally individual act of suicide. In so doing, he foregrounds a strange form of compassion as well as a broader sense of social breakdown.

In this manner, I argue that McCoy represents suicide as a 'complex social phenomenon' which brings forth a crisis in expression and understanding. The representation of suicide in *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* calls into question our capacity to understand and share each other's pain, particularly in relation to the desire to die. As the question form of title and the repetition of the title at the end of the text implies, this challenge is left unresolved. However, in Gloria's death, it appears that the novella presents the pain of wanting to die as something that can be shared; although it shows this only, and provocatively, through a shared suicide. This provocation suggests that McCoy's novella seeks to look beyond linguistic expressions of pain, and indeed to go further than the text itself is able to fully express. McCoy's novella thereby identifies a need for non-linguistic ways of expressing and understanding pain, and specifically the pain of wanting to die, but does not clarify how this expression could be formed. I thus describe this need as a nihilistic 'hope': a 'death of ground' which concurrently

recognises that a limited and elusive empathy is still possible within a state of 'social decay'. Even when life seems pointless and metaphysical redemption or 'substance' impossible, compassion continues in a strange way to be viable and perhaps, therefore, may be a value to remain after nihilism.

5. A Double Suicide in James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1936)

In this chapter I discuss a novella as originally published in a serial magazine rather than a standalone text: James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* from *Liberty* magazine (February 15th to April 4th 1936). Cain's text provides an alternative perspective that develops the discussions in the previous chapters: it questions how empathy may be shared in a double suicide in a manner akin to that in Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935); in similarity to Joe Christmas' death discussed in Chapter 2 here criminals kill themselves having been identified by the law; and, like Paul's suicide in *Infants of the Spring* (1932), Phyllis Nirdlinger's death brings focus to material aesthetics. While there are differences in reading a serial compared to a standalone novel, I propose that Cain's text is a comparable source to the others investigated in this thesis. The structure, content, and writing in *Double Indemnity* in *Liberty* is also very close, although not identical, to the consolidated version published as one of three novellas in Cain's *Three of a Kind* (1943). This republication enables a further opportunity to investigate how an author reworks a representation of suicide.

In this chapter, I will argue that Cain represents suicide as a complex negotiation of a crisis in patriarchal authority. Unlike the previously discussed novels, however, *Double Indemnity* encourages a reading of suicide which highlights individual failure and the control of a social order. Maurice Blanchot brings focus to this sense of failure in relation to suicide:

> He who kills himself says, "I withdraw from the world, I will act no longer." And yet this same person wants to make death an act; he wants to act supremely and absolutely. This illogical optimism which shines through voluntary death – this confidence that one will always be able to triumph in the end by disposing sovereignly of nothingness, by being the creator of one's own nothingness and by remaining able, in the very midst of the fall, to lift oneself to one's full height – this certitude affirms in the act of suicide the very thing suicide claims to deny. That is why he who espouses negation cannot allow it to be incarnated in a final decision which would be exempt from that negation.[1]

Cain's representation of suicide foregrounds such an 'espousal of negation' through Phyllis and her 'marriage' with death. Although a sense of crisis arises in Phyllis' suicide, this death is also marked by misplaced 'confidence' and 'illogical optimism'. The contradictions considered in the passage from Blanchot above recall his discussion of language:

> [words have the power] to absent themselves marvellously in the midst of the totality which they realize, which they proclaim as they annihilate themselves therein, which they accomplish eternally by destroying themselves there endlessly. (43)

There is a sense of duality here in which creation and destruction occur simultaneously. As we will see, Phyllis' suicide reads as a similar act of paradoxical affirmation and denial and thus a crisis of understanding. Such crisis, as explored in this thesis' preceding chapters, indicates a social order that is unsettled. The social order within Cain's text, however, also appears to have a more stable sense of authority than the novels discussed previously. In other words, Phyllis' suicide 'proclaims' a crisis in social order, while she concurrently 'annihilates' herself within the remit of social order. In turn, this retention of some control by a social order intimates that the crisis of understanding following suicide can, perhaps, be mitigated.

This chapter begins by focusing on material aesthetics in Cain's representation of suicide and how Phyllis' death is established within a conventional framework. I then

[1] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1982) First published 1955, 102-03.

examine scholarship on Cain's text and highlight the correspondence of this material aesthetics with analyses of social determination in Cain's writing. In this section, conventional typological interpretations of *Double Indemnity* are reconsidered with an emphasis on how suicide is socially situated. This discussion of social understanding continues as the chapter focuses on a series of passages from the text negotiating such social order, particularly through the characterisation of Phyllis. The final section of this chapter turns to the republication of *Double Indemnity* in *Three of a Kind*. I underscore subtle changes that Cain makes to the text as he reworks his representation of suicide. These alterations reinforce patriarchal authority in the novella and shine a light on the control of a male-dominated social order within the representation of suicide and the wider narrative of *Double Indemnity*.

***Double Indemnity*'s Double Suicide**

Cain's novella was originally published across eight instalments in *Liberty* magazine. While each instalment reads in a similar manner to a book chapter, they begin and end with italicised recaps and previews. Several images by James Montgomery Flagg accompany the text as well as advertisements for a range of different products. Although much could be said about the magazine, here I focus on the text itself as the interests of this thesis pertain to the textual representation of suicide.

The narrative begins with an insurance salesman, Walter Huff, being beguiled by an attractive housewife, Phyllis Nirdlinger, and concocting a plan to kill her husband, Mr Nirdlinger. Mr Nirdlinger is one of several father figures in the text and his death appears to be a challenge to conventional patriarchal authority. Huff and Phyllis stage the death as a railroad accident so that they can collect double indemnity on an

insurance policy. Although this plan unfolds with little difficulty, Huff and Phyllis begin to frustrate each other soon after the murder. This conflict highlights a negotiation of control between the pair and invites a reconsideration of traditional gender relations. Such tension is also echoed in Huff's workplace relationships with a series of father figures. The president of Huff's insurance company, Mr Norton, for instance, wants to try the Nirdlinger case as a suicide in order to limit the pay-out. Huff's direct boss in the claims department, Keyes, is not convinced that Mr Nirdlinger killed himself and starts to investigate the case as one of murder. Suicide is then presented early in the text as an act which demands interpretation, and an act that Keyes seems to understand. These interactions between the Nirdlingers, Huff, Norton, and Keyes, bring to the fore patriarchal authority, death, and the capacity to interpret actions such as suicide through conventional study and analysis. Keyes, in particular, takes a fatherly responsibility over Huff and is portrayed as a logical and authoritative force in the text.

This emphasis on gender relations and patriarchal roles continues as Huff develops an affection for Phyllis' adopted daughter, Lola. In so doing, Huff turns away from the dangerous woman, as represented by Phyllis, towards a fatherlier affection for her innocent daughter. Eventually Huff decides to kill Phyllis, but she shoots him first. As Huff lies in hospital, Keyes suggests Lola may be involved in the murder of her father. Huff, wishing to protect Lola, finally confesses to the killing of Mr Nirdlinger. This shift in Huff's desires from Phyllis to Lola intimates his re-establishment within a patriarchal order. In the final instalment, Keyes unravels the past of Phyllis and reveals that she has committed several murders, including killing children. She is thereby characterised as a villain who stands against an orthodox notion of reproductive futurity. Huff's confession then seems to enable a redemption for him, while this villainous characterisation leaves Phyllis as apparently unredeemable. In the concluding part of the

narrative, Keyes mentions a steamer to Huff upon which Huff meets Phyllis and they jump overboard. Keyes' insight into suicide thus finally affords him the capacity to organise the deaths of Huff and Phyllis and provide a form of complex resolution to the tensions of gender roles and authority in the text.

The text ends with a newspaper report on Phyllis' and Huff's double suicide:

> Report from Captain James Fitzgerald of the S.S. Verona to the Intercoastal Shipping Company:
> Two passengers, Walter Huff and Phyllis Nirdlinger, committed suicide by jumping overboard at 9:40 P.M., Friday night. Boats were lowered and bodies recovered. They will be brought back on the next homeward trip for further identification and proper interment.[2]

Setting aside recaps and previews, this is the only part of *Double Indemnity* that is not written from Huff's perspective. The passage is to the point and provides an official report of the suicides of Huff and Phyllis. The precise and straightforward language, as well as being an account that is appended to Huff's narrative, bring forth a sense of sureness. Since the exact time that Huff and Phyllis jump is recorded, and their bodies are recovered, there is an implication that their suicides were known to be occurring. If this is the case, then the suicides seem socially acceptable. The phrase 'proper interment' indicates a similar feeling of order. The deaths of these individuals appear then to be part of an established process. In other words, this passage intimates that the suicides are socially managed and possibly even expected.

Huff echoes a similar prophetic realisation of the suicides to come when he meets Phyllis on the boat:

> Keyes had mentioned a steamer that was leaving San Pedro on Thursday night.
> Around seven o'clock I put on my clothes. I was weak but I could walk. After a bite to eat I sent for a taxi, obtained a reservation, and went down to the pier. They had a cop watching me, but I gave him the slip.

[2] *Liberty*, Issue (14), 4 April 1936, 54.

> I went to bed right away and stayed there till early this afternoon. Then I couldn't stand it any longer, alone there in the stateroom, and went up on deck. I found a chair and sat there looking out to sea.
> I didn't know where I was going, and didn't care. I had a funny feeling I wasn't going anywhere. Then, all of a sudden, I found out. I head a little gasp beside me. Before I even looked I knew who it was. I turned to the next chair. It was Phyllis. (54)

Keyes' 'mentioning' of the steamer points to a social influence over the suicides. The phrase 'I had a funny feeling I wasn't going anywhere', at once turns attention to the suicide and this sense of social determination. This admission suggests Huff recognises his own impending death, but this 'feeling' does not come from himself. Instead, the conditions he finds himself in appear to compel his suicidal intention; the realisation that he may soon die is something he 'found out' rather than a reasoned decision. At the same time, however, the suicide which follows is an action that Huff chooses. As this scene continues, Huff explains: "Keyes was right. I had nothing to thank him for. He just saved the state the expense of getting rid of me." (54) Although Huff believes he will be executed, he, like Keyes, seems content to help 'the state' rather than force this material 'expense'. Huff's suicide, as such, can be said to follow social expectations and is perhaps even a form of socially acceptable behaviour.

Phyllis, on the other hand, challenges this acceptability and foregrounds a more complex social rebellion. The narrative describes Phyllis finding pleasure in her choice of death:

> She smiled then, the sweetest, saddest smile you ever saw.
> "What were you thinking about?"
> "We could be married, Walter?"
> "We could be. And then what?"
> I don't know how long we sat looking out to sea after that. She started it again: "There's nothing ahead of us, is there, Walter?"
> "No. Nothing."
> "…Walter, the time has come."
> "What do you mean, Phyllis?"
> "For me to meet my bridegroom. The only one I ever loved. One night I'll drop off the stern of the ship. Then I'll feel his icy fingers creeping

> into my heart."
> "…I'll give you away."
> "What?"
> "I mean I'll go with you." (54)

Initially, some sympathy is drawn out in relation to Phyllis here. The description of her smile as 'the sweetest, saddest smile' invokes pity. However, her later declaration that the only 'bridegroom' she ever loved is death indicates that although Phyllis may be pitiable, she is not to be entirely sympathised with. Her desire to have 'icy fingers creeping into [her] heart' is not a feeling that can be easily shared. Likewise, the wish to marry death suggests a form of derangement. Such contradiction between empathy and insanity parallels the desire to know and impossibility of knowing, or 'undecidability', associated with suicide. The juxtaposition of marriage and death particularly foregrounds such uncertainty. Marriage conventionally denotes future possibilities, yet in this scene marriage is equated with an absence of possibility. Phyllis' union with death is an 'espousal of negation', and a paradox similar to that discussed by Blanchot. Like suicide, this identification with death, and thus a contradictory identification with absence, brings focus to an identity being realised and dissolved in the same moment.

Such unsettling incongruity, as discussed in the previous chapters, leads to a crisis of understanding. Here, I read this crisis as a particular challenge to patriarchal control. In this scene, this defiance appears in Phyllis' response to Huff's suggestion that he will give her away. Huff's proposition would situate him as a father to Phyllis, 'giving' her to the 'groom' of death. However, Phyllis does not agree or even seem to acknowledge Huff's attempt to take a controlling, patriarchal position. Phyllis' question, 'what?', forces Huff to realise a parity in their current state. She refuses to afford him a guiding, fatherly role in their double suicide. At the same time, this momentary rebellion and balancing of gender relations is undermined as it is realised only in death. Huff may 'go' as an equal with Phyllis here, but they are going nowhere.

Phyllis' authority, like Huff's, thus seems present but limited. Her exercising of an aesthetic command in her death highlights this restricted control:

> "Walter, we'll have to wait. Till the moon comes up."
> "I guess we better have a moon."
> "I want to see that fin [of a shark]. That black fin. Cutting the water in the moonlight. Ah – death is so beautiful!"…
> The captain knows us. I could tell by the look on his face when he came out of the radio room a little while ago.
> It will have to be tonight. He's sure to put a guard on us before he puts into Mazatlan.
> I'm writing this in the stateroom. It's about half past nine. She's in her stateroom getting ready. She's made her face chalk-white, with black circles under her eyes, and red on her lips and cheeks. She's got that red thing on. It's awful-looking. It's just one big square of red silk that she wraps around her, but it's got no armholes, and her hands look like stumps underneath it when she moves them around. She looks like what came aboard to shoot dice for the souls in the Rime of the Ancient Mariner.
> I didn't hear the stateroom door open, but she's beside me now while I'm writing. I can feel her…
> The moon… (54)

Phyllis' insistence on dying with a moon is sarcastically mocked by Huff. Nonetheless, she does achieve her wish: Phyllis' desire to die, and die in her own way, is realised. This want and authority is described, and to an extent contained, in material aesthetic terms. Unlike the novels discussed previously in this thesis, there does not appear to be a nihilistic or existential challenge being presented in Phyllis' aesthetic conception of death. Death, instead, appears to be something that can be performed through dress and makeup. Indeed, elsewhere Phyllis claims, "I think of myself as Death, sometimes. In a scarlet shroud, floating through the night."[3] This personification of death points to a more palpable comprehension than the individualist, 'ontological', and linguistic crises discussed in this thesis' previous chapters. Andrew Bennett, while observing the thoughts of James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, considers the relationship of suicide, death, and such embodiment:

[3] *Liberty*, Issue (8), 22 February 1936, 20.

> The destruction of the body in suicide, in other words, is an ineluctably material, corporeal solution: suicide, the destruction or negation of the body, is in fact the ultimate act of embodiment.[4]

Phyllis brings this 'corporeal solution' to a critical juncture as she 'embodies' herself as death. Death thus seems to be an intangible concept and yet representable and intelligible through a material aesthetics. Such an aesthetic understanding then situates Phyllis' suicide within an established and gendered frame of reference related to attire and makeup. However, at the same time, her personification as death means her identity can only dissolve into the 'undecidability', nothingness, and intangibility of death. This contradiction of intelligibility and unintelligibility contrasts and appears to problematise the assurance that Huff and Keyes propound in relation to suicide.

Following the theories of 'new materialism', this association between Phyllis and death through objects can be distilled as a form of self-understanding and self-identification. Justin Wilford describes such 'new materialist' theory:

> Far from a return to a naïve realism where matter simply makes a difference, this new focus on materiality – inspired by Hegelian dialectics – shows *how* matter makes a difference by tracing explicitly and implicitly the way that individuals and groups (the subject) are constituted by their varied material worlds (the object). This is not to say, as an older (non-Marxian) materialism might, that subjects are conditioned by their material world. That is to cede still too much to that old transcendent cogito. The new materialism describes the ways, empirically and theoretically, that subject is fundamentally defined by object[5]

Within this framework, Phyllis' insistence on her aesthetic identification with death can be interpreted as a means of her self-constitution. Through her clothing and makeup, she is able to 'define' herself and is 'defined by' her objectified relationship with death. Huff's identification that his suicide is a means of saving the 'state the expense'

[4] Andrew Bennett, *Suicide Century: Literature and Suicide from James Joyce to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), 78.
[5] Justin Wilford, 'Toward a Morality of Materiality: Adorno and the Primacy of the Object', *Space and Culture*, 11 (4) (2008), 410.

indicates a similar commodified understanding of death. In turn, this process of 'constitution' indicates an intelligibility associated with Phyllis and suicide. This identification with death, though, gives rise to a fundamental problem as death is also the end of such objectification, identification, and definition. Precisely because she has died, Phyllis can no longer identify herself as death when she realises this identification through suicide. Her 'proclaimed' identity is concurrently 'annihilated' in its final proclamation. This focus on physicality rather than metaphysical death, however, implies a more tangible sense of comprehension than discussed in this thesis' previous chapters. Indeed, it enables Cain's text to comment on suicide by considering and questioning Phyllis' understanding of and desire for death within a framework of established aesthetic references.

This commentary arises, for instance, as Phyllis' aesthetic imagining of death is ridiculed in the text's representation of suicide. The exclamation 'Ah, death is so beautiful' seems trite and unhinged. Phyllis' dress particularly prompts a reading of her as deranged and laughable. The 'red thing' is not only 'awful-looking' in and of itself, but it also makes Phyllis an object of derision. This dress recalls a previous scene in the text in which Lola recounts walking in on her stepmother:

> the time I came in on her, in her bedroom, with some kind of foolish red-silk thing on her that looked like a shroud or something, with her face all smeared up with white powder and red lipstick, with a dagger in her hand, making faces at herself in front of the mirror[6]

The term 'smeared up' brings forth a feeling of lunacy associated with Phyllis. Again, in this passage, Phyllis is mocked. The 'red-silk thing' is described as 'foolish'. The fact she is 'making faces at herself' highlights Phyllis' risibility. She appears to exercise a form of control in her aesthetics, but this authority is performed in a grotesque and

[6] *Liberty,* Issue (12), 21 March 1935, 56.

contemptible manner. Phyllis' autonomy as realised in her aesthetic performance may render a challenge to conventional wisdom and patriarchal authority; but the ridiculing of Phyllis for this same aesthetic urge seems to downplay this opposition.

Alison L. Goodrum brings focus to this social negotiation of female aesthetics while discussing 1920s' and 1930s' riding attire in the US:

> The concern with neatness and tidiness of external appearance was such because, in a Durkheimian relationship between society and self, inner and moral fortitude were seen as behavioural traits to be publically displayed and enacted […]. Inner orderliness of mind and soul were understood as reflected in the outer orderliness of disciplined body, groomed appearance and immaculate dress. Compliance to the codes of hunting dress – along with their correct enactment – signalled virtue, integrity and wholesomeness of being, as defined in, and by, the spaces of the equestrian system.[7] [sic.]

Phyllis' dress does not 'comply' with social 'codes', as described by Goodrum, and can thus be taken as a challenge to her society and a gendered aesthetic 'system'. By refusing to 'publicly display and enact' a traditional 'neatness' before her suicide, Phyllis 'signals' this rebellion. Goodrum's invocation of Durkheim invites a consideration of this defiance against social influence as potentially akin to suicide. Phyllis' death and identification with death would thus be understood as personal and public acts. They work to render an individual rebellion against a public order through self-identifying in opposition to a conventional social 'system'.

Goodrum continues and explores such negotiations of authority:

> The horsewoman was the subject of self-scrutiny, peer group expectations, media surveillance and class-based snobberies, yet the equestrian system was not only one of pedantry and constraint. Dress afforded the female rider certain freedoms, most keenly evidenced in the widespread acceptance of women in breeches, theretofore unthinkable. This simultaneity of freedom and constraint hints at broader societal trends of the day: the political and social gains of (newly) enfranchised women were neither outright nor assured and female identity was complex, constructed and contested (100)

[7] Alison L. Goodrum, 'A Severity of Plainness: The Culture of Female Riding Dress in America During the 1920s and 1930s', *Annals of Leisure Research*, 15 (1), 95.

Phyllis's suicide is an act in which a similar 'contest' of female identity takes place. She expresses a certain 'freedom' in her rebellious 'red-silk thing' and yet is 'constrained' by Huff's mocking narration of her clothing. This negotiated state, I propose, is similar to the paradoxical nature of suicide in which self-identity is at once 'made and unmade'. By associating Phyllis' subversive material aesthetics most closely with death, her self-identification is thrown into a more extreme 'contestation' of female identity than the horsewomen analysed by Goodrum. Since her material aesthetic self-constitution is intertwined with death, Phyllis' 'freedom' is inherently self-defeating. Such 'constraint' works to mitigate the crisis of understanding arising in her suicide. In other words, Phyllis' aestheticised rebellion against a conventional patriarchal system functions within a framework that has been established by such convention, and thus it is only understood as a rebellious challenge within the assigned roles of the 'system'. At once, then, Phyllis proclaims a violent opposition to a social 'system', but in so doing she is annihilated within, and seemingly by, this same 'system'.

This social discipline is highlighted by the contempt with which Huff and Lola view Phyllis. Their mockery indicates that the problems Phyllis poses can be, to an extent, managed through ridicule. Phyllis' rebellion through identifying with death is derided and set aside as the action of someone who is insane. As considered in this thesis' introduction, Margaret Higonnet notes, "Suicide is a scandal. It ruptures social order and defies sovereign power of life and death."[8] Phyllis' suicide invokes the scandalous. However, the management of her death by Keyes 'mentioning' the steamer and Huff's ridicule, suggest that the 'sovereign power' of 'social order' retains some control. Thus, Phyllis' suicide presents a crisis of understanding as a rebellious self-

[8] Margaret Higonnet, 'Frames of Female Suicide', *Studies in the Novel*, 32 (2) (2000), 229.

identification with death that renders a paradox of self-actualisation through self-destruction, and yet it still seems to work under the remit of patriarchal authority.

Indeed, these suicides seem to be, at least to an extent, socially beneficial. Huff and Phyllis are, in Durkheim's language, socially 'influenced' towards their suicides by Keyes. Phyllis may not be conventionally punished by the law, but, since Keyes has organised the trip on the steamer, and Huff and Phyllis have been identified as criminals, social order concurrently retains some semblance of control. Similarly, Phyllis' identification with death gives rise to a crisis of understanding, while concurrently being tempered as a risible, insane, and self-defeating way of thinking. This representation of a double suicide thus elicits a complex problem – a problem which guides the argument of this thesis in a different direction from the previous chapters. A crisis of understanding and social influence seems to be highlighted by the deaths; but these suicides concurrently indicate that this crisis can be at least partly alleviated by this same social order. I argue, then, that the problems arising from suicide are here rendered as a mitigated crisis which may call for social change but, unlike the previous texts discussed in this thesis, does not call for radical new alternatives.

Scholarship on *Double Indemnity*

V. Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy M. West stress the impact of the Ruth Snyder case on Cain's writing. Snyder had an affair with a salesman, Henry Judd Gray, and together they killed Snyder's husband in order to collect his life insurance. The case was well reported in national newspapers, and particularly in tabloids. This reportage, like Cain's narrative, tends to emphasise the affair and subsequent falling out of Snyder and Gray. Pelizzon and West detail how Cain's writing was influenced by this case:

> In his depiction of femme fatale Phyllis, Cain used imagery nearly identical to that portraying Ruth in the tabloids. At one point, for example, he writes melodramatically of the "one big square of red silk" Phyllis wrapped around herself before her symbolic "marriage" with Death – an image right out of the *Daily Mirror*'s coverage, which described Ruth as donning a "flaming red" kimono while waiting for her lover to appear (Cain 114; April 13 1927, 23). As for the men who fall under his femme fatale's wiles, Cain's doomed protagonists Walter Huff and Frank Chambers are both ensnared by a violent eroticism described in language that echoes Judd Gray's claims on the witness stand that he was rendered helpless by Ruth's animal magnetism.[9]

Pelizzon and West link the 'red-silk thing' to 'melodrama', 'violent eroticism', and 'animal magnetism'. This sexual want is interlaced with a seemingly inevitable 'violence', similar to Phyllis' marriage with death. It follows that gender relations, and specifically negotiations of control through sexual manipulation, are at the heart of the text's considerations of violence and suicide. Such an emphasis on gender roles also invites the typological readings of Cain's text that have become commonplace in scholarship. Here, I reconsider this approach with a focus on socially managing suicide.

Pelizzon and West, for instance, categorise Phyllis as a 'femme fatale'. The parallel with Snyder likewise indicates that Phyllis is of a contemporary type. Frederick Whiting's study of Cain's text details this typology. He foregrounds The Great Depression and self-definition when he observes:

> Huff's and Phyllis's anxiety reflects a larger set of concerns – economic, political, sociological, and aesthetic – about personhood, agency, and typing that were circulating at the time of the *Double Indemnity*'s publication in 1936. Insurance was not merely the largest and most visible institution to negotiate these issues in the public imagination at this time, it was also the source of a particular strain of typological explanation of human beings. In political terms, insurance occupied a central place in the national imagination as a solution to pressures put on individual agency by the Depression.[10]

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[9] V. Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy M. West, 'Multiple Indemnity: Film Noir, James M. Cain, and Adaptations of a Tabloid Case', *Narrative*, 3 (3) (2005), 226.

[10] Frederick Whiting, 'Playing Against Type: Statistical Personhood, Depth Narrative, and the Business of Genre in James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 36 (2) (2006), 197.

Huff's and Phyllis' attempt to dupe an insurance company is here implied to be an effort to assert individualism against the social order that typology entails. I have read Phyllis' material aesthetics as a similar effort to exercise autonomy. In Whiting's interpretation, Huff and Phyllis ultimately fail to manifest this independence, as the insurance company is able to identify the murder and regulate the criminals. The double suicide then adds a degree of complexity to this understanding. Individual agency again comes to the forefront but in a restricted fashion when Huff and Phyllis jump overboard. Suicide again appears to be an act which, as Bennett analyses, engenders and collapses meaning, and where comprehension seems to both arise and yet dissipate. Here this making and unmaking of individual agency poses a challenge to social order.

Whiting stresses the context of The Depression and his identification of both protagonists' sense of anxiety in regard to agency indicates a social problem of regulation, similar to that which I discussed in my reading of *Appointment in Samarra* (1934). It follows that this confrontation between individualism and social influence may be a principal aspect of the social crisis of The Great Depression. In turn, the contradictions of suicide's capacity to both create and undermine a sense of meaning, as studied by Bennett, brings this tension of social influence and individualism to light. As Whiting notes, Cain particularly sets the efforts of Huff and Phyllis to assert themselves against the confidence and control of insurance companies. Huff's manager, Keyes, reveals this self-assurance when he categorises suicides:

> I was studying these tables. Take a look at them. Here's suicide by race, by color, by occupation, by sex, by locality, by seasons of the year, by time of day when committed. Here's suicide by method of accomplishment. Here's method of accomplishment subdivided by poisons, by firearms, by gas, by drowning, by leaps.[11]

[11] *Liberty*, Issue (10), 07 March 1936, 34.

Keyes' continues in this vein for some time. The point he is making is that no one has killed themselves by jumping from the rear of a train. Far from 'undecidable', suicide is cast here as comprehensible. Such a possibility of knowledge suggests that contemporary understanding is adequate to manage suicide if applied appropriately. This reasoning is akin to the world-constituting, 'ontological' thinking that is called into question by William Faulkner, Wallace Thurman, and Calvin Warren. Whiting analyses Keyes' speech and comments:

> In Keyes's litany of suicides, typological categories proliferate along the axes of both comprehensiveness and specificity. Divisions and subdivisions move both horizontally (race, color, occupation, sex, etc.) and vertically (method of accomplishment, by poison, by cyanide, etc.) to encompass what Keyes represents as the *complete* phenomenology of suicide. Anything not classifiable under these types, he implies is an ontological impossibility. (202)

Keyes' process of classifying suicide recalls the work of Louis I. Dublin and Bessie Bunzel. Indeed, Dublin's and Bunzel's study *To Be or Not to Be* (1933) was written for their employer: Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Keyes', though, in contrast to Dublin and Bunzel, seems to consider his classification as conclusive. As Whiting stresses, this is a '*complete* phenomenology'. By invoking a process of study, Keyes underscores confidence in social understanding, and, because suicide has been studied, he feels able to categorically state that Mr Nirdlinger did not kill himself. Dublin and Bunzel, comparatively, argue that such certainty is rarely possible in cases of suicide. Keyes' assessment that suicide is fully categorisable can then be said to be an optimistic and problematic interpretation, which does not register the challenges Dublin and Bunzel make to such a classic Durkheimian conception of society. Indeed, here ontology and social understanding seem to be affirmed, but only in a manner that negotiates the 'how' of suicide rather than the 'why'.

In the world of *Double Indemnity*, Keyes' view is ultimately supported: Mr Nirdlinger did not kill himself. Since Keyes orchestrates Huff and Phyllis meeting on the steamer, and here appears to know when suicide by drowning is likely, it is indicated that he purposefully arranges their double suicide. Through these actions and Keyes' broader theorisation, suicide is assigned a certain intelligibility: predictions based on significant quantities of data provide a possibility of 'complete' understanding. Compared to the work of Dublin and Bunzel in a similar setting, this reading also seems fantastical. Keyes' role in representing the company alongside his understanding based on sociological data collection, draw attention to an optimistic view of social governance. This optimism invites a reading in which Cain's text promotes vigilance and adherence to contemporary, conventional understanding. I will, though, stress in this chapter's conclusion that such a view is problematic and does not corroborate with contemporary suicidology.

John T. Irwin likewise emphasises Keyes' commanding role in Cain's narrative. Irwin describes Keyes as a typological 'boss' and considers how he acts as a father figure to Huff. Like Whiting, Irwin suggests Huff's transgression with Phyllis is an attempt to assert individual agency against figures of authority such as Keyes:

> the hard-boiled detective story began essentially as a men's genre. […] One not uncommon resentment for American working men is the sense of being a wage slave, of being at the beck and call of that dumbbell at the office or the plant, a sense of economic dependence often experienced not just as a curtailment of personal freedom but as an impairment of masculinity. And corresponding to this resentment is the predictable male wish/fantasy of being one's own boss, of owning one's own business.[12]

Irwin's interpretation brings Huff's identity and 'type' to the foreground and casts Huff's murder of Mr Nirdlinger as an assertion of 'masculinity'. This act of murder,

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[12] John T. Irwin, 'Beating the Boss: Cain's *Double Indemnity*', *American Literary History*, 14 (2) (2002), 264.

however, only realises a ‘fantasy’ of control. Although it is intended to result in Huff’s economic independence, it ends with his suicide. Not only is there a ‘fantasy’ of completely understanding suicide, the narrative of *Double Indemnity* also renders a ‘fantasy’ of power. Huff’s attempt to upend conventional structures by ‘beating the boss’, in Irwin’s terms, is a failed ‘wish’ in the text. It then follows that the failure of this ‘fantasy’ re-establishes conventional forms of authority. Irwin notes that Keyes “set in motion the machinery of Huff’s punishment” (258). The term ‘punishment’ calls particular attention to a form of social discipline. Indeed, Keyes, a stand in for ‘masculine’ or patriarchal order, utilises an understanding of suicide to reassert a degree of control over rebellious individuals by organising the final double suicide.

This ‘typological’ approach to the text situates Phyllis as a ‘femme fatale’ against the ‘working man’ Huff. As Christopher Orr notes, however, these conventional, ‘typological’ readings of Phyllis are troubled by the complexity of her characterisation:

> It is difficult to perceive the heroine of Cain’s *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis Nirdlinger, as representative. Cain’s Phyllis is a sociopath and serial murderer who, before her marriage, worked as a nurse with the habit of killing her patients for their money. Her character is so purely evil that it becomes impossible to explain her behavior in terms of social conditioning.[13]

In the suicide scene, Phyllis’ idiosyncrasies and unconventionality come to the fore. Although, as Pelizzon and West observe, Phyllis’ dress appears to recall Ruth Snyder, her identification with death is extreme. Huff’s mockery of Phyllis, for instance, implies she is outside of normal parameters. As Orr comments, her excessive violence intimates that she cannot be entirely understood in orthodox terms. As such, there appears to be a tension between Phyllis’ awkward individualism and the sense of social order and typology within the text. This tension, though, seems to be resolved in the suicide.

[13] Christopher Orr, ‘Cain, Naturalism, and Noir’, *Film Criticism*, 25 (1) (2000), 56.

Phyllis may engage in what Orr describes as “an attack on patriarchy” (57), but this ‘attack’ only culminates in an aestheticised suicide. Her independent aesthetic association with death may exceed conventional terms, but, at the same time, the material focus in the narrative of Phyllis’ suicide suggests that she is still being interpreted within such terms. Likewise, if her death is sanctioned by Keyes, her suicide re-establishes the control of patriarchal social order. Phyllis’ suicide would thus give rise to a crisis in patriarchal authority and typology, and yet end under the remit of such authority. It thus seems that typological understanding is negotiated in the text, and in Phyllis’ death, but that it is ultimately rendered as a tenable and effective way of managing suicide.

The style and form of Cain’s writing stresses this feeling of order and conventional understanding being deliberated and ultimately accepted as authoritative, and not least in the final report of the suicides from the ship’s captain. Pelizzon and West consider how Cain’s hard-boiled writing style corresponds to some of the text’s key thematic interests:

> Hard-boiled writing’s terse, dry language might be read as a modernist adaptation of the tabloid’s gossipy hyperbole and garrulous prose. Particularly in Cain’s case, we can observe how swift-hitting syntax punches into shape flamboyant imagery and melodramatic plots featuring incest, psychopathic killers, suicides, and the like. (231)

Cain’s use of first-person narration in *Double Indemnity* likewise encourages a reading that highlights ‘gossipy hyperbole’. Huff tends to use short sharp metaphors and slips into colloquialisms. This conversational style invites the reader to identify with Huff, and such identification is compounded by his first-person, confessional narrative. This familiarity then opposes the more idiosyncratic and mystical depiction of Phyllis, as the writing beats into ‘shape’ the lurid, violent narrative of Phyllis’ ‘attack on patriarchy’. Huff is a comparatively reasonable figure, who disentangles, opines on, ridicules, and

thereby provides an understanding of Phyllis' actions. In so doing, Huff's 'masculine' narrative voice negotiates and manages Phyllis' antagonism and suicide, before the text ends with the concluding, authoritative voice of the ship's captain.

The final double suicide likewise appears to provide some form of resolution by enacting a punishment of the criminals. Keyes, and the social order he represents, regain principal control of the action in the text. The 'femme fatale' who 'ensnares' the male dies, and Huff provides a confession admitting to his crimes. This double suicide, due to the paradoxes that suicide poses, though, complicates this reading. Because these deaths are suicides, rather than executions, the criminals exercise a form of control. Phyllis continues to present herself as 'purely evil' and, in her 'marriage' with death, she rejects a conventional role of submitting to a man. Her self-identification with death likewise points to a form of independent control which exceeds social norms. Huff's desires for transgression and being his 'own boss' similarly indicate a social challenge. *Double Indemnity*, then, presents a crisis in patriarchal order resulting from female autonomy and male deviation. This crisis, though, leads to a double suicide that seems to be sanctioned by a father figure. It is also narratively controlled by a contrite Huff who has been socially redeemed through his confession. It is this negotiated crisis which leads me to propose that Cain's text, and his representation of suicide, calls for greater vigilance in maintaining existing, and principally patriarchal, structures of control. In turn, this mitigation of the crises arising from suicide can be said to appeal to a form of typological and deterministic, perhaps even Durkheimian, understanding to better negotiate suicide.

Phyllis and Walter

Phyllis' introduction in the text suggests the 'animal magnetism' that Pelizzon and West note, and manifests an early association between gender and typology:

> A woman was standing there. I had never seen her before. She was maybe thirty-one or -two, with a sweet face, light-blue eyes, and dusty blonde hair. She was small, and had on a suit of blue house pajamas. She had a washed-out look. […]
> she was walking around the room, and I saw something I hadn't noticed before. Under those blue pajamas was a shape to set a man nuts.
> All of a sudden she looked at me, and I felt a chill deep straight up my back and into the roots of my hair.[14]

This passage draws attention to the physicality of both Huff and Phyllis, and he specifically notices her attractiveness when she starts moving. Her clothes appear to hide her allure in this scene, but Huff is still able to register 'a shape to set a man nuts'. The word 'nuts' repeats in the text and encourages a reading of Huff being beguiled. It is Phyllis' physical nature – her 'shape' and 'look' – that both entices and frightens him. Such physicality prompts an interpretation of the text that highlights both the materiality and gender relations that are at the forefront of Cain's representation of suicide. Here, though, clothing and gender are associated with temptation rather than violence and death. Since this desire does, though, eventually result in murder and suicide, and in the context of hardboiled crime fiction, it is still recognisably threatening.

In their second meeting, Phyllis employs an alternative material aesthetics that stresses this dangerous temptation:

> She let me in herself. She didn't have on the blue pajamas this time. She had on a white sailor suit, with a blouse that pulled tight over her hips, and white shoes and stockings. I wasn't the only one that knew about that shape. She knew about it herself, plenty. […] The white sailor suit did it. I sat down. (*Liberty* (7) 10)

[14] *Liberty*, Issue (7), 15 February 1936, 8.

Huff realises almost immediately in conversation with Phyllis that she poses a threat, but he is again drawn in by her figure. Phyllis' control is then foregrounded in this passage. She lets Huff in 'herself' and she knows 'plenty' about her own 'shape'. The 'white' clothing indicates innocence, and an aesthetic choice which is intended to help Phyllis beguile Huff – it is this suit which 'did it' and compels him to stay. The risk of beguiling desire thus appears to be under Phyllis' control, and it follows, as Keyes' control over the suicides suggests, that Phyllis is a physical threat to be managed.

Phyllis' movements and this choice of a 'sailor suit' further intimates a conformity with certain contemporary notions of modern feminine beauty. Rebecca Arnold stresses this importance of movement in 1930s' US fashion:

> Fashion magazines disseminated information about modern dance, with reviews of shows and features on well-known dancers, which provided detailed accounts of their grace and elegant movements, as well as integrating dance into articles on exercise and "good" posture. […] these magazines constructed a multifaceted ideal for women to emulate, either through consumption of a range of products, from bath oils to figure-fitting clothes, or by modifying their bodies from within through diet and exercise. The resulting image belied the amount of effort taken to create and maintain it, as it was founded on an aesthetic of "natural" and "unadorned" beauty.[15]

Such an 'ideal' is not in and of itself patriarchal, as Arnold goes on to emphasise (355). However, when set against Phyllis' 'red-silk thing', it seems that her initial interactions with Huff exhibit an effort on Phyllis' part to conform with contemporary male expectations. She 'emulates' conventions through her 'figure-fitting clothes' and 'elegant movements'. Her 'red-silk thing' before her death, that makes 'her hands look like stumps' when she moves, in turn appears to be a particular 'attack on patriarchy' as it challenges Huff's assumptions of her. Phyllis is both 'defined by' her clothing and by Huff's interpretation of her clothing, and yet turns her attire against such understanding.

[15] Rebecca Arnold, 'Movement and Modernity: New York Sportswear, Dance, and Exercise in the 1930s and 1940s', *Fashion Theory*, 12 (3), 355.

Huff's narrative voice and consideration of Phyllis' body and clothes, though, repeatedly intercede to cast her self-identification with death as unattractive and risible. Phyllis' social rebellion thereby works within a frame of reference that is concurrently employed to regulate this rebellion. Typology thus offers a means to, at least to an extent, control Phyllis.

As this scene continues, this negotiation of authority is highlighted as Huff tries to take a steadily more commanding role. He recognises that Phyllis may be planning to murder her husband, but rather than leaving:

> I didn't do it.
> She looked at me, a little surprised, and her face was about six inches away. What I did do was put my arm around her, pull her face up against mine, and kiss her on the mouth, hard.
> I was trembling like a leaf. She gave me a cold stare, and then she closed her eyes, pulled me to her, and kissed back. (*Liberty* (7) 11)

As he does with the subsequent murder, Huff spurs Phyllis by pulling her towards him and kissing her. However, it is noted that Phyllis is in fact the more calculating of the pair. While Huff kisses passionately and 'hard', she merely kisses 'back'; Huff 'trembles', yet Phyllis' stare is 'cold'. Her knowledge and control underlie their relationship. In turn, the text insinuates that she is a corrupting and manipulative presence that Huff fails to manage appropriately.

Throughout this opening instalment of *Double Indemnity*, Huff repeats this intention to leave, yet he seems unable to pull away from Phyllis' appeal. He suggests:

> I knew where I was at, of course. I was standing right on the deep end, looking over the edge, and I kept telling myself to get out of there, and get quick, and never come back.
> But that was what I kept telling myself. What I was doing was peeping over that edge (*Liberty* (7) 12)

This 'deep end' is the dark, violent, murderous space that Phyllis inhabits. Eventually Huff and Phyllis jump overboard and embrace this 'deep end' through their double suicide. As such, Phyllis's world finally conquers Huff but only in their deaths. These

suicides thus mark a decisive limitation to her manipulative control. The recap to the second instalment in *Liberty* explicates Huff's inability to escape and intimates such a restriction of Phyllis' authority:

> Her deliberate allure in manner and dress disturbs him. And his suspicions grow when she inquires, with casual innocence, if she could take out an accident-insurance policy on her husband without bothering him about it.
> […] In a flash, Walter Huff knew what was in her mind and felt he ought to beat it quick, but she holds him with her spell of physical fascination.[16]

Both Phyllis' 'deliberateness' and Huff's 'suspicions' are underscored here as key features of the narrative. The fact Huff realises Phyllis' nefarious intentions 'in a flash' suggests he is sharp minded. Nonetheless, he is caught in her 'spell'. This language of 'spells' denotes a mystical understanding of Phyllis in which she is likened to a witch. She is thereby rendered as being situated outside of and negotiating conventional understanding and order. Her changes in clothing prompts such a reading as she shifts between pleasing Huff in the white suit and identifying herself with death through her 'foolish red-silk thing'. Phyllis' powers of manipulation, though, are concurrently revealed to be conditioned by the responses of the male protagonist. Huff's decisions to stay and to mock regulate Phyllis' apparent power. Likewise, her self-identification with death is interpreted through the eyes of others as an aesthetic choice to be ridiculed. Her strength resides in what she can make Huff do and thus relies on his deviation from appropriate behaviour. He still, then, ultimately has responsibility, while Phyllis is depicted as being dependent on his choices.

Huff eventually realises this mystical appeal of Phyllis, before apparently overcoming her enticement:

[16] *Liberty*, Issue (8), 22 February 1936, 18.

> I loved her like a rabbit loves a rattlesnake. That night I did something I hadn't done in twenty years. I prayed.[17]

The likening of Phyllis to a snake implies that she is diabolic in her tempting of Huff, while Huff's turn to prayer reinforces such a religious interpretation. He is situated here as a victim who has been lured by Phyllis' rattle, and his prayer then indicates that he is a potentially redeemable character. Comparatively, Phyllis appears more 'purely evil' and thereby unredeemable. This opposition echoes the divide in the double suicide – Huff 'saves the state an expense' while Phyllis 'marries death'.

Huff is warned of this unrecoverable characterisation and it is associated with death early in the text. For an instant, Phyllis does not seem concerned with manoeuvring Huff and confesses:

> Maybe I'm crazy. But there's something in me that loves Death. I think of myself as Death, sometimes. In a scarlet shroud, floating through the night. I'm *so* beautiful, then. And sad. And hungry to make the whole world happy, by taking them out where I am, into the night, away from all the trouble, all the unhappiness. (*Liberty* (8) 20)

In a similar manner to Huff's mocking of the 'red thing' in the suicide scene, Phyllis is presented here as a confused character. There is a tempering self-awareness when she admits 'maybe I'm crazy' and acknowledges that she is 'sad'. Although entirely misguided, some pity is elicited by her belief that killing people is a means of saving them. She wants, for instance, to 'make the whole world happy'. This appeal to compassion, though, implies Phyllis is hopelessly psychotic. Codifying her violence within terms of wishing to help leaves Phyllis in an illogical position. The paradox of accepting received social premises of making the 'world happy' and yet believing this can be achieved through homicide, situates Phyllis in an unresolvable contradiction. Since no environmental cause is specified, this insanity is portrayed as an affliction

[17] *Liberty*, Issue (11), 14 March 1936, 28.

rather than victimisation. Her ill-fitting 'red-silk thing' and self-identification with death highlights this alternative and apparently insane reasoning. Such insanity intimates that while Phyllis cannot be redeemed, she can be judged within conventional understanding.

This characterisation of Phyllis as 'purely evil' is further underlined near the end of the text when Keyes discovers Phyllis' violent past. Not only does she kill Mr Nirdlinger, but she also kills several children in order to inherit property from one of them. She is suspected of murdering a previous husband and even tries to sleep with Lola's lover, Nino. This piling up of bodies is revealed just prior to the suicide (*Liberty* (14) 52-53). As *Double Indemnity* unfolds, Phyllis is thus depicted as a violent sadist. Keyes distils this understanding of Phyllis:

> That woman – that wife – is an out-and-out lunatic. Sachetti told me he found five cases, all before the three children, where patients died under her while she was a nurse, two of them where she got property out of it. (*Liberty* (14) 54)

Keyes underscores Phyllis' gender and her relationship with men when he describes her as 'that woman – that wife'. It is thereby insinuated that Phyllis' irrational violence stems from a gendered impulse. The focus throughout the narrative on her physicality echoes this linking of Phyllis' manipulations and violence with her gender. Eventually this characterisation and identification with death leads to her suicide. Phyllis' outsider status and social rebellion thus seem to be inherently self-defeating and are presented as a gendered confrontation in which her only weapon is death. At once, then, Phyllis seems to be punished as a criminal killing herself, yet this suicide is also a manifestation of her desires. Indeed, her lunacy and violence, and her villainous characterisation that is principally based on murdering and manipulating men, cannot be overcome as they are entailed in who she is. Her death, though, secures this self-identification by

concurrently ending it. She may be threatening, but Phyllis is ultimately controllable as her violent social challenge entails its own inevitable dead end of suicide.

Phyllis' self-actualisation as death thus brings the text's negotiation of suicide to a complex juncture. As first quoted in this thesis' introduction, Blanchot considers, "the greatest contradictions. The deliberateness in suicide, its free and imposing side, whereby we strive to remain ourselves" (102). Phyllis' 'remains' herself by killing herself and thereby not being herself at all. This self-reflexive self-identification with death then renders a relatively contained interpretation of suicide. Phyllis' autonomy is wielded to realise an absence of autonomy. This contradiction is complex, but it is also less problematic than other suicides discussed in this thesis thus far. Rather than a provocative challenge, Phyllis' final act appears to indicate that her social antagonism is inherently self-destructive. In order to realise her self-identification with death, she seems compelled to eventually kill herself. This suicide is a culmination of her 'crazy' reasoning throughout the text.

There is still a sense of crisis in this suicide arising in this 'greatest of contradictions', which I suggest echoes a failure of social regulation. Following Durkheimian theory, the suicides occur because society failed previously to regulate these individuals away from criminal acts. Huff commits crimes, as Irwin observes, in order to exercise his autonomy and be 'his own boss'. Phyllis' ability to manipulate Huff likewise demonstrates a breakdown of patriarchal order. Their crimes and their deaths appear then to be testaments of social failure. However, this crisis is concurrently mitigated. By orchestrating Phyllis' and Huff's deaths, the social order, as represented by Keyes, controls the criminals. As such, Cain's representation of suicide gives rise to a restricted problem. The 'purely evil', crazed woman poses a limited threat that is eventually, and seemingly inevitably, brought into line. This sustaining of conventional

order prompts a reading in which the text invites greater vigilance, rather than new alternatives. If suicide is to be definable in the manner that Keyes' presents, then it would follow that it can be appropriately managed. In turn, if Phyllis is read as unredeemable, as I have argued, then it is Huff's deviant urges which require adjustment. Therefore, *Double Indemnity* seems to call for male vigilance to better control the violence of a crazed, villainous woman.

Style, Form, and Other Publications

I want now to explore this argument by situating *Double Indemnity* within Cain's oeuvre. *Double Indemnity* itself contributes to a sense of order in Cain's work; it was Cain's second novella after *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) which, like *Double Indemnity*, was also inspired by the Ruth Snyder case. Although the text does not end in suicide, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* features an adulterous pair killing a husband. It is also written from the perspective of the male lover. There are significant differences in the plots of these two novellas, but their similarities suggest a systematisation built from repetition. Both texts, for example, are preoccupied with the love triangles that Orr calls "the Cain paradigm" (56). Such repetition, like Keyes' categories, reinforces the order of typology that pervades *Double Indemnity*. Likewise, the suicides of caught criminals follow a conventional narrative structure, which I discuss in the next chapter on Raymond Chandler. This repetition and generic form speak to the sense of intelligibility attributed to suicide in *Double Indemnity*.

The novelised version of *Double Indemnity* encourages such an emphasis on suicide as a manageable social phenomenon. Keyes' role is extended in the republicised version of *Double Indemnity* in *Three of a Kind*: for instance, where Keyes only

'mentions' the steamer in the *Liberty* edition, he makes a reservation and gives Huff a false name in the revised narrative.[18] Keyes' sanctioning of the double suicide is thus underscored. Huff's suicide is also downplayed in *Three of a Kind* when it is intimated that he is dying: "The bleeding has started again. The internal bleeding, I mean, from the lung where the bullet grazed it." (*Three of a Kind* 288) This addition changes the tone from the serial by de-emphasising Huff's suicide and foregrounding Phyllis' death. Indeed, if Huff is going to die anyway, then his presence on the boat appears to be a means of urging Phyllis to kill herself. When Huff's suicide is downplayed in this manner, the suicide at the end of the text becomes her punishment more so than Huff's. As such, this revised narrative further encourages a reading of Phyillis' suicide as an act that stresses a gender related discipline.

This interpretation is furthered by changes in the narrative which extend the negative characterisation of Phyllis. Huff notes Phyllis' 'sweetest saddest smile' in the original serial as a stand-alone sentence. This moment of potential sympathy is undermined in the novella:

> She smiled then, the sweetest, saddest smile you ever saw. I thought of the five patients, the three little children, Mrs. Nirdlinger, Nirdlinger, and myself. It didn't seem possible that anybody that could be as nice as she was when she wanted to be, could have done those things. (*Three of a Kind* 287)

This reminder of Phyllis' horrifying violence subverts the brief possibility of pity. A patriarchal need to discipline Phyllis is accentuated when Huff adds himself to the list of her victims. In *Three of a Kind*, the line 'Ah – death is so beautiful' is also removed. As with underlining the role of Keyes, this toning down of Phyllis' aestheticisation of the suicide scene reinforces the power and authority of patriarchal order.

[18] James M. Cain, *Three of a Kind* (London: Robert Hale, 1945), 284.

Conclusion

The deaths of Huff and Phyllis in both editions of *Double Indemnity* appear to strengthen a form of social order. The criminals are caught and punished. However, this punishment is partly undermined by Phyllis' self-control. Because this is a suicide, and because Phyllis embraces the choice of death, she does not seem to be entirely disciplined. Her refusal to adhere to social norms, and specifically patriarchal order, at the last, is an unsettled problem. Phyllis is never comfortably assimilated, and she presents a permanent threat of, as suggested in the text, 'lunatic' female individualism. Huff, on the other hand, is more conventionally disciplined. His death is presented as a means of 'saving the state an expense' and a logical result of his wrongdoing. He returns to patriarchal expectations by providing his confession in order to protect Lola and does not self-identify with death. As such, Cain's representation of suicide invokes a complex social crisis, but this crisis is, compared to the other texts investigated in this thesis thus far, relatively settled. Even though Phyllis' death may present a complex ongoing problem of social rebellion and highlight the uncertainty brought about by suicide, it still works within a sense of order that manages this challenge. Ultimately, as Keyes' catalogue of suicides proposes, typological reasoning appears to offer a means of negotiating such deaths in a manner that mitigates the challenges suicide can pose to social order.

The final stage of this argument can be explicated by comparing Cain's text with McCoy's. Both of these narratives feature a form of double suicide. Indeed, they read as confessions that provide a rationale for why a suicide occurs, and both negotiate complicated relationships between men and women. Cain and McCoy are also part of the hard-boiled form and their writing tends to fall into the genre of crime fiction. They

utilise short sharp sentences, colloquial phrases, and 'melodrama'. These similarities invite comparison, but Cain and McCoy's representations of suicide are different in certain key features.

Following an adjusted Durkheimian approach to reading suicide, these representations particularly differ in the extent to which they appear to emphasise the control of social order. McCoy's text gives rise to a specific problem: the central challenge of the novella is whether or not one can understand Gloria's suffering. In order to completely share this pain, it seems one must accept suicide as an appropriate, or in some ways reasonable, choice. Therefore, this pain cannot be fully shared as it results in death, and thus a breakdown in the capacity to share; which is the crucial problem that Robert's narrative realises. This reading indicates an unresolvable crisis in interpretation and a call for an alternative, necessarily undefined form of expressing and sharing pain.

Cain's text provides a more coherent possibility of identifying a social purpose, or socially beneficial reason for suicide. Here the suicides of criminals are presented as a judicious punishment for criminal acts and the deaths appear to be sanctioned by a figure of authority. There is then a coherent meaning as the suicides enact a social purpose for the living in the form of discipline. The principal difference that I wish to highlight between McCoy's and Cain's texts is the extent to which the complexities of suicide seem comprehensible. Keyes' 'litany of suicides', his mentioning of the steamer, Huff's premonition that he is not going anywhere, and Phyllis' self-identification with death, all suggest that suicide is in some ways 'decidable'. This comprehension does not entirely overcome the crises given rise to by suicide, or Phyllis' complex self-control, but it does, in relative terms to the other texts discussed in

this thesis, mitigate these crises by providing a way of coherently negotiating and interpreting the deaths within contemporary social orders of meaning.

It follows that in the world of *Double Indemnity*, suicide may be better governed by reinforcing existing understanding and more appropriately applying current forms of social order, rather than seeking out new alternatives. Indeed, the republication of *Double Indemnity* in *Three of a Kind* seems to augment and fortify such an approach. In comparing Keyes' 'litany of suicides' to the work of Dublin and Bunzel, I have, though, indicated that this conservative understanding is fantastical and does not cohere with contemporary suicidology. The logic of *Double Indemnity* may be thus based on a problematic, patriarchal typology, but it still invites a social response to suicide located in existing frames of reference.

Phyllis and her aesthetic choices are at once disorienting and rebellious, but, when they result in suicide, they also reinforce established patriarchal structures. Suicide still, in the manner discussed in literary suicidology, troubles understanding in this text, as Phyllis' self-identification with death exceeds reason. However, in comparison with the other novels discussed in this thesis thus far, suicide is presented here as less socially problematic and as an act that some conventional social meaning can be ascribed to. Suicide may not be fully comprehensible in *Double Indemnity*, but it is an act that society can exert control over and also, crucially, an act that is in some ways intelligible within a conservative understanding.

6. Suicide and Jurisprudence in Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940)

In this chapter, I argue that, similarly to James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler represents suicide in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) as a crisis that can be mitigated. I propose that this is a crisis of understanding that arises from the suicide of Velma, aka Helen Grayle, and a social breakdown in which integration and regulation have failed. In particular, this uncertainty is manifested as a problem in the application of the law. On the one hand, the suicide enacts the disciplining of an identified criminal. On the other hand, since this death is performed by the criminal, the capacity of the law to manage a rebellious individual is called into question. As the police then struggle to comprehend this act of suicide, the private detective Philip Marlowe intercedes and describes it as a romantic act. He reasons that Velma most likely kills herself to aid her husband. Through this narrative retelling of the suicide and his ability to interpret and explain the actions of others, Marlowe exercises authority over events. He thereby brings a certain form of order, and particularly an understanding rooted in a patriarchal social worldview, to Velma's suicide and the conclusion of the novel. While such reasoning continues to struggle against the 'undecidability' of suicide as identified in literary suicidology, it manages this crisis of understanding by providing a cogent means of interpreting suicide through a relatively conservative way of thinking.

I thus argue that Chandler presents an alternative perspective on female suicide to Margaret Higonnet, while similarly indicating that suicide calls for a social response. As considered previously, Higonnet observes: "Because a suicide defies our understanding and eludes the social order, narratives of suicide are sites of social reconstruction."[1] Velma's suicide does not entirely 'defy' Marlowe's understanding, nor does it fully 'elude the social order' of criminals being punished. At the same time, a question is raised as to how Velma's decision can be interpreted within conventional detective reasoning. It follows that a form of 'social reconstruction', in terms of addressing how events lead to suicide, is considered in *Farewell, My Lovely*, but in a less radical fashion than the texts discussed by Higonnet and as suggested in the first four chapters of this thesis.

This chapter begins with the representation of Velma's suicide and an exploration of how this death is interpreted by Marlowe through a form of typological detection. Marlowe's capacity to explicate Velma's suicide suggests that typology, and specifically comprehending gender as a causal principal, provides, at least within this text, a means of negotiating suicide. The chapter then turns to scholarship on Chandler to consider such typology in relation to suicidology, and question how Marlowe's detective practices mediate the challenges of understanding that suicide poses. I thus analyse how suicidology can advance Chandlerian scholarship by highlighting a tension between interpretation, or detection, and 'undecidability'. The next two sections of this chapter examine the gendered characterisation of Velma and her suicide, and how law and order are brought to a critical juncture by the suicide. Finally, I situate Velma's death within Chandler's oeuvre and interrogate whether there is a suicide 'type' in his work. I thereby intend in this chapter to develop the previous study of Cain's *Double*

[1] Margaret Higonnet, 'Frames of Female Suicide', *Studies in the Novel*, 32 (2) (2000), 241.

Indemnity by interrogating how a gendered typology is employed to contend with the disordering questions raised by suicide.

Velma's Suicide

Farewell, My Lovely is, like the other early Chandler novels, a twisting of previously published short stories into a longer narrative. This process feeds into the disjointed, staccato style of the text and a fractured form that works to facilitate Marlowe's typological understanding through a series of set pieces. The narrative starts with Moose Malloy hunting for his old love, Velma, and murdering a black bar owner. Malloy escapes and a police officer asks for Marlowe's help in tracking him. This need for Marlowe's assistance introduces an ongoing problem of the law's limitations that will culminate in Velma's suicide. Marlowe suggests finding Velma, whom he eventually determines has married a rich elderly man and has become Mrs Helen Grayle. He then discovers that Velma has already committed one murder before inviting her to a confrontation in which she confesses to a distrust of men and kills Malloy. The socioeconomic power of Velma's husband, however, means it is unlikely that she will be convicted for either murder. Velma's rebuke of society, and men in particular, seems to call for a social response but, yet again, the law is unable to manage her rebelliousness. Nonetheless, Velma runs and hides. When she is finally found, Velma kills a detective before turning the gun on herself. Since she could evade prosecution through her husband's assistance, Velma's suicide is rendered as a surprising act that demands interpretation. Marlowe then uses his typological insight to offer such an explanation for Velma's suicide in the conclusion of the novel.

These events are written from the first-person perspective of Marlowe. He regularly returns to reinterpret what has occurred, either in an internal monologue or through conversations. On occasion, the narrative slips into a third person style as Marlowe provides information that he has be given. This mixed form presents a combination of subjective interpretation and factual accounts. Marlowe, in a classic detective formulation, takes information and provides a coherent understanding of it. His insights then blur with a form of reportage, and Marlowe's reading of events becomes the means by which sense is made and structure is given to the world he inhabits. This process of interpretation, or detection, is particularly pronounced when Marlowe offers his reasoning for Velma's death.

Indeed, in the final chapter, this procedure of reportage followed by explication recurs as the suicide of Velma is initially recounted by a senior police officer, Randall, and then interpreted by Marlowe. Randall's story tells of a detective who confronts Velma with her wanted file from a 'reader':

> She must have looked at the face on the reader almost as long as the dick had down at Headquarters. There was a lot to think about while she was looking at it. The dick sat down and crossed his legs and lit a cigarette. He had a good eye, but he had over-specialized. He didn't know enough about women.
> Finally she laughed a little and said: 'You're a smart lad, copper. I thought I had a voice that would be remembered. A friend recognized me by it once, just listening on the radio. But I've been singing with this band – twice a week on a network – and nobody gave it a thought.'
> 'I never heard the voice,' the dick said and went on smiling.
> She said, 'I suppose we can make a deal on this. You know, there's a lot in it, if it's handled right.'
> 'Not with me,' the dick said. 'Sorry.'
> 'Let's go then,' she said and stood up and grabbed up her bag and got her coat from a hanger. She went over to him holding the coat out so he could help her into it. He stood up and held it for her like a gentleman. She turned and slipped a gun out of her bag and shot him three times through the coat he was holding.
> She had two bullets left in the gun when they crashed the door. They got halfway across the room before she used them. She used them both, but the second shot must have been pure reflex. They caught her before she hit the floor, but her head was already hanging by a rag.

> 'The dick lived until the next day,' Randall said, telling me about it. 'He talked when he could. That's how we have the dope. I can't understand him being so careless, unless he really was thinking of letting her talk him into a deal of some kind. That would clutter up his mind.'[2]

The suicide is here revealed in the phrase 'her head was already hanging by a rag' and an indication that Velma dies instantly and violently. Somehow, through 'pure reflex', she manages to shoot herself twice. This strange, almost inexplicable double shot sits in contrast to the shooting of the detective, which the narrative suggests is predictable and perhaps should have been avoided. The reason for the detective failing to apprehend Velma is provided in the line, 'he didn't know enough about women.' Velma's gender thus appears to precondition her actions and, likewise, the principal error that the detective makes is to act 'like a gentleman'. Velma exploits this convention of gentlemanly conduct, and her violence, as such, corresponds to and negotiates a gendered framework. Since Velma, the primary criminal and villain of the text, will shoot herself moments later, this killing of the detective does not serve a particular purpose for her. This needless violence, alongside the focus on gender, brings forth a seemingly negative characterisation of women. This negativity is also associated with Velma's autonomy and the suicide it leads to. The detective assumes he has control, but, since Velma expects to be caught, it is evident that she has command. This command, though, results in murder and suicide. If Velma's independence and anticipation lead to a problem of violence, and this violence is entwined with her gendered characterisation, then it seems that the text may be calling for a reinforcing of a certain, perhaps ungentlemanly, male control to better manage such violence.

This negotiation of control in Velma's suicide not only calls into question a social order based on gentlemanly conduct, but also manifests a crisis for the law. On

[2] Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*, in *Raymond Chandler: The Big Sleep and Other Novels*, Penguin Classics edn (London: Penguin, 2000), 365.

the one hand, the suicide of Velma enacts a punishment of the criminal. However, since she kills herself, this discipline appears to require Velma's complicity in a similar manner to Cain's Phyllis as considered in the previous chapter. Once again, then, as in Maurice Blanchot's and Andrew Bennett's analyses of suicide discussed throughout this thesis, suicide appears to draw attention to contradictions and disorder. In particular here, a tension arises in the failure of conventional social order in the form of the law occurring alongside a strange type of discipline in Velma's suicide. In Durkheimian terms, Velma is not socially influenced away from suicide in an effective manner. Her detachment from society suggests this suicide is 'egoistic' in nature, and that she has not been appropriately 'integrated'. Yet, by killing herself, she appears to follow certain social expectations of being punished for her crimes.

As the text continues, Randall stresses this challenge of interpreting the suicide:

> 'Shot herself clean through the heart – twice,' Randall said. 'And I've heard experts on the stand say that's impossible, knowing all the time myself that it was. And you know something else?'
> 'What?'
> 'She was stupid to shoot that dick. We'd never have convicted her, not with her looks and her money and the persecution story these high-priced guys would build up. Poor little girl from a dive climbs to be wife of rich man and the vultures that used to know her won't let her alone. That sort of thing. Hell, Rennennkamp would have half a dozen crummy old burlesque dames in court to sob that they'd blackmailed her for years, and in a way that you couldn't pin anything on them but the jury would go for it. She did a smart thing to run off on her own and leave Grayle out of it, but it would have been smarter to have come home when she was caught.'
> 'Oh you believe now that she left Grayle out of it?' I said.
> He nodded. I said, 'Do you think she had any particular reason for that?'
> He stared at me. 'I'll go for it, whatever it is.' (366)

Randall highlights two points that suggest Velma would not be convicted: her looks and her money. I will consider the economic aspects of the law's crisis later in this chapter. The underscoring of Velma's physicality here, though, further encourages a gender emphasised reading of her life and suicide. It is intimated that a lawyer could garner

misplaced sympathy for Velma because she is a woman. Randall notes that other women, 'old burlesque dames', could be brought in to 'sob' and help Velma. Much like the 'gentlemanly' officer's misreading of Velma, it is indicated that a jury would not understand her as they would be taken in by a narrative of a 'little girl' in distress.

Again, the text suggests that the hardboiled detectives have a particular understanding that helps them overcome any misplaced sympathy. They tend to 'know women' in a manner that the public do not and can thereby present a more realistic and coherent narrative than the lawyers. This knowledge takes the form of recognising the potential violence, manipulation, and threat that some women may pose. However, the law is unable to effectively use this understanding to prosecute Velma. Instead, the police seem to require that Velma shoot herself in order for the criminal to be punished. Randall then admits that he does not fully understand Velma's adherence to this discipline, and that he will accept 'whatever' reasoning Marlowe can provide. This need suggests a desire for a response to the contradictions of suicide and a coherent interpretation of the act that may derive from the capacity to 'know women'.

As the novel concludes, Marlowe offers such an understanding:

> 'She was a killer,' I said. 'But so was Malloy. And *he* was a long way from being all rat. Maybe that Baltimore dick wasn't so pure as the record shows. Maybe she saw a chance – not to get away – she was tired of dodging by that time – but to give a break to the only man who had ever really given her one.'
> Randall stared at me with his mouth open and his eyes unconvinced.
> 'Hell, she didn't have to shoot a cop to do that,' he said.
> 'I'm not saying she was a saint or even a half-way nice girl. Not ever. She wouldn't kill herself until she was cornered. But what she did and the way she did it, kept her from coming back here for trial. Think that over. And who would that trial hurt most? Who would be least able to bear it? And win, lose or draw, who would pay the biggest price for the show? An old man who had loved not wisely, but too well.'
> Randall said sharply: 'That's just sentimental.'
> 'Sure. It sounded like that when I said it. Probably all a mistake anyway. So long. Did my pink bug ever get back up here?'
> He didn't know what I was talking about.

> I rode down to the street floor and went out on the steps of the City Hall. It was a cool day and very clear. You could see a long way – but not as far as Velma had gone. (366)

Randall's remark that Marlowe's interpretation is 'just sentimental' is dismissive. But this is the only understanding that provides a sense of closure to the text. The detective genre conventionally demands a feeling of completeness: criminals should be identified and punished. Marlowe offers such resolution through his reading of Velma's suicide. By explaining that Velma killed herself as an act of compassion for her husband, her death is brought into both a genre specific order and an order of male dominance. Marlowe elucidates that this sensitive reading does not save Velma from being a villain; she is still 'not ever' 'even a half-way nice girl'. Her suicide, however, is recast as an act which can be read as following certain norms. Specifically, Marlowe's interpretation indicates that Velma is, in the end, willing to submit to the needs of her husband. This act of interpretation from Marlowe then brings Velma into a typological categorisation that upholds a conventional notion of male supremacy. Her death is thus finally characterised as an act of subservience.

Charles J. Rzepka calls attention to such 'sentimentality' when he comments on hard-boiled detective narratives:

> The hero, a lone knight, seeks not to redeem this fallen society, but to maintain his personal integrity in the face of repeated temptations and deceptions. The 'tough stance' of hard-boiled detection is accordingly both cynical and sentimental, according to [George] Grella (105), and quintessentially American in its idealization of personal autonomy in the face of shadowy coercive forces, such as organized crime, ruthless corporations, wealthy families, and corrupt government agencies, including, typically, the regular metropolitan police.[3]

Marlowe's reasoning is 'both cynical and sentimental'. The cynicism arises in his identification that Velma was not 'even a half-way nice girl' and that it is 'probably all a

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[3] Charles J. Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity P, 2005), 180-81.

mistake anyway'. He does not entirely 'redeem a fallen society' with his interpretation, but he does appear to maintain his 'personal integrity'. Marlowe has not succumbed to the same failings of the police. Instead, he performs a knightly role of saving the damsel in distress, Velma, by reconstituting her suicide as an act of love. Indeed, by retaining a 'sentimental' understanding as opposed to Randall's more complete cynicism, Marlowe in some ways continues to be a 'lone knight' exercising an 'idealised personal autonomy'. This repositioning of Velma as more sympathetic than a simple villain encourages a consideration of her and her suicide as working within a patriarchal social structure. Marlowe's explanation then partly quells the complexity of suicide by presenting it as an act that does not entirely 'defy understanding', nor does it completely 'elude social order'. There is thus a tension between the 'ambivalence' of suicide explored in literary suicidology and Marlowe's interpretive powers.

Marlowe's sympathy for Velma, as revealed in his interpretation, seems to stem from his 'knowledge' and categorisation of women. His act of explication similarly reinforces male supremacy as his voice supersedes Velma's action when he offers a conclusion to the text. Through this explanation, the novel invites its readers to identify with Marlowe. Such identification with the detective figure is often read in scholarship as a means of reinforcing existing social structures. As Rzepka observes:

> As a part of modern mass entertainment, detective fiction helps interpellate its readers into conformity with the hegemony of white, male, middle-class values in Western capitalist-industrial societies. (21)

The reader, like Randall, faced with the uncertainty of suicide, is invited to welcome Marlowe's final explanation, and thereby accept the social typology he uses to provide such an interpretation. If Marlowe's reading of suicide invites such 'interpellation', and he stands in for certain forms of patriarchal order, suicide appears to be an event which *Farewell, My Lovely* uses to re-establish a sense of 'conformity with the hegemony of

white, male, middle-class values'. More precisely, it is patriarchal authority in the form of individual male heroism that is reinforced at the end of *Farewell, My Lovely*.

This re-establishment of an existing social order does not, though, repair the crisis of the law. Randall remains 'unconvinced' and Marlowe moves on to continue his struggle in a 'fallen society'. The novel's final line calls attention to this lack of control on the part of the law, as the phrase 'Velma had gone' and the inability to see how far this is, indicate her command and independence in ending her life. Although Velma's reasoning is elucidated by Marlowe as most likely resulting from her desire to save her husband, she still exercises a challenging self-destructive autonomy which, to a degree, as analysed in previous chapters, exceeds conventional comprehension. As such, the 'ambivalence' of suicide seems to remain in a fashion, even if Marlowe can manage some of the questions posed by Velma's death.

In particular, this recognition that one cannot see where Velma had gone calls attention to the inability to fully resolve and explicate suicide. Even here where Marlowe interprets a suicide with at least some conviction and authority, suicide still appears to be associated with an ongoing challenge of understanding. Marlowe acknowledges this in the ambivalent line, its 'probably all a mistake anyway'. This representation of suicide, as such, brings forth a complex and measured crisis. It manifests an unresolved social breakdown in the failings of the law, and, at the same time, Marlowe characterises Velma's suicide as a potentially comprehensible act of subservience. Suicide in this novel thus gives rise to a crisis in which social influence is both troubled and partly reconstituted. The central question of this text's representation of suicide can then be defined: how does Marlowe's understanding negotiate the complexity of suicide?

Scholarship on Raymond Chandler

Marlowe's interpretation of suicide is enabled by situating Velma within a typological framework. In other words, since Marlowe 'knows enough about women', and Velma coheres with this received idea of women, Marlowe can mitigate some of the challenges of suicide. Through an analysis of scholarly work on Chandler, I here further explore the framework which Marlowe uses to manage Velma's suicide before bringing such understanding into dialogue with the 'ambivalence' highlighted in literary suicidology.

In *Raymond Chandler: Detections of Totality* (2016) Fredric Jameson reworks his previous studies of Chandler and stresses the role of typology. The long gestation of forty years of analyses, revisiting old material and weaving it together, echoes the production of Chandler's own novels. Jameson expounds on such recursion and fractionation:

> since Chandler's project-units remain subgeneric, we can, as an unexpected bonus, compare successive versions of the same form in their published variants, which have not, as in the 'great moderns', been welded together in some single 'book of the world' whose repetitions would be stylistic rather than narrative. […] a new kind of stereoscopic reading emerges in which each scene retains its sharpness while designating at the same time a well-nigh Platonic (yet social-typological) ultimate unit behind it that the reading eye does not so much see as intuit.[4]

The 'project-units' that Jameson refers to are blocks of prose, events, settings, or characters that are repeated time and again in Chandler's work. For instance, a detective being sapped and waking up next to a body, the short stories that become the novels, beautiful female murderers, the description of Marlowe's office, suicide, and so on. Almost every chapter is set in one location, each paragraph centres on a single

[4] Fredric Jameson, 'The Synoptic Chandler', in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), 34. With a slight irony this passage is repeated with minor changes in Fredric Jameson, *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality* (London, Verso: 2016), 58.

character, and the short stories are interlocked to form the longer texts. Chandler's style, as such, is based on a Lego-like play of recombining pieces that are regularly returned to. As several criminals kill themselves in Chandler's writing, a point I will return to in the final section of this chapter, Velma's suicide reads as such a set-piece. This use of repeating blocks intimates a certain intelligibility being associated with suicide.

This typology that Jameson highlights particularly comes to the fore in terms of gender relations in the representation of suicide in *Farewell, My Lovely*. Through this process of typing, and thereby narratively understanding and controlling women, Marlowe appears to recall nineteenth-century theories of criminology. Typological detection, and the term 'type', is closely tied to the deterministic models of early criminologists such as Cesare Lombroso, who espoused individual positivism.[5] In contrast, during the 1920s and 1930s the most prominent form of criminology increasingly focused on environmental causes of crime and was popularised by the Chicago School. While Chandler does not appear to accept Lombroso's discredited theory of identifying criminal 'types' through physical attributes, he does take on the basis that criminals are a distinguishable subset of individuals. As opposed to a myriad of social causes, there is a sense of the inherent criminal. This is not, however, an exclusive rule as the corruption of the police stems from a social system. The actions of individual murderers, though, rarely seem to be rooted in social conditions. Velma, for instance, kills herself even though she is wealthy and likely to avoid prosecution.

By turning away from social causes, Chandler presents an opposing understanding of suicide to Émile Durkheim.[6] Nonetheless, the narrative framing of this

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[5] Lombroso not only emphasises the importance of the concept of 'the type' but also his hopes for its rising popularity in US criminology in his introduction to Arthur MacDonald's, *Criminology* (New York, NY: Funk and Wagnalls, 1892)

[6] Durkheim directly questions Lombroso and associated Italian criminologists in *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, ed. George Simpson, trans. John A. Spaulding (London: Routledge, 2002), (i.e. 66).

suicide and its interpretation through the use of typological categorisation, presents a social response as a means to more effectively manage suicide. In other words, like Durkheim, Chandler represents suicide as a problem that calls for social change. However, this 'social reconstruction' is based on Marlowe's individual capacity to recognise and interpret suicide. As such, Chandler differs from Durkheim by extolling a form individualism, while still following a Durkheimian diagnostic understanding that suicide has identifiable causes which can be addressed through conventional reasoning. Chandler thus sits between Durkheimian theory and literary suicidology as he represents suicide as a paradoxical act: it follows repeating, intelligible patterns while still being disorientating. This contradiction between knowledge and uncertainty seems to be intertwined with the fractured form of Chandler's writing and the set pieces that, as Jameson argues, are both complete and ongoing.

Indeed, these semi-connected, repeating textual blocks lead Jameson to identify the limits of resolution as the central tension of Chandler's novels. He claims, "Inveterate readers of Chandler will know that it is no longer for the solution to the mystery that they reread him, if indeed the solutions ever solved anything in the first place." (*Detections* 57) This questioning of resolution in the texts brings focus to the measured crisis of Velma's suicide. Since Velma's suicide calls attention to urgent challenges in how the law and patriarchal order function, Jameson's point can here be rephrased: does Marlowe's interpretation of Velma's suicide 'solve' these problems? Jameson's flippant second clause, and this effort to explain a suicide, thus speak to the central debate that has dominated Chandlerian scholarship: to what extent is Chandler's fiction purely a stylistic enterprise?

Robert Merrill draws attention to this scholarly debate when he notes, "the academic and popular consensus [is] that Chandler's virtues are stylistic and not

structural"[7]. Merrill goes on to contest this perceived weakness by expanding the concept of plot to include character development. Susan Peck MacDonald counters such approaches:

> Though [Chandler's] achievements as a stylist are often acknowledged, they are often passed over swiftly en route to analyzing thematic aspects of his novels. Chandler himself, however, showed a keener interest in language than have many of his critics[8]

This dispute brings to the fore the friction in Chandler's work between his focus on technique and the generic narrative structures of detection. If language is to be focused on regarding the representation of suicide in *Farewell, My Lovely*, as MacDonald urges, then key phrases come to the fore: 'he didn't know enough about women', 'like a gentleman', 'an old man who had loved not wisely, but too well', 'that's just sentimental' and so forth. The language here emphasises a negotiation of male and female interactions. Comparatively, the principal 'thematic aspect' of Velma's suicide within the detective genre is the identification, capture, and termination of a criminal's ability to commit crime. Because this control plays out through suicide, a crisis in the law is then stressed.

This split in Chandlerian scholarship, between style and story, is encapsulated by Jameson in what he describes as the 'two plots' of Chandler's novels. Charles Scruggs elucidates Jameson's twin vision:

> Jameson said that there are two plots in a Chandler novel, the surface plot of the whodunit and the "psychic drama" through which the "social world continues to be interpreted" ("On Raymond Chandler" 644). In the surface plot, the riddle is solved. In the subterranean plot, as the word "continues" suggests, closure is an illusion.[9]

[7] Robert Merrill, 'Raymond Chandler's Plots and the Concept of Plot', *Narrative*, 7 (1) (1999), 17.
[8] Susan Peck MacDonald, 'Chandler's American Style', *Style*, 39 (4) (2005), 448.
[9] Charles Scruggs, 'The Lawn Jockey and "The Justice We Dream Of": History and Race in Raymond Chandler's *The High Window*', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 48 (2) (2012), 116-17.

The implication that the subterranean world of the texts turns 'closure into an illusion' is problematic. The repeated 'surface' explications of crimes solved are neglected in this binary construction which prioritises one 'plot' over the other. I suggest that, by taking the two 'plots' as co-determining equals, closure is rendered both possible and impossible. This problem is highlighted in the representation of Velma's suicide. She is, at once, brought into a patriarchal social order and yet problematises the order of the law. As such, Velma's suicide demands consideration of both style and story, as well as gender relations and the law. The questions raised in this central debate in Chandlerian scholarship is thus brought into focus by the suicide. The core concern at the end of *Farewell, My Lovely* can then be identified as a question of whether social understanding can be secured against the 'ambivalence' of suicide.

Jameson acknowledges but then attempts to abate this challenge of conclusive certainty in Chandler's work:

> Raymond Chandler's novels have not one form, but two, an objective form and a subjective one, the rigid external structure of the detective story on the one hand, and a more personal distinctive rhythm of events on the other, arranged, as is the case with any novelist of originality, according to some ideal molecular chain in the brain cells, as personal in their encephalographic pattern as a fingerprint, peopled with recurring phantoms, obsessive character types, actors in some forgotten psychic drama […] Yet the two kinds of form do not conflict with each other; on the contrary the second seems to have been generated out of the first by the latter's own internal contradictions. (*Detections* 23)

The 'objective' detective structure is here intertwined with 'subjective', 'recurring phantoms'. Although, for Jameson, these forms are not in conflict, there is a tension that is manifested in the problem of resolution. He later comments, "both these lines converge on the supreme matter of what we have called narrative closure" (*Detections* 60). The highlighting of 'recurrence' in Jameson's analyses suggests that any resolution is temporary. On the one hand, Velma's suicide works within a conventional detective structure through the termination of a criminal's activities at the end of the text, and

thereby presents some form of ‘closure’. On the other hand, this death underscores ‘recurring’ phantoms in the form of a rebellious woman, the act of suicide, and the failures of the law. This problem of ‘narrative closure’ thus comes to the fore as at once settled and unsettled by Velma’s suicide. I have likened such contradiction to a crisis of understanding in this thesis. However, compared to the texts studied in the first four chapters of this thesis, this crisis seems relatively measured by Marlowe’s invocation of certain patriarchal norms to interpret Velma’s suicide.

These norms stem from the hard-boiled genre that Chandler is both engaging with and developing. Wesley Beal emphasises:

> some of the major conventions of hardboiled detective fiction: the stark individualism of the detective, his antagonistic relationships with women, and above all the codes of masculinity that are typified by detachment and violence.[10]

These ‘codes of masculinity’ and ‘antagonistic relationships with women’ are complex. Marlowe’s consideration of Velma’s suicide as a ‘sentimental’ act, for instance, evokes sympathy. While Marlowe takes a determining role in interpreting Velma’s death, he also presents compassion rather than simply ‘antagonism’. This care, though, still functions within a ‘code of masculinity’ by recalling a desire to save a damsel in distress. As Kirsten Garrison notes:

> Much of the scholarship on Marlowe seems to assume that he is, in fact, a moral character, and that his role as the grim knight embarked on dubious quests evinces an ethical code.[11]

Marlowe’s ‘code of masculinity’ is tied up with this ‘ethical code’. Although these codes are marked by ‘detachment and violence’ and thereby become ‘dubious’, they still present a comprehensible form of order. In the representation of Velma’s suicide, the detective she murders fails to recognise these codes of conduct. He does not ‘know

[10] Wesley Beal, ‘Philip Marlowe, Family Man’, *College Literature*, 41 (2) (2014), 11.
[11] Kristen Garrison, ‘Hard-Boiled Rhetoric: The “Fearless Speech” of Philip Marlowe’, *South Central Review*, 27 (1/2) (2010), 110.

enough about women' and his 'gentlemanly' behaviour does not fit the hard-boiled mode of masculinity and 'stark individualism'. Marlowe engages in a more detached dominance by interpreting Velma's suicide from a physical and narrative distance.

The representation of Velma's suicide thus works to reinforce this complex form of masculine order deriving from a conception of 'knightly' behaviour. 'Knightly' here can be taken as referring to the violence, individualism, and male control that Marlowe foregrounds over 'gentlemanly' naivety. This authority is realised in the conclusion of *Farewell, My Lovely* through Marlowe's retelling of Velma's suicide. Garrison particularly stresses the importance of Marlowe's voice, and suggests that "by giving Marlowe absolute control of the narrative conch shell, Chandler indicates that he is the only character we may trust." (111) Since Marlowe appears to be the only character who can understand and offer explanations for events, he takes ultimate command of the narrative. The reader appears to be compelled to follow his viewpoint as he has 'absolute control of the narrative'. In turn, the reader would be 'interpellated into conformity' with the text's 'masculine' order. But, since this interpellation occurs in relation suicide, it also seems to be inevitably insecure.

As Bennett argues and as discussed throughout this thesis, suicide leads to a problem of interpretive 'ambivalence'. It is an act that at once affirms and denies understanding. Marlowe seems to enter this uncertain space and provide a relatively cogent reading of suicide. In this manner, his narrative authority is used to recast Velma's suicide as a 'sentimental' act of love for her husband, and patriarchal order thus appears to be repaired through the representation of suicide. At the same time, this reframing does little to balm the crisis in the law. As such, the implied response in the text which works to mitigate the crises arising from suicide, and thereby to better manage suicide, is to rely on 'heroic', male, individuals such as Marlowe. The very

complexity of suicide would therefore be understood in this text as a means of encouraging a conservative 'social reconstruction' in which a gendered, typological insight is made paramount. Such a move is, though, concurrently rendered suspect as, in the face of this same complexity, Marlowe cannot entirely secure his reasoning for Velma's suicide. It follows that Velma's suicide is a measured crisis in which 'undecidability' arises but is concurrently downplayed. Reading *Farewell, My Lovely* alongside the insights of suicidology thus draws attention to an ongoing, underlying struggle in Chandler's work, in which Marlowe's understanding is troubled by matters that cannot be resolved. Perhaps then, Chandler's novel can be said to appeal to a conservative social reconstruction while concurrently registering a certain doubtfulness about whether such change can happen and what it would ultimately achieve.

Gender in *Farewell, My Lovely*

Chandler's writing style of short, sharp, descriptive sentences and the regular use of similes draw attention to his use of typology. This typological approach, I have argued, enables Marlowe to explain Velma's suicide. This approach of standardising women into categories is also called forth when Marlowe first sees a picture of her:

> It was a blonde. A blonde to make a bishop kick a hole in a stained-glass window. She was wearing street clothes that looked black and white, and a hat to match and she was a little haughty, but not too much. Whatever you needed, wherever you happened to be – she had it. About thirty years old.
> I poured a fast drink and burned my throat getting it down. 'Take it away,' I said. 'I'll start jumping.' (229)

The phrase 'it was a blonde' immediately classifies Velma within a subset of women. Likewise, the term 'it' refers not to the photograph but to Velma herself and implies an impersonal, objectifying approach to women. This physical focus continues in the

suggestion that Velma could 'make a bishop kick a whole in a stained-glass window' – a phrase which suggests that she is beguiling and able to manipulate men through her attractiveness. Her everyday 'street clothes' indicate that this appeal is part of her rather than her attire. Marlowe similarly appears enchanted when he proposes that Velma's physical nature means that she could provide anything and everything that anyone might need and asks for the photo to be taken away. This 'need' is apparently sexual and the 'you' assumed to be a male. In turn, as in Marlowe's 'sentimental' reading of Velma's death, it seems here that women can be classified based on their capacity to satisfy male desires and that Marlowe has a particular insight into this classification.

Much of this initial reaction recurs when Marlowe meets Velma for the first time, and his tendency to type women in relation to men is particularly reiterated. Marlowe enters the Grayle residence to find three people:

> The third was the blonde. She was dressed to go out, in a pale greenish blue. I didn't pay much attention to her clothes. They were what the guy designed for her and she would go to the right man. The effect was to make her look very young and to make her lapis lazuli eyes look very blue. Her hair was of the gold of paintings and had been fussed with just enough but not too much. She had a full set of curves which nobody had been able to improve on. The dress was rather plain except for the clasp of diamonds at the throat. Her hands were not small, but they had shape, and the nails were the usual jarring note – almost magenta. She was giving me one of her smiles. She looked as if she smiled easily, but her eyes had a still look, as if they thought slowly and carefully. And her mouth was sensual. (250)

Here Velma has become 'the blonde'. The reader is thus invited to principally identify Velma by this physical feature. Although Marlowe claims he 'didn't pay much attention to her clothes', much of this passage goes on to detail how Velma is dressed. This clothing is not only designed by a man, but also the 'right man' to draw attention to Velma's attractiveness. This passage then situates Velma within a preconditioned understanding of beauty that is defined by men: the hair is 'fussed' by the right amount, the 'full set of curves' are ideal, and the nails evince 'the usual jarring note'. These

descriptions indicate that Marlowe is reading Velma against a sexualised standard and favourably rating her based on her physical appeal. The contradiction regarding how much attention Marlowe pays to Velma's clothes suggests that this categorisation based on her looks is to be taken as an immediate, and thereby given, understanding rather than a studious interpretation. In so doing, Marlowe expresses a capacity to interpret and categorise Velma instantly based on her physicality.

It is also this physical appeal that leads Randall to suggest Velma would not be convicted for her crimes. Implicitly, it may be this attractiveness that beguiles the detective who Velma kills. This potentially manipulative appeal of a beautiful woman is thus presented as a threat. The passage above realises this danger as Marlowe loses his focus due to Velma's physical charm. His captivation by the principal criminal in the text suggests an initial failure to recognise the potential hazard she poses. After the suicide, however, Marlowe overcomes this challenge and re-establishes his 'personal integrity' when he disarms Velma through his 'sentimental' interpretation of her death.

This dangerous aspect of Velma's characterisation is first recognised by Marlowe, though, at the end of their first meeting. It is the arrival of Mr Grayle that brings Marlowe out of his enchantment:

> She fell softly across my lap and I bent down over her face and began to browse on it. She worked her eyelashes and made butterfly kisses on my cheeks. When I got to her mouth it was half open and burning and her tongue was a darting snake between her teeth.
> The door opened and Mr Grayle stepped quietly into the room. I was holding her and didn't have a chance to let go. I lifted my face and looked at him. I felt as cold as Finnegan's feet, the day they buried him. The blonde in my arms didn't move, didn't even close her lips. She had a half-dreamy, half-sarcastic expression on her face.
> Mr Grayle cleared his throat slightly and said: 'I beg your pardon, I'm sure,' and went quietly out of the room. There was an infinite sadness in his eyes.
> I pushed her away and stood up and got my handkerchief out and mopped my face. (258)

The likening of Velma's tongue to a snake denotes diabolic temptation. The fact her mouth is continuously open indicates an invitation, but also a lack of care. She is thus cast as a seemingly frivolous seductress. Once Mr Grayle enters, however, Velma returns to being depersonalised as 'the blonde'. Her lack of reaction to her husband is in stark contrast to Marlowe's concern. In comparison, sympathy is elicited for Mr Grayle in the phrase 'infinite sadness', while Velma is presented as being callous towards this diminutive, 'quiet' figure. Marlowe then recognises his complicity in this affair and the mistreatment of Mr Grayle upon the man's arrival. The detective's action of mopping his face indicates an escape from the passionate enchantment of Velma. He pushes her away when he acknowledges her lack of empathy and transgression of conventional gender relations. Marlowe thus retains his 'integrity' by rejecting the temptation of a dangerous woman, while Velma is assigned a role as a heartless, sexualised, threatening, and archetypal 'blonde' – a characterisation that echoes the descriptions of Phyllis as a femme fatale as discussed in the previous chapter.

In Marlowe's final confrontation with Velma, this menacing characterisation is, similarly to Phyllis, cast as a broader challenge to a male dominated social order:

> She took the glass and tasted it and looked across it at the far wall. 'I don't like men to receive me in their pyjamas,' she said. 'It's a funny thing. I liked you. I liked you a lot. But I could get over it. I have often got over such things.'
> I nodded and drank.
> 'Most men are just lousy animals,' she said. 'In fact, it's a pretty lousy world, if you ask me.'
> 'Money must help.'
> 'You think it's going to when you haven't always had money. As a matter of fact it just makes new problems.' (357)

Velma's identification that 'most men are just lousy animals' is a direct rebuke of contemporary gender relations. The repetition of the term 'lousy' insinuates that the world's problems are perhaps caused by the 'animalism' of men. Velma's terminology recalls the views of Gloria in Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935).

This confession that the world seems ‘lousy’ suggests a failure of Durkheimian ‘integration’ and ‘regulation’, in a similar manner to Gloria. Velma’s worldview likewise appears entrenched and her indictment of men does not change with her increased wealth and standing. Indeed, she takes issue with men regardless of their wealth (Mr Grayle), informality (Marlowe), or gentlemanly behaviour (the detective she murders). This antagonism situates Velma as a threat to patriarchal social order and enables a momentary negotiation of Marlowe’s male-dominated perspective.

Shortly after Velma admits this distrust of men, though, Marlowe offers his own reproach of her in a rebuke that Gloria is never faced with in McCoy’s novella. As he confronts Velma with an accusation of murder, Marlowe suggests:

> She leaned forward a little and her smile became just a little glassy, Suddenly, without any real change in her, she ceased to be beautiful. She looked merely like a woman who would have been dangerous a hundred years ago, and twenty years ago daring, but who today was just Grade B Hollywood. (358) [sic.]

Having identified Velma as a criminal, Marlowe ceases to be fascinated by her. It appears that she has little control over whether she is ‘beautiful’ or not. Although she does not change, Marlowe now sees her as a hackneyed figure. This shift in judgment traces Marlowe’s overcoming of Velma’s physical attraction and her potential power to manipulate, while also reinforcing his narrative dominance in defining Velma. Moments later in this scene, it is revealed that Marlowe has set Velma up to confront Malloy. She shoots Malloy before running away and finally killing herself a few pages later. Marlowe may later admit to Anne Riordan that Velma was “playing” (362) him, but by instigating the events that lead to Velma’s suicide, he reveals his control over this game. This characterisation of Velma throughout the novel then intimates that she is a threatening but understandable female ‘type’. In the end, Marlowe uses this comprehension to manage Velma’s suicide.

It is in this final discussion with Anne that Marlowe's authority particularly comes to the fore. She is a different 'type' of woman to Velma. The daughter of a police officer, Anne is innocent and inquisitive. In conversation with Marlowe, her face regularly 'flushes' – indeed, the phrase "she flushed" is repeated four times in three pages (293-95). As an amateur detective learning from Marlowe's experience, Anne performs a role that is subservient to him. In their last conversation, this deference reaches an extreme:

> 'You can have mine,' Anne Riordan said, and got up and brought her untouched drink over to me. She stood in front of me holding it, her eyes wide and a little frightened.
> 'You're so marvellous,' she said. 'So brave, so determined, and you work for so little money. Everybody bats you over the head and chokes you and smacks your jaw and fills you with morphine, but you just keep on hitting between tackle and end until they're all worn out. What makes you so wonderful?'
> 'Go on,' I growled. 'Spill it.'
> Anne Riordan said thoughtfully: 'I'd like to be kissed, damn you!' (364)

This passage ends the penultimate chapter and the next goes on to narrate Velma's suicide. Anne is situated here as an antithesis to Velma: she does not drink and is wide eyed in front of Marlowe. Her adjectives – 'marvellous', 'brave', 'determined', 'wonderful' – present Marlowe as a conventional hero. His masculinity is also brought forth in the likening of him to an American Football player, 'hitting between tackle and end' and trying to break through an offensive line to sack the opposing quarterback. The violence Marlowe both faces and employs is thereby celebrated by Anne. His response in a 'growl' likewise calls attention to a gruff, animalistic masculinity, while the phrase 'spill it' reinforces Marlowe's hard-boiled tone, street wise persona, and a world-weary understanding. Velma's indictment of men as 'lousy animals' thus appears to be revised as Anne extols a similar coarseness. Marlowe's control here, and this praising of his character, then inform the next chapter and his interpretation of Velma's suicide through his 'knowledge' about women.

Farewell, My Lovely is preoccupied with gender relations and negotiating the potential power of transgressive women. Although the capacity for violence intimates that Velma has a degree of authority, since she is identified as a criminal by Marlowe, and he instigates the events that lead to her running away and killing herself, her authority seems limited. Indeed, by bringing Velma's suicide into line as an act of love for her husband, Marlowe provides relief to this tension of female autonomy struggling against patriarchal order that can be traced throughout the novel. Marlowe then, in the end, stands out as a 'brave', 'determined', individual, male, hero. This position of control and understanding thus manages Velma's confrontation with a male dominated, 'lousy world'. As such, Marlowe's 'heroic' individualism can be considered a means of managing suicide. While such a view sits in opposition to Durkheim, and particularly his interpretation of 'egoistic suicide', it still denotes a social response to suicide. This response would be found in patriarchal control, as manifested in individual male heroism, taking command of rebellious, suicidal women. This construction closely parallels Cain's *Double Indemnity*, but Chandler's text also registers a more pronounced sense of doubt as this reinforcing of patriarchal order interplays with a crisis in the law.

Law and Order

Alongside gender relations, Velma's suicide indicates a failure of conventional judicial order. As noted previously, the law appears to require Velma to kill herself in order to enact a disciplining of the primary criminal in the text, but Velma's authority in this act presents a challenge. She is not disciplined within appropriate legal means. Indeed, by shooting a detective just before her suicide, Velma directly stands against judicial order.

Throughout the text, this inadequacy of the law is regularly brought into focus. A key scene occurs when Marlowe considers the principal characters that he has encountered in the novel and focuses on different ‘types’ of police officers:

> I thought of nasty old women beaten to death against the posts of their dirty beds. I thought of a man with bright blond hair who was afraid and didn’t quite know what he was afraid of, who was sensitive enough to know that something was wrong, and too vain or too dull to guess what it was that was wrong. I thought of beautiful rich women who could be had. I thought of nice slim curious girls who lived alone and could be had, in a different way. I thought of cops, tough cops that could be greased and yet were not by any means all bad, like Hemingway. Fat prosperous cops with Chamber of Commerce voices, like Chief Wax. Slim, smart and deadly cops like Randall, who for all their smartness and deadliness were not free to do a clean job in a clean way. I thought of sour old goats like Nulty who had given up trying. I thought of Indians and psychics and dope doctors. (329)

Initially here, gender relations are again emphasised. The phrases ‘beautiful rich women’ and ‘nice slim curious girls’ refer to Velma and Anne respectively. In both cases, Marlowe stresses that these are ‘women who could be had’. This terminology reiterates a sense of male domination. As the passage continues, Marlowe turns attention to the police and identifies several ‘types’ that all seem limited. Hemingway and Chief Wax are corruptible, while Nulty is ineffective since he does not even try. It is the description of Randall, though, that highlights a broad social problem. Randall’s lack of freedom and inability to be ‘clean’ indicates that the police are unable to perform their jobs effectively. Such incapacity demonstrates that this is a ‘fallen society’ and provides a reason for the law’s struggle to control Velma and her suicide.

Nonetheless, Marlowe’s language in this passage suggests sympathy. His identification that Hemingway ‘is not by any means all bad’ intimates pity for the police. Even though he is prone to violence and corruption, Hemingway is not an inherently bad person. Likewise, Marlowe’s characterisation of Randall as ‘smart and deadly’ foregrounds a sense of respect. As opposed to Velma’s case, such esteem

suggests that Marlowe does not believe that fault lies with the police themselves. Officer Hemingway distils the primary problem being hinted at in the passage above, "Cops don't get crooked for money. Not always, not even often. They got caught in the system." (323) If Randall's and Marlowe's insinuations that the detective Velma murders is 'crooked' are accepted, he too appears to be 'caught in the system'. Hemingway continues and elaborates on this problematic 'system':

> 'A guy can't stay honest if he wants to,' Hemingway said. 'That's what's the matter with this country. He gets chiselled out of his pants if he does. You gotta play the game dirty or you don't eat. A lot of bastards think all we need is ninety thousand F.B.I. men in clean collars and brief cases. Nuts. The percentage would get them just the way it does the rest of us.' (325)

Hemingway proposes that there is no choice other than corruption. He particularly stresses that the inability to be 'honest' is a deep-rooted problem in 'this country'. The failures of the law thus go beyond individual actions and are identified as a wide-ranging social challenge in the US. Since all of the police officers are implicated as contributing to, or failing to overcome, this troubled situation, the systemic problems of the law seem inescapable.

Velma's suicide foregrounds this systemic crisis as she is not punished in 'a clean way'. It is argued in the text that the law would fail to convict Velma, and seemingly because of this systemic problem. Like Randall's description of 'high-priced' lawyers, Marlowe's comment that Chief Wax is a 'fat prosperous cop' calls attention to a problematic, capitalist hierarchy. This sense that the root cause of the systemic predicament of the police is due to those in charge is detailed by Red, an ex-police officer whom Marlowe admires:

> The trouble with cops is not that they're dumb or crooked or tough, but that they think just being a cop gives them a little something they didn't have before. Maybe it did once, but not any more. They're topped by too many smart minds. That brings us to Brunette. He don't run the

> town. He couldn't be bothered. He put up big money to elect a mayor so his water taxis wouldn't be bothered. (339-40)

Again, Red indicates that the challenges of the law are due to a systemic, social problem. The mayor is corrupt and the police officers are 'topped by too many smart minds'. The hierarchy of the law is thereby called into question. Red also, though, emphasises that this problem is contemporary and that the police have lost something that they once had. It follows that this systemic and capitalist framed problem is intrinsically associated with the 1930s.

Red stresses this sense of a contemporary breakdown as his analysis continues:

> These racketeers are a new type. We think about them in the way that we think about old time yeggs or needled-up punks. Big-mouthed police commissioners on the radio yell that they're all yellow rats, that they'll kill women and babies and howl for mercy if they see a police uniform. They ought to know better than to sell the public that stuff. There's yellow cops and yellow torpedoes – but damn few of either. And as for the top men, like Brunette – they don't get there by murdering people. They got there by guts and brains – and they don't have the group courage the cops have either. But above all they're business men. What they do is for money. Just like other business men. (340)

This 'new type' of criminal is tied up with modern capitalist practices. In likening the gangster, Brunette, to typical businessmen, Red suggests that businessmen could in turn be likened to gangsters. He thus reinforces the notion that social problems lie with 'the top men' in a capitalist hierarchy. In similarity with Marlowe's typology of cops, the police are not particularly 'yellow' in Red's estimation. Instead, wealth and power appear to be at the root of the 'system' in which officers like Hemingway are caught. This focus on contemporary capitalism encourages a reading of the crisis in the law as conditioned by, or at least working in tandem with, The Great Depression. In turn, this crisis of the law may indicate a broader social crisis as discussed in this thesis' introduction in relation to the work of scholars such as Michael Denning.

Marlowe draws attention to this feeling of an extensive social challenge near the end of the text as he summarises what has happened to various characters:

> As for Brunette, you can't get anything on a guy like Brunette. They'll have him before the Grand Jury and he'll refuse to say anything; on his constitutional rights. He doesn't have to bother about his reputation. But there's a nice shakeup here in Bay City. The Chief has been canned and half the detectives have been reduced to acting patrolmen, and very nice guy named Red Norgaard, who helped me get on the *Montecito*, has got his job back. The mayor is doing all this, changing his pants hourly while the crisis lasts. (364)

Although the changes occurring in the police force are welcomed by Marlowe, there is a tension underlying this passage. The fact Brunette will go free indicates a continuing problem for the law. The corrupt mayor likewise retains his position. While some of the officers have changed position, the system itself has not significantly altered. Marlowe may describe this 'shakeup' as a 'crisis', but a deeper crisis seems to be revealed in the need for this 'shakeup'. It has already been argued in the text that individual officers are not at the heart of the law's problems. The changing of the guard by reducing 'half the detectives' will not then alter the 'system' that Hemingway draws attention to. Thus, the systemic crisis of the law seems to continue beyond the text.

However, it is precisely because the law fails that the private detective is needed. Marlowe's investigation and his role as a private detective results from this inability of the law to execute certain cases themselves. The crisis of the law, which is brought into particular focus by Velma's suicide, thus cannot be overcome in this text. The hard-boiled private detective genre which Chandler is developing requires this crisis at its base. Nonetheless, Velma's suicide enables Marlowe to express his importance and control within this crisis-ridden system. Since the law, in the form of Randall, desires an explanation of events, Marlowe's interpretation of Velma's suicide is presented as a socially beneficial proposal which offers a response to the law's limitations. Even though Marlowe seems unable to repair the crisis of the law, he is able to offer an

alternative sense of order by ascribing a certain intelligibility to suicide. I describe this provision as a means of mitigating but not resolving a crisis. Since this crisis is here entwined with contemporary social conditions, it seems that the text may be calling for a nostalgic return to a certain form of pre-Depression, 'knightly', individual, male control. The 'undecidability' of suicide, as realised in Randall's need for an interpretation of Velma's death, thus appears to work as a means of extolling Marlowe's typological understanding. This structure, though, would then depend on an ongoing problem: Marlowe's comprehension cannot be entirely secured against the 'ambivalence' of suicide. Instead, his understanding and the social typological worldview that it derives from can only be reasserted each time the law fails. It follows that, like the repeating textual blocks noted by Jameson, Marlowe only offers a fleeting resolution in the face of Velma's suicide, and a patriarchal understanding that provides a momentary respite in this 'fallen' society.

Suicide Type in Chandler's Writing

The central concern in the representation of suicide in *Farewell, My Lovely* appears to be whether Marlowe's understanding can be considered final, or whether the problems drawn attention to by suicide repeat in Chandler's world. Certain forms of suicide do recur in the Chandler oeuvre, which suggests that these problems are not resolved and that there are suicide 'types' in his work. The closest parallel to Velma's suicide is the death of Eileen Wade in *The Long Good-Bye* (1953)[12]. A similar reading to my interpretation of Velma's suicide could be applied to Eileen. However, since *The Long*

[12] Raymond Chandler, *The Long Good-Bye*, in *Raymond Chandler: The Big Sleep and Other Novels*, Penguin Classics edn (London: Penguin, 2000), 367-659.

Good-Bye was published significantly after the time frame for this thesis, I turn attention to a series of other suicides in the Chandler oeuvre.

These suicides are represented in several of Chandler's short stories, and there are two dominant approaches that he employs. The first appears in a handful of short stories: 'Guns at Cyrano's' (1936), 'The King in Yellow' (1938), and 'Trouble is My Business' (1939).[13] In all three of these texts there is a suicide that prefigures and propels the narrative. In both 'Guns at Cyrano's' and 'The King in Yellow' a woman is rejected by a man, a father and a lover respectively, before resorting to suicide. In 'Trouble is My Business', a father is financially ruined by another man and kills himself. A friend or relative then pursues revenge. This mission of vengeance results in the murders that are investigated in the texts themselves. These examples provide unquestioned rationale for the suicides. The suicides are outside of the events in the narratives and have a functional role in explaining the motives for later murders. Suicide is thus used in these texts as an explicable act that elucidates the murder plot. Similar to Velma's death, there appears to be a discernible reason for suicide. In Velma's case, Marlowe proposes such a reason as a potential interpretation. In these short stories, the motive for suicide is even more directly expressed.

'The King in Yellow' also exemplifies the second form of suicide representation. This is the suicide of a murderer. This type of suicide appears in 'The King in Yellow', 'No Crime in the Mountains' (1941), *Farewell, My Lovely*, and *The Long Good-Bye*. These suicides all occur in situations in which it appears the law, at least in the short term, will not punish a criminal. In 'The King in Yellow', a problem arises as the detective, Grayce, discovers that the primary criminal is his friend George Millar. Grayce knows that Millar has been taking revenge for the suicide of his sister

[13] Raymond Chandler, *Collected Stories*, (London: Everyman's Library, 2002)

and confronts him in a cabin. He is then in a position in which suddenly involving the police would not only be a transgression of his old friendship but would also break the narrative of an individual hero. Furthermore, Millar has completed his revenge and is unlikely to commit anymore crimes. Grayce makes a deal with Millar to give him a head start, although he later admits that he knows where Millar would go. Millar drives off a cliff and kills himself. There is thus no need for the law to be involved and Grayce is able to move the responsibility for punishment onto Millar. Grayce, by identifying his knowledge of Millar's intentions, retains control over events. This structure recurs in *Farewell, My Lovely*. Although Velma is less sympathetic than Millar, her death likewise provides a sense of conclusion and enables the detective to retain control by expressing an ability to interpret suicidal actions.

'No Crime in the Mountains' also presents suicide as an act that provides some sense of 'narrative closure'. Published in late 1941, the Second World War looms over this text. The major criminals are a Nazi, Luders, and a Japanese man. Following a long chase, Luders surprisingly manages to capture two US detectives, Evans and Barron. Although Luders' plot has been discovered and foiled, he has a gun pointed at the detectives. Suddenly, Luders shoots himself. In this final moment when the enemies of America may gain a pyrrhic victory, the heroes are saved because Luders kills himself. The justification for Luders' death is firstly implied by himself, "we Germans are fatalists"[14]. Barron goes on to elucidate, "I figure his pride was hurt" (1177). Neither of these explanations are satisfying, but the implication is that Luders kills himself because he is a Nazi. His failure seems to be inherent to his Nazi identity. As Luders acknowledges, "They will find me just because to me it appears impossible." (1171)

[14] Raymond Chandler, 'No Crime in the Mountains' in *Collected Stories*, 1171.

Luders' death is justified by the 'type' of person he is. This suicide, like Velma's, then offers a narrative conclusion through the death of the thwarted antagonist.

A sense of coherency is produced within the Chandler oeuvre by the repetition of such suicides, which in turn helps justify Marlowe's interpretation of Velma's death. The ability to identify and interpret suicide is made even more prominent in cases where detectives are able to quickly dismiss the possibility of suicide. A characteristic example occurs in *The High Window* (1942). Marlowe finds a body and remarks, "The set-up could be for suicide. But people like Louis Vannier do not commit suicide."[15] Marlowe knows the 'type' of person Louis Vannier is and, therefore, he can be certain that Vannier did not kill himself. This typological reasoning presents suicide as an act that can be classified, and therefore an act that can be, at least to an extent, understood. Similar to Durkheim then, Chandler ascribes a certain intelligibility to suicide by categorising the act. This process of comprehension is, however, troubled by the complexity of suicide as considered in this thesis in relation to the work of Blanchot and Bennett. It follows that the control evinced in this classifying and interpreting of suicide may be considered suspect. Nonetheless, Chandler presents a possibility of negotiating this apparent 'ambivalence' by turning to certain figures of authority – male detectives – who have the capacity to elucidate the actions of others by employing a form of typological analysis.

The order of repetition in the Chandler oeuvre relating to suicide does not then overcome this problem of suicide's 'undecidability', but it does suggest an effort to bring suicide into established frames of reference. Suicide is thus attended to by Chandler with more coherency than several of the other authors discussed in this thesis.

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[15] Raymond Chandler, *The High Window*, in *Raymond Chandler: The Lady in the Lake and Other Novels*, Penguin Classics edn (London: Penguin, 2001), 152.

However, even these interpretations from detectives, such as Marlowe's reading of Velma's death, rarely offer complete resolution. The failure of the law to discipline criminals continues to bring focus to social failures being associated with suicide. This ongoing problem that criminal suicides realise for the law, combined with a retention of male control and a recalling of 'sentimental' and conventional modes of interpretation, I read as a measured crisis.

As seen in *Farewell, My Lovely*, it seems, then, that Chandler uses the complexity of suicide as a means of highlighting Marlowe's exceptional understanding. Marlowe's ability to interpret suicides helps him to establish the veracity of his 'code', justify his narrative dominance, and thereby 'interpellate' a reader into conformity with his male-dominated 'typological' worldview. Suicide thus appears to be represented as an event which may not provide certainty, but from which some sense can be made. This intelligibility arises from situating suicides within an extant order of meaning; such as patriarchal social order in Velma's case. In turn, such order seems to be beneficial in managing the crisis of understanding that suicide poses. It follows that Chandler's novel calls for greater reliance on male individual heroes, such as Marlowe, who 'know enough about women' and other 'types', to limit the risk of suicide. The uncertainty and irresolute nature of suicide, though, draws attention to a certain complex doubt associated with this conservative 'social reconstruction'.

Conclusion

Velma's suicide has more in common with the death of Phyllis in James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1936) than the suicide of Gloria in Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935). Like Phyllis, Velma's suicide presents the death of a

criminal antagonist and another beautiful woman who appears to enchant a male protagonist. In both cases, men identify the criminality of women and instigate the events that lead to the final suicides. Velma does not suggest a complex crisis of communication like Gloria. Instead, Marlowe finds a relatively coherent, 'sentimental' meaning in Velma's suicide. Likewise, Keyes' control over the final deaths in *Double Indemnity* suggests that suicide can have an identifiable social purpose. Since McCoy does not provide a stable figure of authority like Cain's Keyes or Chandler's Marlowe, the social breakdown in *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935) is more pronounced than in Cain's and Chandler's novels.

Finally, I suggest that by foregrounding the complexity of suicide in reading Chandler's novel, a certain sense of doubt is brought to light in his conservative conception of society. In particular, Marlowe's confession that it is 'probably all a mistake anyway' may not be simply a throwaway line, but rather a registering of a deeper ambivalence similar to that found in suicidology. Marlowe's worldview would thus be understood as being celebrated within the texts, but concurrently recognised as inadequate. Such limitation is drawn attention to in Chandler's writing through the implications of a nostalgic, 'knightly' romance, which has been overwhelmed by the crisis-ridden contemporary world. Such romance, or 'sentimentality', seems to be outdated and no longer provide the same sense of meaning – as Red comments: "Maybe it did once, but not any more." (339-40) Suicide can thus be said to bring to the fore both the benefits and limits of Marlowe's case solving abilities, and the conservative typological worldview it depends on, in a contemporary society rent with violence and crises of understanding.

7. Suicide and Perseverance in Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940)

In this chapter I read Carson McCullers' representation of suicide in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) as an act of exclusive love, which is responded to by a call for a more pluralistic, social love. While the difficulty of communicating one's feelings to friends, lovers, and acquaintances is at the core of the novel, this challenge is also drawn into a particular crisis by John Singer's suicide. In the final section of the novel, McCullers explores reactions to Singer's death and negotiates this problem of empathy and comprehension. Although Singer's suicide brings this crisis of communication into focus, in response to his death the other characters decide to continue on with their hopes for universal, shared understanding. When set against Singer's death, this hope seems unrealisable but the effort towards it is still rendered as valuable. Singer's suicide thus appears to prompt a recognition of the value of an all-inclusive yet seemingly impossible form of love. Striving for this love could, in turn, regulate against suicide.

This chapter begins by considering the representation of Singer's suicide as a sudden disruption within the narrative. In the next section this disruption is likened to a tension between hope and despair as identified in scholarship on McCullers. I then cast Singer's suicide and the responses to it as interplaying between these contradicting perspectives of possibility and impossibility. Echoing McCullers' own narrative divisions as well as this central tension between despair and hope, this chapter develops

by first examining the characterisation of Singer and his relationship with his friend Antonapoulos before interrogating the reactions to Singer's suicide. Although distinct from the previous two chapters, a similar mitigation of the crises given rise to by suicide will be identified over the course of this chapter. Here this discussion moves on from crime and considers a more complex regulation of suicide that seems to contemplate, like Albert Camus, whether perseverance is a reason on its own to continue living.

John Singer's Suicide

McCullers' text details the lives of five interconnected subjects in a small mill town in the US South. These characters are: Mick Kelly, a young girl becoming a woman; Biff Brannon, a recently widowed café owner; Dr Copeland, a black Marxist doctor; Jake Blount, a white Marxist or anarchist agitator; and John Singer, a deaf-mute. These five individuals interact with one another; but their narratives are separated and the chapters alternately focus on each protagonist. Such division emphasises the alienation that marks social relations in the novel. The text likens this form to that of a wheel:

> Each person addressed his words mainly to the mute. Their thoughts seemed to converge in him as the spokes of a wheel lead to the centre hub.[1]

McCullers writes in a synoptic structure in which characters collide with one another, while the writing continues to present discrete interior lives. As in previous chapters, such a multi-perspective form invites a socially focused reading. Singer is, however, given a unique position as the crux, or 'hub', of this structure, and his suicide is the text's core event. Throughout the novel, the other characters are all drawn to the mystery of Singer and they try, and fail, to imagine how he lives his private life. In

[1] Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (London: Penguin, 2008), 187.

Mick’s, Biff’s, Copeland’s, and Blount’s regular visits to Singer they spend most of their time speaking about themselves. Since Singer communicates little of his own life to the other characters they tend to idealise him. He thus becomes a confidante, an often-indifferent sounding board, and a centrepiece around which the other characters rotate. His suicide then acts as a shock to this idealised characterisation and creates a baffling problem for the other characters that they negotiate in the novel’s conclusion.

At the same time, McCullers shows that this romantic view of Singer is misplaced from the beginning of the text by inviting the reader into his private life. Singer is primarily concerned with his friend, Antonapoulos, another deaf-mute. Although Singer enjoys listening to the other characters, he is often confused by them. Antonapoulos, however, provides Singer with a feeling of comprehension. In much the same manner that the other characters use Singer as a confidante, Singer idealises Antonapoulos as the only one who understands him. Antonapoulos, though, struggles to be cognisant of much more than food and satiating physical instincts. This childlike behaviour is implicitly explained as a medical condition. Indeed, Antonapoulos’ health worsens throughout the text and he is taken to a nursing home where he eventually dies. Not long after discovering that Antonapoulos is dead, Singer shoots himself in the chest. This act thus seems to be revealed to the reader as one of love and a response to loneliness. The other characters do not, though, have this knowledge. The text thereby explores the central problem, as identified by Andrew Bennett, of suicide suggesting meaning and understanding while concurrently rendering such meaning elusive and impossible. Compared to the previous chapters, though, this tension is here more directly worked through as a crisis of loneliness and community.

The description of Singer's suicide stresses the sense of disruption that Copeland, Blount, Mick, and Biff are left to deliberate. Having returned from the nursing home where he has been told of Antonapoulos' death:

> Singer left his luggage in the middle of the station floor. Then he walked to the shop. He greeted the jeweller for whom he worked with a listless turn of his hand. When he went out again there was something heavy in his pocket. For a while he rambled with bent head along the streets. But the unrefracted brilliance of the sun, the humid heat, oppressed him. He returned to his room with swollen eyes and aching head. After resting he drank a glass of iced coffee and smoked a cigarette. Then when he had washed the ash tray and the glass he brought out a pistol from his pocket and put a bullet in his chest. (286)

The carefree action of leaving 'luggage in the middle of the station floor' associates Singer's thinking with a certain self-centredness. The location of the 'middle of the station' intimates a sudden decision and suggests that Singer is not thinking of those around him. Likewise, by purchasing the instrument of his suicide from 'the jeweller for whom he worked', Singer brings an involuntary participant into his death. Such egoism invokes a Durkheimian sense of social detachment, as discussed previously. The indication that Singer does not feel a need to communicate or to find a social balm for his 'aching head', similarly presents a problem in social integration and regulation.

His 'bent head' further draws attention to this absence of social consideration, while the 'listless turn of his hand' insinuates an abandoned resolve. Singer seems to have come to his decision with an impassive acceptance. Concurrently, though, his 'rambling' and 'resting' indicates contemplation. Although Singer leaves himself time to find alternatives, his isolation does little to change his suicidal intention. The short sharp sentences and the action which plays out as a series of banal moments, foreground this feeling of inevitability. Singer's 'swollen eyes and aching head' briefly, though, notes a more pronounced sadness. The 'oppressive' heat likewise underscores a sense of overwhelming despair. This combination of suffering and banality presents Singer as

wearied. By responding to his physical strain through formulaic actions – rambling, resting, washing the ashtray and glass – Singer intimates that he is resigned to his death. The pistol shot then stands out against this normalcy and passivity as a shocking and disrupting moment of violence. This passage marks the end of the second section of McCullers' novel and the section break underlines the suddenness of Singer's death.

In this way, Singer can be considered a characteristic example of Émile Durkheim's 'egoistic suicide': he "has become detached from society, [and thus] he encounters less resistance to suicide in himself"[2]. Through such a reading, as discussed previously in Chapters 1 and 4 on John O'Hara's and Horace McCoy's texts respectively, the social influence over Singer's life is stressed. His death would then be considered a result of a social failure to 'integrate' him. Durkheim observes:

> suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual forms a part. But society cannot disintegrate without the individual simultaneously detaching himself from social life, without his own goals becoming preponderant over those of the community, in a word without his personality tending to surmount the collective personality. The more weakened the groups to which he belongs, the less he depends on them, the more he consequently depends only on himself and recognizes no other rules of conduct than what are founded on his private interests. (167)

This passage indicates a dynamic interrelation between the isolation of individuals and the 'disintegration' of society. Greater detachment of an individual weakens social bonds, while weakened social bonds in turn escalates such detachment. Singer's loneliness before his suicide, and in the act itself, would be thereby understood as a social breakdown. The disruption highlighted in the narrative can then be said to correspond to the social disorder his individualism both engages with and provokes. Following the adjustments made to Durkheimian theory in this thesis' introduction, this

[2] Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, ed. George Simpson, trans. John A. Spaulding (London: Routledge, 2002), 175.

discomposure seems to realise Singer's defiance against his society. In turn, his death would be a call for social reconstruction to repair such social 'disintegration'.

Nonetheless, Singer's decision to shoot himself in the chest presents a potential, more personal reasoning for this brutal act. There are several references to hearts in the novel. Indeed, the word 'heart' is prominent in the title. Singer seems to shoot himself in his heart and target a conventional symbol for love. Since this suicide directly follows Singer hearing of Antonapoulos' death, it is suggested that Singer kills himself as an act of love for his lost friend. In this fashion, the death recalls a traditional understanding of suicide. It echoes the suicides of Romeo and Juliet and Werther "the turbulent heart"[3], as well as the death of Velma discussed in the previous chapter. Having lost the person he feels closest too, Singer ends his life. This suicide is, then, an expression of dependence. As such, the sense of despair and oppression, as well as the anti-social and banal actions preceding the suicide, prompt an interpretation of Singer's death as an overly individuated and yet romantic response to a crisis of loneliness.

McCullers' own comments on her novel have often been referred to in scholarship as they provide some lucid interpretations of the text, and not least in relation to a question of resolution in the face of Singer's disruptive suicide. In particular, McCullers concisely describes how the conclusion to the novel provides a sense of closure which seems to contrast the challenges this crisis of communication gives rise to:

> This book will be complete in all of its phases. No loose ends will be left dangling and at the close there will be a feeling of balanced completion. The fundamental idea of the book is ironic – but the reader is not left with a sense of futility. The book reflects the past and also indicates the future.[4]

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[3] The quote here is from Durkheim referring to what he claims Werther calls himself (249). Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* contains roughly a hundred references to the heart.
[4] Carson McCullers, 'Author's Outline of "The Mute" (Later Published as *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*)', in *The Mortgaged Heart*, Ed. Margarita G. Smith, (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1972), 148.

This sense of ‘completeness’ underscores a feeling of resolution. However, and at the same time, McCullers implies that such settling is not an endpoint as the text ‘also indicates the future’. McCullers goes on to identify how this “cohesive finality” (125) will be expressed through Biff: “In the last few pages [Biff] threads through the details of the story and arrives at the most salient points. […] His reflections bring the book to a close with a final, objective roundness.” (137) In the last section of the novel, the core event of Singer’s suicide is returned to by Mick, Copeland, Blount, and Biff. They ‘reflect the past’ by considering the loss of Singer before turning to the future. In so doing, they negotiate Singer’s suicide and the crisis of understanding it poses.

The other characters, though, are not aware of his potential romantic reasoning. The death for them, as I will show, is particularly baffling. Alongside a Durkheimian ‘egoism’, this suicide, not least in Singer’s isolation, thus brings focus to the ‘undecidability’ discussed in the work of Bennett and Maurice Blanchot. McCullers’ synoptic form, in particular, invites a consideration of whether the ‘disintegration’ and uncertainty given rise to by Singer’s lonely suicide can be negotiated by the other characters. The complexity of suicide suggests that such a deliberation will inevitably be incomplete. As such, the ‘final roundness’ McCullers searches for would be inherently troubled by the suicide at the heart of her novel. The text thus gives rise to a similar central question to that considered in the previous chapter: how can suicide be responded to with any sense of resolution?

Scholarship on *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

Sarah Gleeson-White provides a means of thinking through the tensions in the text when she draws attention to the complexities of McCullers’ writing:

> McCullers' worlds are said to represent alienation, loneliness, a lack of human communication, and the failure of love. Although there is no denying the validity of these constructions of the southern grotesque, I do not think they tell the full story. The grotesque can also offer greater possibilities for representation and knowledge, and McCullers' own definition of the grotesque is dynamic in its emphasis on creative tension: "The technique is briefly this: a bold and outwardly callous juxtaposition of the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of a man with a materialistic detail" [5]

I suggest that a comparable feeling to this 'creative tension' emerges in McCullers' representation of suicide. The 'materialistic detail' of Singer's final moments, as he washes the ashtray and glass, reads as a 'callous juxtaposition of […] the immense with the trivial'. Although the scene is not conventionally amusing, the invocation of banality alongside the tragic nature of suicide highlights such 'creative tension'. 'Alienation, loneliness, a lack of human communication, and the failure of love', are brought to the fore by Singer's suicide, but Gleeson-White's comments encourage a search for 'greater possibilities' alongside this despair. This sense of possibility is most pronounced in the responses to Singer's suicide. The suicide itself, though, is a complex moment of crisis where the 'immense' overwhelms the 'trivial'. The 'whole soul' of Singer, or his love for Antonapoulos, is identified in the 'materialistic detail' of the shot to the heart. Nonetheless, the suicide concurrently overpowers this expression of love, at least for the surviving characters, by manifesting a critical social 'disintegration'.

Following Gleeson-White's lead, I argue that McCullers' novel explores a tension between the possibilities and failures of social connection and communication. The suicide, and Singer's life preceding his death, foregrounds the latter side of this tension. It is conditioned by social breakdown as Singer kills himself as a result of the

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[5] Sarah Gleeson-White, 'Revisiting the Southern Grotesque: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Case of Carson McCullers', *Southern Literary Review*, 33 (2) (2001), 109.

end of his relationship with Antonapoulos. Scholars such as Laurie Champion particularly stress this 'alienation':

> Singer represents the central Christ figure, and like Willie, his death lacks redemption. He forsakes his worshipers and they are left to suffer with feelings of loneliness and desertion. The alienation the others feel upon his death develops McCullers's theme of spiritual alienation and isolation into a profound statement: we are all lonely hunters, and we are alone in every sense of the word – alienated from other humans, separated from others, physically, and now spiritually, alone.[6]

Interpreting these comments within a Durkheimian framework would suggest that Singer's suicide underscores 'loneliness' because it is 'egoistic' in nature. His death, when read as a result of "excessive individuation" (*Suicide* 175), brings forth a challenge of communication and understanding. In turn, if this challenge exceeds Singer and 'we are all lonely hunters' as Champion advances, then this problem of shared comprehension can be recast as a more urgent, serious, and broad crisis in communication. This challenge of alienation then appears to be the principal problem Singer's suicide gives rise to, and that the other characters are left to negotiate.

Although I argue in line with Champion that the suicide brings such isolation to a critical juncture and foregrounds a crisis of communication, I propose that the text as a whole may be more hopeful than this challenge first indicates. Darren Millar defines such a feeling of hopeful possibility in McCullers' writing:

> The presence of so many dreamers under one sky is a sign of untapped utopian potential which the failure of each individual only seems to emphasize. If McCullers's work traditionally has not been identified with hopeful affirmation it is only because the personal tragedies of her characters have clouded readers' perceptions of the utopian nature of her vision, a vision that is attuned to the social potential inherent in the collective, even while it seems to insist on the tragedy that besets individuals.[7]

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[6] Laurie Champion, 'Black and White Christs in Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*', *The Southern Literary Journal,* 24 (1) (1991), 51.

[7] Darren Millar, 'The Utopian Function of Affect in Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* and *The Ballad of the Sad Cafë*', *The Southern Literary Journal*, 41 (2) (2009), 88.

Singer's suicide is a narrative of 'personal tragedy'. If his death is interpreted as a result of over-individuation, then it is social breakdown which leads to personal horror. Indeed, when the text is taken as a whole, 'the collective' and the failures of society routinely emerge as a determining force. McCullers' synoptic approach of foregrounding several characters' lives urges such an emphasis on the social milieu over and above the individual. With this understanding at the forefront, it seems that the failure to socially integrate Singer is at the root of his suicide. The possibilities of this society changing in the aftermath of the suicide would then provide the principal hope for the future.

This complex sense of possibility underlies the 'creative tension' of Singer's suicide. Indeed, the 'tension' this suicide evinces seems to insist on a 'creative' response. Precisely because the other characters do not have the information required to interpret Singer's death as a romantic act, they are compelled to find alternatives. Such positive potential alongside despair in McCullers' writing is noted in several ways by scholars. In particular, Noah Mass argues for a similar dynamic friction arising in McCullers' characterisation of the US South:

> But it was not unusual for McCullers to celebrate southern regional particulars at one moment and compare the antebellum South to Hitler's Germany at another. Much of McCullers's work shows her reaching for a language that will allow her to articulate both her love for, and her antagonism against, the South of her birth, and doing so in the context of an emerging American global presence.[8]

Mass' reading highlights McCullers' celebration and criticisms of the US South within a 'global' framework. This tension is prominent in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, which was written in the shadow of The Second World War. References to Mussolini and Hitler in the text, as well as fascism more broadly, draw attention to an impending global

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[8] Noah Mass, '"Caught and Loose": Southern Cosmopolitanism in Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and *The Member of the Wedding*', *Studies in American Fiction*, 37 (2) (2010), 231.

crisis. As in Singer's suicide, this crisis manifests itself principally in the text as a social disintegration and a problem of communication. Echoing aspects of Durkheimian theory, there is a feeling of 'alienation' that speaks to a broad social collapse.

Michael C. Smith emphasises this concern of a foundering of communication in relation to Singer and Antonapoulos:

> On the surface [Singer] seems to be compassionate and attentive to others; he looks after Antonapoulos and later in the novel visits him at the asylum before finally being driven to suicide by the Greek's death. But as the novel progresses, the reasons for Singer's actions become increasingly suspect. He is drawn to Antonapoulos for essentially selfish reasons. The Greek, because he is a moron as well as a mute, can neither understand nor question Singer. Thus Antonapoulos is the perfect vehicle for Singer to use in creating a dream world of imagined communication. He 'talks' to his friend in sign language unconcerned that Antonapoulos does not understand. His lack of comprehension simply 'did not matter' to Singer, who sings for no one but himself.[9]

Here Singer's individuation, and his 'dream world of imagined communication', come to the fore as particular problems of comprehension. Because Antonapoulos cannot entirely understand Singer, their relationship becomes 'suspect'. Singer's actions preceding his suicide likewise lack an attentiveness to others. Furthermore, his death highlights this isolation and, since it results from the loss of Antonapoulos, this 'suspect' relationship. This crisis of communication then results in suicide, and Singer's 'selfish reasoning' is brought to a juncture. In turn, it seems the text calls for a collective response to better manage suicide. Such a response, however, still has to contend with the complexity of suicide. I therefore suggest, in similarity to the previous chapters, that the critical tendency to ascribe either hope or despair to McCullers' work appears to be troubled by such 'ambivalence'. Here, though, I want to develop this discussion by focusing on how such complexity is moderated.

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[9] Michael C. Smith, '"A Voice in a Fugue": Characters and Musical Structure in Carson McCullers' *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 25 (2) (1979), 260.

Casting the ‘tension’ of the text in the ‘creative’ terms considered by Gleeson-White may itself provide a means of negotiating the crisis of understanding that suicide gives rise to. In line with critics such as Champion, Millar, and Mass, I argue that *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* invites an interrogation of social behaviour in the light of individual tragedy. Suicide, and the possibilities of other characters moving on from suicide, thus seem to be intertwined with a social consideration of communication and understanding. It follows that a ‘social reconstruction’ of this ‘disintegration’, in the manner considered in relation to the work of Margaret Higonnet in this thesis, would be found in the strengthening of social bonds and the rebuilding of communal relations. Champion suggests that individuals seem inherently lonely in the text. Millar, on the other hand, notes a more optimistic, ‘utopian potential’. In this chapter, I investigate whether these two possibilities of hope and despair can be combined, as they appear to be in Singer’s suicide when it is read as an act of social disintegration and love.

Singer and Antonapoulos

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter opens with an image that draws attention to the central preoccupations of Singer’s narrative, which reach their climax in Singer’s suicide. These are the challenges of communication and his love for Antonapoulos:

> In the town there were two mutes and they were always together. Early every morning they would come out from the house where they lived and walk arm in arm down the street to work. The two friends were very different. (7)

Opening the novel with two mutes brings early focus to challenges of understanding. The fact that the pair are ‘arm in arm’, live in the same house, and are ‘always together’ implies a bond closer than ‘friends’. But this togetherness is destabilised by the

conflicting description that they ‘were very different.’ The tension between close interaction and miscomprehension thus comes to the fore from the very start of the text.

The narrative continues to bring focus to this friction between unity and disparity as Singer’s and Antonapoulos’ interactions in the privacy of their shared home are revealed:

> In the dusk the two mutes walked slowly home together. At home Singer was always talking to Antonapoulos. His hands shaped the words in a swift series of designs. His face was eager and his grey-green eyes sparkled brightly. With his thin, strong hands he told Antonapoulos all that had happened during the day.
> Antonapoulos sat back lazily and looked at Singer. It was seldom that he ever moved his hands to speak at all – and then it was to say that he wanted to eat or to sleep or to drink. These three things he always said with the same vague, fumbling signs. […] Singer never knew just how much his friend understood of all the things he told him. But it did not matter. (8)

The narrative here highlights Antonapolous’ and Singer’s distinct approaches to communication. Singer takes great care to shape his words with precision; Antonapolous, comparatively, ‘fumbles’. This stylistic variance in how they move their hands is also apparent in the content of what they say. Singer looks back to express, explain, and consider his day. It seems that Singer uses this relationship as a means of revisiting and working through his experiences elsewhere. Antonapoulos, on the other hand, focuses on the present. He tries to communicate physical desires and his language is marked by these wants. The fact Antonapoulos does not, or cannot, respond to Singer indicates a lack of care or understanding. Singer’s ‘sparkling’ eyes imply that he does not recognise this imbalance. He is ‘always talking’ because this is not a conversation but a monologue. Smith suggests that the comment ‘it did not matter’ evidences Singer’s selfishness. Similarly, Antonapoulos’ inability to express more than his own desires can be read as selfish. As such, communication here appears to be practiced and yet broken. This unsettled interaction calls attention to a similar crisis of connection as

that evinced in Singer's suicide: both characters appear to feel a need to express themselves, yet they are unable to bridge the gap between them.

Singer's measured articulation here stands in contrast to the lonely, 'listless' wave when he buys the gun for his suicide. In comparison, then, this disconnected relationship seems to be enough to provide Singer a reason to live. Antonapoulos, though, becomes ill and is eventually sent to an "insane asylum" (12). This final breakdown, when the 'spiritual' distance noted by Champion is combined with a physical separation, leads to Singer feeling 'profoundly' alone. The descriptions of Singer's response to this first loss of Antonapoulos echo the suicide scene:

> Each evening the mute walked alone for hours in the street. Sometimes the nights were cold with the sharp, wet winds of March and it would be raining heavily. But to him this did not matter. His gait was agitated and he always kept his hands stuffed tight into the pockets of his trousers. Then as the weeks passed the days grew warm and languorous. His agitation gave way to exhaustion and there was a look about him of deep calm. In his face there came to be a brooding peace that is seen most often in the faces of the very sorrowful or the very wise. But still he wandered through the streets of the town, always silent and alone. (15)

This passage marks the end of the introduction to Singer in the novel. Between this portrayal and the suicide, through the majority of the novel, Singer's 'agitation' and 'very sorrowful' state do not change. He may continue to walk as he did with Antonapoulos, but now these strolls are marked by loneliness. Singer stuffs his hands into his pockets as if he is refusing to communicate. His 'agitation' appears to emotionally and physically overwhelm him. This sense of being overcome, similar to the 'oppressive' heat on the day Singer kills himself, is reflected in the 'languorous' days. Although Singer's face expresses 'a brooding peace' and a look of 'deep calm' against this 'agitation', these identifications are only superficial. His distress is not relieved; he is merely exhausted by it. His wearied state of being 'silent and alone' then does not alter between here and the suicide. Through all of his interactions with the

other characters in the novel, Singer remains isolated and unable to forge a 'meaningful' relationship in the manner he imagines with Antonapoulos.

Blanchot considers such lonely walks in relation to suicide:

> Nerval, it is said, wandered adrift in the streets before hanging himself. But aimless wandering is already death; it is the mortal error he must finally interrupt by immobilizing himself. Hence the hauntingly repetitive character of suicidal gestures. He who, through clumsiness, has missed his own death, is like a ghost returning only to continue to fire upon his own disappearance. He can only kill himself over and over.[10]

Singer likewise seems to 'wander adrift'. Singer's seeming resignation after the first loss of Antonapolous can be interpreted in light of Blanchot's comments as prefiguring his suicide. His isolated walks, precisely because they are isolated, are an example of 'mortal error'. Singer only has one, completed, effort at suicide. However, his 'aimless wandering' seems to indicate and prefigure the loneliness and crisis of communication that will eventually result in his 'immobilising himself' through suicide. Because Singer does not replace the imagined world of understanding he has with Antonapoulos, he does not work through the 'egoism' that results in his suicide. Instead, he is 'like a ghost' in the novel, waiting to conclude his already waning relationship with Antonapoulos through suicide. This bleakness thus appears to be an indictment of the alienation that Singer's life foregrounds.

In contrast to a Durkheimian conception of social determination, however, Singer's isolation appears to be self-established. His principal problem is that he values this uneven relationship with Antonapoulos to the extent that he is dependent on it. This reliance is illustrated in a series of letters that Singer writes to Antonapoulos but destroys before sending – a destruction that further emphasises the one-sided nature of

[10] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1982), 102.

Singer's relationship with his friend. The most prominent of these missives is both a love letter and, with hindsight, a suicide note. Singer writes:

> I think of us always and remember everything. I long for the food you used to make. At the New York Café it is much worse than it used to be. I found a cooked fly in my soup not long ago. It was mixed with the vegetables and the noodles like letters. But that is nothing. The way I need you is a lonliness I cannot bear. Soon I will come again. My vacation is not due for six months more but I think I can arrange it before then. I think I will have to. I am not meant to be alone and without you who understands.
>
> Always,
>
> John Singer (191) [sic.]

Singer expresses his feelings most directly in this letter. His need to see Antonapoulos appears to be essential; it is something he 'has' to do. His inability to 'bear' his isolation then leads to a sense that he cannot continue living. By suggesting he is 'not meant to be alone and without you', Singer indicates the suicide that follows Antonapoulos' death. Again, this suicidal feeling is marked by the 'trivial' and the 'immense' – 'a cooked fly' and 'loneliness'. Associating suicide with this 'technique' of 'creative tension' intimates that there may be a greater sense of possibility here than Singer acknowledges.

Nonetheless, Singer does not identify a purpose in living that can satisfy him beyond his relationship with Antonapoulos. His description that Antonapoulos is the one 'who understands' does not fit with the previous acknowledgement that he does not know how much Antonapoulos comprehends. It follows that Singer's idealisation is a fantasy that blinds him to alternative possibilities. Smith's argument that Singer constructs a 'dream world of imagined communication' is thus brought to the fore. Although Singer misperceives Antonapoulos, he confesses to a deep need for this 'dream world'. Signing off with the word 'always' encourages a reading of this dependency as one of love. Perhaps then, if Singer's love could look beyond Antonapoulos and embrace the complex possibilities of 'creative tension', he would be able to negotiate his loneliness and the suicide it leads to.

This love for Antonapoulos, though, seems to be inextricable from Singer and particularly his heart. The narrative regularly notes that Antonapoulos is "the friend to whom [Singer] told all that was in his heart." (180) The title of the novel suggests that pursuing the passions of the heart, as Singer does, inevitably leads to isolation. As observed previously, Singer's final shot to the chest can be read as a destruction of this heart. The shot to the chest thus appears to be a final statement, and perhaps an inevitable outcome, of Singer's love, loss, and loneliness. David Foster Wallace in his speech 'This is Water' argues:

> It is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot themselves in: the head. They shoot the terrible master.[11]

For Singer, the 'master' is not his mind but his heart: his actions are conditioned by his love for Antonapoulos. Singer's inability to manage this ardour is marked by the misapprehension of his friend. There is little ambiguity in Singer's decision to kill himself; his reasoning of love is brought forth in his letters, the timing of his death, and the bullet to the chest. Although this love evinces a form of care, the suicide it results in presents a more problematic social breakdown. The text thereby indicates that such a binary conception of love, particularly in the form of a one-sided relationship, is invariably both self and socially destructive.

This connection between love and suicide is considered by the most perceptive character in the novel, Biff Brannon. Early in the novel, following the death of his wife, Biff asks himself, "Why? Why was it that in cases of real love the one who is left does not more often follow the beloved by suicide?" (111) Singer's suicide is a realisation of such 'real love'. His desire is so concentrated on a single individual that Antonapoulos'

[11] David Foster Wallace, 'This is Water', Kenyon Commencement Address 2005 <https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/DFWKenyonAddress2005.pdf> [accessed 20 September 2017]

death is also his own end. Such violence, though, undermines this binary conception of 'real love' by manifesting it in a cycle of self-destruction. It is a love which seems to be defined through isolation and 'egoistic suicide'. Because Singer imagines an 'ideal world of communication' with Antonapoulos, he is unable to find an alternative source of social purpose. In turn, following the dynamic escalation of 'disintegration' in Durkheimian theory, the suicide which results from this lack of purpose then manifests a crisis for Singer's society.

At the same time, this crisis appears to be concurrently mitigated by Singer's isolation and the focus on his exclusive relationship with Antonapoulos. Precisely because Singer's life is defined by his loneliness, his death presents a controlled problem. If Singer's isolation is at least partly self-established by his lonely walks and 'dream world', then in turn it seems that his death is primarily a reflection of himself rather than his society. In a similar sense to the self-reflexive identification of Phyllis with death as described in Chapter 5, suicide here is in some ways closed in upon itself. Unlike Julian English's admonishment of 'bastards' discussed in Chapter 1, Singer's suicide seems self-involved. While this death calls attention to a complex crisis of communication and acts as a social disruption, this suicide seems less challenging than those discussed in the first four chapters of this thesis. As an act of love, it reads in similarly 'sentimental' terms as analysed in the previous chapter. This death, as a suicide, presents problems of 'ambivalence' and a crisis of comprehension. But since there is a certain intelligibility associated with Singer's decision to die, it follows that a relatively coherent social response to this complexity may similarly arise.

Responding to Suicide

The last of the novel's three parts is the shortest and is set two months after Singer's suicide. McCullers here expresses the divisibility and separation of her various storylines by giving a solitary chapter to each character set during different periods of a day. This temporal and structural atomisation is exacerbated when both Blount and Copeland leave the town entirely. Such isolation is negotiated in this final section through the various reactions to Singer's suicide. Biff brings focus to the central concern raised by the assorted relationships with Singer: "The thing that mattered was the way Blount and Mick made of him a sort of home-made God." (204) This description echoes Singer's relationship with Antonapoulos. He too fashions an ideal 'home-made God' in his friend. Singer goes so far as to dress Antonapoulos in this image. He provides him clothes, and the narrative describes Antonapoulos, "Sitting motionless in his bright, rich garments he seemed like some wise king from a legend." (196) The wisdom ascribed to Antonapoulos here recalls Singer's identification of his friend as 'one who understands'. This unbalanced relationship with Antonapoulos then recurs in the other characters' interactions with Singer.

Copeland, for instance, suggests "[Singer] was a wise man, and he understood the true, strong purpose in a way that other white men could not." (121) Similarly, Blount and Mick identify Singer as someone who uniquely understands them (65 and 213-14). Biff is the only character who is sceptical of Singer's comprehension. The narrative observes, "Only Biff was serious. He wanted to ascertain if the mute really understood what was said to him." (25) The reader is invited to share this cynicism when the narrative provides insight into Singer's thoughts and his understanding is

revealed to be questionable. Rather than engaging with the other characters, Singer is dismissive:

> At first he had not understood the four people at all. They talked and they talked – and as the months went on they talked more and more. He became so used to their lips that he understood each word they said. And then after a while he knew what each one of them would say before he began, because the meaning was always the same. (181-82)

Although Singer recognises the words, he seems indifferent to their content. By suggesting that 'the meaning was always the same', Singer appears to disregard the value that the other characters find in their conversations. Again, as with Antonapoulos, communication is one-sided and feelings are not shared. Combining Blanchot's comments with Durkheim's, this effort and failure at communication can be described as a 'hauntingly repetitive' and 'aimless' set of gestures that draws attention to an 'egoism' and 'anomie' which increase the risk of suicide. When Singer's relationship with Antonapoulos ends, he does indeed resort to suicide. Mick, Copeland, Blount, and Biff face a similar loss after the suicide of Singer, but they react very differently. Their responses to Singer's death thus provide an alternative understanding which could, perhaps, work to resist suicide.

Dr Copeland's passion is a marked counterpoint to that of Singer. His life is directed by a love that extends beyond any one individual and into a desire for progress for his race. Copeland, though, estranges his children as they do not believe in what he repeatedly describes as 'the strong, true purpose' (i.e. 125). His love, which is not universal, becomes violent as he pushes his family away. Again, then, there is a challenge of communication resulting in alienation. The text stresses that "[Copeland] wanted to speak to his son, but he could think of nothing to say" (81). This inability to express himself dominates Copeland's narrative:

> How much that he had said today was understood? How much would be of any value? He recalled the words he had used, and they seemed to

> fade and lose their strength. The words left unsaid were heavier on his heart. They rolled up to his lips and fretted them. The faces of his suffering people moved in a swelling mass before his eyes. And as he steered the automobile slowly down the street his heart turned with this angry, restless love. (175)

Copeland's 'angry, restless love' is mishandled as it separates him from his family and overwhelms him to the point that he cannot convey himself effectively. It does, though, give him a hope and a purpose that Singer does not have. Copeland's desire for communication may be disrupted by his inability to express his 'purpose' in a definitive articulation, but, rather than embracing death, he perseveres with this endeavour.

The end of Copeland's narrative returns him to this effort to cogently express himself. He is dying from TB and will be reunited with his children. This reunion offers hope, although it is an optimism restricted by Copeland's struggle to convey his 'strong, true purpose'. The key terms of 'swelling' of his 'heavy heart' and a lack of 'strength' are repeated as Copeland feels desperate to speak yet cannot communicate:

> He felt the fire in him and he could not be still. He wanted to sit up and speak in a loud voice – yet when he tried to raise himself he could not find the strength. The words in his heart grew big and they would not be silent. But the old man had ceased to listen and there was no one to hear him. (293)

This moment of passion unsatisfied, that has echoed time and again in Copeland's narrative, marks the end of his story. Although he is dying, he continues with hope. This persistence is manifested in the 'fire' which burns within him throughout the novel and in his ongoing struggle to find the words to impart his 'true purpose'. Copeland's response to Singer's suicide is thus to continue. Where Singer stops trying to communicate by killing himself following the loss of Antonapoulos, Copeland perseveres after the loss of Singer.

Jake Blount's narrative follows a similar path. Where Copeland reiterates the phrase 'strong, true purpose', Blount repeatedly turns to the concept of 'people who

know' (i.e. 24). Again, this phrase has no sustained definition but is associated with an opposition to contemporary capitalist social structures. These repetitions provide a gloss over the moments when Blount and Copeland struggle to express themselves. The return to such nebulous terms suggests that Copeland and Blount are unable to fully communicate their beliefs. This repetitiveness also, though, asserts a sense of conviction that is maintained in the face of Singer's suicide. Blount's political philosophy is unclear and varies from strike action to anarchistic violence. As Biff points out, "There were many things about the fellow that seemed contrary." (18) Nonetheless, much like Copeland, Blount envisions a form of social progress through collective action. Blount's insurmountable problem is that he, again mirroring Copeland, cannot forge this coherency through communication. As he acknowledges, "No matter what I say I can't seem to make them [anyone] see the truth." (118) The crisis in communication is thus underscored here in the inability to persuade through words.

Blount's final section begins with a race riot, but it is a brawl in which "each man was for himself" (295). While the riot is loaded with complex connotations in the context of the US South, these are quickly dispersed by the descent into individualistic violence. The implication, then, is that rather than a racial conflict there is a deeper problem of individualism which is being challenged. Since Singer is isolated to a greater degree than the other characters, this individualism is most prominent in his narrative. He does not seek a meaningful relationship beyond his interaction with Antonapoulos, whereas the other characters are able to look further than their interactions with Singer. Blount's desires to continue looking beyond such isolation would thereby work against Singer's 'egoistic suicide'.

It is after this dramatic fight that Blount comes to terms with Singer's death. Just as he has always done, Blount leaves town and continues his vagrant travelling. Before

he goes, though, he visits Biff who, unsolicited, gives him forty dollars. The explanation for this present is simply because Biff is, as Blount states, “a right decent guy” (301). This expression of friendship through gift giving, however, only manifests a sense of community through its concurrent breakdown. The act of giving a gift is inextricable from Blount leaving. It is an act of sharing which marks the end of a relationship. Such a formulation implies that community can be forged through care, but only tentatively and momentarily. These transient but hopeful possibilities, which are also implicit in Copeland’s narrative, become explicit in Blount’s departure:

> he was going. All was to begin another time. The road ahead lay to the north and slightly to the west. But he would not go too far away. He would not leave the South. That was one clear thing. There was hope in him, and soon perhaps the outline of his journey would take form. (304-05)

At the same time as Blount looks forward with optimism., he recognises that nothing has yet changed. Like Copeland, Blount intends to continue on with his struggle, and, in both cases, it seems unlikely that their endeavours will be successful. These characters, though, respond to the loss of their friend by persevering with the effort to communicate their beliefs.

Blount’s leaving is followed by Mick’s arrival at the café. Mick’s narrative has a steady trajectory formed by the dissolution of childhood dreams. Almost everything of her youth, from her clothes, to how often she hears music, to her desires, slowly fade. Singer’s death does not disrupt this trend. In fact, it is while he is living that Singer catalyses the premature ending of adolescence for Mick. Her family is in financial trouble and there is the opportunity for Mick to be employed with the caveat that she would leave school at fourteen. In the final moments of consideration, she feels she requires Singer’s advice and authorisation. With little thought he tells her to take the job. Mick’s desire to help her family and their wish to protect her invokes a social

awareness that Singer lacks. Following this counsel, Singer leaves to try and visit Antonapoulos for the last time. He does not think of Mick's job again. Instead, he finds that Antonapoulos has died before returning to the town, and to Mick's boarding house, to kill himself. The next time Mick sees Singer, she finds his body. Singer's self-centredness is again revealed when he leaves his body to be found in such a fashion. His suicide is then directly associated with Mick's job, and she remarks, "There were these two things she could never believe. That Mister Singer had killed himself and was dead. And that she was grown and had to work at Woolworths." (306) Mick's disbelief underscores the disruption of Singer's suicide as well as her desire to turn away from it.

At the end of Mick's narrative, she sits alone after work with a chocolate sundae and a beer. Her choice of food and drink intimates her position between childhood and adulthood. This scene, when considered against the youthful vibrancy with which Mick had been introduced in the novel, is bleak. There is, however, still a sense of optimism:

> But the store hadn't asked her to take the job. So there was nothing to be mad at. It was like she was cheated. Only nobody had cheated her. So there was nobody to take it out on. However, just the same she had that feeling. Cheated.
> But maybe it would be true about the piano and turn out O.K. Maybe she would get a chance soon. Else what the hell good had it all been – the way she felt about music and the plans she had made in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense. And it was too and it was too and it was too and it was too. It was some good.
> All right!
> O.K.!
> Some good. (308)

Mick recognises a social component to her position when she suggests 'there was nobody to take it out on'. Her musical ambition is more self-focused than Copeland's or Blount's revolutionary ideals. But she still looks to her community to buttress her desires. Indeed, Mick associates her job with whether 'anything made sense'. She thus seems to hope that meaning can be made by the society in which she lives, before deciding to persevere with this belief. However, her repetition of 'it was some good'

stresses that the ordering of meaning by her society is only sustained by reiteration. She requires validation that her dreams have a deeper purpose and associates such validation with repetition: by continuing to think positively about her dreams, they continue to have value. It follows that the disruption of Singer's suicide is worked through by Mick as she turns to a social 'sense' forged in ongoing repetition. Like Copeland and Blount, she responds to loss through perseverance.

Mick is more distraught than Copeland and Blount, and the end of her narrative is bleaker than theirs. She does, however, similarly respond to Singer's suicide by turning to the future. Her optimism is evinced in the line 'Maybe she would get a chance soon.' Reiterating Copeland's and Blount's narratives, Mick envisions the possibility of change. Such change may seem unlikely, but all three characters choose to persevere with hope. This perseverance directly contrasts Singer's decision to kill himself. Like Mick, Copeland stresses that he cannot comprehend Singer's death:

> the mystery of his suicide had left him baffled and without support. There was neither beginning nor end to his sorrow. Nor understanding. Always he would return in his thoughts to this white man who was not insolent or scornful but who was just. And how can the dead be truly dead when they still live in the souls of those who were left behind? But all of this he must not think. He must thrust it from him now. (290)

Copeland here highlights the core themes of loneliness and loss. The two-word sentence 'Nor understanding' draws attention to the confusion Singer's suicide elicits as a response to such isolation. However, Copeland pushes this uncertainty away. His querying of whether the dead are 'truly dead' suggests a downplaying of the loss of Singer. He then forces himself not to think of Singer, and the term 'thrust' realises this strong determination to focus on the future.

Blount intimates a similar feeling when he considers why Singer killed himself:

> Singer was dead. And the way he had felt when he had first heard that he had killed himself was not sad – it was angry. He was before a wall. He remembered all the innermost thoughts that he had told to Singer,

> and with his death it seemed to him that they were lost. And why had Singer wanted to end his life? Maybe he had gone insane. But anyway he was dead, dead, dead. He could not be seen or spoken to, and the room where they had spent so many hours had been rented to a girl who was a typist. He could go there no longer. He was alone. A wall, a flight of stairs, an open road. (297)

Blount's repetition of the word 'dead' and the emphasis on Singer's absence, again bring forth a feeling of loss. Unlike Copeland, Blount does think of Singer as 'truly dead'. However, this loss and the loneliness Blount confesses to seem to be short lived. The 'wall' turns to 'stairs' and finally to an 'open road'. Blount, in a manner akin to Mick and Copeland, turns attention to the future. He dismisses suicide as the act of someone who is liable to have 'gone insane'. Not only do these characters move on from the death of Singer, but the broader society also appears to continue unabated here: Singer's room has already been rented again. These narratives thus appear to recognise the 'undecidability' of suicide, and the crisis of comprehension it entails, before moving on from this bafflement by persevering with already established hopes and ideals.

The final chapter elucidates this approach of using the tragedy of Singer's suicide as a base from which to search for a more optimistic future. This chapter focuses on Biff Brannon. Biff's uniqueness is revealed both in the nature of his narrative, through his inquisitive scrutiny of himself and all of the other characters, as well as in explicit statements from Singer. Singer describes him as "a thoughtful one" (190) and explicates, "the New York Café owner is different – he is not just like the others. […] He watches. The others all have something they hate. And they all have something they love" (189). Biff analyses events through inductive reasoning. He experiments with alternative viewpoints; for instance, by wearing perfume and by trying to understand the "freaks" (23) in his bar. This positioning of Biff as a non-hating, non-loving detective figure, not dissimilar to Philip Marlowe, then enables him to articulate a particularly informed and thoughtful response to the suicide.

At the end of the novel, Biff provides his final response to what he describes as:

> The riddle. The question that had taken root in him and would not let him rest. The puzzle of Singer and the rest of them. More than a year had gone by since it had started. […] And now for a month Singer had been dead and buried. And the riddle was still with him, so that he could not be tranquil. There was something not natural about it all – something like an ugly joke. When he thought of it he felt uneasy and in some unknown way afraid.
> He had managed about the funeral. They had left all that to him. Singer's affairs were in a mess. There were instalments due on everything he owed and the beneficiary of his life insurance was deceased. There was just enough to bury him. (311)

Biff's inability to entirely unravel the 'riddle' of Singer troubles him. It is the sense of uncertainty and what is 'unknown' that seems most unsettling. But Biff also takes a more pragmatic approach than the other characters. By managing the funeral, he is able to discover more about Singer. Again, Singer's lack of social awareness is foregrounded in the recognition that his financial 'affairs were in a mess'. The phrase 'something like an ugly joke' stands out and intimates a compounding of the 'tragic and the humorous'. Such a contradiction invokes McCullers' 'creative tension' as well as the 'uneasiness' caused by suicide. Biff then, perhaps because of this pragmatism and 'creative tension', is able to move on from suicide at the end of his narrative.

As with Copeland, Mick, and Blount, there is a sense of friction in Biff's thinking which derives from the loss of Singer. However, Biff focuses on how this strain plays out in living, rather than death. This discord develops from an all-embracing love being caught against a dark potential future:

> in a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valour. And of those who labour and of those who – one word – love. His soul expanded. But for a moment only. For in him he felt a warning, a shaft of terror. Between the two worlds he was suspended. He saw that he was looking at his own face in the counter glass before him. Sweat glistened on his temples and his face was contorted. One eye was opened wider than the other. The left eye delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error and ruin. And he was suspended between radiance and darkness. Between bitter irony and faith. Sharply he turned away.

> ‘Louis!’ he called ‘Louis! Louis!’
> Again there was no answer. But, motherogod, was he a sensible man or was he not? And how could this terror throttle him like this when he didn’t even know what caused it? And would he just stand here like a jittery ninny or would he pull himself together and be reasonable? For after all *was* he a sensible man or was he not? Biff wet his handkerchief beneath the water tap and patted his drawn, tense face. Somehow he remembered that the awning had not yet been raised. As he went to the door his walk gained steadiness. And when at last he was inside again he composed himself soberly to await the morning sun. (312)

Biff’s final resolution is to be ‘sensible’ and to live regardless. As Biff argues for continued existence, he seems to reject Singer’s decision to die. As noted previously, The Second World War looms over the novel, and Biff appears to be engaging with this sense of global fear when he recognises ‘a future of blackness, error and ruin’. He also, though, finds ‘radiance’ against this ‘darkness’. This light is rendered through social-consciousness in the form of ‘human struggle’. Biff’s ‘suspension’ is one that looks forwards; the past is ‘narrow’ and the future ‘wide’. As such, it is associated with living. It is Biff, not Singer, who thereby explores the tensions underlying *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. His response to the lack of an answer, both to his call for Louis and his interrogation of life, is to persevere. This decision identifies the moment in which the ‘trivial’ and everyday reclaims a position above the ‘immense’. In other words, being ‘reasonable’ and calling attention to day-to-day tasks, such as raising an awning, works to quell the discomposing, existential questions brought to the fore by Singer’s suicide.

Like Copeland, Blount, and Mick, Biff’s response in the aftermath of Singer’s suicide is to consider future possibilities. These characters, in the end, ‘turn away’ from the tension of ‘undecidability’ associated with suicide. The contradictions and complexities of suicide, as discussed throughout this thesis, then seem to be mitigated by bringing focus towards a brighter social future and the routine activities of living. Such a forward looking, socially focused approach calls forth the ‘utopian potential’ described by Millar as a response to suicide. However, this endeavour for love and

social advancement appears to be a permanent 'struggle' against the intrinsic loneliness noted by Champion. The core purpose these characters seem to find, that leads them away from suicide, is to persevere. Continuance thus offers a meaning for life that regulates against suicide. Although in some fundamental ways alone, these characters are socially integrated enough to see possibilities. I suggest this reading of McCullers' text can be distilled in comparison with the work of Camus.

I recast this 'utopian potential' in absurd terms in order to stress the complex struggle that still dominates the lives of McCullers' characters, and how this struggle can work to regulate against suicide. Their hopes may ultimately be impossible to realise, but Copeland, Blount, Mick, and Biff still choose to continue. Singer's suicide is thus presented in comparison to be misguided and unproductive. Indeed, particularly in light of the 'egoism' foregrounded in Singer's suicide, his death reads as a failure to exercise the broad, social love espoused by Biff. This reasoning against suicide is similar to the logic of Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). The hope attributed to McCullers' characters means that they themselves cannot be considered absurd. It is the text as a whole which prompts a response to suicide that works in a fashion redolent of Camus' understanding of the absurd.

Camus suggests that the only philosophically justifiable response to the proposition of suicide is to reject it and continue with "a confrontation [between individual human and world] and an unceasing struggle"[12]. He notes that finding a fundamental meaning to life, or a resolution to the absurd human condition, is impossible. However, the task itself, living, and the conscious and in some ways rebellious work of living, still has purpose. More precisely Camus states, "revolt gives life its value." (53) It is persevering against an insurmountable challenge, like Sisyphus

[12] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2005), 30.

compelled for eternity to push a boulder up a mountain and watch it roll back down, that provides life, and thus continuing to live, with value. Revolting against the impossibility of finding a meaning to life by facing this absurd problem and continuing regardless is then itself a meaning for living. The permanence of this 'confrontation' indicates an insurmountable boundary, such as Sisyphus' task. But this difficult and challenging state of affairs still provides a cogent and consistent regulation against suicide.

The challenge of communicating a universal love is a similar insurmountable boundary in McCullers' novel. In the representation of Singer's suicide, this challenge comes into focus as a crisis of comprehension and a social 'disintegration'. This crisis is, however, managed by the other characters. By highlighting the future, the text notes that there are more productive possibilities than suicide. Singer's death still troubles the surviving characters: it is a baffling event that they cannot fully understand. This lack of comprehension, though, does not appear to be particularly debilitating. Instead, Copeland, Blount, Mick, and Biff all find reasons to continue struggling in much the same way as they did when Singer was alive. They persevere in their failing efforts to forge communal relations after the loss of their friend. This reaction directly opposes Singer's choice of suicide following the death of Antonapoulos. Suicide thus gives rise to a crisis of communication in this novel, but the text also invites a continuing struggle against this crisis. It seems, then, that this crisis can be managed by living and the effort towards an impossible, universal, love-based communication.

Conclusion

The use of multiple narrative perspectives in the novel invites a social interrogation of Singer's suicide. Although Singer is described as the 'hub' of the text, the 'wheel' of

other characters continues turning without him. This continuance is particularly manifested in the perseverance that is celebrated in the final section of the novel. While Copeland, Blount, Mick, and Biff all find some purpose for their lives to persevere with, Singer is overwhelmed by an exclusive relationship with Antonapoulos. His death, in Durkheimian terms, results from over-individuation. Singer's suicide thus registers an absence of a broader social awareness as well as an increasing social 'disintegration'. The misunderstanding of the other characters and this social breakdown come to a critical juncture when Singer ends his life. His death then elicits a baffling problem for Singer's acquaintances through a crisis of communication and understanding.

The final section of the text, however, works to move on from this crisis. Copeland, Blount, Mick, and Biff cannot 'solve the riddle' or offer complete resolution to the complex challenge of Singer's suicide. They are, though, able to provide alternative approaches to the loss of an idealised friend. Biff's conclusion, in particular, calls forth a broad, social vision, as he stresses 'love' as a human quality associated with 'labour'. This 'radiance' against 'darkness', like Copeland's 'true purpose', Blount's revolution with 'people who know', and Mick's dreams, seems impossible to realise. There is still then a 'creative tension' between 'bitter irony and faith' in the text. In striving for a form of communication they cannot realise, these characters remain alienated. Nonetheless, this struggle seems to be worthwhile. If a crisis of isolation is the primary driver of Singer's suicide, and yet the work towards a seemingly impossible form of communication is a reason for living that can be found in the face of the suicide, then the novel can be said to bring forth an absurd understanding. Here it is the ongoing struggle for a universal love that 'gives life its value', and thus works to regulate against suicide.

This interpretation is in partial contrast to other texts examined in this thesis. In particular, McCullers offers an alternative response to a crisis of suicide than John O'Hara in *Appointment in Samarra* (1934). In both novels, an individual creates a baffling problem when they kill themselves. The Gibbsville society in O'Hara's text reacts by reasserting standardised gestures. They seem to continue not with hope but by reiterating a social order that has been rendered inadequate and suspect. In McCullers' text, there is a more coherent sense of change that is registered by the characters' explicit desires for social development. While the surviving characters similarly persevere with their lives following a suicide, McCullers' cast have purposes that are determined by optimism for a different future. McCullers particularly specifies this hope in the 'one word – love'. In contrast, O'Hara's text foregrounds the complexity of suicide and calls for a less defined alternative future by highlighting current social failings rather than hopes for change. Therefore, these texts register a similar recognition of the disorienting crisis suicide poses, but vary in terms of where responses to such crisis can be found. Through the adjusted Durkheimian approach taken in this thesis, this variance can be identified in how characters respond to the complexity of suicide and consider the potential social changes that may help to better manage suicide. In McCullers' novel, perseverance against a crisis of communication appears to be an effective means of regulating against suicide.

Conclusion

Here I explore a tension of crisis and possibility that has emerged in this study by returning to the central questions raised in this thesis' introduction: is there a potential for 'altered discourses', 'social reconstruction', and 'thinking anew' in the face of suicide crises? Can there still be such calls for social change alongside the 'undecidability' identified in literary suicidology? If so, can such change be specified, or is suicide only ever an act that is subsumed by negation and ambivalence? And finally, what, if anything, can a representation of suicide say about a society which is itself in crisis?

All of the texts studied within this thesis represent suicide as a crisis that invites some form of social response or 'social reconstruction'. However, there are marked differences between these responses, the texts all have their own distinct concerns and they do not all present forms of 'thinking anew'.

The Cadillac suicide at the end of John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* renders a fundamental social crisis as it presents an undisciplined form of individualism, which the society O'Hara depicts seems unable to address. The failures of contemporary society in managing Julian English and his death then appear to register a need for radical 'social reconstruction' to better handle such individualism. In William Faulkner's *Light in August*, Joe's and Mrs Hightower's deaths bring focus to the limits of racist and patriarchal social orders. The seeming inability to make sense of Joe and

Mrs Hightower by disciplining them in racial and patriarchal terms before and after their suicides presents a problem of comprehension for their society, which I proposed, in relation to the work of Calvin Warren, troubles certain racist and patriarchal ways of thinking. Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* similarly contemplates the contradictions of a black suicide in an anti-black world, and highlights the inadequacies of an anti-black worldview. Thurman's novel encourages a reading that considers Paul beyond his racial and sexual identity, whilst simultaneously indicating that such a reading is impossible within contemporary anti-black, anti-gay social constructions. Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* likewise portrays suicide as a crucial problem for social understanding. Robert's struggle to express a shared pain, similarly to Gloria's difficulties in communicating her suffering, I suggested works as a call for new alternative forms of expression to negotiate suicide and suicidal desire. I propose, then, that all four of these texts represent suicide as an act from which radical forms of 'thinking anew' – new ways of integrating individuals, new discourses on race or patriarchy, new forms of expressing pain – are registered and solicited.

While these novels are distinct in what form 'social reconstruction' may occur, they all speak to principal inadequacies in how we understand each other. Indeed, they seem to reach a limit of understanding that is evinced by suicide, and then, in Maurice Blanchot's terms, they "overflow"[1]. As Blanchot specifies, "overflowing does not signify plenitude, but emptiness, the excess by comparison to which fullness is still lacking." (130) By 'overflowing' these novels do not 'signify plenitude' or a sense of completeness, but rather draw attention to 'emptiness' and failure, ironically, through an 'excess' of self-directed violence. These four texts present such excess through

[1] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1982), 130.

representations of suicide that render current thinking – about individualism, race, gender, pain – as 'still lacking'. Blanchot further suggests, "The desire to die would express […] a certain need for plenitude; it would be the aspiring movement toward the brim, the impulse of liquid that wants to fill the vase." (130) In these texts, the 'aspiring movement' exceeds its container, in this case conventional social understanding, through representations of suicide that bring paradoxes to light and demand further interpretation. In so doing, they recognise and provoke a recognition that contemporary understanding is deficient. These deaths then insist on radical thinking and social change to better engage with suicide and negotiate such 'overflow'.

The following three chapters similarly considered how suicide gives rise to questions of personal and social crisis. However, I suggested that these novels do not engage in the same radical forms of 'thinking anew'; instead, they find social responses to suicide in existing understanding. In James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*, suicide is represented as an act that can in some ways be predicted and understood. The failures of Walter Huff in the novella seem to be repaired by a father figure, Keyes, as the text calls for greater vigilance in maintaining and applying contemporary understanding and patriarchal order to better comprehend and control suicide. Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* likewise presents a cogent interpretation of suicide through Philip Marlowe, and thus the proposition that suicide crises could be addressed through a reinforcing of certain forms of existing patriarchal authority. Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, I argued, renders a sense of hope for change in the face of suicide by extolling perseverance. All of the major characters move on from the crisis of John Singer's suicide by returning to and struggling on with their seemingly unattainable ambitions.

As such, these three texts register suicide as a social crisis that demands interpretation and consideration, while suggesting that such crises can be in some ways mitigated through current ways of thinking. Although, like the first four texts discussed in this thesis, there is a recognition that society could change to better regulate and negotiate suicide, in these final three novels the particular problem of 'excess' is no longer brought into focus. A set of relatively conservative forms of 'social reconstruction' are instead identified by way of a response to the fictional suicide. In other words, the current state of society is not 'lacking' in the same radical, fundamental manner as considered in the first four chapters, and thus suicide can be socially responded to without the 'altered discourses' and 'thinking anew' discussed by Margaret Higonnet and Holly Laird.

This difference in social responses demonstrates that literary representations of suicide can call attention to and help distil particular, and sometimes critical, concerns about contemporary society. Such identifications of social problems then play a role in shaping how society may – or may not – change to address these concerns. The influence that literature can have on social reform might be radical or conservative, but it exists and provides a unique insight into how social relations may be envisioned to better contend with the problems of understanding that suicide poses.

However, this sense of possibility still has to struggle against the ambivalence of suicide, as discussed in literary suicidology. There is always another, more disorienting aspect of suicide – as Andrew Bennett stresses, "Above all, suicide makes and unmakes meaning."[2] Although I have proposed that certain distinct calls for social reform can be drawn from these representations of suicide, at the same time, they are troubled by the

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[2] Andrew Bennett, *Suicide Century: Literature and Suicide from James Joyce to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), 3.

uncertainty that is associated with suicide. In all these texts there is a continuing feeling of social failure, and that any sense made in terms of 'social reconstruction' is still concurrently unsettled and 'unmade' by suicide. In the first four chapters of this thesis, the possibilities of 'social reconstruction' are inevitably ill-defined. Since the suicides give rise to social problems by exceeding contemporary understanding, they demand something new, but this new thinking cannot be expressed precisely because contemporary understanding has been rendered lacking. This paradox does not fundamentally undermine the sense of possibility in the texts, but rather renders any social change as a complex problem. The final three chapters, which I contended present relatively conservative calls for 'social reconstruction', face a similar problem as contemporary understanding and social relations are again rendered inadequate by suicide. Reinforcing such relations, or persevering in spite of them, does not overcome the challenge that the uncertainty of suicide poses. Indeed, in all three of these texts there is a continuing feeling of social crisis and the problems that led to suicide are unresolved – neither the law nor Phyllis are reformed in Chandlers' and Cain's texts respectively, and McCullers' characters are still alienated. This problem of making and unmaking, I argue, recalls Louis I. Dublin and Bessie Bunzel's phrase that suicide is a "complex social phenomenon"[3], and suggests there is always a sense of multiplicity, of possibility and impossibility, attending representations of suicide.

In response to the second and third questions raised at the end of this thesis' introduction, then, it seems that suicide representation may not be subsumed entirely by negation, but that suicide also always registers a limit of understanding. As such, the considerations of 'social reconstruction' investigated in relation to suicide

[3] Louis I. Dublin; Bessie Bunzel, *To Be or Not to Be: A Study of Suicide* (New York: Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1933), 15.

representation need to be recognised as the opening of discussions rather than offering resolution. None of the texts studied in this thesis conclusively settle the crises arising from suicide, instead they invite ways of continuing to think proactively about these problems in particular social ways.

In the introduction to this thesis I asked what, if anything, suicide can say about a society which is itself in crisis. Perhaps, following the work of Dublin and Bunzel, it could be said that the Great Depression set conditions that urged certain ways of discussing suicide, and specifically suicide in relation to social crisis. It would, however, require similarly focused studies of other locations and periods to provide a comparative and determine any specific nuances of the Great Depression. Nonetheless, the analyses conducted in this thesis suggest that there was a particular concern of negotiating suicide as a social problem in literature in the 1930s, and it seems likely, and in some cases it is indicated in the texts themselves, that the Great Depression was a significant influence in the realisation and depiction of this concern.

The impact of these considerations of social change, though, seems to stretch much further than a focus on the 1930s may imply. As contemplated most explicitly in relation to the work of Lee J. Richmond in Chapter 4 on Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, these texts have a "timeless emphasis"[4]. Indeed, precisely because these texts highlight suicide, they bring to the fore principal questions that extend beyond a contemporary setting. Suicide, and suicide representations, may have certain characteristics that are conditioned by their time and place, but they invariably call

[4] Lee J. Richmond, 'A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance: Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 17 (2) (1971), 92.

attention to core questions regarding the human condition.[5] As Bennett observes, "the potential for suicide can be considered part of what it means to be human" (3).

The texts studied in this thesis often broaden their considerations of suicide to such essential, rather than contemporary social, concerns – such as McCoy on pain or McCullers on love. In so doing, these texts suggest that the discussions of social change deriving from suicide, whether conservative or radical, are central to how we understand, live, and die with each other. The social problems identified by Faulkner, Thurman, O'Hara, and McCoy, for instance, may be cast within a contemporary framework, they certainly are marked by their present-day concerns – lynching, Harlem, Cadillacs, dance marathons – but they also speak to issues that are not unique to the 1930s. The concerns of identity, individualism, and pain are, like suicide, universal human challenges. Similarly, the problems in gender relations, of judicial order, and of alienation, as raised by Cain, Chandler, and McCullers respectively, encourage thinking about social relations beyond a contemporary setting.

This manner of representing of suicide, with its emphasis on suicide as a social problem as well as a timeless concern, offers a significant contribution to current conversations in literary suicidology and beyond. These texts not only direct suicide discourses towards more discrete and focused negotiations of how social relations may affect suicide, but they also provoke complex, ongoing discussions of how these social relations could be developed. They thus encourage a combination of Durkheimian theory and literary suicidology as a means of thinking through, complicating, and disentangling some of the challenges of understanding, bafflement, and empathy that suicide can pose.

[5] As discussed in various ways by the critics referred to in this thesis that consider suicide. Durkheim, for instance, often returns to questions regarding 'human nature' (i.e. 169, 208).

Ultimately, as analysed throughout this thesis, these calls for social change, whether radical or conservative, may be elusive and only offer the beginnings of conversations rather than solutions. However, these texts still identify distinct and fundamental concerns about how we interact with each other, both in relation to suicide and in everyday life. The contribution of these texts to suicide discourses may be most pronounced in their framing of suicide as a social problem that can be responded to in a variety of ways. Perhaps more importantly, though, the broader contribution of these texts is to invite deep and complex reconsiderations of how we engage with and understand one another. Their representations of suicide, at their heart, seem to be about continuing to think through how we, collectively, can work to improve social relations and, particularly, improve the lives of those who may wish to end theirs.

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